ELISABETH BRONFEN

# The Knotted Subject

*Hysteria and Its Discontents*

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## HYSTERIA AND ITS DISCONTENTS

*ELISABETH BRONFEN*

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*FOR GEORGE B. BRONFEN*

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The hysteric is a divine spirit that is always at the edge, the turning point, of making. She is one who does not make herself . . . she does not make herself but she does make the other. It is said that the hysteric "makes-believe" the father, plays the father, "makes-believe" the master. Plays, makes up, makes-believe: she makes-believe she is a woman, unmakes-believe too . . . plays at desire, plays the father . . . turns herself into him, unmakes him at the same time. Anyway, without the hysteric, there's no father . . . without the hysteric, no master, no analyst, no analysis! She's the *unorganizable* feminine construct, whose power of producing the other is a power that never returns to her. She is really a wellspring nourishing the other for eternity, yet not drawing back from the other . . . not recognizing herself in the images the other may or may not give her. She is given images that don't belong to her, and she forces herself, as we've all done, to resemble them.

—*Hélène Cixous*

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# PREFACE

IN THE COURSE of its long medical history, hysteria—that infamously resilient somatic illness without organic lesions—has stubbornly remained elusive to any precise definition and has thus proved itself a useful screen on which to project the diagnostic fantasies of doctors faced with their own impotence and helplessness. Precisely because the hysteric seems to be imitating other illnesses while her psychosomatic symptoms are clearly aimed at an addressee—be this a physician, other family members, or a public audience—she readily appears to be an arch simulator, deceiver, and seductress. Nevertheless, by keenly responding to the hermeneutic task exemplified by the hysteric's bodily enactment of psychic discontent and anguish, analysts seeking to offer an interpretive cure inevitably find themselves drawn into scenes of mutual implication. For even though the hysteric appears to be a particularly fruitful object for scientific speculation because of her protean symptoms, she also develops one symptom after another whenever the cure for any given ailment is offered. In so doing, she insists that no solution is ever complete. Faced with this nosological enigma, physicians in past centuries have found themselves trapped in a mixture of fascination and resignation—so much so that Lasègne called hysteria the wastebasket of medicine, where one throws everything one has no use for, and Charcot repeatedly maintained that his hysteric patients were making much ado about nothing.

It is commonly thought that hysteria as a psychosomatic ailment died out at the beginning of the twentieth century, and the fourth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* used by American psychiatrists and social workers accordingly no longer lists hysteria as a syndrome. Nevertheless, in recent years hysteria once again, has become the topic of a lively critical debate. Beginning in the late 1970s feminist scholars such as Hélène Cixous, Catherine Clément, and Christina von Braun (and, more recently, Janet Beizer, Evelyn Ender, and Claire Kahane) have invoked a return to the question of hysteria as a means to discuss the exclusion of feminine subjectivity inherent in patriarchal culture. At the same time, cultural historians like Mark S. Micale have strongly argued for an inclusion of the discussion of male hysteria, and art historians and literary scholars such as Georges Didi-Huberman and Sander Gilman have emphasized the issue of visualization in medical representations of this ailment. Elaine Showalter has even suggested that an array of psychosomatic illnesses, such as chronic fatigue syndrome or war shock, could easily be viewed as postmodern forms of hysteria. Concurrent with this critical reappraisal of hysteria—and perhaps taking a cue from such authors as Gustave Flaubert, who insisted on calling himself a hysteric, and from the surrealist poets Aragon and Breton, who praised hys-

teria for being the greatest poetic discovery of the nineteenth century—contemporary popular culture celebrities have embraced this seductive and deceptive manner of self-performance. Psycho-rock singers Sinead O'Connor and P. J. Harvey, laying bare their torment and anguish on stage, recall the public performance of private traumas conducted by Charcot during his Tuesday lectures at the Salpêtrière. Madonna exhibits her astonishing ability to find ever new guises and roles (including the writing on her back she flaunts in nude photographs), strangely matching the versatile histrionics, deceptive seduction, and dermography displayed by the hysteric patients housed in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century clinics of Europe and North America. Similarly, a photopage headlined "Hysteric Glamour" (published in 1996 in a Berlin-based newspaper) displays two models posing in seductive attitudes next to a text that reads, "We were girlies, sweet and nasty, tired of having no idea. We wanted to be glamourous . . . burned down the house. Now we are women, hysteric + cool."

Moreover, in response to Jacques Lacan's inclusion of hysteric discourse as one of four discourses at work in psychoanalysis, critics Slavoj Žižek, Gérard Wajeman, and Bruce Fink have discussed hysteria as a paradigmatic example of a radically ambiguous relationship between the subject and the so-called Master in response to whom the subject's identity is constituted. Within this reformulation, the hysteric subject emerges as one who both supports the desire for a figure of paternal authority and recognizes that it requires the Other as an addressee—even while the hysteric subject also radically protests against this interpellation. Indeed, following Lacan's schema, Lucien Israël suggests that the language of hysteria be considered a mode of communication, an attempt to establish a relation with the Other, to broadcast the message of a recognition of lack—"I am not complete"—yet accomplishing this, in contrast to all other forms of neurosis, by transforming anxieties and desires into somatic manifestations.

In concert with this renewed interest in hysteria, this book sets out to reinvestigate medical discourses and cultural performances relating to this elusive, protean, and enigmatic psychosomatic disorder as they were developed in diverse psychiatric and psychoanalytic writings; in fictional texts; and in operatic, cinematic, and visual representations from 1800 to the present. If traditional conceptions of hysteria persist in the notion of much ado about nothing, I suggest taking this "nothing" and its relation to the resilience of self-fashionings, as well as the crisis in interpellation engendered by the hysteric performance, quite seriously and quite literally and reading it as a language that allows the subject to voice both personal and cultural discontent. My wager is that by shifting away from a gendered notion of hysteria, which considers all its symptoms to be the expression of dissatisfied feminine sexual desire, and instead by returning to Sigmund Freud's initial interest in finding a traumatic rather than a sexual etiology of hysteria, this conversion of psychic anguish into a somatic symptom can be interpreted as

the enactment of a message in code. Yet what the hysteric broadcasts is a message about vulnerability—the vulnerability of the symbolic (the fallibility of paternal law and social bonds); the vulnerability of identity (the insecurity of gender, ethnic, and class designations); or, and perhaps above all, the vulnerability of the body, given its mutability and mortality.

To bring a psychoanalytically informed discussion of the language of hysteria into dialogue with readings of specific narrative and visual representations, my introductory chapter develops most of the theoretical issues I will return to in the course of the book. At stake in this preliminary discussion is not only the exploration of a traumatic etiology of hysteria but also the manner in which this trauma can be conceptualized as a snarled knot of memory traces, which as a wandering foreign body haunts the psyche. At the same time, given my interest in exploring a discussion of hysteria that is not solely defined by a relation to phallic symbolism, I revisit Sophocles' tragedy of *Oedipus*. Finding matricide to be as much at the core of this text as are the two desires that Freud postulates as the lynchpins of his Oedipal theory—namely, the desire for the maternal body, as well as patricide—I suggest including another anatomic sign in our discussion of psychic developement: the navel. For this cut, this knotted scar marks a moment of castration not only in the sense that it commemorates the loss of the mother but also in the sense that it marks our mortality, the vulnerability of our bodies, and thus radically protests against any phantasies of omnipotence and immortality. Looking at a modern day Oedipal story, Hitchcock's *Psycho*, I investigate those "navel moments" in the film where the traumatic knowledge of vulnerability is either hidden behind protective fictions of plenitude or horrifically erupts from behind such screens. The navel, I suggest, could serve as a particularly fruitful sign for a discussion of the traumatic nothing about which the hysteric makes so much ado, because the hysteric's complaint revolves precisely around a knowledge of fallibility and fragility, and it goes hand in hand with a need for protective phantasies and a desire for imagining what the condition of happiness and plenitude might be. As a countertext, thus, I offer Woody Allen's *Zelig*, the story of a happy hysteric who, rather than repressing the traumatic knowledge of privation, learns to convert it into a stabilizing protective fiction of transference love.

Building on the navel as an anatomic sign that is at once highly suggestive and fundamentally unreadable, my first chapter offers a discussion of the plethora of critical readings of Freud's specimen dream of Irma's injection, and in so doing returns to the notion that hysteria defies closure. For in response to his recalcitrant hysteric who will not be cured, Freud finds at the navel of his dream an unplumbable spot, a knot tying together all the strands of his nocturnal phantasy scenario but one that cannot be unraveled. And all the while he desperately seeks to arrive at a symbolic formula for dream work to counter the traumatic knowledge of mortality and fallibility of this dream, both analyzing and identifying with the resistant

hysteric. My discussion explores the ways in which each critic of Freud's interpretation, seeking to fill the original text's gaps, repeats the inability to find closure that haunts Freud's own rendition. These attempts, given that they themselves are never complete, suggest that the figure that best describes the rhetoric of Freud's specimen dream and its interpretations is a counter-directional gesture, one that knots together the sublimation afforded by a coherent narrative solution and the desublimation that serves to articulate the traumatic knowledge of fallibility inherent in the analytic effort, with the result that the analysis can do nothing but repeat the hysteric's broadcast. I end with a reading of Barthes's *Camera Lucida*. Though writing more than half a century later, like Freud, Barthes investigates the power of our collective image repertoire—using photography, however, rather than dreams. His discussion also revolves around a navel point—though not explicitly designated as such—namely, the empty page standing for the one true image that ties him to the maternal body, to an acceptance of her loss and an embrace of his own death.

Having installed my theoretical framework, I move in the second part of the book to the historical moment when, with the birth of the bourgeois family, hysteria bloomed as the language within which the daughter could articulate her discontent. Tracing the development of both medical and cultural formations of hysteria forward to the year in which Freud and Breuer published their *Studies in Hysteria* (1896), I interlace a critical reevaluation of the archival texts on hysteria, using such diverse aesthetic texts as Mozart's *Magic Flute*, Radcliffe's gothic *The Romance of the Forest*, Stoker's *Dracula*, and Wagner's *Parsifal*.

In the third part I look more closely at versions of the case history beginning with three distinct yet interrelated sets of psychiatric discussions: Freud's and Breuer's work on hysteric patients, Jasper's work on criminal nostalgics, and Pierre Janet's work with hysteria. I also explore the cultural exchange between medical and artistic discourses. Anne Sexton was diagnosed as a manic-depressive hysteric, yet after her first failed suicide attempt, she turned into one of the most successful American poets of her day. Using her biography and writings I suggest that her case history illustrates not only how she used her writing to keep psychic disturbances at bay, but also how in her hysteric protest against paternity she used her poetry to rewrite Freud's Oedipal story to articulate her poetic version of the daughter's discontent. I end this third section of case studies with a text in which an aesthetic representation feeds upon a medical discussion of hysteria, though in a more distanced and ironic mode. Arguing that Hitchcock's *Marnie* can be read as a cinematic version of the psychoanalytic case history of hysteria, I particularly contend that, far from simply paraphrasing Freud, Hitchcock—in imitation of the hysteric's discourse—radically challenges some of the tacit presuppositions of Freud's insistence on a sexual cure. For the outcome

of the hero's dramatic enactment of the heroine's scene of trauma is not a cure but the horrific rebirth of a monstrous girl-woman.

The last section returns to the historical beginnings of this book—the cultural moment when enlightenment begins to reveal the obscene desires inherent in the symbolic system of law—only to transpose this gothic note into the language of postmodernity. I offer the films of David Cronenberg as a cinematic rendition of hysteric hallucinations. By focusing once again on navel scenes, I explore how Cronenberg's cinematic enactment of womb anxiety–womb envy offers a visual performance of how trauma is present in the psyche as a wandering foreign body of nonabreacted memories and desires. My final example for a postmodern performance of the language of hysteria is a discussion of Cindy Sherman's photography. Although she never speaks about herself in terms of hysteria, and indeed works with no explicit references to medical and psychoanalytical discourses, I place her work within the context of contemporary women artists who directly address the issue of hysteria. She uses a constant masking and refashioning of her body to broadcast a message about how we are haunted by the elusive and protean sense of vulnerability, implenitude, and fallibility, even while the mise-en-scène of desire created by phantasy work seeks to hide this traumatic knowledge.

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Throughout this book, all translations from French and German are my own, unless otherwise attributed, and reference is given to the original text. Further, references to a cited text will appear with page reference after quotations and, unless otherwise stated, refer to the same text throughout; passages without page references are from the last-cited page. Unless otherwise stated, all italics are the author's and all ellipses, mine.

# PART ONE

## ▶ THE HYSTERICAL SUBJECT OF THEORY

# INTRODUCTION

## Navel Inversions

Home is where they buried my umbilical cord.

—*Derek Walcott*

### I

IN THE REPERTORY of western imagery, the navel is the firmly privileged representative for the origin of human existence. Literally a skin mark and an index of the primal cut made at the belly of a newborn, and figuratively a culturally codified symbol for the making of an independent human being, the navel refers in retrospect both to the child's bond with the maternal body and its bond with divinity. Though this bond is physically severed at birth, it remains psychically sustained and ritually renewed throughout the life of each individual. The navel marks centrality. Anatomically placed at the body's center, it becomes a symbol of the world's spiritual center as well. At the same time, however, it also functions as a sign of bondage, namely to the law of genealogy and mortality. Whereas angels and artificially created simulacrums of the human body have no navels, Adam and Eve (created in the image of their divine father, rather than born of woman), are often depicted with a belly button. Precisely this theologically debated detail of the body comes to highlight their fallen, human status, their difference.

Visualized as a common point of connection but also as an incision and severing, the navel emerges as a cultural image fraught with reticence. Although it is often prominently displayed in sculptures of the human body and frequently a significant detail in paintings of the nude, it yet remains an oversight. Most dictionaries of subjects and symbols in art, or motives and themes in literature and folklore, will ignore the navel or merely include a cursory entry mentioning its multifarious usage as trope for conceptualizations of the center. Nor has the navel been privileged theoretically in psychoanalytically informed semiotic and cultural studies of the body, as have other body parts such as the breast, penis, vagina, eye, nose, or foot. Indeed, however suggestive the navel appears, it is yet a willfully unexplored part of the human body, an obscene detail that fascinates even as it repels, owing perhaps precisely to its intangibility.

Marking an earlier opening to the body, it seems to echo the vagina as well as the anus, transforming the stomach into an erotically exciting but also a cultural taboo zone. At the turn of the century, for example, a performance of Richard Strauss's *Salome* in New York City provoked a scandal because the soprano displayed her navel while performing the "Dance of the

Seven Veils." As the dancer moved, the navel kept changing its shape, dangerously opening and closing—and offending the censors—with each new gesture. Under the Hays production code it was considered improper to offer an unmitigated view of the navel, so that Hollywood actresses could exhibit their belly only if its central point was filled with a jewel or covered with an ornament. Given the navel's deceptive appearance, then, and its simulation of an erotogenic orifice as well as an undecipherable cavity whose function and destiny remain obscure, anecdotes about this body part abound. Naive lovers look to the navel as the most natural site for sexual intercourse, while children often believe babies emerge from this indeterminate hole. Youngsters ponder the seeming fragility of its structure. When told that the navel was created by being tied off from the umbilical cord, they readily phantasize that it can come undone: the little boy who equates his navel with a screw, frustrated that no one can tell him what it is for, takes a screw driver and opens it. In this child's phantasy the bottom finally falls off.[1]

Above all, the navel is a flashback or an analeptic index of a bodily wound. In its anatomic sense, after all, it is a slight, round depression in the center of the abdomen, containing a bulging scar where the umbilical cord, connecting the fetus with the placenta in the womb, had been attached. That this individually unique somatic sign can also become transformed semiotically within our image repertoire so as to signify the vulnerability of human existence in general was illustrated poignantly for me in a story told by a friend. Going through an art gallery, she tried to help her daughter distinguish between images of the baby Jesus and those of the crucified Christ. "Christ," her mother explained, "is different from the baby Jesus because he has four wounds: two on his hands, one on his feet and one on his side." Her daughter cannily replied, "But I see a fifth wound," pointing to the navel.[2]

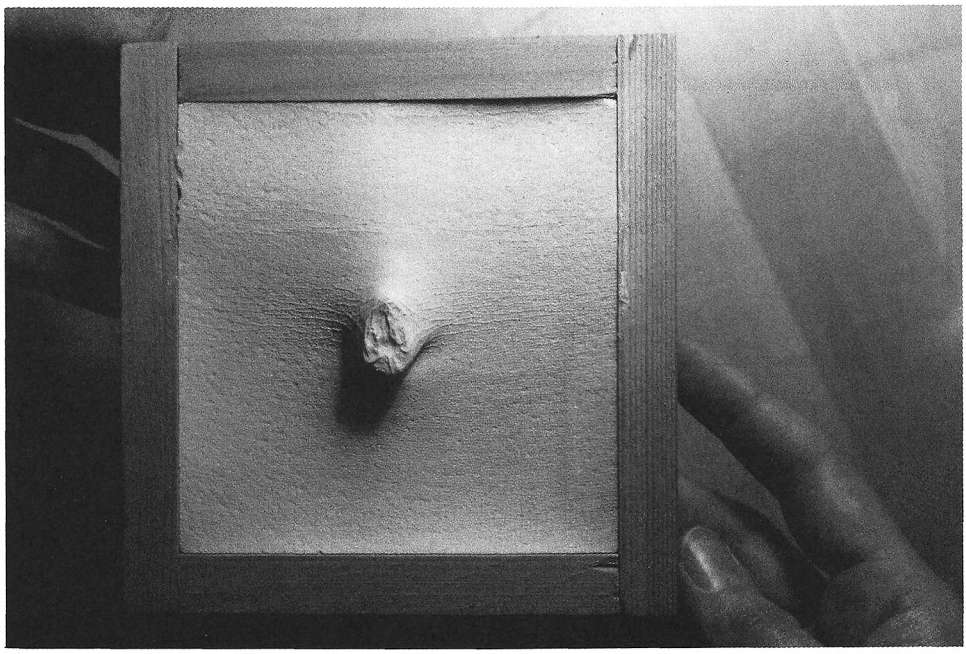
What ultimately renders the navel such a suggestive and irresistible aperture is in part its protean quality, for, depending on the shape of the stomach, its appearance will change as well—an opulent belly will produce a round navel, a flat one a vertical slit. Equally crucial, however, although the naval perfectly simulates an opening with a designated aim, it actually serves no purpose and leads nowhere. Functioning neither as an entrance nor an exit, it displays a hole that is nothing. As it represents the interface between an opening and a closed-off cavity, between what is internal and what is external to the body, it also delineates what is off-limits to visualization. For although the navel is open to the exploration of the touch, its most intimate point remains impenetrable to the eye, already inside the folds of the body—though it is separated as well from the actual body interior by a piece of knotted skin. Functioning as a demarcation between the intimate and the external, it remains inaccessible to the gaze both from the outside and the inside. The navel, one could say, is obscene precisely because it is so indeterminate, suggestively visible yet ultimately hidden, a useless, surplus skin

pointing belatedly to a prior urgency, namely the site of originary nourishment for the child in the uterus and the wound that produced its birth. Signifying a human commonality, it is also a mark par excellence of singularity. Each navel is a radically unique shape, the sign of individuality, for though we all have a navel, yet no navel completely resembles another.

It is precisely this challenge to specularity posed by the navel that Marie-Ange Guilleminot exploits in *Point commun. Vues de l'intérieur.*" Since 1991 this Paris-based visual artist has made more than ninety plaster casts of navels. As she explains, in her work she is motivated by the desire to approach a person in a virginal situation, to create a new kind of relationship between artist and model.[3] The intimate practice played through in her performance is defined by a language and by tools usually attributed to other activities. Guilleminot sets up a rendezvous during which she initially treats the models as clients, speaking with them about their attitudes toward their navels, about why they are willing to have an imprint taken, and how they imagine this imprint will look. Evoking both a medical and a sexual setting (these two domains so poignantly coming together in the psychoanalytic session), she then asks each respective model to lie down and expose his or her navel. This can occur either in a private space (as was the case in the finissage to her show at the Galerie Chantal Crousel on 3 March 1995), or as a public demonstration.

Placing a five-by-five inch wooden frame around the navel of the model, she first cleans the aperture and lubricates it with Vaseline to eliminate any particles that might alter the imprint and to prevent hair from sticking to the mold. She then fills the frame with warm plaster and asks the model to remain lying down until the plaster is firm enough to be removed, soliciting from each model associations that come to mind in the course of the molding procedure. In that the plaster requires a certain amount of time to set, Guilleminot's navel casting, resembles moments of waiting in photographic practice, both the time of exposure (which in the early days of photography could stretch to several minutes), and the time of developing the negative and the print in a dark room. Once the plaster cast has hardened, she helps the model slowly lift the inverted imprint of the navel from the belly and displays it to his or her expectant gaze. The first exhibition of Guilleminot's navel casts took place on 20 June 1992, when a series of about seventy frames was presented lying flat on tables in the apartments of five people who had been *moulée*—molded, matrixed, and cast. Her project continues, depending on the new people she encounters since all her models must be accquaintances to some degree. Unlike the medical and the psychoanalytic meeting, the process of taking someone's navel imprint involves familiarizing herself with the other person; at the same time, the scene of molding is suggestive, like the navel around which it revolves, never becoming entirely intimate.

Seminal to Marie-Ange Guilleminot's performance is that the innermost folds of the navel, which remain inaccessible to the eye, can be rendered



Marie-Ange Guilleminot, *Point commun. Vues de l'intérieur.* (By permission of the artist.)

visible by virtue of representation—but only as an inversion of this intimate body part. Hers is a self-conscious staging of misrepresentation, capturing what is otherwise intangible and indeterminate in a decipherable form but at the cost of conversion and displacement. The mold we see perfectly fills out the space that the navel touches, thus *ex negativo* exposing the shape of this suggestive, irresistible detail. Drawing out what is normally withheld, rendering publicly what is intimate, Guilleminot extracts an improper portrait of the model. Though not a copy of the face, the body part that is usually privileged in portraiture, her molded navels nevertheless can be read as fairly precise renditions of the individuality of the models. Indeed, the fantasies and anxieties about what this intimate body part will look like, which are called forth in the course of the navel molding, find their acme as each model contemplates the sculpted inversion of her or his navel. As though echoing the old practice where midwives would read the knots on umbilical cords as prophetic signs that allowed them to predict how many more pregnancies a woman would undergo,[4] model and audience scan the imprint to produce an explanatory narrative of its donor: "What does my navel really look like?" "What will it say about me?" "How will others read this intimate self-image?"

Furthermore, the act of representation, as it is ritually performed by Marie-Ange Guilleminot's navel moldings, also implies a scene, one self-consciously staged for an audience (be this only the artist and the model) or, as at the gallery with its group of spectators, a scene calling forth a story to

boot. Imitating the gesture of giving birth, it repeats the severing and doubling undertaken in parturition, and though the object brought forth through the molding is a plaster cast rather than a living body, it is formed indexically in the image of the donor, duplicating precisely the cutting point between maternal body and newborn. Indeed, one of the women working at the Gallerie Crousel read these molds as entirely accurate portraits, quite confident that she knew the personality of each owner, knew whom she would be able to get along with and whom she would never want to meet. Even without going so far as to draw inferences about the hidden personality traits of a model from its navel cast, the singularity each mold displays is striking. The folds, knobs, fissures, and peaks that distinguish one cast from all the others calls for an interpretive story, this hermeneutic gesture supported by the fact that each mold not only exhibits clearly a unique shape but is also the product of an impression whose referentiality is binding. It is the imprint of an authentic skin mark.

There are, then, two bodies involved in Marie-Ange Guilleminot's navel moldings: one is a somatic representation, a protean scar on the skin, intangible and indeterminate because only partially visible; the other is a plaster cast that converts this skin mark into a tangible and legible semiotic sign, open to multifarious interpretive narratives attempting to explore and name this obscenely irresistible body detail. Explicitly demonstrating the process of dislocation, fragmentation, and isolation by which an obscure body part can become the privileged object in the staging of fantasies of intimate encounters with otherness and visualizations of the impenetrable, Guilleminot self-consciously reflects the process of aesthetic parturition itself. Indeed, her navel moldings function self-reflexively like a mise-en-abyme of the strategy of conversion and replacement that lies at the core of all strategies of representation.

The trajectory that Marie-Ange Guilleminot's performance traces parallels, in a nutshell, what is at stake in my inquiry into the configurations of hysteria seen in western culture. Her point of departure is a perturbing and irresistible body detail, the somatic sign of naught. Quite literally no thing, a cut knotted together to form a scar, the tracing of the figure O, of no anatomical value, the navel is at once a worthless body part and a cipher for obscene fantasies of erotic or horrific nature involving penetration into the body interior or extracting something from this intimate, unknown site. The parturition of the plaster casts then renders this intimate and impenetrable part of the human anatomy external. By converting what is an indeterminate body boundary written on the skin into a decipherable representation, Guilleminot's navel molds produce an inverted sculpture of this body scar, this knotted point of incision that touches upon without ever disclosing the naught from which it shields but which it also preserves. Yet one must not forget that the navel itself is an improper representation, marking after the fact an inaccessible and yet unencompassable nothing—a nonevent, a nonsite, a nonbody—at the origin and core of all subjectivity. To return to the

anecdote about Christ's wounds, this knotted scar demarcates by giving (an improper) shape to the nothing subtending psychic processes and by moving the viewer with its traumatic impact, a piercing injury that is naught because it is only recognized belatedly. As Cathy Caruth argues, "The impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time" (1995, 9). Yet this indeterminate traumatic impact not only of parturition itself but also of the fragility and mutability it encompasses, staunchly inhabits our imaginary phantasies and symbolic codes, even without taking on any definitive form. It impacts as a resilient trace of bondage, vulnerability, and incision—as the persistence of a remainder. Guilleminot's navel molds thus emerge as "metarepresentations," inversions of a somatic sign that is itself a transformation of sorts and that has been produced to mark an ineluctable impression that radically resists representation. I maintain that it is precisely this ubiquitous and impenetrable traumatic impact—this injurous blow to the tissues of the body and the mind—that representations of hysteria obliquely address by converting naught into exuberant and resilient protean symptoms.[5]

However, before developing more precisely the enmeshment between the language of hysteria and those traces of traumatic impact, deprivation, and loss at the core of all self-representations, I should explain what is to be gained by privileging the navel as a critical category in a discussion of subjectivity. In the 1980s critics explored the potential of poststructuralist terminology in their effort to describe how the subject—grafted onto a complex network of significatory difference, deferral, and displacement—came to embody and perform gender constructions. To describe the shift in literary and cultural studies in the past decade, concepts such as emplacement, ensoulment, coherence, closure, ethics, and moral commitment seem to be emerging as the compelling concern of the 1990s.[6] In an essay called "Identity and the Writer," A. S. Byatt notes this change, explaining

> Lately—and I think this is a cultural observation—I've replaced the post-romantic metaphor with one of a knot. I see individuals now as knots, in say, the piece of lace that one of Vermeer's lacemakers is making. Things go through us—the genetic code, the history of the nation, the language or languages we speak . . . the constraints that are put upon us, the people who are around us. And if we are an individual, it's because these threads are knotted together in this particular time and this particular place, and they hold. I also have no metaphysical sense of the self, and I see this knot as vulnerable: you could cut one or two threads of it . . . or you can, of course, get an unwieldy knot where somebody has had so much put in that the knot becomes a large and curious, and ugly object. We are connected, and we also are a connection which is a separate and unrepeated object. (1987, 26)

At stake for Byatt in the metaphor of the individual as knot is the transformation *from* emphasizing how a subject is inscribed by multiple codes and understands the self as a result of this inscription, with each individual

subject to the symbolic discourses and representations of a given cultural context *to* an emphasis on the subject's particularity, to the very specific individually differentiated form of knotting the subject. The pun contains the seminal ambivalence I am concerned with in regarding the navel as a critical category for cultural analysis, namely, the enmeshment between connection, incision, bondage, and negation, that is, the bond constructed over naught. To speak of the knotted subject emphasizes not that the subject is split and multiple but *how* this multiplicity offers a new means of integration. The metaphor of the knotted subject yields an image for the condition of being culturally determined, with identity resulting from the inscription of cultural representations. At the same time this metaphor calls into question the specificity, particularity, or uniqueness of each cultural determination, ultimately favoring a notion of an individual who integrates fantasies of coherence with an acknowledgment of fallibility.

What makes the metaphor of the knotted subject so compelling to me is precisely that it allows one to move beyond a notion of the subject as exclusively constructed by representations, indeed beyond the conventional postmodern dictum "all is representation," even as it doesn't deny the supremacy of symbolic inscription. To speak of a knotted subject also allows me to underscore the way notions of want or implenitude, flaw, and vulnerability are inscribed into human existance.[7] If one moves toward a concept of subjectivity that argues for individual integration of incoherences, one can account for another element omitted from the exclusive privileging of the simulacrum—namely, the way that our body makes us each fallible, our mutatability imposes constraints on us. At the same time, this critical shift also addresses the impact of a traumatic knowledge specific to each person and how it returns to haunt not only any sense of plenitude and integrity offered by narcissistically informed self-fashionings and phantasies but also vexes the sense or security that what fundamentally splits the subject is its alienation within language.

Shifting our critical interest to the navel as signifier for a knotted scar that covers and touches upon a nonrepresentable wound ultimately allows us to address another moment of the uniquely unrepeatable cut that binds each human together, a wound which is parallel to but not subsumed by symbolic castration.[8] In one of the crucial marks of poststructuralist criticism, namely Derrida's claim for dissemination against Lacanian determination, as this emerged in the debate over Edgar Allan Poe's tale "The Purloined Letter," Derrida countered the notion of fate addressed by Lacan by suggesting that "a letter can always not arrive at its destination. . . . It belongs to the structure of the letter to be capable, always, of not arriving" (Muller 1988, 187). Slavoj Žižek, in turn, shrewdly inserts into the picture precisely the category so fundamentally neglected by poststructuralism, namely the notion of the *real.* He suggests, "We can say that we live only insofar as a certain letter (the letter containing our death warrant) still wanders around, looking for us. . . . Such is the fate of all and each of us, the bullet with our name on it

is already shot . . . at the end of the imaginary as well as the symbolic itinerary, we encounter the Real" (1992, 21). It is precisely this wandering body, the traumatic knowledge of our mutability that hysteria communicate so spectacularly by virtue of its many protean symptoms.

If I suggest speaking of a knotted subject, then, with the navel as a signifier for the way the individual is constructed out of and over an originary traumatic wounding, I do so to emphasize that the acculturated subject only in part fades before the diacritics of the symbolic field that dictates its subjugation to language and cultural codes, that is, subjects itself to symbolic castration. Still another fading is at stake, however, referring to actual castration, given that the acculturated subject also fades before the real law of mortality: at birth, mutability, fragility, and fallibility all inscribe human existence. As the narrative of the Oedipal trajectory teaches us, sexual and symbolic castration stand in for a real lack. By being subject to symbolic laws *and* sexual anatomy, to representations *and* to the body, each human, precisely because subject to individual death, is individual and connected. The inscription of mortality at birth—ironically called the big leveler—also marks the singularity of each mortal existence. Therein lies the crux of the ambiguity between connection and negation implied by the notion of the knotted subject, for which the navel is both a somatic and a semiotic figure. This signifier points to the vulnerability inhabiting the individual, namely, that the knotting occurs over a wound, both shielding and constructing a site within which are the remains of the traumatic impact.

However, as Judith Butler (1990) has shown, sexuality cannot be discussed independently of the symbolic discourses on gender that produce it. In addition to distinguishing symbolic and sexual castration, now, however, I would suggest exploring the distinction between processes of language and Lacan's *real*. Bruce Fink defines the psychic realm of the real as an unrent, undifferentiated fabric, a seamless surface or space that doesn't exist, since it precedes language, yet which serves as the matrix onto which symbolic and imaginary processes are grafted. In other words, he views the real as the material that cultural codes and phantasies transform into narratives meant to sustain them. Obviously these articulations of the real are registered belatedly, or after the fact; Fink notes, "Insofar as we name and talk about the real and weave it into a theoretical discourse on language and the "time before the word," we draw it into language and thereby give a kind of existence to that which, in its very concept, has only ex-sistence" (1995, 25). So to distinguish between "symbolic castration" and the real incision (symbolically rendered only belatedly and in the gesture of a dislocated figure), which harks back to the traumatic wound at the onset of mortality yet defies any direct representation by not referring to any clearly marked single experience or event, I propose the concept of "denaveling." Its force comes directly from the delay and dislocation of its articulation though, in contradistinction to symbolic castration, it refers to an actual cut.[9]

By introducing this set of categories into our consideration of the subject's position and representation within the symbolic field of culture, my interest

lies in writing such concepts as transcience and mutability back into the psychoanalytic account of psychic processes. The entire paradigm of mortality is as crucial to our discussion of visual and narrative representations as such already well-established and related categories as body, gender, desire, or ethics. For this hermeneutic enterprise, which places traumatic impact at its center—namely, the fragility of the body, the precariousness of the image repertoire, and the fallibility of the symbolic—I will use the term *navel*. Signifying the paradigm of concepts that are both literally and figuratively connected with this anatomical body sign as well as its symbolic counterpart, *omphalos* (the Greek term for navel, referring to ancient sculptures), the navel is devoid (like the phallus) of any direct reference to bodily reality; that is, referring to the representational quality of an articulation. In so doing, I suggest both a theoretical divergence from and a debt to Freud's discussion of castration, for which the Oedipus complex is the linchpin. For in this theoretical model, the issue of having or not having the phallus is the pivotal indication for the position one can take within a culture, whether one follows the classical patriarchy's privileging of the phallus or a more modern feminist critique of phallocentricity. As Griselda Pollock (1991, 32f) accurately notes,

> If everything is allowed to hinge only on castration, with its overly anatomical associations, men, who have penises to lose, appear not to be afflicted by lack. . . . The focus on castration gives undue and absolute significance to the sexing of the subject which then is read back as the end towards which all preceding processes drive. . . . But we are all subject to many psychic moments of lack in the process that begins with birth. . . . The Oedipal story as Freud and company invented it, and western bourgeois families institutionalised it, can be read as a defensive, masculinist representation, distancing men from the lack which forms all human subjects by making feminine bodies the exclusive and visual bearers of deficiency.

One of the premises underlying my argument about cultural configurations of hysteria is that the hysteric strategy of self-representation and self-performance negotiates between the phallus and the omphalos, staging as it does the child's questioning whether having or not having the phallus is all that determines a subject. For what the hysteric is so painfully aware of is precisely another law that dictates an individual's phantasies and symptoms; namely, the inevitable yet also inaccessible traumatic impact that she or he can neither fully repress nor directly articulate. In choosing the navel as an anatomical sign to designate this other force field constituting the subject, I follow Mieke Bal. She argues that whereas the phallus refers to gender in terms of "to have it" versus "to be it," the omphalos, in contrast, "is fundamentally gender specific—the navel is the scar of dependence on the mother—but it is also democratic in that both men and women have it. And unlike the phallus and its iconic representations disseminated throughout post-Freudian culture, the navel is starkly indexical" (Bal 1991, 23).

By rewriting symbolic castration under the aegis of the navel, speaking of denavelment and of the omphalos, I seek a way out of the impasse in psycho-

analytic theory, all division and separation inevitably turning into a discussion of sexual differences, so that feminine castration is necessarily viewed as different from masculine castration as are the phantasies concomitant with sexual castration revolving around the phallus. Instead I suggest shifting our critical attention to nongendered psychic moments of loss, severance, deprivation, and the persistent production of narratives commemorating the impact of traumatic vulnerability at the core of our psychic and aesthetic representations. These phantasies and symptoms hark back to an indeterminable yet ineluctable originary wound and look forward to the equally indeterminable, inevitable human demise that threatens the human subject above and beyond the symbolic significance of a culturally privileged organ.

## II

Before discussing how the language of hysteria can interrogate and sustain the Oedipal trajectory as described by Freud, it is worthwhile to review the origin of his psychoanalytic project, namely his formulation of the castration complex. With and against this primal theoretical phantasy, I will offer a rereading of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* to shed light on a moment in this play that Freud chose *not* to read. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud isolates this tragedy as the illustration par excellence of the distressing disturbance brought about in the child's relation to his parents by the first stirrings of sexuality. The Oedipus legend, according to Freud, springs from some primeval dream material that corresponds to two universally persistent dreams: that men dream of having sexual relations with their mother is not only the key to the tragedy of Oedipus but also "the complement" to a second dream, namely the dream of the father being dead (Freud 1900–1901, 261–264). He calls *Oedipus the King* a "tragedy of destiny," whose lesson for the spectator is the "submission to the divine will and realization of his own impotence." One could say that it serves as a core scenario for symbolic castration, admonishing the subject to curtail his desire in accordance with the law dictated by culture. However, the compelling force moves us even today, Freud adds, precisely because Oedipus's destiny "might have been ours—because the oracle laid the same curse upon us before our birth as upon him. It is the fate of all of us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse toward our mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father. *Our* dreams convince us that that is so." Thus they add a sexual encoding to the scenario of cultural forbiddance. The acculturated subject, according to Freud, is one who accepts this sexually encoded, symbolic castration. Abandoning the childhood wishes articulated by Sophocles this acculturated subject can detach his sexual impulses from his mother and forget his jealousy of his father.

Incest and patricide are the essence Freud draws from the play, and it is interesting to look carefully at his summary of it. The action of the play, he

suggests, "consists in nothing other than the process of revealing with cunning delays and ever-mounting excitement—a process that can be likened to the work of a psycho-analysis—that Oedipus himself is the murderer of Laïus, but further that he is the son of the murdered man and of Jocasta. Appalled by the abomination he has unwittingly perpetrated, Oedipus blinds himself and forsakes his home. The oracle has been fulfilled." Yet if we turn to Sophocles' play we can see that the mother-wife is eliminated in a far more radical sense than is implied by the standard psychoanalytic formulation of a renunciation of the maternal body. Freud suggests that this story is about man's destiny, to recognize his fundamental impotence. He further reads it as an allegory about the subject's move from a drive-oriented "natural" existence to a renunciation of his "drives." This renunciation, this acceptance of symbolic castration, is concomitant with his becoming an acculturated being. However, in so doing Freud elides a significant moment—the death of Jocasta.

In Sophocles' rendition, Jocasta initially pleads with Oedipus not to pose any more questions to the messenger, as the latter is about to confront him with the devastating story of his origins. She hopes that the terrible family secret may remain unrevealed and that the illusory integrity of her marriage be upheld, however precariously. Even before the messenger can convey the truth about Oedipus's family debt, she turns from her husband, warning him, "God keep you from the knowledge of who you are." Returning home, she goes straight to her marriage chamber, the fatal site of double procreation. Tearing her hair, she calls upon her dead first husband, Laïus, groaning and cursing her bed in which, in the words of the messenger, "she brought forth husband by her husband, children by her own child, an infamous double bond" (Sophocles 1954; lines 1250–51). In choosing the act of suicide, Jocasta acknowledges her guilt at precisely that moment when the disclosure of the dangerous knowledge she has sought to keep from Oedipus appears to be inevitable. Taking her life means resigning herself to the inheritance she had tried to avert. In suicide she faces her legacy directly, without any fantasies of an intact family as shields from the traumatic impact. Significantly, her actual death is elided in the play; the rest of the messenger's report renders it only obliquely, concentrating instead on Oedipus's rage and distress. The messenger explains, "How after that she died I do not know—for Oedipus distracted us from seeing. He burst upon us shouting and we looked to him as he paced frantically around, begging us always: Give me a sword, I say, to find this wife no wife, this mother's womb, this field of double sowing whence I sprang and where I sowed my children! . . . Bellowing terribly and led by some invisible guide he rushed on the two doors—wrenching the hollow bolts out of their sockets, he charged inside" (lines 1252–1263).[10]

Sophocles' play thus articulates a dream other than the one about our incestual desires for the mother and our patricidal hatred and murderous wishes directed against the father, namely a dream of matricide. Just before

Oedipus becomes appalled at the crimes he has unwittingly committed, indeed immediately after he discovers that he is the murderer of his father, his response is not atonement but rather the desire to commit another murder. With sword in hand he rushes into the bedroom of his mother-wife, hoping to strike with his sword at this field of double sowing. The phantasy he embarks on is that in destroying the body that was the origin both for himself and his progeny he might discharge the guilt he is suddenly burdened with. He might thus assert his potency against the curse of knowledge that Jocasta brought on him in the double gesture of giving birth to him and bearing his children. However, Jocasta has thwarted his efforts. As he and his servants enter the room, they find her hanging, the rope twisted around her neck. "When he saw her, he cried out fearfully and cut the dangling noose. Then, as she lay, poor woman, on the ground, what happened after was terrible to see. He tore the brooches—the gold chased brooches fastening her robe—away from her and lifting them up high dashed them on his own eyeballs, shrieking out such things as: they will never see the crime I have committed or had done upon me!" (lines 1263–1272).

What would Oedipus have done if Jocasta hadn't committed suicide? I venture a speculation: he would have deflected his aggressive instincts from himself onto her, as his initial response indicates he wanted to, and killed her. And if he had been successful in this initial matricidal urge, would he have had to blind himself? I would further speculate that the answer would be 'no'. By destroying "this mother's womb, this field of double sowing whence I sprang," he would have also destroyed the site of his origin and, by extension, the so-called curse laid on him before birth. He thus could have given birth anew to himself, and in this self-engendered refashioning could have cleansed himself from the family debt, the legacy of his birth. Destroying the maternal body would have reinstated his imaginary fiction of omnipotence and would have sustained a phantasy scenario of a second denaveling, symbolically undoing the first umbilical incision. So one might then read his matricidal impulse as a universal desire distinct from the one isolated by Freud, namely the desire to obliterate the incoherences and flaws inflicted on us by genealogy. That birth position forces the individual to oscillate between phantasies of wholeness (whether an integrity of the body or family bond) and a recognition that this notion itself is perhaps a necessary, but an illusory, phantasy. The dream of matricide, in other words, establishes the illusion that we can become or remain innocent, not fallible or responsible for our implenitude.[11] It is precisely because Oedipus cannot sever himself from the history of his genealogy, just as he cannot move beyond the mortality that the maternal body (the "field of double sowing") so tragically inscribed in his life, that he must resort to blinding himself. He thus conflates symbolic and actual castration in a gesture repeating the traumatic incision of denaveling that is at the root of his story.

One might speculate that Oedipus becomes appalled at his own abomination (to return to Freud's formulations) precisely because he cannot kill

Jocasta. At the sight of her dead body he recognizes his own impotence before fate. Not only has it become a sign for the mutability and fallibility that any notion of potency would require he repress, but also, and maybe above all, it signals his impotence precisely in the fact that he himself could not kill this site of his origin. I would add that he wishes to escape more than the crimes of patricide and incest. Freud read the gesture of self-blinding as a symbol for sexual castration and as a disavowal in response to the guilt felt about incestual and patricidal instincts. Yet Oedipus's response can also be read as a disavowal of a different guilt: his reaction of matricidal desire when the oracle told him he was not omnipotent but rather vulnerable and fallible. Over and above incest and patricide we share another fate, perhaps common to men and women alike in a way the gendered Oedipus complex is not, another curse that the oracle laid upon us with the cutting of the umbilical cord, whose nonarbitrary, indexical sign is the navel, not the phallus. This curse, or prophecy, is about the mutability of our bodies and our need to accept the parental debt; much as Oedipus cannot escape the fatal enmeshment of his mortality and responsibility for the fallibility he inherited from his parents, we can negotiate but never elide our common fate.

Any fundamental realization of what Freud calls impotence, I would argue, involves a recognition of the traumatic knowledge of vulnerability that grounds our existence. The reversal of this recognition, the dream of omnipotence, is thus directed toward two moments that Freud's discussion of sexual castration elides: the desire for immortality in the face of the mutability of the human body and the desire to be innocent of the matrix of psychic incoherences we each inherit from a given family structure. Both desires elicit the wish for a sacrificial cleansing, posited against the recognition that we must accept responsibility both for the mortality of our body and the flaws of our family history, a double legacy inherited with the cutting of the umbilical cord and bespoken by the navel. The desire to refashion ourselves mythically, outside and beyond anatomical and historical facticity, is related to—and is as illusory as any—myths about immortality.[12] These, myths, I would argue, are two equally fundamental dreams that we carry from childhood on and that Sophocles articulates in his play through the dead body of Jocasta.

By shifting the emphasis in my reading of the Oedipal story from incest and patricide to failed matricide, and by interpreting the ensuing self-castration as the metonymic substitute for a desire to eradicate the site of one's origin—the mother's womb and the child's remnant of this connection via the navel—I am moving away from the sexual encoding of castration. I want to suggest instead that at the epicenter of all traumatic knowledge, including what Freud calls the recognition of human impotence, lies a recognition of mortality. Freud's psychoanalytic theory purports, that the Oedipal subject handles this awareness of death as an *Unheimlichkeit*—as the state of not being fully at home in the world because one's somatic and psychic state is fragile and mutable. By having recourse to a sexually encoded act of dis-

placement, aggression is directed either outside of or displaced among other body organs, only to be converted into phantasies or realizations of partial dismemberment. Oedipus, unable to kill Jocasta, blinds himself, thus shifting the fear of death to an issue of seeing. Freud's psychoanalytic narrative readily transforms these pierced eyes into a metaphor for the male sexual organ, in a hermeneutic gesture that the existential therapist Irvin Yalom (1980, 59–74) calls a press for translation engendered by an unwillingness to directly theorize the traumatic impact of our mortality. Indeed, as Yalom argues, Freud ultimately came to view the nature of trauma as explicitly and exclusively sexual, emphasizing abandonment and castration as primary and privileged sources of anxiety in his effort to avoid or exclude a discussion of death.

Freud's inattention to death is particularly striking in the case studies on which he initially based his early theories about anxiety, trauma, castration, and femininity (see the *Studies in Hysteria*) where death pervades the clinical histories of his patients. The traumas precipitating the hysterical symptoms of the three main patients—Anna O., Emmy von N., and Elisabeth von R.—quite markedly involve death, either because the patient was involved in nursing a dying parent or because the deaths of various family members forced these women to confront not only the truth of their own mortality but also the fallibility of symbolic codes when faced with the total disintegration of the family bond. Yet Freud, in his interpretation of each case, either overlooks the connection between hysterical trauma and mortality or translates it into issues of sexually encoded loss: castration (e.g., the loss of the penis) or abandonment (e.g., the loss of love). Freud's phallic reading, Yalom argues, overlooks that the common denominator of abandonment, separation, and castration is the loss and annihilation connected with death. In his very late writings on the death drive Freud returned to the issue of mortality, which he had minimized at the turn of the century in writing his *Interpretation of Dreams* and his *Studies on Hysteria*. However, he never abandoned the primacy of sexual castration as an explanatory model for psychic organization and disturbance.[13] Freud's work on hysteria, in which he reads hysteric symptoms not as representations of death anxiety and traumatic impact but as articulations of a sexual scenario (an actual event of sexual abuse or a phantasy of seduction) resulted in the so-called "riddle of femininity." The narrative of phallic monism posits woman as an enigma, eliding the other story Freud's hysteric patients were telling him: a story about real death anxiety. Similarly, the insistence on incest and patricide, ignoring the desire for matricide, in *Oedipus the King* translated issues of mortality and facticity into sexuality, thus repressing the knowledge that death is the metaphorical navel of all feelings of impotence.

Under the aegis of the phallus, as Christa Rhode-Dachser (1991) argues, the Oedipal story translates femininity into an enigma for the masculine subject by devising a twofold symptom-representation: the sexually cas-

trated and demonic woman. This construction of femininity is how the masculine subject projects the recognition of mortality and fallibility. In the double strategy characteristic of symptom formation, the phallic narrative represses this traumatic knowledge by deflecting all the values connected with the paradigm of mortality onto the sexually different feminine body, finding its oblique articulation there. Psychoanalytic theory can be said to screen a recognition of mortality by sexually encoding narratives about the traumatic knowledge of human vulnerability in terms of the castrated or the demonic woman. As the feminine equivalent of the phallic masculine subject, she comes to harbor the denied recognition of death.

If making the feminine body the exclusive and visual bearer of fragility and want sustains the masculinist Oedipal story, as Griselda Pollock puts it, then for feminist hermeneutics to interrogate its linchpin, the so-called riddle of femininity, requires undoing the boundary that distances men "from the lack which forms all human subjects" (1991, 33). Such a dismantling of phallic strategies above all involves abandoning the distinction between a masculine and a feminine subject of castration. By returning to the masculine subject those aspects of human existence that culture has projected onto femininity—lack, drives, deprivation, fallibility, implenitude—we no longer focus our critical attention on gender distinction. Rather, shifting critical attention from phallus to omphalos implies confronting the way the subject emerges as a knot shielding itself from its originary wound by avoiding this traumatic knowledge of mortality. In other words, the initial incision produces a split in the subject from which sexual desire, cultural images of potency and immortality (as well as neurotic symptoms) may emerge as secondary screen phantasies. At the same time, this traumatic incision is also what knots the subject *together* at the navel of its being.

## III

The field of mythopoetics has seen the navel as a symbol for the site not only of origin but also of termination. In speaking of the navel of the world, concomitant with the idea of a centered existence is the notion that all life departs from and also returns to a sacred center. Thus, Christian mythology sees the altar as an *umbilicus terrae*, and stories of antiquity have always drawn on the connection between the navel and the grave, vault, or tomb,[14] this anatomical mark signifying the mortal wound that taints all human life from birth. For example, in Plato's *Symposium* (1961, 543), Aristophanes, describing the birth of sexuality, claims that because the initially androgynous humans tried to reach up and set upon the gods, they were punished by being cut in half. The sight of the gash was meant to frighten them into keeping quiet, and although Apollo tied the skin together over the one opening, "smoothing most of the creases away," Aristophanes suggests "he left

a few puckers round the navel, to remind us of what we suffered long ago." As a mythopoetic symbol, then, the navel signifies that the centeredness of human existence is constructed over a gap, a fissure, a void.

This image of human existence emerging from a center that is split recalls the priestess at Delphi in a cave-like shrine, chanting the oracle's truth over a cleft in the earth, inspired by mephitic vapors that rose from the earth, a scenario that allows me to specify the symbolic resonance with the omphalos. In Greek mythology the omphalos referred to a mound-shaped, stone, cult object, a supremely sacred fetish to which the suppliant used to cling, the most famous example of which was found in Apollo's temple in Delphi. Jane Ellen Harrison (1927, 386–429) suggests that this religious fetish was a crucial stake in the conflict between the old matrilinear order of the daimones of Earth and the Olympian Apollo, representative of the new patriarchal order. The omphalos was initially the sanctuary of Gaia—herself transparent, representing Earth as a maternal divinity. In her power to nourish and protect, Gaia represented a cyclical divinity, giving forth mortal existence and reclaiming it. The cult of Gaia acknowledged human mortality and its debt to Earth, and in this religious order the omphalos as maternal emblem was meant to relate both nourishment and mortality to the realm of a feminine originary divinity. In Harrison's reading, the sequence of cults from Gaia to Apollo, during which the progenitress of all generations of gods was transformed into an antagonistic demonic nature force, was seen as the conflict between the dream-oracle of Earth and Night and the truth of heaven's light and sun. This conflict crystallized in the myth of Apollo's slaying of the snake Python, who was both Gaia's child and guardian of the omphalos. Indeed, one Pompeian fresco shows the Python, still coiled around the omphalos, with the high pillar behind it giving it a grave-like look.[15]

However, after the displacement of Gaia by Apollo through this sacrificial murder, the general apparatus of her cult, the mephitic cleft in the earth and the omphalos as site of oracle, were maintained. The fetish-stone and maternal emblem, however, received a new encoding and were transformed into the sign of the earth's center on which Apollo's monistic faith in a paternal God could be based. The story of Gaia's prophetic powers was exchanged for those of Zeus who, seeking to find the center of the earth, released two eagles from the eastern and western edges of the world, only to have them meet over Delphi. In the cult of Apollo, the omphalos also served as the site of prophecy, only now it was in the form of the Delphic navel stone transformed into a grave-mound commemorating the sacred snake Python. One could say that this new religious realm was constructed at the grave of the sacred snake, and indeed navel stones are often seen in conjunction with gravestones.

Yet the Apollonian omphalos functions like a symptom that negates even as it articulates the impact of disavowed knowledge. Re-encoded, it displaces Gaia and with her an acknowledgment of the vulnerability of life, of

the mortal's debt to Earth; it does so precisely by commemorating the killing of the snake, which, functioning as manifest connection to this maternal divinity, can be read as the mythopoetic rendition of the umbilical cord. In other words, even as the Apollonian omphalos displaces the snake, now no longer encircling the navel-stone but buried beneath it, it reminds us of the visible connection to the source of life, which is also the source of death. The trajectory from Gaia's to Apollo's omphalos might then be read in the following way. Initially, the omphalos signified the maternal emblem, marking the site of a manifest worship of the chasm at the center of existence—Earth's cleft—with a visible connection to the transparent maternal force given shape in the figure of Python. In the second, Apollonian phase, the omphalos was transformed into an apotropaic emblem, a shield from any direct acknowledgment of our mortal debt to the maternal Earth. After this shift in belief, brought about by virtue of a form of matricide, the omphalos came to serve as site of purification and prophecy, at the same time, however, commemorating the now invisible umbilical cord. So that Apollo's omphalos, whose manifest function lay in marking the center of the world and the site of truth, had a supplementary function as a gravestone, rendering a displaced acknowledgment of death as well. The navel was symbol of a ritually marked central source of life and fertility and of sacrifice and commemoration (as a gravestone monument).

The omphalos that interests me is not Gaia's altar but rather Python's grave-mound: there it functions as a symbol of loss and commemoration, articulating how values connected with the maternal divinity—the Earth, the night, the bond between birth and death—ground any paternal symbolic system. In this function the omphalos describes an aspect of the destiny of our anatomy distinct from Freud's story of the phallus. It invites us to think of the navel as a gravestone commemorating the death of our Python, the umbilical cord we have lost. In the interpretive narrative I am advocating, the navel marks a double matricide: the bodily severing at childbirth and the psychic renunciation of the maternal body required by symbolic castration. Although the omphalos thus functions as the edifice on which phantasies of potency and immortality can be erected, as the apotropaic gesture that can mitigate the anxiety induced by human vulnerability, this navel-grave also is the trace of the incision we carry with us as we move into the paternal cultural order. It is, after all, the signature of the lost maternal body, admonishing us of our debt to death.

My redefinition of the omphalos follows Jacques Lacan's discussion of the psychic history of the subject as structured by a fundamental loss of the maternal body—a loss we never own or represent but one that we repeat. For Lacan the lack of this or that object is not at stake but rather the very lack of being. Far from assuaging this traumatic impact, the sublimation of drives and desires that results from a symbolic castration works against fictions of potency and immortality. It recreates the void left by this loss of the mother, pointing to what is fundamentally *unheimlich* in our way of inhab-

iting the world and the cleft that underlies phantasies of plenitude. Indeed, in his article, "The Function and Field of Speech and Language," Lacan (1966, 105) suggests, "When we wish to attain in the subject . . . what is primordial to the birth of symbols, we find it is in death, from which his existence takes on all the meaning it has." For Lacan castration involves coming to terms with what one is not, with what one does not have, with what one cannot be; with a recognition of finitude and that something crucial is always already lost—and irretrievably so. As Richard Boothby suggests, Lacan's notion of castration "is only incidentally related to a paternal threat of violence," or to the threat of sexual dismemberment, and he adds, "Acceptance of castration means [instead] abandoning the narcissistic dream of absolute self-adequacy and submitting to an original being at-a-loss" (1991, 149).

It is precisely because the paternal threat and its privileged signifier, the phallus, are only incidental to a castration that addresses the fallibility and vulnerability of the subject, whereas the maternal loss is endemic to it, that I speak of denaveling along with symbolic castration. I locate the site of this other incision at the navel, a remainder or residue written into the body, "which harkens back to the primordial object of satisfaction, that original object in relation to which every subsequent attempt at satisfaction must be deemed a refinding of the object: the mother" (Boothby 1991, 165–167). While the force of phallic castration resides in producing ongoing signification and deferral of desire, the omphalos points to the real, traumatic knowledge of human existence grounded by mortality. In other words, I am exploring an omphalic form of signification based not on the repression of traumatic enjoyment, in the way sublimation is. This omphalic form of signification neither forgets nor substitutes for the originary traumatic relation to the maternal body (its excessive presence and then its loss) but rather constructs a site within the symbolic for this knowledge.

In other words, an omphalic signification neither directly satisfies desire by moving from representation to action (in what Lacan has called the *passage à l'acte*) nor directly sublimates desire by keeping it unrealized, allowing the object at stake to remain lost. Rather, it addresses the mortal vulnerability of the subject; it enjoys the trace of this traumatic kernel. Sublimation would require that something be successfully repressed in order to be symbolized. The omphalos, in contrast, commemorating a lost body and the traumatic impact of vulnerability that could only be articulated in its wake, addresses a different knowledge. Since the traumatic kernel was never fully present to the psychic process, it can also never be fully lost. Representation here implies a strategy of conversion that preserves bits of the lost body, which is why the navel scar, index of parturition's incision, appears as such an adequate somatic metaphor for the process.

Yet this lost body, as Michèle Montrelay astutely notes, appears as an object of desire and anxiety not only belatedly, but also refers to "a time when nothing was thinkable: then, the body and the world were confounded in one chaotic intimacy which was too present, too immediate—one contin-

uous expanse of proximity or unbearable plenitude. What was lacking was lack" (1977, 233). Omphalic, then, I want to call a strategy of representation that is firmly in place within the symbolic and not to be relegated to a realm beyond cultural laws. At the same time this strategy oscillates between sublimation and the celebration of a traumatic remnant harking back to the site of unbearable plenitude. Evoking anxiety, the traumatic impact calls for sublimation; never really repressed, however, it persistently wanders, as a foreign body, through the psychic and somatic systems.

## IV

Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), is a postmodern rewriting of *Oedipus the King*. In the movie Normal Bates succeeds at the matricide that eluded his mythic forefather, only to displace his unappeased aggressive impulses by making a fetish of the lost maternal body, subsequently killing young women who threaten to be not only rivals to but moreover repetitions of Mother. Rather than offering an interpretation of the entire film, however, I will concentrate on three scenes revolving around navel inversions, which illustrate what is at stake in omphalic representation.[16] Hitchcock begins his narrative with a panorama of a city, whose name, Phoenix, Arizona, is then set into the center of the shot; the bird-like camera seeks out a building, swoops down, slips through the bottom slit left open from the pulled-down blinds of a window, and enters a dark space, only to arrest its flight by revealing the body of the protagonist, Marion Crane, lying half-dressed on a bed.

As we discover in the following scenes, she (like the camera introducing her), is a wanderer, lacking a clear position in her social order and in search of a place of habitation. Meeting her lover clandestinely during a lunch break, she seeks to legitimate their relationship through marriage and to gain respectability before the law; she is thwarted in her desire because Sam insists that he must first pay off his dead father's debts and his ex-wife's alimony. The next scene confirms the instability of her position within the symbolic, staging it, however, as an ambivalence toward paternal authority. Like an hysteric, Marion, who has no father of her own, plays to the father's gaze, responding to her customer's, Mr. Cassidy's, flirtation by taking on the coyly submissive pose of the daughter as he boasts about how he intends to pay $40,000 in cash to buy a house to give to his "sweet little girl" for her wedding. Significantly he looks suggestively at Marion only to correct himself, "Oh, oh no, not you," as he sits on her desk and continues his seductive speech, describing how his gift is meant not to buy happiness but rather to "buy off unhappiness," constantly addressing the similarity between Marion and his "baby" with such questions as "Are *you* unhappy?"

Though it remains unclear whose unhappiness is to be bought off—the daughter's—as she moves into the unknown territory of marriage, or the father's, bereft of his daughter, the fact that Cassidy prides himself in being

potent enough to ward off any sense of vulnerability evokes the exact opposite message to Marion. What his seduction provokes is her recognition not only of her implenitude (she is unhappy precisely because she does not have a home) but also of the fallibility of paternal authority. Cassidy jokingly explains that this is "private money," that he has not declared before the law. By thus offering his unhappy surrogate daughter a piece of the knowledge he keeps from his real daughter, that is, a glimpse of the hole in symbolic consistency, he shows her how to profit from his flaw by herself questioning the authority of the law. Demurely obeying the command of her boss to take the money to a safe-deposit box, she no longer sustains but rather dismantles paternal authority. She steals the money. With this act of parturition—Marion cuts the money, the symbolic baby Cassidy has nourished in private as the father—she also cuts herself from the community of law-abiding citizens. She renders visible the obscene, unspoken detail on which the entire transaction of buying off unhappiness is based: She acts out the fact that the father's potency feeds off illegal, private funds.

Marion's theft is the first omphalic moment in the film. The navel, as signifier of a founding incision, shielding from but also addressing vulnerability, is here rendered in the image of the envelope that contains the illegal money. The camera repeatedly seeks out this bundle, folded in half, unsealed, held shut by a rubber band, now referring both to the father's and the daughter's fallibility before the law. The envelope now figures as the mark of both Marion's and Cassidy's transgressive cut that jettisons them from social codes, with the daughter imitating the father's effort at another gesture of parturition: buying off unhappiness. As Marion changes in her room, the camera views this knotted scar five times, from all sides, the last shot showing Marion plunging it into the dark caverns of her purse. From here she extracts it when a policeman on the highway stops her to see her licence, then again in the garage restroom, where she exchanges her car. Later she opens the envelope to fold the money into a newspaper, and she leaves it, like Poe's purloined letter, excessively exposed on her bedside table in Bates Motel, somewhat shielded from the view of Norman. Significantly, it is the last object that he clears from her room when he seeks to make Marion's corpse, along with her effects, disappear from sight.

Throughout Marion's scenes, she remains ambivalent toward the law, acknowledging its authority even as she transgresses it. On the manifest level she reaches the Bates Motel only on the second night of her trip to bring the stolen money to Sam in Fairville and sell him on the idea of marriage: The policeman had stopped her that morning while she was sleeping in her car at the side of the road. On the latent level, however, in turning off the highway Marion follows a fateful call to discover the truth of her desire for marriage, this bond that could sustain a fantasy of integrity and belonging that might shield her from a sense of abandonment and implenitude. We will discover that this lack, based on subjectivity because it ensures individuality, or the distinction from other objects and bodies, though traumatic, nevertheless

preserves her from the equally disturbing and unbearable excess of plenitude that would extinguish all life-sustaining differentiation. As Montrelay, commenting on Oedipus's discovery of the truth, writes, "The realization of unconscious desire is always so catastrophic that the subject can never bring it about on its own" (1977, 234). Indeed it needs a symptom of sorts which, as Žižek puts it, "is a compromise formation. . . . In the symptom, the subject gets back, in the form of a ciphered, unrecognized message, the truth about his desire, the truth that he was not able to confront, that he betrayed" (1993, 187).

In Norman Bates, Marion finds herself confronting precisely such a signifying double, one who also lost a father early on and thus only imperfectly subjected to "symbolic castration," hovers between supporting and transgressing the authority of paternal law.[17] To analyze both the ciphered message Norman broadcasts to Marion and the self-representation he has designed, which culminates in the shower scene, we must see how the film's second omphalic moment is embedded in a narrative sequence. Marion's realization of her desire begins, after all, with a discussion about Norman's mother: "My mother—what is the phrase?—she isn't quite herself today." After he invites Marion to have dinner with him in his homey kitchen, indeed just as she is about to cautiously place the stolen money wrapped inside the newspaper on the bedside table, she hears a disembodied female voice coming from the house in which Bates lives, calling out, "No, no." Although Norman describes Marion as "just a stranger" who is hungry on a wet night, the mother forbids him (on a manifest level) to feed her "ugly appetite with my food or my son." Yet screened out by the sexual narrative (the maternal voice's castrative interdiction that the son enjoy a potential bride) lies a different message about another appetite satisfied by cutting open any idealized fictions of sexual or marital pleasure. Because it is disembodied the maternal voice is itself a foreign body, wandering bereft of any corporality through the Bates Motel. It harks back in a ciphered way to an earlier traumatic parturition, namely the matricide committed by Norman, and prophesies a repetition of this fatal incision. This voice of the murdered mother is the trace of a lost object haunting Norman's psychic system, for which the house, itself an omphalos of sorts, is a visual externalization. A lost body, this maternal voice was not successfully repressed, forgotten, or sublimated, and thus came to be embodied in this vault of Norman's mind as the repeated recollection of trauma.

The jettisoned, freely floating voice that now belongs neither to Norman nor to his mother, as indeterminate a body as the navel, points out to Marion the fallibility of her phantasy that she could build a happy marriage with Sam based on the money stolen from Cassidy. In the ensuing conversation with Norman, Marion's decision to accept symbolic castration is confirmed. Thanking him for the exchange, she decides to go back to Phoenix the next morning and return the money, both acknowledging her guilt and relinquishing her romantic idealization. But by rendering an intimate, traumatic

trace external, a second desire is awakened in both Marion and her symptom, Norman, directed not at sublimating lack but rather at enjoying unbearable plenitude, filling the hole in paternal authority with an excessive presence of the maternal body. As though to pave the way for the total obliteration of the differences underlying the origin and sustainment of individual subjectivity, body boundaries seem to blur in the course of their conversation. It is no longer clear who is stuffing and who is being stuffed; who is alive and who, inanimate; what is outside and what, inside.

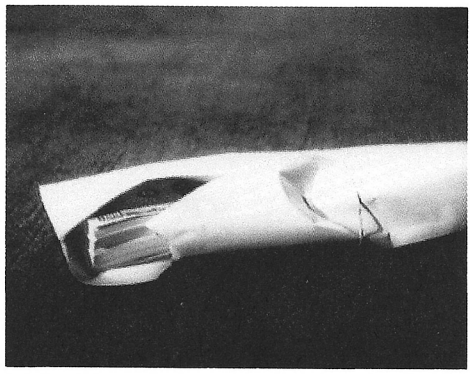
On the one hand, Norman speaks of his hobby, "stuffing things . . . taxidermy," shown by the many stuffed birds on the parlor wall and whose crowning achievement, at the end of the film, is the transformation of his mother's corpse into a fetish. On the other hand, Hitchcock lays the trace for the discovery of a second, far more disturbing fetish, namely, that it is Norman's body which has in fact been stuffed, transformed into the living host of the lost maternal body. Norman's preservation of a bond twice severed, by parturition and then by matricide when he stabbed his mother in repetition of the umbilical cut, keeps alive the traumatic impact. Overtly he justifies his unwillingness to leave the "trap" he was "born into," having recourse to a screen fiction, namely his filial responsibility toward keeping Mother. If he were to leave, he explains, "the fire would go out. It would be cold and damp like a grave." Furthermore, while Marion had read Cassidy's confession of the illegality of his funds as an invitation to imitate him in his transgression of the law, Norman interprets Marion's revelation of her fraud as an invitation to embark on his transgressive desire.

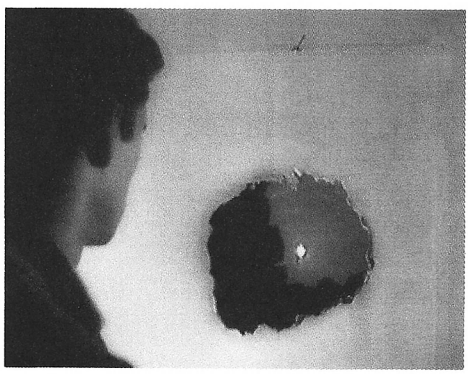
Showing us Norman smiling at the discrepancy between the name Marion gives in parting and the signature in the register, Hitchcock begins the sequence that will end with the car containing her corpse sinking into the swamp behind the motel. One could say the shower scene that follows enacts the content of the conversation preceding it: namely, that escape is impossible; one is born into an irrevocable knot and caught within constraints from which complete liberation would be a fiction. It visualizes, as a hallucination in the real,[18] what has been insufficiently repressed. The hallucination evokes first as a disembodied voice and then as the object of the conversation, namely, the maternal body in her traumatizing intimacy "too present, too immediate—one continuous expanse of proximity or unbearable plenitude," (Montrelay 1977, 233) which appears before Marion as her nemesis. As Barbara Creed notes, interpretations of this scene tend to see it either as representing the mother's desire to get rid of a rival or as a symbolic form of rape. She suggests that it be seen, instead, as a rendition of the son's response to a castrating parent: "Norman 'becomes' mother largely to turn the tables on mother, to ensure his own survival—to castrate rather than be castrated" (1993, 148). I would call this scene omphalic, however, because it ties together the two castrative constraints that are of concern here. Like Oedipus, Norman enters into the privacy of a feminine realm, knife in hand, ready to stab Marion Crane. On the manifest level of the story he thus interrupts her during her shower, a gesture of cleansing, meant to ritually mark her accep-

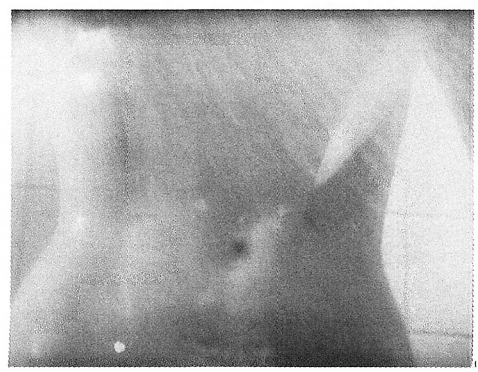
tance of symbolic castration. By going back to Phoenix and returning the money, she not only acknowledges her guilt but also relinquishes the phantasy of an intact home brought about through marriage. If, however, one stays with the less literal reading within which Norman and his alter-representation, Mother, are symptoms of Marion's unconscious desire, a second aspect of castration, what I am calling *denavelment*, comes into play. Whereas the shower marks Marion's ability to sublimate the inadequacy of her social existence, the lack of a marital bond, it also enacts her wish to enjoy what lies beyond (and precedes) this lack—precisely by enmeshing a representation of vulnerability with its actual performance.

If we accept the hybrid Norman-Mother as personifying the engulfing plenitude first felt in the maternal body, so overwhelming because the undifferentiated proximity allows for no autonomy and thus engenders a traumatic vulnerability from which lack shields, then its entrance into Marion's privacy has, as William Rothman notes, an uncanny, dual function: "First she is compelled to acknowledge this apparition as her own projection. Second, she is compelled to acknowledge this nightmare figure also as real, beyond her control" (1982, 301). At the navel of the film, Marion and Norman are actually conjoined. Their union is not erotic, but because of their desire to enjoy the traumatic kernel at the navel of their existence, they come together as one and the same phantasic body: Mother, engulfing the child, undoing the umbilical cut, and claiming back the body she gave forth. In Norman's case, as the narrative at the end of the film explains, this is a moment of psychosis when the son relinquishes all individuality and becomes the mother he killed. In Marion's case, the disembodied maternal voice had already given her a ciphered message about the frailty of her family romance and phantasies of marital plenitude with Sam. The appearance of its embodiment as Norman-Mother transmits two further messages about vulnerability. Just as marriage will not buy off unhappiness, so the symbolic is inconsistent: there is no restitution for her crime and she cannot undo the wound her theft has inflicted. As she is confronted with the irrevocable truth of her mortality, the vanity underlying her fantasies of romantic plenitude and social refashioning is utterly disclosed. At all three levels—phantasy, public position, and reality of the body—the message the phantastic figure of Norman-Mother brings is that to close the gap and undo the navel is a form of traumatic enjoyment commensurate with death. As Norman-Mother repeats the gesture of stabbing, which had itself given birth to this phantastic figure, repeating the matricide at the root of his psychosis, both Norman and Marion enjoy the traumatic kernel subtending any act of sublimating representation. They relinquish themselves to the archaic body of destructive impulses, which are curbed in the course of castrative representations leading to sublimation. Indeed, they enact a breakdown, in which symptoms become exclusively flesh.

That this scene cannot be interpreted merely as a phantasy of sexual penetration but must also be seen as a return to the traumatic impact of an earlier cut is shown by our viewing the knife actually stabbing the body only

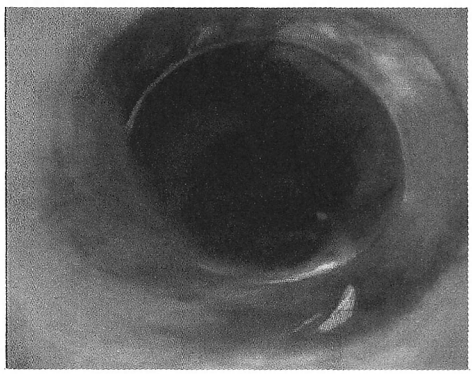


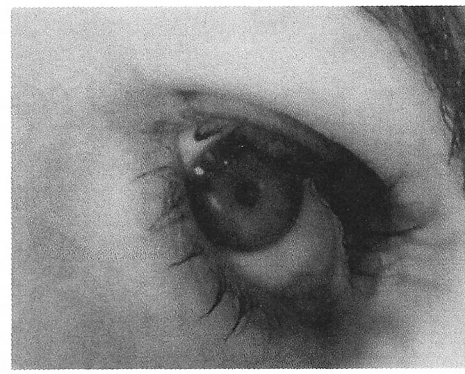


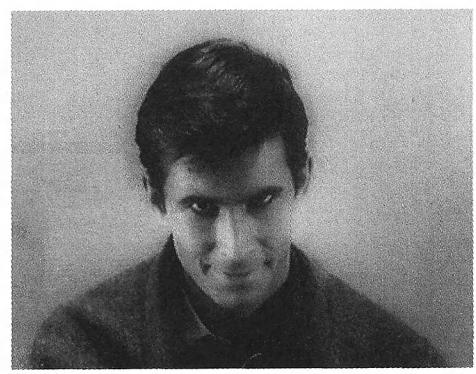


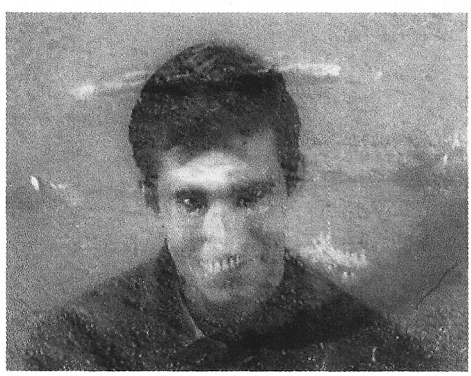
Alfred Hitchcock, scenes from *Psycho*: the envelope of money; removing the painting; the hole in the wall; the gaze; the shower murder; the drain; the dead eye; the mother fetish; the grinning Mother-Norman; the merged Mother-Norman; recovering the car.

when its blade is pointed not at the genitals or the breasts but rather at the abdominal area, just above her navel—at the site of Marion's womb.[19] Norman-Mother, one could say, wants not only to kill Marion but to pierce her at exactly the site from which she could become a mother herself. In attacking the site of motherhood he seems to take from her, in a preventive gesture, the ability to give birth to men like himself. With this doubly coded gesture he cuts into the feminine womb; as with "the field of double sowing," he attacks both the maternal body and himself, sustaining his phantasy work.









For Marion, however, returned in denaveling to the site at which her subjectivity began, it is as if, sliding down along the bathroom wall, she wakes up from a moment of phantastic trauma beyond language only to realize it was not a hallucination but actuality. The truth she has acquired, the most intimate tip of the navel, cannot be rendered in representation. Hitchcock thus gives us only an inversion: the dead eye.

On the narrative level, which self-reflexively comments on the act of representation, Hitchcock insists that the navel remains an indeterminate

boundary, a site marking the entrance, exit, and return of mutable bodies, along with debris one wants to reject. It is a shield from direct access to the inevitable, inaccessible matrix of vulnerability. This dual message, I suggest, comes across visually through the sequence of holes introducing and concluding the murder scene. Hitchcock shows us Norman removing a painting of "Susanna and the Elders" so as to gaze at Marion undressing through a hole in the wall. Significantly, this clandestine hole appears to be precisely behind the navel Susanna so tauntingly flaunts in the painting that screens it, and it resembles a belly with a navel. Hitchcock, in a close-up, then explicitly focuses on the eye and the hole, the latter a navel behind a navel, that Norman seeks to penetrate with his gaze. Covering the hole again, Norman returns to the house. Meanwhile Marion, having calculated whether she can pay back from her own savings the stolen money she has already spent, throws the torn bits of figures and paper into the toilet bowl and flushes these down, a navel image Hitchcock frames but does not penetrate.

In the shower itself he then rapidly aligns the showerhead—spouting water—with Marion's opened mouth—screaming in terror—and the bathtub drain, only partially visible as we see Norman-Mother pressing Marion against the wall. Her navel is struck by the knife; after Norman's exit, we once again see the showerhead emitting water and the drain absorbing its bloody transformation. The scene closes with the camera moving toward the bathtub drain until it has completely filled the frame, and superimposing on this Marion's dead eye, from which the camera then recedes, this navel image signifying the interface between traumatic knowledge and the limits of visualization. The camera then travels from Marion's head, passing by the showerhead and the toilet bowl (without showing its interior) through the room to alight on the newspaper containing the money. Through the open window we see the Bates house and now hear not the maternal voice but Norman's, calling out his horror. This signals another reason why I would call the cinematic language in this scene omphalic: by virtue of the technique of rapid sequence of shots (more than forty in as many seconds), it constructs a cinematic space that preserves traumatic knowledge without representing it directly. It avoids sublimating the impact into a single, fixed, and semantically encoded image.

In the final scene of revelation Norman-Mother, with the same gesture he entered his seductive guest's bathroom, breaks into the cellar room with knife in hand, ready to stab Marion's sister. Lila had gone there hoping to find Norman's mother, but had turned around in horror when she discovered that the person she had hoped to learn from now exists only as the remains of a corpse. As she turns, however, she finds herself confronted with a resurrection of this dead mother. Yet Lila, in contrast to her sister firmly emplaced within the symbolic, indeed seeks merely to cover the cleft her sister's theft created. The message she receives, between these two foreign bodies of the fetish and the phantastic figure of Norman-

Mother, enacts for her the truth of her sister's death, not her own. At the same time, however, this scene initiates the last sequence I am calling omphalic, one that again blurs the boundary, before a final fusing of bodies into traumatic plenitude.

Lila is facing the fetish just before she turns around, so that both she and the mother fetish are virtually in the same position; it is unclear who is to be the object of Norman's thrust. As she turns from the fetish, Lila's out-flung arm causes the bulb to swing back and forth. Casting shadows and then returning with its light, this swinging bulb transforms the cellar into a mutable phantasmagoric space. While Sam overpowers Norman-Mother, Lila first notes the wig fallen to the ground and then, once more, the maternal fetish. If the stable light had initially emphasized the deadness of the preserved head, the movement of the light now reanimates the maternal face. Roger Dadoun calls this "the most horrific moment of the film, the scene that is the fantasmatic and emotional pivot of the whole story [because] the mother is everywhere, occupying the whole screen from one edge of the frame to the other" (1989, 50–51). Hitchcock dissolves this traumatic image of excessive maternal plenitude, obliterating all distinctions—between the dead and the animate, the self and the other—into that of the county courthouse, and in doing so this image continues to haunt the viewer, just as, in Creed's words, "The all-pervasive presence of the mother . . . continues to haunt the subject even after the mother's death" (1993, 150).

If the omphalos as gravestone buries and recalls the absent Python and, with it, our connection to the maternal body, we also find several articulations in *Psycho* that correlate to Oedipus's castrative self-blinding. On the one hand, the serial murder of women, recalling and potentially replacing the psychically preserved, dead, mother with the significant cut, at least in Marion's case, is shown to be directed at the navel. On the other hand, the omphalos gravestone also finds articulation in Norman's effort to create a two-sided maternal fetish: the perfectly harmless stuffed fetish and his own murderous impersonation of her. Rather than sublimating her death by acknowledging his crime, he preserves and repeatedly performs this traumatic knowledge at his own body, by transforming himself into the host that harbors the parasitical dead mother's voice and language as well as by dressing in her clothes whenever he is once more overwhelmed by the impulse to kill potential mothers. While the failed murder of Lila structurally repeats the successful killing of Marion, it does so with a significant difference, marking the peripeteia of Hitchcock's narrative. Both scenes hinge on a breakdown of the symbolic, the first one opening up the hole through which the unbearable excessive proximity of the Mother can reemerge as a hallucination in the real, and the second case, when the desire is satisfied, a scene in which Norman is the object against which the force of too much maternal presence is directed. Although it costs him life as a differentiated subject, the result is not murder, but transformation. Before our eyes he enacts the phoenix, with

which the film began, as we notice the wandering voice of Mother arising from the ashes of Norman's body.

With the explanation "Bates no longer exists," the psychoanalyst embarks on an interpretive narrative of Norman's transformation. After the early death of the father, matricide was Norman's response to too much maternal presence, an incestuous desire gone awry, provoked when Norman found himself unable to contain his murderous jealousy once it was aroused by the presence of a rival. Oedipus, faced with Jocasta's corpse, blinds himself and thus embraces a psychic trajectory in which sublimation occurs because desire is repressed and symbolization performed, repeating the cutting of the mortal thread Jocasta undertook when she hanged herself. Norman, able to commit matricide, actually binds himself ever more closely to Mother. In order to erase any memory of this traumatic event, which he cannot sublimate because he cannot fully repress it (it actually gains force from the impact of an earlier cut, the loss of the father), he has recourse to another register of representation, namely, the body. As the analyst explains, "He was simply doing everything possible to keep alive the illusion of his mother being alive." He cannot psychically symbolize her death to himself, given that this realization is shielded by the psychic blank with which he registered the traumatic impact of matricide.

Preserving the dead mother who cannot be buried, he encrypts her in his own psychic register, so that he harbors not only the signature of parturition—the navel—but also the traces of the dead mother: her voice, her sentences, her clothes. Possessed by this foreign body, he either splits his personality, carrying on conversations with her, or dissociates himself completely, falling into a trance as Mother takes over completely; "He was never all Norman but he was often only Mother." Owing to successful matricide, he, unlike Oedipus, does not need to blind himself; rather he can continue to perform the act of severance from other potential maternal bodies, the potential brides that attract him. Yet, while the analyst's narrative is meant to assuage the horror evoked by the revelation of Norman's deeds, the closure of *Psycho* is extraordinarily perturbing because it ends not with a victim but with a haunting image.

Sitting in the cell of the courthouse, Mother-Norman now takes his symptom no longer as a ciphered message but as the truth, and no longer keeps the maternal fetish alive but rather feels assured that he is this dead body. Supporting the law and utterly displaying its limitations s/he sits in the police cell, pondering, "It's sad when a mother has to condemn her own son, but I couldn't allow them to believe that I would commit murder. They will put him away now, as I should have, years ago." To prove her subjection before the law she explains that she will simply sit and stare, without even harming the fly that moves across her hand. As the camera moves toward the sitting figure, it once more fills the frame with a face uncannily hovering between being alive and dead. Grinning, Mother-Norman oscil-