



**“CHRIST KID, YOU’RE A WEIRDO”**

**A KRISTEVAN READING OF**

***BAD BOY BUBBY.***

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**A thesis presented to  
the University of Adelaide  
and  
the Department of Social Inquiry**

**1998**

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## **Abstract**

**This thesis explores issues of identity and sexuality in the film *Bad Boy Bubby*, utilising Julia Kristeva's theories on abjection, love and melancholia. Through the examination of the film's representation of the 'self,' sexual difference and the Maternal body, this thesis argues that *Bad Boy Bubby* is unable to offer cinematic or psychical Oedipal resolution. This inability derives from what emerges in the film as an awareness and exploration of the crisis and disintegration of masculine subjectivity.**

## **Declaration of Originality**

**This thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma at any University, and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by any other person except where reference is made.**

**Signed by**

**Melissa Iocco**

## **Acknowledgments**

**I would first like to thank my supervisor Associate Professor Kay Schaffer for her guidance, energy and enthusiasm throughout the year. Her creative criticism and constant show of encouragement and support have proved invaluable to this project. I would like to thank Ben for his constant love and support. Thanks also go to my mother, Ninetta, who always made my education her first priority.**



## INTRODUCTION

### ***BAD BOY BUBBY, FEMINISM, KRISTEVA***

#### **“Bubby be a big weird kid. Christ kid, you’re a weirdo”**

In 1993, Rolf de Heer made a low budget film which he called *Bad Boy Bubby*. Set in and around the streets of Port Adelaide, South Australia, *Bad Boy Bubby* is a film which pushes the boundaries of the acceptable, the decent and the tasteful. Looking back, five years on, no-one would have anticipated the reaction and effect this strange and curious film would have on cinema spectators and film theorists alike. Besides acquiring a healthy cult following here and abroad, *Bad Boy Bubby* won a handful of awards at the 1993 Venice Film Festival, and also picked up four AFI (Australian Film Industry) awards in 1994, including best actor (Nicholas Hope), best director (Rolf de Heer) and best screen-play.

#### **“Nothing but a big weird kid”**

*Bad Boy Bubby* is the tale of a man-child’s Oedipal-like journey of self discovery through a life of abuse, confinement and escape. Bubby is a thirty five year old man who lives with his mother, Flo, in a dirty, dark, sparsely furnished flat. Bubby’s mother bathes him, feeds him, beats him and has sex with him (quite regularly, it is suggested). All his life Bubby has never left the flat, gone outside or had any

contact with anyone besides his mother, their tormented cat and the cockroaches which dart about their home. One day, Pop knocks on the door and Bubby's life irrevocably changes. After a series of strange and extreme events, Bubby ventures outside for the very first time. Through all of his strange and sometimes unbelievable encounters, Bubby searches for and struggles with his 'self,' through manifestations of horror, love and melancholia.

*Bad Boy Bubby* is a shocking, disturbing and offensive film. At the same time, *Bad Boy Bubby* is a very funny, sad and thought provoking film. The first time I watched *Bad Boy Bubby*, I was shocked by the graphic scenes of incest and murder, sickened by the scenes of animal cruelty, unimpressed by its representation of women and thoroughly entertained and enthralled by Nicholas Hope's amazing portrayal of "Bubby." Almost everything about *Bad Boy Bubby* - dialogue, use of music and lighting, character and editing - contribute to the film's ability to sicken, disturb and entertain the spectator. Watching *Bad Boy Bubby* is an experience - mesmerising, strange and ambiguous.

The appeal and popularity of this strange and sometimes offensive film is that it addresses a crisis in the stability of white Western masculinity and masculine patriarchal structures. Audiences living in white, Western industrial societies are shocked, offended and entertained by *Bad Boy Bubby*'s willingness <sup>to</sup> exploit the fragility of Paternal law and Western insecurities surrounding the 'self' and 'other.'

*Bad Boy Bubby* addresses the postmodern 'splitting' of the 'self' and the construction of multiple, varied subjectivities and sexualities beyond Oedipality.

The film speaks to a postmodern audience who have lost their faith in grand narratives such as Christianity and capitalism. It speaks to an audience who have lost their belief in masculine patriarchal structures such as the Church and the State. Moreover, *Bad Boy Bubby*'s testing and critique of the modernist construction of the 'self' and sexual difference makes it a very relevant, powerful, compelling and unsettling film.

### **The Kristevan Factor**

*Bad Boy Bubby* is a film that is preoccupied with themes of horror, sexuality and identity. This preoccupation lends itself to a Kristevan interpretation and reading of the film. Although Kristeva's work is mainly concerned with psychoanalysis, language and literature, I believe that her ideas can make an important contribution to any analysis of film interested in exploring representations of identity, self and sexual difference.

The psychoanalytic and linguistic insights of Julia Kristeva have been capturing the imagination and criticism of feminists for over the last twenty years. Influenced by Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theories of the ego, subjectivity and desire,



Kristeva explores the area of female and Maternal embodiment largely unexamined and ignored by male theorists. Utilising Kristeva's work on the Maternal body and the 'subject in process,' feminists have attempted to explore and undo Western, patriarchal discourses and modernist representations of masculine subjectivity and female embodiment.

*Bubby meets Kristeva: Aims and Objectives*

The purpose of this thesis is to provide a Kristevan reading of the film *Bad Boy Bubby*. Utilising Kristeva's theories on the Maternal body and the 'subject in process' I investigate the representation of sexual difference and notions of the 'self' in the film. I am particularly interested in the representation of the Maternal body/figure in relation to the subject's struggle for independence in both the elements of narrative and spectacle in the film.

Arguably, one of the most arresting, disturbing and memorable aspects of *Bad Boy Bubby* is the psychological, sexual and physical abuse Bubby suffers at the hand of his overweight, slovenly and domineering mother. As some feminist film critics have shown us, such 'horrific' representations of women in film have less to do with enactments or mirroring of 'real' women and 'real' situations and more to do with masculine patriarchal fears and anxieties surrounding sexual difference and the borders, boundaries and stability of the self (Creed 1993).

Using the insight of the psychoanalytic theories of Julia Kristeva, I will be able to tease out issues in the film surrounding Bobby's psychic, physical and sexual journey of the self. These insights will also help me explore to what extent *Bad Boy Bobby*'s crisis in male subjectivity is dramatised at the expense of the representation of the Maternal body and sexual difference.

### **Feminism, Film and Psychoanalysis**

It cannot be denied that film is a popular and influential form of entertainment and representation. Feminists interested in investigating notions of the 'self' and sexual difference in film have increasingly turned to psychoanalytic theories and methods of analysis in order to explore the workings and mechanisms of the film text. Such theorists have emphasised the importance of recognising film as a *signifying practice*, a constructed and manipulated text, rather than a neutral vehicle of communication or mirror on the real world (Creed 1987, 282). Feminist film theorists have been concerned with how the film text is given *meaning* through narrative, spectacle and various filmic devices. I will briefly introduce concepts from feminist film theory which will be useful to my analysis of *Bad Boy Bobby*.

#### **Audience Positioning and Spectatorship**

Kaja Silverman has explored the notion of 'suture' as a major contributor to establishing notions of a unified 'self' and sexual difference in the cinematic text,

and in the psyche of the viewer. Silverman describes 'suture' as "the procedures by which cinematic texts confer subjectivity upon their viewers" (1983, 195).

There are several ways in which the spectator is 'sutured' into the narrative and spectacle of the film. This is done by 'subjective' interlocking shots, particularly the shot-reverse-shot formation. These devices give meaning to the text "and a subject-position is constructed for the viewer" (Silverman 1983, 201). The shot-reverse-shot constructs the cinema spectator as a neutral, active and unified viewing subject. This is done by aiming to deny, as much as possible, the camera's existence thus "fostering the illusion that what is shown has an autonomous existence, independent of any technological interference, or any coercive gaze" (1983, 201-2).

Silverman points out that editing, cutting, excluding and negating shot from shot and scene from scene also contribute to the 'suturing' and reassurance of the viewer's subjectivity. Conventional cinema practices utilise these techniques in order to create a cinematic journey for the spectator that is smooth, coherent and 'rational.' These practices appeal to and reinforce the subject's imagined notions of unity, rationality and symbolic oneness. Through its attempts to reassure the subjectivity of the spectator, conventional cinema becomes a pleasurable, reassuring and enjoyable form of representation and entertainment.

### *Desire and Identification*

The roles of desire and identification in conventional cinema reinforce the subjectivity of the spectator in a number of ways. Character ego ideals often provide the audience with a focus for narcissistic identification. This narcissistic identification reassures the subjectivity and 'wholeness' of the spectator and reinforces divisions between 'self' and 'other.' Constructions of identity and sexuality through Oedipal narratives and 'journeys' reinforce notions of a universal male-self and a feared and desired female-other. The Oedipal constructions of self and other are achieved through cinematic techniques such as camera angle and focus, use of sound and lighting. The psychical and physical construction of the female-other in film often works to invoke desire, fear and anxiety in the spectator. Feelings of pleasure and discomfort are also aroused via the potential transgression and subversion of Oedipal narratives and boundaries. Cultural ideas surrounding male identity and female sexuality are inextricably linked to the construction of desire and identification in film.

### *Scopophilia: Pleasure in Looking*

In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1990a) Laura Mulvey states that "the fascination of film is reinforced by pre-existing patterns of fascination already at work within the individual subject and the social formations which have moulded him [sic]" (1990a, 28). Laura Mulvey points out how pleasure in looking - scopophilia - is pleasant because it reinforces the male subject's ability to desire the

object . The ability to desire coincides with the acquisition of language and the moment of castration. Thus, scopophilia is simultaneously uncomfortable for the subject because desire inevitably points to the moment of male castration. Mulvey states “Desire, born with language, allows the possibility of transcending the instinctual and the imaginary, but its point of reference continually returns to the traumatic moment of its birth: the castration complex. Hence, the look, pleasurable in form, can be threatening in content, and it is woman as representation/image that crystallizes this paradox” (1990a, 32).

Exploring a similar theme, Kaja Silverman holds that the female subject of the film narrative “signifies lack within the fiction of the film, a fiction which inevitably duplicates dominant cultural values. She signifies, that is, the absence of the phallus (of control, power, privilege). As usual, her body provides the means for representing this deprivation. She simultaneously attracts the gaze - appeals to the senses - and represents castration” (1983, 223).

Mulvey’s theory revolves around the ‘active’ viewing position of the male spectator and the ‘passive’ viewing position of the female spectator. According to Mulvey, if the female viewer chooses to identify with the active male gaze, she is considered to be taking a ‘masochistic’ viewing position. Mulvey has been criticised for not exploring and focussing on the specificities and the flexibility of the female gaze and female spectatorship - a criticism Mulvey has tried to respond

to (see Mulvey 1990b). Despite this criticism, I believe that Mulvey's focus on the male gaze makes an important contribution to the undoing of notions of a unified, rational, masculine 'self' and thus fixed 'inevitable' sexual difference.

### **Abjection, Love and Melancholia**

This thesis is divided into three chapters. These chapters correspond to Kristeva's theories on abjection, love and melancholia and the ways in which these notions manifest themselves in the narrative and spectacle of *Bad Boy Bobby*. My investment in Kristeva's theories surrounding abjection, love and melancholia is two-fold. Firstly, these aspects of Kristevan theory most interestingly and relevantly explore issues of identity, sexuality and the relationship and tension between the Maternal body and the 'subject in process.' Secondly, much of *Bad Boy Bobby* can be explored and interpreted through abjection, love and melancholia in the subject, particularly in terms of the film's representation of the Maternal body, the self and sexual difference. I will focus mainly, though not exclusively, on three of Kristeva's publications: *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982), *Tales of Love* (1987) and *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (1989).

Kristeva's three categories of analysis help structure the body of the thesis.

Chapter One, Filth and Fear, will explore the ways in which notions of abjection

and horror are manifested in the narrative and spectacle of *Bad Boy Bubby*. These notions are considered in relation to the film's representation of the Maternal body and the transgression of psychical and physical boundaries. Chapter Two, Loss and Love, will consider Bubby's extension of himself through the relationships he forms after he leaves home. I will consider how notions of loss and love are central to the establishing notions of the self, language and identity and thus the psychic and cinematic disavowal of the Maternal body. Chapter Three, Melancholia and Music, will explore the manifestation of melancholia and mourning in *Bad Boy Bubby*. Themes of religion, law and institution in the film will be explored in relation to the crisis in Australian masculine subjectivity through the crumbling of these patriarchal structures. This chapter will also consider the role of music, rhythm and light in the film and how they help to disrupt and contradict notions of a fixed identity in the character Bubby, and in the spectator's viewing experience of *Bad Boy Bubby*.

Using the tools of feminist film theorists and the psychoanalytic insights of Julia Kristeva, my intent is to show that *Bad Boy Bubby reinforces* patriarchal notions of the 'self' and sexual difference, *as much as it subverts* these notions and shows them to be unreliable, unstable, malleable, penetrable and in flux.

# CHAPTER ONE

## FILTH AND FEAR

. . . uncertainties about the limits of the  
subject (myself versus other people,  
inside verses outside) internalize . . . [an]  
aggressive fascination with the mother.

Kristeva, *New Maladies  
of the Soul*, 1995.

Shocking, confronting, sickening, offensive and horrifying. Some of these words come to mind when considering *Bad Boy Bubby*'s scenes of sexual and physical abuse, psychological manipulation, incest, animal cruelty and murder. This chapter considers *Bad Boy Bubby* in terms of Kristeva's notion of abjection, a theory most useful for investigating the role that the horrific, the shocking and the disgusting play in relation to cinematic representations of the Maternal body, the self and sexual difference. Scenes invoking filth and fear litter *Bad Boy Bubby*. I explore *Bad Boy Bubby*'s 'filth and fear' in relation to three key areas in the film. First, I consider the filth and fear present in *Bad Boy Bubby* in relation to notion of abjection, as developed by Kristeva in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982). Second I consider the film's construction <sup>of</sup> the Maternal body as abject and the ways in which this figure evokes infantile and adult fears and desires. I explore



how the representation of the abject Maternal relates to issues of identity, sexuality and horror in *Bad Boy Bubby*. Third, I consider notions of physical and psychological borders and boundaries. The film's exploration of gender roles, normal and abnormal sexual desire and clean and unclean bodies work to both exploit and reinforce these constructed boundaries and borders. *Bad Boy Bubby* never leaves the realm of the abject and it never completely restores the identity of the spectator. For these reasons Kristeva's theory of the abject is most relevant and useful to an analysis of *Bad Boy Bubby* because, as Kristeva explains, "abjection is above all ambiguity. Because while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it - on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger" (Kristeva 1982, 9). *Bad Boy Bubby* has the abject seeping into its themes, flowing into its style, infecting its characters and unsettling its spectators.

### ***Bad Boy Bubby's Cinematic 'Powers of Horror'***

*Bad Boy Bubby* offers its spectators many uncomfortable scenes which are shocking and disgusting. Such scenes occur predominantly within the first half of the film which is suffocatingly slow and painful to watch. The lack of dialogue and narrative action draws the spectator into the mundane and perverse (non)activities of Bubby and his mother, Flo. Visually, the pair are not appealing to the eye - Bubby is a thin, boyish-looking, balding man in his mid-thirties; his mother is an

overweight, slovenly woman in her mid-fifties. In the first few minutes of the film, the spectator is invited to look at their naked bodies - Bubby, as he stands passively in a tub of water as his mother bathes him, and then his mother, as she bathes her face, arms and breasts. The visual representation of Bubby's mother's excessive body - her large, saggy breasts, flabby arms and generous stomach, combined with the general state of squalor in their home, contribute to the spectator's general feelings of visual disgust, disdain and abjection. Also, the visual representation of Flo as unattractive and overweight contributes to the construction of her character as ultimately unlikable, cruel and perverse. It is an excessively exaggerated body which is seen to exemplify Mikhail Bakhtin's statement that an "exaggeration of the grotesque requires an extreme, fantastic character" (1984, 306).

"We don't get very many visitors"

The flat in which Bubby and his mother live in is sparsely furnished, dark, dirty, grey, drab, cold and damp. The walls are stained and splattered, the saucepan in which Bubby's mother heats milk for Bubby is dirty and burnt, and the floor is grey and filthy. This is an effective way to present the living conditions of characters who are to be constructed as improper, unclean and perverse - "a grotesque world in which only the inappropriate is exaggerated . . . is extremely poor, colorless and far from gay" (Bakhtin 1984, 308) - an accurate description of the first half of *Bad Boy Bubby*.

The representation of Bubby and Flo's living conditions and depraved lifestyle also reinforces the negative cultural and historical associations between dirt and the lower classes. Filth, lack of hygiene, ignorance, despair and the passions are often associated with the lower classes, as opposed to the cleanliness, rationality, dignity and reason of the upper classes. It is also a cultural distinction often made between Western cultures and 'other' 'backward' cultures (see McClintock 1995, 207-231, and Finch 1993, 32-49). Because the spectator is often invited to identify with Bubby, his living conditions, poverty and deprivation make this identification difficult, contributing to the compromised subjectivity of the spectator.

### *Cats, Cockroaches and the Abject*

In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982), Julia Kristeva explores the way in which abjection manifests itself within most cultures and societies as a means to define and separate subject from object, inside from out, human from non-human, clean from unclean and, inevitably, masculine from feminine. Working from theories informed by Sigmund Freud (1913) and Mary Douglas (1980), Kristeva holds that body waste is abject because it both threatens and defines the subject's borders of the clean and unclean, and the exterior and interior of the body. Bodily waste must be abjected since "the body must bear no trace of its debt to nature: it must be clean and proper in order to be fully symbolic . . . Any secretion or discharge, anything that leaks out of the feminine or masculine defiles"

(1982, 102). Kristeva articulates the way in which bodily wastes remind us of death and the ultimate abjection - the corpse.

Such wastes drop so that I might live, until from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit - cadere, cadaver. If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of waste, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expels, "I" is expelled" (1982, 3-4).

In the past, the relationship between abjection and film has mainly been considered in relation to the horror genre. Barbara Creed's analyses of abjection, sexuality and identity in contemporary horror films are exemplary. She begins with the premise that "the horror film abounds in images of abjection, foremost of which is the corpse, whole and mutilated, followed by an array of bodily wastes such as blood, vomit, saliva, sweat, tears and putrefying flesh" (Creed 1993, 10). It can be said that *Bad Boy Bubby* is not a film which necessarily fits into the horror genre. But, like the horror film, *Bad Boy Bubby* does engage in a visual display of dead bodies and bodily waste.

The corpse is a feature of *Bad Boy Bubby* - the corpse of Bubby's mother Flo and father Pop, and the corpses of Bubby's 'pets.' Out of curiosity, Bubby suffocates his cat, by wrapping its head in cling-wrap. Later, in an attempt to animate the cat, he shakes it around and slaps it about the head. When Bubby packs a suit-case and

leaves home, he takes the dead cat with him. Later in the film, Bubby befriends another cat, which he later finds dead. Out of sadness, Bubby weeps and holds the dead animal close to his face. In a later scene, we see Bubby stroking the same dead cat on his leg. These scenes are an example of the film's ability to disturb the boundaries between the living and the dead, the clean and unclean. The fact that Bubby treats the corpses and carries them around as if they were alive, challenges the cultural and physical borders between the living and the dead. The spectator is challenged and disgusted by the fact that the corpse of the cat does not bother Bubby - he is not sickened or disturbed by it.

Bubby's own body is also represented as abject. To emulate the beard of his Pop, Bubby smears a viscous brown paste to his face, pasting to it pieces of his own cut hair. Bubby eats a cockroach after he is unable to entice his dead cat to eat it. In another scene, Bubby urinates in his chair after not being allowed to move from it for several hours. The camera moves slowly from Bubby's face, down his seated body and to the urine seeping through the wicker chair, splattering onto the floor. In two separate scenes, Bubby pursues and catches a cockroach, carefully pulls off each of its legs, lines them up and watches the limbless insect writhe about. Due to *Bad Boy Bubby's* willingness to explore and exploit the abject, the spectator is spared none of the detail of these scenes. The film's 'suturing' effects and subjective filming, combined with Bubby's attachment to his dead pets, *and* the representation of Bubby's own abject body, makes identification with Bubby

difficult, compromising the spectator's ability to identify with a 'clean' and 'proper' ego ideal. This compromise further adds to *Bad Boy Bubby*'s ability to challenge the psychical and physical borders of the spectator.

### *Cinema Spectatorship and the Abject*

The most complex, ambiguous and contradictory aspect of abjection is the way in which it both repels and attracts, sickens and pleasures, disgusts and arouses, reinforces and subverts. The abject can be attractive to the subject as it offers pleasure in transgression, pleasure in encountering death and the unknown (Creed 1994, 59). "One thus understands," Kristeva states, "why so many victims of the abject are its fascinated victims - if not its submissive and willing ones" (1982, 9). Creed has argued that the cinema *itself* is an abject form of representation. This is due to the way cinema is able to represent death and other forms of abjection effectively through special effects, make-up and re-enactments of death and dying. Creed states "modern audiences want to encounter death, to see what death might look like, to feel their skin shiver, stomach tighten, adrenalin pump, heart pound . . . It is the cinema's technical ability to represent the violation of boundaries between the living and the dead human which renders it such a perfect medium for capturing death and abjection" (1994, 59).

As mentioned previously, it would be inaccurate to categorise *Bad Boy Bubby* simply as a horror film or a part of the horror genre. Besides the film's depiction of

the abject - dead bodies, murder, bodily waste - I believe the film challenges notions of the self in a more complex and subtle way than does the horror film. The contemporary horror film provides us with an encounter with the abject, a temporary loss of our psychological and physical borders and boundaries. The horror film has moments of tension and release, opening up and closure. The horror film offers a “cathartic experience...enabling a journey into the unknown and an encounter with the taboo and repressed elements of human existence - from the safety of the cinema seat” (Creed 1994, 59). Unlike the horror film, *Bad Boy Bubby* has difficulty presenting the spectator with closure, resolution or relief. Order is not restored, despite the initial suggestions that it may be, and its encounter with the abject is continual and prolonged, long after one leaves the cinema.

### The Abject Mother

Kristeva holds that the Maternal body/figure has been attributed <sup>with</sup> a special relationship to the abject. This connection has meant that discourses and representations on motherhood and the specificities of the female body have often been influenced by the fears, desires and anxieties of the male subject. An example of this limiting representation of motherhood can be found in the mother character, Flo, in *Bad Boy Bubby*. The name Flo reminds us of the word ‘flow’ suggesting a changing, inconstant and unstable identity. It is a name which reflects a volatile,

fluid and 'flowing' character or entity which is hard to pin down and categorise - something which slips between your fingers. It is an interesting name given to a character who, for most of the time, is the epitome of abject (infantile and adult) masculine fears, anxieties<sup>and</sup> desires.

Flo can be interpreted as the devouring, jealous, selfish mother, refusing to relinquish her hold on her child. The emphasis on Flo's flabby folds of skin, her large sagging breasts, her thick strong legs, her sour menacing face and her cruel perverted character, work to reinforce her status as the terrifying and abject Maternal figure. In the film, as in the psyche according to Kristeva, the suffocating yet comforting Maternal realm is constructed and imagined in opposition to the world of the symbolic Paternal where one acquires identity, language and a notion of the 'self.'

Abjection is connected to Kristeva's concept of the 'pre-Oedipal' or semiotic phase. The semiotic phase of development could be described as that time in which the child has not acquired and is not aware of "identity, system, order" (1982, 4). The child is said to exist in a dyadic and symbiotic relationship with the mother or Maternal. The child/subject first experiences abjection when it begins to break away from the mother and takes up a place in relation to the symbolic order. But as with all of the subject's experiences with abjection "it is a violent and clumsy



breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling” (1982, 13).

When the subject experiences the abject, after his or her entrance into the symbolic, it is a trace memory or experience of the Maternal ‘semiotic’ (a notion which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three). The semiotic allows access to a memory back to, or resulting from, a time where there were no borders, structures or discourse - the place where ‘meaning collapses.’ The experience inspires feelings of loathing and love; it is both comforting and frightening.

In *Bad Boy Bubby*, Flo can be seen to represent the ultimate fear and desire of the subject - she is the engulfing, terrifying and suffocating Maternal figure. At the same time Flo offers protection, chaos and ‘comfort’ through ignorant bliss and lack of boundaries. The cinematic and cultural representation of motherhood-gone-wrong can be attributed to what Kelly Oliver calls ‘misplaced abjection’ (Oliver 1993a, 6). The association of the feminine with the abject has been imposed “upon social representation, causing an actual denigration of women” (Kristeva 1987, 374). The child needs to ‘abject’ the Maternal in order to enter the symbolic, language, identity and discourse. But, as Kelly Oliver points out, what the child needs to ‘abject’ is the Maternal *container*, not the actual body of a woman (1993a, 6). Western cultural discourses on, and representations of, maternity do not

separate the Maternal function from women as people. Hence, the construction of ideal, positive womanhood is associated with motherhood and Maternal care (1993, 6). It is a construction which eludes the fact that some women cannot or do not choose to reproduce, and that some women do not mother, or ever look after children. Cultural anxieties surrounding the relationship between women, their reproductive capacities and their role in child care are inextricably linked to cultural representations of the abject mother - such as the terrifying mother character Flo in *Bad Boy Bubby*.

### *Unsettling Sound and Sickening Silence*

The use of sound, speech and dialogue in the first part of the film both reinforces and challenges the cinematic associations of the abject-feminine with sound and the symbolic-Paternal with meaning. The constant tick of a clock, far away industrial screeching sounds, a constant eerie hum and the scratch of Bubby's spoon and sugar in his bowl provide a disturbing substitute for the characters' lack of dialogue. This use or lack of sound is an effective way to illustrate Bubby's life of confinement and ignorant bliss with his mother.

Kaja Silverman has explored the relationship between psychoanalysis, sound and the female voice in cinema. Silverman argues that the female voice is often represented as an ambivalent "sonorous envelope," attesting "to the divided nature of subjectivity" (1988, 72). The fantasy of the "sonorous envelope" stems from an

image of infantile containment, before the infant has acquired language and identity. In this stage of subject development the mother's voice is imagined as either a comforting blanket of sound or a suffocating, entrapping web - in both cases the child is imagined as "trapped within the vocal continuum of the Maternal voice" (1988, 74). These ideas are further implicated in the development and struggle of masculine subjectivity and the Maternal threat to lure the subject back into the Maternal abyss of incoherent sound and disorder.

Silverman's ideas are relevant to the representation of the mother-child relationship in *Bad Boy Bubby*. In many ways, Bubby is still in a stage of infantile containment. Bubby's mother meets all his physical needs and keeps him confined in a small space, almost as if he were in a perverse nursery or a dark womb. The eerie industrial hums and distant screeches are the sounds which create the suffocating blanket surrounding Bubby. The spectator, who is invited to feel the extent of Bubby's confinement, is also surrounded by these 'irrational sounds.'

The only soothing or comforting words heard in the first part of the film are during the offensive scenes of incest between Bubby and Flo. "Such a good little boy," "that's a good boy," and "good boy Bubby" are some of the 'comforting' statements heard throughout the sex scenes between Bubby and Flo. These gentle phrases, juxtaposed with Flo's bossy and abusive "don't move!" "be still!" "don't

you bloody forget it!” and “by Christ I’ll beat you brainless!” provide an unsettling and uncomfortable soundtrack to the first half of *Bad Boy Bubby*.

Although Flo is given the ultimate verbal authority between the two characters, her dialogue signifies the static, unchanging relationship she maintains with Bubby.

Bubby is locked into stasis, imprisoned in a desirable, seductive and yet confining Maternal bond. Bubby’s relationship with Flo is the place *from which* the narrative progresses. Flo loses verbal authority and verbal control when Bubby’s Pop returns after a thirty-five year absence. The tone of Flo’s voice changes when she addresses Pop. Here, as opposed to when she addresses Bubby, she is polite, flirtatious and apologetic. Flo utters phrases like “I’m sorry, we don’t get very many visitors,” “would a sherry do?” and “you always were a charmer!” As Pop caresses Flo’s breast, she expresses a new-found modesty and insecurity signalled by her question “you don’t think its too big?” Silverman states the male voice is given status and authority by identifying “the mother with sound and the father with meaning” (1988, 75) and by “stripping the female voice of all claim to verbal authority” (1988, 77). Pop takes control of the filmic ‘plot’ upon his arrival. The scenes between Bubby and Flo contain little dialogue or narrative action and are filled with distant humming and screeches. On the contrary, scenes including Pop contain greater dialogue, increased narrative action and a welcomed plot development.

*Bad Boy Bubby* allows the character Pop to succeed in claiming verbal authority over Flo and Bubby. However, Pop does not succeed at representing a Paternal authority which is 'purer,' 'cleaner' or more 'reliable' than Maternal authority. This is mainly because the figure of Pop is 'abject' in his own way - an idea I discuss later in the chapter.

### **Bubby: Breaching Our Borders and Boundaries**

*Bad Boy Bubby* does not stop at visual abjection. Many of the themes, relationships, characters and ideas in the film are also abject - threatening to cross the cultural and psychical borders of the clean and unclean, the proper and improper. In *Bad Boy Bubby*, the border is challenged by the representation of proper and improper gender roles, normal and abnormal sexual desires and distinctions between inside and outside bodily surfaces. The spectator's experience of discomfort, disgust or disdain throughout these scenes further challenge the spectator's sensitivity to the threat of these securing borders and boundaries.

In psychoanalytic terms, the border is associated with the subject's archaic relation to the mother, the threat of and desire to fall back into the Maternal container after entering the 'clean' symbolic world of Paternal law and power. On the surface, *Bad Boy Bubby* seems to enact an abject-Maternal world versus rational-Paternal world scenario. For example, Bubby acquires freedom and his 'own' life in the

outside world *after* his Pop arrives. After closer consideration, however, it becomes obvious that the film's borders surrounding the self and sexual difference are not so clear cut.

### (S)mother and Son

The relationship between Bubby and his mother, Flo, is presented as abnormal, strange and perverse. The relationship, however, is full of contradictions and ambiguities. Flo shaves, bathes and cooks for Bubby - who is a grown man. Acts of cleaning, shaving and washing, have purifying, healing and cleansing associations attached to them. These cleansing, purifying, Maternal gestures, juxtaposed with the characters' depraved living conditions and scenes of Flo inflicting psychological, sexual and physical abuse on Bubby, provide the spectator with an unsettling and contradictory opening to the film.

Flo goes <sup>to</sup><sub>^</sub> extremes to keep Bubby from 'growing up.' She does this by feeding him a babyish meal of hot milk poured over pieces of bread and sugar - a metaphoric invocation of the breast which also works to signify poverty. Furthermore, Flo keeps Bubby's sexual and physical desire aimed solely at her through sex (incest). Flo also punishes Bubby for being curious and she scares him into not going 'outside.' What makes these scenes all the more contradictory and abject is that while Flo tries to keep Bubby a baby, she also punishes him for being one. Flo beats Bubby for soiling himself and scolds him for masturbating. Flo keeps Bubby

hovering at the border of abject-Maternal and clean-Paternal worlds. This strengthens Flo's power over Bubby at the threshold of both realms, further reinforcing the ambiguity of the mother-child dyad.

The spectacle and narrative of a grown man of stunted speech and character, relying on his mother for all his physical needs, both reinforces and challenges our assumptions and expectations surrounding Maternal behaviour and adult male development and behaviour. It challenges, because it presents us with a transgression of 'normal' gender roles and boundaries. It reinforces, because it suggests the refusal of normal gender roles represents a world that is inevitably lower class, dirty, abnormal and perverse.

The image of a jealous, possessive, monstrous mother figure terrorising the central character we are invited to identify with, is not new to cinema. It is an image of the Maternal that can be found in such films as *Carrie*, *Psycho*, *The Birds* and *Misery*, as explored by Barbara Creed.

In these films the Maternal figure is constructed as the monstrous-feminine. By refusing to relinquish her hold on her child, she prevents it from taking up its proper place in relation to the symbolic. Partly consumed by the desire to remain locked in a blissful relationship with the mother and partly terrified of separation, the child finds it easy to succumb to the comforting pleasure of the dyadic relationship (Creed 1993, 12).

Despite the fact that Flo terrifies and tortures Bubby, it is the only life he has ever known. Bubby experiences distress when Flo directs her attention to Pop. Later when Bubby is scared and disillusioned with the 'outside' world, he retreats to the dark, dirty flat. Interestingly, it is not until Pop tells Bubby to 'go outside' that Bubby first begins to consider leaving the dark, grey, Maternal realm. Bubby's thoughts about going 'outside' become more and more frequent. His gaze, and that of the camera, becomes focussed on the gas mask hanging on the wall, rather than the action and dialogue between Flo and Pop, heard softly in the background.

In some ways *Bad Boy Bubby* reinforces the cultural fears and stereotypes surrounding the over-possessive terrifying mother and the father who offers independence and order. However, *Bad Boy Bubby* has scenes which suggest that these understandings of gender and sexuality are constructed and learnt, and thus not essential nor inevitable. This can be seen through Bubby's tendency to learn play and dress through imitation. When he reverse play-acts his relationship with Flo with his cat, Bubby wears a dress of his mother's stuffed with 'pretend' saggy breasts. Here, Bubby associates power, dominance and privilege with certain ways of dress, behaviour and sexual 'difference.' When Bubby wants to be a man like his Pop, he wears Pop's clothes and pastes on a false beard - despite the fact that he can grow a beard himself. These are scenes which exemplify Judith Butler's ideas regarding gender as performance involving parody, imitation and 'drag' (Butler



1990, 137). Therefore, the film oscillates between reinforcing traditional notions of the self and sexual difference and subverting them.

"He never had a father": Flaunting Fragile Laws

In part, Bubby's life with Flo is constructed as an abject Maternal world with no rules or laws, no symbolic father. The incestuous relationship between Bubby and Flo is an example of this. Kristeva, following Levi-Strauss, has said that the prohibition of incest provides one of the founding structures of morality and society (1982, 68). The incest taboo serves mainly to sever the psychological and physical ties between mother and son, to "ward off the subject's fear of his very own identity sinking irretrievably into the mother" (1982, 64).

The scenes of incest in *Bad Boy Bubby* shock and offend the spectator as they exploit the boundaries between subject and object, proper and improper gender relations and normal and abnormal sexual behaviour. Cultural representations of the ideal mother/Maternal usually construct the mother as sexless. They are representations of motherhood which suppress any desire, joy or *jouissance*. Ewa Ziarek has said that "dominant cultural constructions of motherhood continuously skirt the trance of Maternal *jouissance*, [and] submit it to the stability of Paternal law" (1992, 101). The desire Flo has for her son is represented as perverse, excessive and forbidden compared to the more familiar image of the nurturing, sacrificial, sexless mother - the moral and "sexual guardian of her

children” (Finch 1993, 70). Since the spectator is ‘sutured’ into Bubby’s ‘innocence,’ the scenes of incest are all the more disturbing, and the character of Flo appears to be all the more sinister and abject.

Flo’s hypocritical use of religion also constructs her as an abject character - lacking, but also invoking, law and order. When Flo makes reference to God or Jesus, it is in a hypocritical, threatening, calculated way. Flo refers to the cross hanging on the wall in order to scare Bubby into not leaving the Maternal domain - “Jesus can see everything and if he tells me you’ve moved, by Christ I’ll beat you brainless!” Pop is also constructed as a religious hypocrite who dresses as a priest but only preaches “part-time.” Kristeva points out that the hypocrite, the liar and the traitor are also abject because they expose and flaunt the fragility of law, system and order. Flo, like the abject, is “immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady” (1982, 4).

When Bubby suffocates his mother to death, it is almost as if one expects that law, system and order will be restored. However, Bubby still refuses to go outside and take on language, identity and a ‘proper’ sexual partner. Bubby instead waits for his dead mother to serve food on his plate and sleeps naked next to her dead body. Even after Bubby is finally rid of his Maternal ‘shackles’ and the Paternal threat of castration (through his murder of Pop), Bubby slips back into a dependent, infantile mode and awaits for his mother to satisfy his drives and desires. This

highlights the film's refusal (or inability) to place Bubby on either side of the Maternal/semiotic or Paternal/symbolic.

*"You can call me Pop": Loose Law and Drunken Order*

When Bubby's 'Pop' returns after a thirty five year absence, the spectator is presented with a potential 'cleaning-up' of the film's (so far) abject narrative and spectacle. The incestuous relationship between Bubby and Flo stops, as Pop seduces Flo and re-establishes his sexual relationship with her. Bubby stops imitating Flo and begins playing at performing his 'proper' gender role by speaking and dressing like Pop. Flo's behaviour also changes as she assumes a 'proper' female gender role. Flo's tone of voice becomes polite and giggly, flattered by Pop's compliments about her "whoppers."

The change in Bubby and Flo seem to suggest that order, law and proper gender roles have been restored with the return of the Father. Pop also brings some symbolic elements with him into this abject Maternal realm. Pop attempts to invoke in Bubby 'proper' mother-child relations - "give your mother some privacy!" - and 'proper,' although bawdy, male-female relations - "you've got great tits Flo, one of the seven wonders of the world!" Pop also expresses a dislike for 'abnormal' sexual desire - "as long as he ain't a poof," - and a dislike for Bubby's unusual behaviour and speech - "eh, what's up son? You got a mental condition or

something?” It is also interesting to note that lighting in the film becomes brighter when Pop arrives, suggesting a Maternal/dark-Paternal/light dichotomy.

The possibility of a restoration of order and system, however, is not very reassuring to the spectator. This is due to the fact that the characters themselves are represented as depraved, perverse, poor and squalid- offering no ego ideal to the spectator for identification. What is ‘abject’ about Bubby learning from Pop is that Pop is hardly ‘clean’ and ‘proper’ himself - being old, poor, unshaven, haggardly and drunken. Pop is constructed as weak, untrustworthy, unreliable and dishonest - as is underscored by his nervous laugh when Flo says “I don’t know if I can trust you, Harold.” The film fails to give us the satisfaction that order has been restored with the return of Pop. Rather, *Bad Boy Bubby* reminds us that the symbolic is fragile, contradictory and built on unstable foundations. Bubby’s murder of Pop, as well as Flo, could be interpreted as a refusal to enter or embrace either world - not one without the other.

### *The Clingwrap Killer*

Bubby’s mode of killing through suffocation also challenges cultural borders and boundaries. Bubby cling-wraps his cat out of curiosity, not knowing it would lead to the creature’s death. With this new-found knowledge Bubby purposely cling-wraps Flo and Pop, and later cling-wraps the parents of his love interest, Angel.

Bubby's experiments with clingwrap as a mode of suffocation occur simultaneously with his curiosity about the 'poisonous' air outside that Flo has told him about. Bubby wonders what it would be like to "not breathe." When Flo threatens to push Bubby outside, Bubby begins to cough and splutter uncontrollably and automatically, thus revealing a psychologically-induced physical reaction. When Bubby is traumatised after losing his mother to Pop and defeated by his inability to win her back, he suffocates them both by wrapping their heads in clingwrap. Later Bubby cling wraps the parents of his love interest Angel after he witnesses their terribly cruel and hurtful behaviour towards her.

What seems to be at work here is a fascination with life and death - defined by the presence and absence of breath. Breathing and the mouth provide an entry and exit to the inside and outside surfaces of the body. The film's recurring theme of suffocation, breathing, not breathing, gas masks and poisonous air, illustrates an exploration and exploitation, in psychic terms, of these borders and boundaries, making it unsettling to the spectator's own borders of the psychical and physical.

### *Filth and Fear*

Despite *Bad Boy Bubby's* exploration of filth and fear through the representation of the abject, terrifying mother, the film refuses to offer any overall fixed notions of the Maternal, sexual difference or the 'self.' It's seemingly simple binary oppositions of abject-feminine versus rational-masculine worlds are challenged and

subverted by the representation of both realms existing within one another. Inevitably, both realms are unstable, unfixed, unreliable and socially constructed. Ultimately, Bubby refuses, or is unable, to exit one 'world' and enter another, pointing to a crisis in subjectivity and a lack of Oedipal resolution in the film. The cinematic experience of *Bad Boy Bubby* is unsettling and uncomfortable because it confuses the psychical journey the spectator usually is invited to take with the hero/ego ideal through conventional cinematic techniques and narratives. The evidence of Kristeva's abjection at work makes the already bumpy and muddy journey of the 'self' in *Bad Boy Bubby* all the more seductive, suffocating and subversive. The character of Bubby and the spectator are treated to a physical and psychical experience through the cinematic gaze which is much like the abject - "double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered" (1982, 207).

## CHAPTER TWO

### LOSS AND LOVE

**I am, in love, at the zenith of subjectivity.**

**Kristeva, *Tales of Love*,**

**1987.**

This chapter explores the themes of loss and love in *Bad Boy Bubby* and the ways in which these themes contribute to the film's representation of Bubby as a 'subject in process.' After murdering his parents and leaving his home, Bubby encounters sex, love, emotional turmoil and "tiny tits" in the 'outside' world. Using Kristeva's psychoanalytic insights surrounding love and amatory experience, I will show how Bubby's experiences with love illustrate a crisis in masculine subjectivity. Through the representation and exploration of relationships, love, desire and romance, *Bad Boy Bubby* ultimately refuses to resolve the Oedipal crisis set up in the first half of the film. Although some aspects of the film's romantic narrative and spectacle work to reinforce notions of the 'self' and sexual difference through its representation of male ego 'love,' I will explore how these notions are also subverted in *Bad Boy Bubby*. I will also consider whether the film allows for a more flexible and fluid account of female and male sexual and emotional experience.

## Oedipal Scenarios and Ego Identification: Bubby Competes For Love

### Kristeva's Approach to the Amatory

In *Tales of Love*, Julia Kristeva states that “the speaking subject is a loving subject” (1987, 170). The ability to ‘love,’ or be ‘in love,’ is central to the establishment and affirmation of the ‘self’ and its relation to the ‘other’ in the development of subjectivity. Kristeva states that “love of others originates in love of self . . . because in loving itself, the subject affirms its ontological solidity” (1987, 173). Hence, the subject is able to ‘love’ and ‘desire’ only after the awakening of narcissistic desire - an ultimately empty and imaginary reflection and idealisation of the self (1987, 268). This imaginary and empty reflection triggers an eventual crisis of the ‘self’ and masculine subjectivity.

Love “is impossible without a separation from the mother” (Lechte 1990, 167).

Love is possible only after the child has ‘abjected’ the Maternal container and has established boundaries surrounding its own clean and proper body.

Moreover, love is only possible after the child has acquired language, identity and a sense of ‘self’ and ‘other.’ Kristeva states “love of self is what establishes *one's own* as a unity as well as *one's own good*” (1987, 173). One becomes a narcissistic subject, and thus a loving subject, “only following the impact of a Paternal identification subsequently producing the Ego ideal” (Kristeva 1987, 126).



### Observing the Oedipal

Laplanche and Pontalis describe the Oedipus complex as an “organised body of loving and hostile wishes the child experiences towards its parents . . . The Oedipus complex plays a fundamental part in the structuring of the personality, and the orientation of human desire” (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973, 282-3). Once the male child identifies with the Paternal, he realises that he cannot challenge the father as a rival for his first object of love - the mother or Maternal container. The male child also realises that he cannot challenge the father’s superior physical and symbolic phallic power. If the child develops ‘normally,’ he overcomes this crisis by learning to identify wholly with the Paternal and accepting that he will one day take on his own phallus and lover. Despite the suspicion and difficulty some have accepting Freudian analysis of this type, it is certainly worth considering in relation to *Bad Boy Bubby*, since the narrative and spectacle of the film both seem to reinforce and complicate the Oedipal scenario described above.

### Bizarre Love Triangle

The relationship between Bubby, Flo and Pop provides an interesting intersection of Oedipal fears, desires and transgressions. When Pop arrives, Flo loses interest in Bubby sexually and she becomes both indifferent and nasty towards Bubby’s sexual advances. In an Oedipal context, this suggests that Flo has decided to give up her ‘perverse,’ engulfing and threatening attachment to Bubby in order to accept the Paternal law and influence she desires. She tells Pop “I’ve been waiting

thirty-five years for you to come back.” After some hesitation, Flo decides to take Pop back - “You always were a charmer!” Bubby identifies with Pop immediately - copying his gestures, facial expressions, dress and voice. The spectator is ‘sutured’ into Bubby’s new found ego identification with the Paternal through filmic techniques such as brighter lighting and subjective shots from Bubby’s perspective which focus very closely on Pop’s eyes, nose and mouth. Facial close-ups of Pop from Bubby’s perspective suggest that Bubby is absorbing and memorising every word his Pop is saying, further associating Pop with the Father’s Law and language. Flo and Bubby’s identification with and desire for Pop reinforces the mother and child’s Oedipal identification with and desire for the Paternal.

The spectator becomes most aware of Bubby’s identification with his new found Paternal influence. In one scene, Bubby puts on Pop’s suit, pastes on a false beard and attempts to seduce his mother by using Pop’s words, gestures, gruff voice and Irish accent. Flo responds to Bubby’s advances at first but then, in a “race back into the arms of the law” (Rose 1986, 151), she betrays her ‘perverse’ desire by pretending that Bubby is attacking her once Pop returns to the room. A shift occurs in filmic terms from the representation of Bubby’s Oedipal crisis to the exploration of Flo’s. The behaviour and actions of Flo are significant in relation to Kristeva’s interest in the ambiguous, contradictory and unnamable pleasure and pain of motherhood - “I yearn for the Law. And since it is not made for me alone, I venture to desire outside the law . . . In sensual rapture I am distraught. Nothing

reassures, for only the law set anything down. Who calls such a suffering *jouissance*? It is the pleasure of the damned” (1986b, 175).

Believing that Bubby has sexually attacked Flo, Pop hurls Bubby outside the flat. Moments later, Flo opens the door and throws Bubby the gas mask. This is an interesting gesture in at least three ways; first, it suggests that after all the years Flo has psychologically and physically terrorised Bubby into staying inside, she quickly accepts and succumbs to Pop’s law - after all she has been “waiting thirty-five years” for him to return; second, her offering of the mask could be interpreted as a sympathetic gesture, knowing that Bubby will cough and panic, because he believes that the air outside is poisonous; third, it illustrates Flo’s desire to continue to possess Bubby, to keep him her “Bubby” by maintaining his ignorance and his distorted, childlike attitude toward the outside world. This third interpretation is most relevant to the aims of this thesis, as it indicates a distrust for Paternal law. Although it seems Flo gives up her (un)usual ways and her (un)usual life in order to encourage Pop to stay, she indicates an unwillingness to relinquish her power and influence over Bubby, to Pop.

“Now you be still Pop. Mum, you be still too”

In a complication of the Oedipal scenario, Bubby suffocates Flo and Pop by wrapping their heads in clingwrap - echoing the earlier scene involving the killing of Bubby’s cat. Killing his Pop, Bubby enacts his Oedipal desire for the death of

the rival/father. The murder of Flo could be seen as the destruction of her immense Maternal power over Bubby. Flo is a more threatening figure than Pop since “the mother ultimately represents castration, suffocation, death, the void - themes also common to the representation of the monstrous feminine in the horror film” (Creed 1993, 102). The killing of Flo is most significant and central to the digesis of the film as it is the only way Bubby and the spectator are able to achieve some form of independence, freedom, normality and fresh air! More generally, the cinematic representation of the dead mother (physically and symbolically) can be attributed to Kristeva’s idea that “phallic idealization is built upon the pedestal of a putting-to-death of the feminine body” (1987, 356). What is interesting about *Bad Boy Bubby* is that once the abject feminine body is put to death, the film goes out of its way to find it again for Bubby and the spectator, suggesting an implicit and explicit intention to deny the spectator’s expectation of an Oedipal resolution.

### **Mothers and Lovers**

#### **Establishing Ideal Icons of Love**

Kristeva suggests that traditional Western notions and symbols of love are based on the suppression and denial of female/Maternal *jouissance* in order to make way for ‘ideal’ love and masculine ego love. Kristeva examines the relationship between love, motherhood and the Maternal body because it is the “idealization of the

mother in primary narcissism” (Lechte 1990, 177) which sustains the subject’s desire and ability to love.

In “Stabat Mater” Kristeva states that the image of Virginal motherhood and sacrificial love “is the *fantasy* nurtured by the adult, man or woman, of a lost territory . . . it involves less an idealized archaic mother than the idealization of the relationship that binds us to her, one that cannot be localized - an idealization of primary narcissism” (1986b, 161). Symbols of ideal, pure, clean love work to smooth over and “cover up the unsettling aspects of maternity and the mother-child relationship” (Oliver 1993a, 50). This ‘smoothing over’ promotes the possibility of love which is ‘untainted’ by the abjection associated with the Maternal. Amatory discourses in *Bad Boy Bubby* often work to blur the boundaries surrounding notions of ‘tainted’ and ‘untainted’ love between the ‘self,’ mother, lover and other.

### *Bubby Searches For Love*

As Bubby finds sex and love once he ventures out into the world, *Bad Boy Bubby* seems both to buy into and reject the dichotomies of ‘pure’ and ‘impure’ love. Bubby is particularly drawn to women who physically resemble Flo - plump, middle-aged, large breasted women. The film’s representation of Bubby’s murder and then idealisation of Flo corresponds with Kristeva’s idea that “there is no idealizing identification without the murder of the loved object” (1987, 126).

Bubby's romance with Angel is an example of the film's ambiguous relation to and representation of the Oedipal scenario. When comparing aspects of the Bubby/Flo relationship to the Bubby/Angel relationship one is able to see that the good mother/lover versus bad mother/lover dichotomy is present in aspects of the film's romantic narrative. Bubby is initially drawn to Angel because of her resemblance to Flo. Both are large-breasted and overweight, both are conscious about the size of their breasts, both wash and clean Bubby, and both take Bubby as their lover - but here is where the similarity seems to end. The visual and narrative contrasts between Flo and Angel reinforce the association of the Maternal with simplistic binaries and dichotomies such as inside and outside, dark and light, irrational and rational and evil and good. Angel is constructed as caring, Maternal, sensitive and gentle, whereas Flo is abusive, cruel, perverted and jealously Maternal in a terrifying way. Angel is a caring nurse who works with severely disabled adults, whereas Flo is represented as a lower class, selfish alcoholic who has refused to give her son 'proper' nourishment and care. When Bubby meets Angel in the park, Angel is dressed in white and it is a bright sunny day. This contrasts the film's association of Flo with the dark, grey drab 'inside' of their home. Angel treats Bubby with kindness and love, she can see past his strangeness, she cares about his opinion of her, and in true amatory mode, she takes Bubby to meet her parents. In many ways the romance between Angel and Bubby holds out some hope of resolution to Bubby's Oedipal crisis. Hence, some aspects of Bubby and Angel's

relationship correspond to 'normal' romantic love and thus the validity of Bubby's 'self' through love.

### *Flo(w)ing or Angel-ic?*

The names given to Bubby's love interests illustrate their constructed difference.

One immediately associates Angel with the angelic, the good the pure - she is caring and nurturing and like an 'angel.' She saves Bubby from isolation, loneliness and homelessness. The name 'Angel' underscores the way in which Flo is not an 'angel' to Bubby, rarely displaying any redeeming qualities towards her son.

Furthermore, in a Kristevan sense, the reference to an Angel is also a reference to symbolic and static religious icon of female/Maternal purity which is without 'sin,' impurity or abjection and, like the Virgin, "has no *jouissance* . . . her body is marked with the Name of the Father" (Oliver 1993a, 51).

As mentioned in Chapter One, the name 'Flo' reminds us of the word 'flow' - something fluid, changing and flexible, with an inability to stay within one area of physical or psychical identity. These ideas could be related to the extent to which Angel provides Bubby with a pure, untainted love - much like icons of angels and the Virgin provide Western society with a pure and untainted ideal of love, femininity and motherhood - and the extent to which Flo/flow challenges the ideal by refusing to stay within any constructed boundary. Flo(w)ing between the role of the mother/nurturer, father/authoritarian, woman as castrator and woman as lover,

Flo 'flows' because she is a character who challenges yet defines, disrupts yet reinforces our definitions and expectations of feminine decency, motherhood and the Maternal. The character Flo(w) confuses ideas about the boundaries surrounding Bubby's 'self,' her 'otherness' and their mother-child relationship.

### *How Much of an 'Angel' is Angel?*

To dismiss the character Angel as simply the angelic reverse side of the evil Flo would be to ignore the ways in which the character is less an 'Angel' and more a Flo(w) in the ways I have described above. Angel is not an 'angel' of the traditional sort in the sense that the film allows her to be embodied, rather than just romantically idealised. The film allows for Bubby's 'pure' and 'good' love interest also to be, like Flo, manipulative, abject and 'impure.'

In the scenes with Angel, the film shows Bubby's lack of socialisation, and thus individuation. When Bubby boldly asks Angel to show him her breasts, Angel refuses. Then Angel says that she'll show him only if he 'becomes' Bubby (at this stage of the film Bubby has 're-invented' himself as 'Pop'). Bubby stops 'being' Pop and Angel unzips her dress and shows him her breasts. Angel says, "Now you go back to being Pop and Bubby's our secret." Angel 'plays' Bubby as both child and adult, locking amatory discourse into that of the mother-child dyad. In addition, Angel's words echo those of a child abuser, gaining the child's trust by extracting what they want from the child and then saying that it will be their



‘secret.’ This is an ambiguous scene because the film’s narrative trajectory works here in opposition to the spectacle. Visually, Angel exposes her breasts upon Bubby’s request, allowing herself to be physically vulnerable with a man she just met. On the other hand, the dialogue suggests that Angel is in control, taking advantage of Bubby’s vulnerability and fragility in order to extract knowledge about him.

Physically, Angel is not an ‘angel.’ The film links her to the ‘abject’ in a number of pointed scenes. In various scenes we see Angel blowing her nose, Angel giving birth and Angel working with severely disabled adults. As outlined in Chapter One, these activities are ‘abject’ because they point to the materiality of the body and the fragility of our borders surrounding ‘rationality’ and the ‘clean’ and ‘upright’ body - ‘abject’ activities which disturb the boundaries of the inside and outside.

In the scene between Bubby, Angel and Angel’s parents, the film encourages a more creative interpretation of the ‘angelic’ as opposed to the static religious imagery and discourses surrounding the ‘angelic.’ Angel’s parents are portrayed as cruel, hypocritical religious bigots who terrorise and taunt Angel because of her weight. This religious couple called their daughter ‘Angel,’ - the epitome of the thin, fair, pure and ethereal - but physically she did not turn out this way. In a sharp visual contrast between mother and daughter, Angel’s mother is a small, thin, bird-like woman who pecks daintily at the lunch on her plate. Angel’s mother

says to Angel, in front of Bubby, “if God had wanted us to be fat, he’d have made us all the same way, wouldn’t he? But he didn’t. God doesn’t like fat people. Fat people are an abomination in his eyes!” In this context, Angel’s fleshy body represents sin, lack of control and indulgence. Angel’s father further associates Angel’s body with gluttony - “be the first time you didn’t finish your dinner!” - and sexual promiscuity - “she’s a fat slut!” While giving the character a religious name loaded with meaning, *Bad Boy Bubby* seems to question, rather than celebrate, religious imagery, icons and discourse - a theme I will take up in greater detail in Chapter Three.

Because of the connections and associations between Angel and Flo, Angel’s presence in the film allows Bubby (and the spectator) a link or trace back to the Maternal/semiotic realm. In the context of *Bad Boy Bubby*, it is a link back to Bubby’s connection with Flo, and at the same time, it is a link to that which is unknowable, totally inconceivable and hardly imaginable. Despite the fact that Angel seems to provide Bubby with ‘proper’ love, in many ways Angel is still more the mother, rather than the lover Bubby ‘should’ be searching for.

### *Happily Ever After?*

The film’s ending is exemplary of the character Angel’s ambiguous role as mother and lover. *Bad Boy Bubby*’s conclusion seems at first formulaic, conventional and quite ordinary compared to the rest of the film. In three brief scenes, Bubby and

Angel reunite, Bubby and Angel have sex, Angel gives birth to twin boys and Bubby and Angel seemingly live happily ever after. In the film's final scene we see Bubby and Angel in their garden on a bright sunny day with their two sons, aged about five or six, and their pet cat. The spectator sees a happy, carefree and energetic Bubby chasing his sons about, squirting them with the garden hose. Angel sits and watches nearby holding their pet cat. In this scene Bubby is like a young boy enjoying the outdoors, sunshine, water and friendship. Angel is like the ideal mother watching on lovingly and protectively, still careful not to interfere too much with the children's games. The film's ending gives Bubby the childhood, love and mother he never had. This scene leaves the role of Angel ambiguous, a role which to the end oscillates between lover and mother. This oscillation reinforces Bubby's lack of Oedipal resolution through the film's inability to distinguish clearly the representations of self and mother, and self and lover. The scene is further littered with ambiguous imagery. The couple are shown to live next door to a large Boral Energy Plant. The dry-looking roads which surround their house are framed with black power lines. Just as Bubby and Angel's idyllic house and garden come into view, a large garbage removal truck drives by. This abject industrial imagery juxtaposed with romantic family imagery reinforces *Bad Boy Bubby's* refusal to sit on either side of the Oedipal fence. Despite the fact that now Bubby is a loving father and an independent lover, this scene suggests that, to an extent, the film has ended just as it began - contradictory and ambiguous.

'Cherie the Salvo': Sex and Religion

Before he meets Angel and not long after he leaves Flo's flat, Bubby has a sexual encounter with a woman named Cherie. Bubby's first sexual encounter in the 'outside' world provides an interesting intersection of sex, religion and notions of the angelic. In the sex scene between Bubby and Cherie, the Salvation Army singer, one is able to see again how the film both reinforces and subverts notions of 'proper' and 'improper' love. Bubby and Cherie have sex in the same way Bubby and Flo did (with the woman on top), but Cherie is young, thin and physically attractive, thus drawing a sharp visual comparison between this scene and the 'perverse' and 'shocking' earlier sex scenes of incest with Flo. While they are having sex, Cherie angelically sings a hymn she says she usually saves for her "special friend, Jesus." A focus on Cherie's Salvation Army hat, bright light and a fleeting shot of a religious statue complicate and contradict the associations between sex, religion, Cherie and the 'angelic.' While surrounded by this white light, Cherie reaches sexual climax as she reaches vocal climax of the hymn. According to Kristeva, orgasm is an inevitably unimaginable aspect of female and sexual *jouissance*. In this scene Cherie's orgasm is placed in association with the static and empty religious imagery of the ideal feminine, the Virginal and the angelic. Since Cherie is constructed and associated with the angelic her "vaginal *jouissance*" (Kristeva 1986c, 149) works to subvert and contradict conventional ideas surrounding the angelic and its association with feminine 'purity' and 'cleanliness.' The film complicates a potentially 'self' affirming sexual scenario

with this scene's traces and links to the Maternal realm, via Cherie's vocal melody and orgasm. Thus the boundaries between Bubby's 'inside' sexual experiences with Flo and his very first 'outside' sexual experience with Cherie are blurred and confused. Bubby's attempt to fill the emptiness left from his separation from his mother with a 'normal' heterosexual relationship is complicated. The scene presents us with an account of heterosexual love which is ambiguous rather than 'self' confirming and male ego defining.

*Uncivilised Desire, Inappropriate Desire*

On other occasions, Bubby is immediately attracted to women who, to Bubby, resemble Flo. On Bubby's first night out, he is drawn to the voices of a group of Salvation Army singers. Bubby examines the face of each of the singer, but is physically drawn to an older, plumper, large-breasted woman. The film places emphasis on Bubby's inappropriate desire for the woman by providing a close up of the woman's hand gently pushing Bubby's hand away as he fondles her breast. In another scene, Bubby grabs the breasts of a woman who resembles Flo. When the woman screams, a group of women angrily surround Bubby, knock him to the ground and kick him repeatedly. This scene emphasises the lack of imaginary boundaries between Bubby and Flo and thus between Bubby and women who look like Flo. Bubby's attempts to re-live his experiences and life with Flo fail, as now Bubby must learn about proper and improper touching, the symbolic rules and

personal boundaries surrounding other people's bodies - something he had never learnt from Flo.

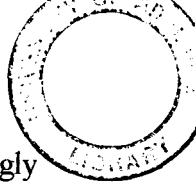
When Bubby is being attacked, the spectator is invited to identify and sympathise with Bubby, by means of close up, slow motion footage of Bubby's face, capturing his physical anguish and emotional defeat. The sympathy the spectator feels for Bubby is directly linked to the film's construction of Flo is as a cruel perverted mother who, through her own selfish and jealous ways, has now distorted Bubby's ability to find affection and love in the outside world. The film permits Bubby's anti-social and inappropriate behaviour to be blamed on the mother, a theme which also can be found in previously mentioned horror films explored by Barbara Creed (1993). Creed examines popular horror films such as *Carrie*, *Psycho* and *Friday the 13th*, where the sexually dysfunctional, anti-social and sheltered "monstrous child is ultimately depicted as a creation of the psychotic, dominating mother" (Creed 1993, 79). Although Bubby is more uncivilised than monstrous, the spectator is encouraged to sympathise with Bubby rather than the several women he fondles, touches and pursues, hence reinforcing for the audience a 'subjective,' 'Bubby'-identified cinematic gaze.

The film's exploration of Bubby's limited social skills also point to the learnt, copied and performed aspects of gender, love and romantic relations. In a restaurant scene, Bubby approaches Angel for the very first time. With his new

found Paternal ego identification, Bubby repeats the words he heard Pop use to seduce Flo - “You’re a sexy woman Flo. God you’ve got great tits, great big whoppers of things.” Bubby’s repetition of Pop’s vulgar and crude words to Angel in a fancy, fashionable restaurant highlights the clash of ‘uncivilised’ and ‘civilised’ words and worlds. The scene also emphasises the learnt and ‘scripted’ nature of gender relations and amatory discourses. Significantly, it is the way that Bubby is dressed - in a clean white suit and fetching white Panama hat - which leads Angel to believe that Bubby is a confident, wealthy man mocking her insecurities, rather than an uncivilised ‘child’ looking for love. Angel cries, “You’re a very cruel person, you know that? Just because you’re rich and handsome, you think its okay to make fun of people like me. Well it’s not funny, its just hurtful.” Angel’s reaction to Bubby’s advances points to the constructed notions of class and identity. The spectator is aware of Bubby’s depraved, lower class background, his ‘innocence’ and his ignorance even though, in this scene, Bubby is dressed well and in clean, elegant and ‘upright’ surroundings. Angel’s reaction highlights the fact that class, gender and identity are always a matter of context and cultural framing. It is a scene which illustrates an awareness of the performed and scripted aspects of class and romantic gender relations.

### *‘Angel’ Gazing*

Kristeva points out that the representation of the longing, romantic gaze in amatory discourse is important to the establishment and experience of the loving



'self.' On occasions when Bubby sees his love interest, Angel, he stares longingly at her and, due to subjective, 'sutured' shots from Bubby's perspective, Angel becomes the object of both Bubby's and the spectator's gaze. Kristeva states that the "lover soaks up the loved one through his gaze, which becomes the strongest conveyor of amatory effect" (1987, 349). The loved object is an idealised reflection of the 'self,' an ideal imposed upon the object of desire - in Kristeva's words - "The lover is a narcissist with an object" (1986d, 250).

Since the amatory gaze works to affirm notions of the self, cinematic use of the subjective gaze works to affirm both the identity of the spectator as well as the film's main character(s) of identification. Therefore when the camera/Bubby stares longingly at Angel, the film reinforces, rather than subverts, notions of the self. On the other hand, the reflection of the loved object is also empty one - Narcissus' ideal image was not a 'real' image, but a surface mirror image of himself. Hence, reassurance of the self with the cinematic representation of the 'subjective' romantic gaze is only an initial and surface one, a "powerful distancer" (Kristeva 1987, 349) due to the impossibility for the 'self' to have any depth in reflection. Hence, Kristeva's insights on the amatory gaze work to complicate *Bad Boy Bubby's* use of the romantic stare. Bubby's attempt to resolve his Oedipal crisis through the amatory gaze is disrupted by the inevitably shallow and empty mirroring of the ideal 'self.'



When Bubby and the spectator look at Angel's exposed breasts (via a subjective shot), the image immediately reminds Bubby of his mother - "They be beautiful, like mum." This is a moment which potentially offers Bubby and the spectator Oedipal resolution through voyeurism and fetishism of the lover/other. Rather, the scene is subverted into a romanticisation of Bubby's constant childlike dependence on, attachment to and idealisation of his mother. On another occasion, two young attractive women present their slim, tanned, naked bodies to Bubby. One asks Bubby what he thinks of their bodies - "Tiny tits" Bubby says, to which she replies "Tiny? These aren't tiny, they're perfect thirty-six's. Where did you come from?" "Them not Angel tits," Bubby scoffs walking out of the room. Although the spectator recognises the women as traditionally and conventionally desirable to look at, the scene is put to an abrupt end as Bubby refuses the sexual favours of the women and leaves the room. Hence, when Bubby and the spectator are offered a moment of amatory ego identification, the moment is contradicted, further complicating the film's already ambiguous relationship to notions of the 'proper' and 'loving' self.

### Loss and Love

Kristeva argues that conventional discourses on love work to satisfy the ego, identity and the self. *Bad Boy Bubby's* representation of amatory experience has difficulty in satisfying the identity of Bubby, and the spectator, due to the film's ambiguous relationship towards that which should be resolved in the Oedipal

scenario - the 'self' and sexual difference. The role of loss, love and relationships in *Bad Boy Bubby* work to both reinforce and subvert traditional workings and notions of love and amatory discourses. The film sets up the possibility for the resolution of Bubby's Oedipal crisis through the death of Flo's 'abject' Maternal body and the killing of Pop. However, moments of Oedipal resolution set up through the film's amatory narrative and romantic spectacle are undercut by Bubby's attachment to and idealisation of Flo and her 'abject' Maternal body. Furthermore, the character Angel is unable to offer Bubby any Oedipal resolution through sex and love due to the ambiguity of her fluctuating role as embodied and idealised mother *and* lover. Although some aspects of Bubby's amatory experiences work to reinforce and satisfy the ego and the 'self,' overall Bubby's experiences with loss and love point to an inability to resolve comfortably the Oedipal crisis. Despite *Bad Boy Bubby's* seemingly "happily ever after" conclusion, its exploration of loss and love and its relationship to the 'self' remains closer to Kristeva's observation - "Love is, in short, the soul's sight for invisible things" (1987,110).

## CHAPTER THREE

### MELANCHOLIA AND MUSIC

**Bubby no fit no more out there.**

*Bad Boy Bubby.*

**The crisis exists only for mirrors that are  
enamoured of stable images.**

**Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 1989.**

This chapter explores the theme of melancholia and the use of music in *Bad Boy Bubby*. A prominent feature of *Bad Boy Bubby* is its critique of traditional masculine patriarchal structures such as religion, the State and capitalism. The manifestation of melancholia in the film derives from what emerges in *Bad Boy Bubby* as an awareness of the unreliability and instability of these masculine, self-affirming structures. This melancholic awareness further contributes to the film's exploration of the crisis and disintegration of male subjectivity. *Bad Boy Bubby* also investigates the fraud of the 'subject' through the use of music, light and rhythm, working to emphasise Bubby's desire to return to the Maternal body/container and his rejection of the 'outside.' The exploration of the 'semiotic' in moments of chaos, confusion, sadness and music heightens the film's melancholic theme and effect. It is a mesmerising effect which speaks to those

melancholic and musical “extraterrestrials suffering for want of love” (Kristeva 1987, 372).

### **Melancholia and the Disintegration of the Male Subject**

#### **Mourning the Maternal**

In *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (1989), Kristeva explores the manifestation of mourning and melancholia in the subject and the psyche. The experience of melancholia, or melancholic feelings, is a consistent part of human subjectivity and the psyche. Kristeva holds that melancholia works to reinforce the stability of the self - “without a bent for melancholia there is no psyche, only a transition to action or play” (1989, 4). Alternatively, melancholic feelings also work to subvert the stability of ego identity - “any loss entails the loss of my being - and of Being itself” (1989, 5).

According to Kristeva, melancholia and mourning comes about through a crisis in subjectivity through the subject’s “impossible mourning for the maternal object” (1989, 9). Furthermore, melancholia “conceals an aggressiveness toward the lost object, thus revealing the ambivalence of the depressed person with respect to the object of mourning” (1989, 11). These ideas are relevant to the way in which Bobby mourns his mother’s death in a combination of tenderness and aggression. The fact that the film focuses on Bobby’s mourning rather than his lack of guilt

emphasises Bubby's (or the film's) inability to confront his murderous actions. This heightens the psychoanalytic and symbolic dimensions over the naturalistic textures of the film. In one scene, Bubby performs on stage with a giant blow-up version of Flo. Bubby dances provocatively with the doll, relating to 'her' in an aggressively sexual manner. He chants about her "great big whoppers" and how he wants to see her "tits." Bubby peels off her dress to reveal the doll's large plastic blown-up breasts to the cheering crowd. This hostile sexual aggression towards the mother, and the mother's body, may be interpreted as a symbolic attempt to exorcise, or at least deal with the suffocating physical and emotional relationship Bubby had with Flo. It is also important to note that this scene comes after the very sad and poignant scene where Bubby weeps over the chalk outline of his mother's dead body after returning to their home in depressed and defeated state. This criss-crossing of emotions illuminates the subject's ambivalent and ambiguous relationship towards the lost 'object' - in this case, Bubby's complicated sexual aggression towards the 'body' of Flo and the memory of his dyadic relationship with her.

In *Men's Silences: Predicaments in Masculinity*, Jonathan Rutherford states that "mourning becomes a permanent affliction which the subject attempts to resolve through a search for the transformational object of the mother or her symbolic equivalent" (1992, 124). This corresponds to the occasions in the film when Bubby is drawn to women who physically resemble Flo. Also, during the performance

with the blow up Flo, Bubby for a moment imagines the mask of Flo's face to be that of his love interest, Angel. It is after this scene that Bubby and Angel are reunited and the film ends - attempting some form of Oedipal resolution. However, the 'happy ending' in *Bad Boy Bubby*, as discussed in Chapter Two, is more a surrender to the impossibility of resolution, completion or wholeness.

### Masculine Melancholia

Subjectivity and selfhood have been historically, scientifically and culturally placed on the side of the masculine - specifically white, Western and middle-class. Since masculinity has greater investment in defensive ego boundaries of the self, males may have greater potential for feelings of fundamental loss and meaninglessness of the self, and hence, the potential for greater instances, investigations and representations of white, Western, male melancholia - such as in *Bad Boy Bubby*.

In *Black Sun*, Kristeva states "the periods that witness the downfall of political and religious idols, periods of crisis, are particularly favorable to black moods" (1989, 8) and thus "a tremendous crisis of thought and speech, a crisis of representation, has indeed emerged" (1989, 221). Due to the sexual, social, political and economic upheavals since the 1950's in the white Western world, it is not surprising that the white Western male has been experiencing this *black mood*; a crisis in the place, meaning and function of masculinity. Jonathan Rutherford points out that "feminism, gay affirmation and the culture of libertarian socialism had a precipitous

effect in undermining masculine presumptions . . . Masculinity is over dependent for its coherence upon public discourses. In consequence, *men will experience periods of social and cultural transition as a disturbance to their identities*" (1992, 13-15, italics mine).

According to Lynne Layton, "there are many other variables contributing to the increased visibility of fractures in the fantasy of phallic wholeness" (1994, 391). Masculine melancholia is, of course, subject to its own cultural, historical and social specificities. The effects of Australian-ness and Australian identity as a specific and historical contributing factor in the crisis of Australian male subjectivity in *Bad Boy Bubby* will be considered later in the chapter.

### *Encounters with Empty Establishments*

One of the most consistent aspects and themes throughout *Bad Boy Bubby* is its comment on social disintegration and its critique of the hypocrisy and instability of patriarchal establishments. The film is particularly critical of the State, materialism/capitalism and religion. These critiques contribute to the exploration of melancholia and the male subject in crisis since it is these institutions which have traditionally affirmed masculinity socially, physically and spiritually.

There are a number of scenes in *Bad Boy Bubby* which explore themes of disintegration, corruption and destruction of society. After leaving 'home' Bubby

has a number of experiences which confound the masculine relationship to society's institutions. For example, in one scene Bubby sees a tree for the very first time. Bubby marvels at the sight of the young tree and explores its textures with curiosity and fascination. A moment later an aggressive council worker, who barks at Bubby to get out of the way, proceeds to destroy the young tree with his chainsaw. In another scene, a policeman drags Bubby out of a car, swears at him and punches in the stomach. In another scene, two policeman mock, laugh and make racist jokes at two Aboriginal women who come to the police station for assistance. When Bubby spends time in jail for harassing Angel, the out-of-touch prison official gives Bubby ten dollars as he is released to 'help him on his way.' Bubby responds to this meagre donation with - "Well, if that's all there is, we're fucked!" - a phrase learnt earlier from his association with the men in the rock band Bubby later joins. Furthermore, the film enlists the same actor to play the worker at the establishments Bubby wanders into and explores - the printing shop, the bakery and the petrol station. This seems to suggest the repetitiveness and circularity of work, industry and society - where workers are stripped of individuality, normalised and homogenised into the same body, face and personality. The collection of above mentioned scenes in *Bad Boy Bubby* illustrate a State and a society that is destructive towards its environment, violent and racist towards its citizens and out of touch with the economic realities of every day people. It illustrates a society which also drains the individuality of its workers, normalising the differences between them.



### *Bobby's World Collapses Around Him*

In two scenes there is scaffolding, repairs and reconstruction being done inside the police station and in the church. These two places of male authority are physically and symbolically represented as falling apart, incomplete and in need of repair. Despite the patriarchal illusion and insistence that its structures are unmovable, reliable and dependable, *Bad Boy Bobby's* emphasis on scaffolding, welding, drilling, workmen and renovation *inside* these dominant structures points to a structure which is crumbling from the inside. These scenes reflect a society and its structures which are never complete - half done, never whole, constantly being re-done, re-shaped and re-invented. These scenes are revealing in light of the Western subject who relies on notions of unity, stability and wholeness to give meaning to the 'self.' But, much like Bobby and the Kristevan subject, masculine patriarchal structures are never whole and *always in process and in crisis*.

### *"Strike me down...if you dare!"*

One of the most consistent and overt messages in *Bad Boy Bobby* is its criticism of religion - both organised religion, and the philosophical and spiritual notion of a God. This can be seen early on in the film when Flo uses Jesus as a menacing threat to keep Bobby obedient and motionless, and when Pop, a dislikeable and drunken character, arrives in a priest suit claiming he's only a 'part time' priest. The Salvation Army singers use their donation money to buy pizza, and later the

camera focuses on 'Cherie the Salvo's hat while she and Bubby have sex. Angel's parents are also characterised as religious bigots who say Angel is a "disappointment," "gross," and a "fat slut" because "God doesn't like fat people. Fat people are an abomination in his eyes."

There are two scenes, in particular, concerning religion which stand out. Steve, the guitarist from the band Bubby joins, delivers a monologue to Bubby and the audience (actor looking directly at camera) in an almost teacher-student fashion, which expresses the film's stance on religion. The speech is used in order to discourage Bubby from doing any more of his own "cling wrapping," emphasising the child-adult, good-bad dichotomy and sentiment in the speech. The scene delivers its position on organised religion with the lines - "They've all done their fair share of killing or being killed and its all pointless." While the point is an admirable and important one to make, the direct address turns the speech into a didactic lecturing of Bubby and the audience. The scene is filmed with shot-reverse-shots of Bubby's face, revealing his almost birds eye view of the band member and the floor beneath him. The editing and dialogue in this scene disrupts the ambiguous flow of the film since it produces a message that is blatant, obvious and uncomplicated. In context of the whole film, the scene is <sup>in</sup> keeping with the rest of the film since *Bad Boy Bubby* is constantly disrupting, disturbing and surprising the spectator. Alternatively, within the *content* of the filmic narrative the scene is a didactic intrusion - simplistic and 'preachy.'

In general, this cinematic criticism of religious hypocrisy is both empowering and melancholic within the context of the film and its wider social relations. It may be liberating to those who have been oppressed by religion in the film, such as Bubby and Angel, and at the same time it undermines masculine, Paternal authority.

According to Kristeva, the undermining of religious authority contributes to a crisis of the 'self' and subjectivity - a challenge to "the speaker with the fact that he is not whole" (1980b, 271).

In another scene an elderly 'Scientist' takes Bubby to a large grey-looking factory. In one long, drawn out shot, Bubby and the Scientist stand in the factory, among its many levels, pipes, stairs and metal fixtures. The camera zooms in for a fairly close shot of the characters and then tracks out beyond the point at which the two are invisible. What is gradually revealed and then sustained is an almost God-like view of the large, sterile, empty-looking factory. The relationship between the spectacle and narrative in this scene is most contradictory and quite revealing in the context of the film. The Scientist's speech is worth recalling at length.

There is no God. There can be no God . . . we arrange our lives with more order and harmony than God ever arranged the earth. We measure, we plot, we create wonderful music. We are the architects of our existence. What a lunatic concept to bow down before a God who slaughters millions of innocent children . . . "Fuck you God! Strike me down...if you dare! You tyrant, you non-existent fraud!" It is the

duty of all human beings to think God out of existence. And that's what you must do Bubby, think God out of existence, take responsibility for who you are.

Despite the fact that this narrative is concerned with doing away with God, it is a speech delivered by a God-like father figure. The Scientist - a white-haired, Caucasian, elderly man - offers Bubby a new way, 'truth' and light - much like a priest or spiritual guide. The Scientist's voice-over throughout this omniscient scene further promotes his God-like qualities. Bubby and the spectator are offered another 'truth' by a similar, yet ideologically different, authority. The name 'Scientist' encourages the idea that we have discarded priests, religion and faith, for scientists, technology and 'proof' - one male truth, knowledge and authority for another.

Interestingly, the spectacle of the scene offers a different set of meanings to that of the narrative, and our two 'truths' are exposed to be as empty and deceiving as each other. Throughout this existentialist Kafka-esque speech the spectator views steel grey pipes, stairs and fixtures, robotic workers - dull, grey, bleak, lifeless technology as testimonies to human 'architecture' and creation. The Scientist's Shakespearian reference to our 'harmony,' our 'measuring' and 'plotting' is presented before us in a depressing display of cold machinery. Our 'wonderful music' is industrial noise, a constant hum, which hovers eerily beneath the Scientist's voice. Despite the fact the Scientist praises the achievement and *significance* of human beings on this planet, the scene visually, slowly and

painfully reduces Bubby and the Scientist into mere specks - *insignificance*. At this stage of the scene, the spectator is left gazing uncomfortably at this enormous, colourless, lifeless, empty building. The contradiction of narrative and spectacle in this scene is exemplary of the representation of the crisis of the 'self' and lack of masculine Oedipal resolution in *Bad Boy Bubby*. In psychoanalytic terms, a man overcomes his Oedipal crisis and attachment to the Maternal container by taking his place within patriarchal society and structures - the Church spuriously offering spiritual power and capitalism offering material power. In the scene with the Scientist, *Bad Boy Bubby* shows these structures to be shams - empty, shallow and flat. It's postmodern criticism of the mainstays of male structural authority - the Church, the State, and capitalism - leaves little for the affirmation of masculine identity and the 'self.' What is left is disillusion and disaffection, mourning and melancholia, a split, lost wandering 'self' - the nihilistic aspect of postmodern angst.

"*Bubby been left to die, me Pop now*"

After the film's attempts to expose patriarchal structures and identities as empty, shallow and unfulfilling, our anti-hero Bubby re-invents himself as 'Pop.' It is an identity which seems to embody the Holy Trinity of patriarchy - the father, the son and the holy spirit. The only way for Bubby to survive in the outside world is to stop being a 'Bubby' and start being a 'Pop,' despite the fact that Bubby and the

spectator know that 'Pop,' literally and symbolically, is unreliable, shallow, and empty. After the scene where Bubby mourns the loss of Flo, he surrenders to the emptiness of the 'self' and 'identity' by 're-inventing' himself as his 'Pop.'

Elizabeth Grosz holds that "the speaking subject must 'pay' for the unity and certainty of its position, its 'mastery,' with the renunciation of its maternal pleasures and the sacrifice of its oedipal, incestual attachments" (Grosz 1989, 49).

Kristeva would suggest that this 'surrender' is necessary to the successful establishment of subjectivity within the first few years of life - "the child king becomes irredeemably sad before uttering his first words; this is because he has been irrevocably, desperately separated from the mother" (1989, 6).

#### Anger, Aggression and Austr-alienation

Isolation, depression, melancholia, feelings of meaninglessness and worthlessness can often be expressed through anger, violence and aggression. This violence is one of the first things Bubby encounters when he ventures outside - a woman runs screaming from her home in a domestic dispute, and moments later Bubby sees a woman being robbed by a man on the street. This kind of violence, particularly violence against women, is felt, experienced and represented cinematically in much of the Western world. The specificity of Australian culture, however, and the fact that *Bad Boy Bubby* is an Australian film, should not be ignored.

Australian culture, despite embracing multiculturalism and 'difference' to an extent, has felt the Western crisis threatening masculine subjectivity in several culturally and historically-specific ways. Physically, and sometimes culturally, isolated from the rest of the white Western world, and closer to countries of an 'Asian' identity, white Australian national identity is riddled with ambivalence and insecurity. Lacking the traditions, customs and religions of Europe (Alomes 1994, 47) and an inability to identify either with an indigenous culture or an Asian 'other,' white Australian national identity has a fragility and defensiveness which has increased with global threats to masculine values and patriarchal structures. Discussing the manifestation of Kristeva's abjection in Australian literature and masculinity, Joan Kirkby (1994) suggests that since Australian identity is fragile, its imaginary borders and boundaries are often protected with great fervour and energy.

A society like Australia, formulated under the regulation of a powerful, punitive external law . . . has remained particularly resistant to intermixture, the erasing of differences and the threat of undifferentiation. There has been the belief in the principle of identity without intermixture, *the exclusion of anything that breaks boundaries, a fierce need to maintain symbolic oneness* and a fierce condemnation of hybrids and migrant beings (Kirkby 1994, 146, italics mine).

A nation with insecure boundaries will go to a great effort to define and reinforce those boundaries through violence, cultural and social 'othering,' and exploitation

and exploration of the abject (in ways outlined in Chapter One). When Bubby nervously and curiously steps out of his home for the very first time and wanders onto the road, a large car screeches up to him. Two men wearing football jerseys and drinking beer hang out of the car. They shout to Bubby “Get off the road you fucking greedy bastard!...Get a look of the bastard, will ya? You fucking poofster bastard!” These men wear the icons of Australian working class culture. The beer, the football, the homophobia and the blasphemy illustrate a hollow defensiveness towards a masculinity that is insecure.\* These are angry, young, working class Australian men whose fragile national and masculine identity goes into overdrive at moments of fear, desire and difference. Difference comes in the form of a gas-mask wearing Bubby, a strange, thin, lost, bizarre looking man in his pyjamas, who has wandered onto this hostile Port Adelaide street.

### **Stage Lights and Bagpipes**

Music, light and sound play very important roles in *Bad Boy Bubby*, particularly in relation to the film’s subversion of notions and representations of a unified, rational self. The film’s over-investment in ‘semiotic’ moments contribute to the lack of Oedipal resolution and a lack of affirmation of the ‘self.’ Once Bubby ventures ‘outside,’ he refuses to fully succumb to language, discourse and fixed identity. Rather, Bubby prefers to seek out pleasure in music, melody and rhythm,

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\* For a discussion on the relationship between Australian male culture, lack of secular religion, and love of football see Alomes 1994, 46-65.



taking the spectator through his moments of the incoherent, the undefinable and the unpredictable.

*Music: Tenderness and Violence*

Throughout the film *Bubby* is often drawn to music and singing. *Bubby* is drawn to the singing of a Salvation Army choir, and later, he is drawn to the sound of a violin. In one scene, *Bubby* is arrested and taken to jail for pursuing and 'attacking' his love interest, Angel, outside a restaurant. In jail he hears the loud, droning sound of bagpipes, and in a mixture of wild agony, curiosity and ecstasy, he begins shouting, jumping and pounding on the prison wall. *Bubby* is dragged out of his cell and into another cell, where he is raped by an inmate. The scene is made more disturbing by the loud and dreary drone of the bagpipes which continue. *Bubby* grimaces in pain and shock, and then surrenders to the sexual attack, 'playing dead' as the violent thrusts of the rapist match the dreary pulsation of the bagpipes. The moment *Bubby* leaves prison he is drawn to and follows the sound of a church organ being played in a nearby church.

The music in *Bad Boy Bubby* is used in association with moments of happiness and tenderness, or with extreme sadness, melancholia and violence. Music is invoked, then, to express feelings of agony, ecstasy and *jouissance* in a way language, dialogue and discourse cannot. Although the use of music is a common cinematic device, it is an important one particularly within the context of a film like *Bad Boy Bubby*. In accordance with the work of Kristeva, it seeks to undermine

masculine  
^ patriarchal structures, such as language and discourse, through the privileging of the 'semiotic' and music.

### Rhythm, Light and the Semiotic

The use of rhythm, sound and light also contribute to the film's exploration of the 'semiotic' and challenging of the 'self.' In one scene, Bubby enters a printing shop and is drawn to the sound of the printing machine. The film allows the spectator to experience Bubby's 'semiotic' moment as Bubby. The camera focuses on Bubby as he closes his eyes in a mixture of ecstasy and relief. In this scene we 'become' Bubby as the screen blacks out to leave only the rhythmic, pulsating sound of the machine. When Bubby is disturbed by a worker, so is the spectator and 'our' moment is destroyed. In another scene involving Bubby and men from the rock band, Bubby experiments with some stage lights, oblivious to the band's conversation about him. On another occasion when the band members are discussing matters, one of them places a set of headphones over Bubby's ears. Male voices are replaced with soothing music, and the spectator is again drawn into Bubby's blissful moment without language, conversation, discourse or words. Even in the 'outside' world Bubby yearns for and seeks out moments of escape through the seductive and subversive rhythms of semiotic bliss

When Bubby wanders onto the stage while the band is performing, he begins to speak and sing erratically into the microphone. Bubby then begins to perform regularly with the band who, like the crowd, are enthralled and amused by Bubby's performance. Bubby's performances as the band's 'front-man' include phrases, actions, profanities, sounds and melodies he has encountered in his past. His style and words are erratic, unpredictable and impromptu, while the lights surrounding him change from shades of green, red and orange. As the performances with the band continue, Bubby's words become more repetitive, familiar, 'performed' and rehearsed. The band performs in bigger venues and the crowd dresses and speaks like their hero Bubby/Pop and even know the words to the now familiar songs. The change from erratic chaotic words and sounds to rehearsed familiar and performed words, mirrors to an extent the acquisition of language and verbal communication Bubby has experienced since his departure from Flo and the 'inside.'

Unlike the journey of the 'unified subject' who must repress the semiotic in favour of the symbolic, Bubby maintains his strong link to the Maternal/semiotic. This can be seen when Bubby/Pop becomes accepted by and popular with the group of disabled adults whom Angel nurses. Bubby's ability to understand and interpret the normally unintelligible groans, screeches and contorted expressions of the disabled adults, represents his, and the film's, attempt to transcend traditional structures of language and hierarchies of communication.

Kristeva states that 'discourse' is very limited by language, its denials, structures and rules. She says, "discourse is a complex psychological event that cannot be reduced to what I call the *symbolic* dimension of grammatical categories and their organisation. Discourse also includes the semiotic modality, which is independent from language" (Kristeva 1995, 109). Bubby's ability to communicate the desires and opinions of the group to Angel illuminates Bubby's transcendence of these "denials structures and rules" which limit communication and the spoken word.

### *The Maternal Semiotic*

The 'semiotic' is that which cannot be defined, categorised or articulated through traditional language structures. Kristeva describes it as "a distinctive mark, trace, index, the premonitory sign, the proof, engraved mark, imprint - in short a distinctiveness admitting of an uncertain and indeterminate articulation because it does not yet refer . . . or no longer refers . . . to a signified object" (1980c, 133).

An experience with the ambiguity of the semiotic is considered to be a trace, a link or a line to the dyadic relationship between Maternal container and infant, when there was no fixed border of the 'self' and 'other,' but rather a series of disorganised sexual impulses and energies which, Grosz states, "animate the child's body in a series of rhythms, spasms, movements that predate its conscious corporeal control . . . They defy unification, distinctive boundaries and social

regulation” (Grosz 1989, 43). Bubby’s numerous semiotic pleasures further emphasise his inability to take up his place in relation to the symbolic Paternal. Bubby remains actively attached to the suppressed realm of the semiotic indicating his refusal or inability to resolve his Oedipal crisis.

Kristeva holds that the semiotic often manifests itself in forms of music, rhythm, laughter, pulsations and poetry - “it is poetic language that awakens our attention, a feature that univocal rational scientific discourse tends to hide - and this implies considerable consequences for its subject” (1980c, 135). Thus, *Bad Boy Bubby*’s exploration of the semiotic through music, rhythm and light disrupts categories of the self, categories of sexual difference and particularly the imagined unity and cohesion of the spectator, since the spectator is so often invited to experience these moments from the perspective of Bubby - our ‘male’ subject permanently in process.

### *Melancholia and Music*

Melancholia is an archaic awareness of the impossibility of the ‘self.’ Music and the ‘semiotic’ are a constant reminder, or ‘evidence’ if you like, of this impossibility. *Bad Boy Bubby*’s themes of melancholia and use of music illuminate the film’s exploration of the crisis in, and disintegration of, masculine identity in Australia at the end of the twentieth century. *Bad Boy Bubby*’s interrogation of patriarchal structures and establishments reinforce its representation of a

masculinity which is currently experiencing a crisis in place, purpose and meaning, particularly within Western industrial societies. This interrogation is given greater significance and meaning in light of Kristeva's insights on melancholia, the Maternal semiotic and the subject in crisis. Bubby's inability to repress the strength of his tie to the Maternal semiotic contributes to the film's overall lack of Oedipal resolution, further posing a challenge to the stability of Western patriarchal notions of the 'self' and sexual difference. Because the spectator is so often invited to join Bubby in his semiotic moments, just experiencing the melancholia and listening to the music which litters *Bad Boy Bubby* is a subversive and ambiguous experience. It is subversive and ambiguous because, in the words of Kristeva, "[it] awakens our attention to this undecidable character of any so-called natural language, a feature that univocal, rational, scientific discourse tends to hide - and this implies considerable consequences for its subject" (1980c, 135).

## A SUMMARY

I approached this project with a seemingly clear idea of how I felt about the film *Bad Boy Bubby* and its relation to the psychoanalytic theories of Julia Kristeva. At first I thought the film was degrading and condescending towards women, using the abject, terrifying mother to reinforce the anxieties, fears and desires of the male subject. I thought the arrival of Pop represented Bubby's journey from dark to light. I thought Bubby's romance with Angel was a simple physical and psychical fetishisation of the mother/Maternal container, a relationship which would resolve Bubby's Oedipal crisis. Initially, I thought that Bubby's exploration of music enhanced his experience of masculinity and male identity through the association with an all male pub rock band. I thought that the spectator completed the cinematic journey from child to adult with Bubby from the film's terrifying beginnings to its seemingly conventional happy ending. I believed *Bad Boy Bubby* would be another case of limiting and unfulfilling cinematic representations of women and the Maternal body in order to smooth over the fears, anxieties and desires of the male spectating subject. I believed that Kristeva's theories on the shocking abject, romantic love and male melancholia would enhance my investigation of *Bad Boy Bubby* as an example of the cinematic reinforcement of woman as 'other,' woman as 'monster,' woman as 'fetish' - woman as a playground for disavowed masculine desires, insecurities and paranoias.

I found that, to an extent, my hypotheses were supported. The manifestation of Kristeva's abjection, love and melancholia did reinforce notions of a complete masculine self and thus woman as 'other' and the related-to-object in the film. As I delved deeper into Kristeva's theories, however, I found it more difficult to sustain the argument that *Bad Boy Bubby* was all about the affirmation of the 'self' and the denigration of the 'other.' Kristeva's emphasis on the 'subject in process,' the split subject and the subject in crisis led to my awareness and exploration of the character of Bubby as a 'literal' subject in process, unable to resolve his Oedipal crisis, nor fully accept his graduation to the unified 'self' through language and identity.

The film deceptively suggests that it has taken the spectator on a journey from dark to light, from evil to good, from slime to sunshine, from (m)other to lover, from frightening-feminine to preferred-Paternal. But from the beginnings in Bubby and Flo's drab and dirty flat, to the end which sees garbage trucks and an industrial landscape surrounding Bubby's idyllic new life, the resolution - like all attempts to resolve and confirm the self - is only a surface one and a shallow one, one which Bubby accepts and one which makes this 'happy ending' unusually deceptive and subversive. The experience of watching *Bad Boy Bubby* itself is never smooth sailing. It doesn't present the spectator with an uncomplicated opening and closure or tension and release. It denies the spectator the pleasures usually offered by the narratives and techniques of conventional cinematic styles. It is the film's



awareness of the fraud of the 'self' which creates a journey of male identity for Bubby and the spectator which never comes to an end - a never ending story which constantly needs to be re-examined, questioned and challenged.

Kristeva provides us with the psychoanalytic tools to re-examine our assumptions surrounding notions of culturally constructed dichotomies of the male-self and the female-other. Her theories refocus our attention to the Maternal body as a site of fear, desire, and sexual difference as a changing, unstable, and flexible site.

Kristeva's insights encourage us to question the authority of signifying practices such as language, literature and cinema. Abjection, love and melancholia not only inflect the stories we tell, but the ways in which we tell them. If we combine this knowledge with a subversively-made film such as *Bad Boy Bubby*, notions surrounding the self, sexual difference and the Maternal body begin to expand - creating the possibility for many and varied accounts of subjectivity, sexuality, masculinity and femininity.

*Bad Boy Bubby* creates a cinematic experience which compels us to reconsider and explore again the crisis in male subjectivity at the end of the twentieth century.

Through an examination of the film's trajectory, informed by Kristeva's theories on abjection, love and melancholia, we can begin to imagine identity and sexuality anew - beyond modernist prerogatives and masculine presumptions.

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