

Dejects and Cannibals: Postmodern Abjection in Ana Lily Amirpour's *The Bad Batch*

Kimberly Jackson

Department of Language and Literature, Florida Gulf Coast University, USA

Correspondence: kjackson@fgcu.edu

Peer review: This article has been subject to a double-blind peer review process



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Abstract

Ana Lily Amirpour's 2017 film The Bad Batch is a nightmare of postmodern abjection. Set in a desert wasteland in Texas, the film depicts a quasi-futuristic society that starkly reveals the dark underside of contemporary society, here portrayed in two realms, both exhibiting the height of abjection: the cannibal town called the Bridge and the shanty town of Comfort, where a lone perverse patriarch impregnates all the women while doling out steady doses of LSD to contain the masses. Borrowing from Julia Kristeva's description of the 'deject' in her work Powers of Horror, this analysis focuses on those characters who ultimately choose neither of these options. Having confronted and internalized the abject, these characters become eternal exiles, achieving a measure of liberation by assuming and embodying their partiality and by embracing 'a weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant' (Kristeva, J., 1982: 2).

Keywords: postmodernism; abjection; Amirpour; Kristeva; deject; cannibalism

In *Cannibalism in Literature and Film*, Jennifer Brown argues that ‘the cannibal figure reflects and embodies fears of specific times and spaces’ (2013: 7). Brown’s work is situated in a significant body of scholarship chronicling the history of cannibalism in both its reality and its fictional portrayals, as well as the reasons for our fascination with this taboo practice. The twenty-first century no doubt has its own unique relationship to this popular ‘other,’ one that manifests itself in a recent film from director Ana Lily Amirpour: *The Bad Batch* (2017). As I will argue, the cannibals of *The Bad Batch* represent one facet of a particularly dark vision of postmodern consumer culture. As Priscilla Walton points out in *Our Cannibals, Ourselves*, “we” have become “them” in the twenty-first century’ (2004: 154).

Amirpour’s Films

Ana Lily Amirpour’s first feature film, *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (2014), was a critical success, earning accolades from *Variety*, *Salon*, *The New York Times*, and *The Hollywood Reporter*, among others. Touted as ‘the first Iranian vampire Western’ by Brooks Barnes of the *New York Times*, the film has been praised for its unique aesthetics and feminist themes (Barnes, 2013). Amirpour’s second film, *The Bad Batch* (2017), did not garner much favour, most critics suggesting that unlike *A Girl*, *The Bad Batch*’s interesting aesthetics do not make up for its lack of narrative depth. *The Bad Batch* is no doubt a difficult film to pin down in terms of its overall message and nearly impossible to place firmly in one genre, but that is precisely where its power and complexity lies. The film’s patchwork quality offers a vivid picture of the chaotic, darker elements of the postmodern condition and, when looked at closely, reveals a salient critique of contemporary American society.

Like *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*, *The Bad Batch* depicts a bleak reality and an unflattering portrayal of humanity. *A Girl* takes place in the fictional Bad City, a small-town mecca of drugs and prostitution, complete with a mass grave of faceless corpses. *Bad Batch* depicts a desert wasteland, a sort of internment camp for society’s unwanted, who either turn to cannibalism or drug addiction. Both also include non-traditional love stories between individuals of questionable morals who would be incompatible, perhaps even enemies, if it were not for the hopeless situations in which they find themselves. The difference between the two films is not simply aesthetic. Though actually set in California, *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*, shot in black and white, all dialogue in Farsi, has a sort of exotic placelessness. The titular character is meant to seduce not only her prey but also the viewing audience with her innocent yet ageless fury. The film evokes a sense of the uncanny, its foreignness mixed with

familiar Western cultural iconography. The overall effect is a sort of haunting bemusement.

The supernatural component of *A Girl* – a vampire who strikes out at pimps and drug dealers – not only infuses the film with a sense of justice but also allows the couple ultimately to escape Bad City. Despite its savagery, there seems to be a purpose to *A Girl's* work; she polices, scolds, and liberates. She is both monster and fairy godmother, a supernatural Robin Hood of sorts. Her darkness is revelatory, while the unrelenting light of *Bad Batch* seems to reveal nothing. At the end of *A Girl*, the couple drives off, hopefully to a better place. In contrast, there is no escape from the Bad Batch. Perhaps even more than the fence around the desert wasteland, the ruined skeletons of cars and aeroplanes signifies the inescapability of this place, while the presence of scooters and golf carts emphasises the dysfunctional childishness of American consumer culture. Unlike the beauty of *A Girl's* postmodern pastiche, *The Bad Batch* plunges the viewer into a horrifying indifference, revealing the darker side of the postmodern condition. The viewer, like the main character of the film, is cast into a world where one can never really get one's bearings, where all are exiles and outcasts who, rather than socialise, would prefer to eat each other, and there is neither a true patriarch nor a supernatural force to ensure that justice is served. Yet there is some sense of redemption in the end, one perhaps more realistic given the reality the film depicts.

The Bad Batch begins when the film's protagonist, Arlen (Suki Waterhouse), finds herself cast out, wandering, lost and alone in a strange land peopled by monsters who literally want to eat her alive. She learns about the harsh realities of her outcast status immediately after being abandoned in the fenced-off wasteland. She is captured by female cannibals who cut off and consume first one of her arms and then one of her legs. She escapes, only to find herself in yet another nightmare, an 'oasis' inappropriately named Comfort, ruled by a cult leader akin to Jim Jones. Calling himself 'The Dream,' this leader, played by Keanu Reeves, keeps his constituents happy by doling out regular doses of LSD like candy, while he himself keeps a harem of young, heavily-armed women, all pregnant with his children. Caught between two untenable realities, herself made a figure of abjection, unable to locate herself or form any sort of identity, Arlen must find a way to forge a future. With the law of the father literally reduced to a drug-induced hallucination and the cannibal as phallic (m)other who dismembers and consumes 'me' before 'I' even get my bearings, this is a nightmare of abjection, one that is portrayed in the film as particular to the postmodern condition.

What Kind of Story is This?

Perhaps one of the things about *The Bad Batch* that plagues critics and viewers alike is that it is difficult to locate a genre with which to associate it. In an interview with *The Verge*, Amirpour describes it as ‘like *Road Warrior* meets *Pretty in Pink*’ (Tiffany, 2017). Indeed, the film does have a post-apocalyptic feel to it, strangely combined with Amirpour’s characteristic shine for 1980s American iconography. In one of the few positive reviews of the film, director Scott Derrickson describes it as ‘a cannibal movie, sure, but one that has more in common with the Southern moral mazes of Flannery O’Connor’s fiction or the dream-logic cinema of David Lynch than any grindhouse exploitation film’ (Derrickson, 2018). I would agree with Derrickson’s characterisation of the film as dream-like. Amirpour herself refers to it as a ‘savage fairy tale,’ a compelling characterisation not only because of the ferocity and violence of early fairy tales prior to their later re-scripting for genteel readers, but also because of the frequency with which their protagonists are cast out onto perilous terrains (Tiffany, 2017). In fact, both dreams and fairy tales have something in common in that each, through processes of reduction/condensation, translates ‘real’ or ‘conscious’ life into symbols with both manifest and latent content. C. M. Woodhouse, writing about Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, expresses it beautifully:

The fairy-story that succeeds is in fact not a work of fiction at all; or at least no more so than, say, the opening chapters of Genesis. It is a transcription of a view of life into terms of highly simplified symbols; and when it succeeds in its literary purpose, it leaves us with a deep indefinable feeling of truth; and it succeeds also, as Orwell set out to do, in a political as well as an artistic purpose, it leaves us also with a feeling of rebelliousness against the truth revealed. It does so not by adjuring us to rebel, but by the barest economy of plain description that language can achieve; and lest it should be thought guilty of a deliberate appeal to the emotions, it uses for characters not rounded, three-dimensional human beings that develop psychologically through time but fixed stereotypes, puppets, silhouettes (Woodhouse, 1946: xi).

Just as Orwell’s novel was criticised for the very elements that make it an effective political fairy tale, so *The Bad Batch* has been criticised for its caricatural characters, its seeming lack of direction, resolution, or moral. And yet I think one leaves a viewing of the film feeling that something like an indefinable truth has been revealed. Like Orwell’s fiction, indeed like dystopic literature in general, *The Bad Batch* ‘foregrounds the oppressive society in which it is set . . . to comment in a critical way on another society, typically that of the author or audience . . . to stimulate new critical insights into real-world societies’ (Booker, 2013: 5).

The dystopic situation into which the heroine of *The Bad Batch* is thrown offers a dark mirror of contemporary society. The wasteland of *The Bad Batch*, divided into two ‘cultures’ – the chaos of the cannibalistic Bridge and the relative order of Comfort – represents a reduction of the social strata of postmodern consumerist society similar to the one H.G. Wells performs on modern capitalist society in *The Time Machine* (1895), with vicious cannibalistic Morlocks and the worthless, feckless Eloi. And just like Wells’ supposedly futuristic society, the wasteland of *The Bad Batch* is meant to comment more about our contemporary society. Its writer and director states as much in an interview with Kaitlyn Tiffany of *The Verge*:

all those questions about modern American society that you can get from a weird, savage fairy tale like this, one where I am very consciously taking a look at what is American, what are our behaviors, what does the system make us into and make us capable of doing to each other. That’s what I’m seeing. Right now, right this minute. It’s not some future dystopia (Tiffany, 2017).

In a similar vein, Derrickson describes it as a ‘sprawling nightmare tapestry of a film [that] dives deep into our collective American soul-sickness, into the oppression of our basic social systems and the delusion of our basic ideals’ (Derrickson, 2018).

Amirpour’s journey into the deepest, darkest secrets of the American soul passes through and entangles narrative elements of various popular genres that force us to confront those aspects of contemporary humanity we would prefer to repress, but, as its director and writer has conceived of it, the film is most notably a ‘savage fairy tale.’ As I will argue, the film includes a postmodern rewriting of the classic fairy tale and, in tandem with that, a vision of a culture that is no longer capable of completing the process of abjection, of warding off those threats to social and bodily cohesion. It explores the consequences of finding oneself in such a state; and the bare possibility of redemption therefrom.

As Cannibal Movie

While more dark political fairy tale than horror film, *The Bad Batch* shares certain similarities with classic American horror movies that portray cannibals, like Tobe Hooper’s *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) and Wes Craven’s *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977). In *Cannibalism in Literature and Film*, Jennifer Brown argues for a strong link between these portrayals of cannibalism and capitalist consumerism, in which ‘people have the right to live off other people’ (Brown, 2013: 123). As Brown explains, ‘The cannibal figure represents the fear that our appetite for consumption knows no end, and indeed reminds us of our own potential inhumanity’ (Ibid: 7).

Unlike the 'colonial cannibal' - a 'them' that was culturally and geographically external to the West - the contemporary cannibal, whether in its fictional portrayals or in real life cases like serial killers Ed Gein and Jeffrey Dahmer, 'has moved to the centre' (**Ibid: 13**). So while 'it once warned us about others,' the cannibal 'now warns us about ourselves' (**Ibid: 7**).

As Brown notes, 'the cannibal has become the reviled image of overindulgence, overspending, and overexploitation of resources' (**Ibid: 214**). However, Hooper's and Craven's original films were contextually specific, focusing on the figure of the 'hillbilly,' a culturally and economically excluded class who came to represent a 'deep failure in the American economic system' (**Ibid: 113**). According to Brown, while featuring a similar cannibalistic underclass, the twenty-first century remakes of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *The Hills Have Eyes* were aimed at a different target: George W. Bush, 'the redneck in the White House' (**Ibid: 12**). In both versions of *The Hills Have Eyes* in particular, the line between civilised and savage becomes blurry, as the civilised family in each case must become savage in order to survive.

The cannibals of *The Bad Batch* are similarly represented as primitive, uneducated, 'apathetic people living in squalor with no hope for the future' (**Ibid: 112**), and there are clear parallels between the literal cannibalism in which they engage and the overindulgence practiced in 'civilised' Comfort. Further, detractors of President Trump might see a resemblance between the reign of egomaniacal, 1970s-Las Vegas-playboy The Dream and the current state of the union. A rampant populist, The Dream distracts his people with grand vapid speeches from his pulpit, while techno-rave music blares from enormous speakers and an associate doles out doses of LSD. His name is ironic; like the cannibalistic family of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, The Dream's 'family' is 'expressive of the sense that the American dream ha[s] not only failed but "fallen apart"' (**Ibid: 120**).

As Postmodern Fairy Tale

While there are resemblances between horror movies that feature cannibals and *The Bad Batch* in terms of the socio-political critique contained within them, the plotline of *The Bad Batch* aligns more closely with classic fairy tales, many of which include cannibals. As Maria Tatar, Cristina Bacchilega, and others contend, the attribution of stock characters, plot elements, and morals to fairy tales is doomed to failure when all the variants of particular tales are taken into account. However, most agree that there are some general narrative formulae that appear across a wide spectrum of similar tales within the genre, many of which also appear in *The Bad Batch*.

Our protagonist, Arlen, has much in common with the classic fairy tale hero. She, too, embarks on a journey that involves a transformation of sorts. Tatar describes the hero's plight as follows:

The tale's hero is a wanderer . . . exiled from home . . . his path takes him from a lowly condition at home to a world of enchantment and finally back to a modified and elevated form of his original condition. Cast in the dual role of victim in one set of family circumstances and seeker in another, he can slip with ease from a state of abject self-pity to one of bold resourcefulness (Tatar, 1987, 2003: 71).

In this regard, *The Bad Batch* is a story about a young girl who has somehow lost her way and finds herself in the gravest of dangers. There are bestial monsters and sly villains who try to trick her with promises of food and riches; there is a fairy godfather with a carriage; and yes, a prince, of sorts. In fact, all the main characters in *Bad Batch* correspond with stock fairy tale characters, according to Vladimir Propp's catalog. There is the villain: the cannibalistic Bridge People. But there is also the false hero: The Dream, who also poses as a donor or 'provider of magical agents': LSD (Tatar, 2003: 67). Once our heroine uses her cunning to escape from the cannibals, she employs a helper: the Hermit. Like a fairy godfather, the Hermit is an itinerate wanderer, traversing the vast wasteland alone, searching for people who need help. He never speaks, but his ageless, sun-ravaged face speaks volumes. The helper takes her to Comfort – 'a world of enchantment' – where a sorcerer reigns (Ibid). Like the gingerbread house of Hansel and Gretel, what seems like 'comfort' turns out to be another form of nightmare from the one she left. Sensing her own enchantment, Arlen journeys away from Comfort and out into the desert, where she meets Miami Man, an impossibly large and muscled Jason Momoa, who, like a Big Bad Wolf, approaches silently from out of the desert night, appearing to Arlen no doubt as familiar (human/grandmother) and villain (wolf) in one. While she, like Angela Carter's Wolf Girl, might be just as happy for Miami Man to eat her alive, he has other designs. Ordering her to rescue his daughter (the princess) from Comfort, he becomes the dispatcher, to whom she is 'obliged to take a redemptive journey . . . motivated by [her] violation of a prohibition' (she murdered Miami Man's wife, another cannibal, and the mother of the princess) (Ibid). When Arlen returns to Comfort, she is offered a false happy ending. Arlen could choose to stay in Comfort and become one of the Dream's concubines, living in a mansion in the lap of luxury. She could, in other words, choose to be a classic fairy tale heroine, who 'suffers humiliation and defeat that ends with a rapid rise in social status through marriage' (Ibid: 95). Instead, she chooses to complete her mission and return the princess to her father. Arlen's decision to leave the 'magic' and enchantment of Comfort and its 'father,' The Dream, in order to be with

the dangerous cannibal Miami Man aligns her with other postmodern fairy tale heroines, like Angela Carter's 'The Tiger's Bride,' in which, as Bacchilega explains, 'she can separate from him [the father] with no regrets because his appearance in the magic mirror no longer touches her. The subject of her own transformation, her own rebirth, she instead – 'white, shaking, raw' – approaches the tiger 'as if offering, in myself, the key to a peaceable kingdom in which his appetite need not be my execution' (Bacchilega, 1997: 99). This may seem an equally dangerous choice for Arlen, but it is not as if an infinite number of possibilities open up to her in this wasteland. She is a product of the society that exiled her. She can neither reject it wholesale by becoming an inhuman beast nor become a part of its obscene excrescence by living as a citizen of Comfort. The postmodern rewrite can only go so far in keeping within the patriarchal frame of the fairy tale genre. As Bacchilega explains, 'Gaining access to the construction of their own subjectivity, as the tiger's bride does, liberates women only partially within a genre which . . . is often used to constrain gender' (Ibid: 101-2). While Arlen has succeeded in separating herself from a tyrant king and in transforming her beast back into a prince, her victory is only partial, as is she. Her journey does not result in a successful exclusion of the abject and an attendant gain in wholeness; rather, it requires that she internalize and embrace the abject.

Postmodern Abjection

Abject characters, themes, and encounters are a mainstay of fairy tales, where we find various versions of cannibalism, incest, bodily mutilation, and infanticide, as well as perverse mother and father figures. The abjected mother appears, as in horror films, in the myriad faces of the monstrous feminine and creatures who want to 'eat you up.' Fathers appear in the guise of big bad wolves and Bluebeard figures. Like a dark fairy tale, *The Bad Batch* takes us to a primal, pre-cultural phase where we must confront the monsters we try so desperately to repress. It forces us to revert, to encounter the abject, to experience horrific and baffling encounters with all manner of material and events that, according to Julia Kristeva, 'disturb identity, system, order' (1982: 4). The abject is 'what does not respect borders, positions, rules' and what thus must be excluded 'so that I might live' (Ibid: 3). As Barbara Creed explains:

In general terms, Kristeva is attempting to explore the different ways in which abjection, as a source of horror, works within patriarchal societies as a means for separating the human from the non-human and the fully constituted subject from the partially formed subject. Ritual becomes a means by which societies both renew their initial contact with the abject element and then exclude that element (Creed, 2015: 38).

The issue with the postmodern nightmare depicted in *The Bad Batch* is that the process of abjection cannot be completed. On the one hand, in their isolation from 'normal' society, the Bad Batch have regressed to a primitive, savage state, without access to the necessary rituals of defilement that would order a relation to the abject. On the other hand, they are in a sense 'beyond' modern society in that they have experienced it and been abandoned by it; they know about ritual, but it holds no meaning for them. In an essay on the film *Alien 3*, Louise Speed explicitly links the postmodern condition with Kristeva's notion of abjection, citing both as situations where meaning collapses and borders break down, particularly the borders of the 'clean and proper self,' whether that refers to the social and corporeal individual or the social body in general (**Speed, 1998: 128**). Speed ascribes the unpopularity of *Alien 3* to its failure to complete the process of abjection, leaving audiences dissatisfied, unable to expel the horror the film exhibits.

While very different from *Alien 3*, it is my contention that *The Bad Batch* suffers from a similar incompleteness, but this is precisely what makes it an important film and a salient commentary on the postmodern condition, which has hindered our ability to drum up the kind of ritualistic expulsion necessary to complete the process of abjection. But this is not because there is nothing that we fear or that horrifies us. As Jean Baudrillard contends, 'These are, indeed, the only passions we have today: hatred, disgust, allergy, aversion, rejection and disaffection' (**Baudrillard, 2002: 145**). We suffer precisely from an excess of the abject, the non-object. 'We are in a social trance: vacant, withdrawn, lacking meaning in our own eyes' (**Ibid: 143**). Everywhere boundaries collapse, and we experience 'a hatred born of accumulated indifference' (**Ibid: 146**). Baudrillard continues:

[F]rom this point on there is something which is completely beyond social regulation. If this is not the end of History, it is certainly the end of the social. We are no longer in anomie, but in anomaly. Anomaly is not only what escapes the law but the rule. What is outside the game, "offside," no longer in a position to play (**Baudrillard, 2002: 146**).

The wasteland of *The Bad Batch* is just such an 'offside' space, devoid of the illusions of our progressive ideologies and unable to fully constitute itself through the process of abjection.

Given the emphasis on bodily wastes in Kristeva's theory of abjection, it is particularly interesting to examine not only the rampant cannibalism in the film, but also its obsession with fecal matter. In fact, the major difference between the Bridge and Comfort explicitly centers on the status of feces. After Arlen is captured, dismembered, and consumed, she manages to escape because she smears her own excrement over her body. She is already abject in two senses – one, she has been abjected from the social

order, and two, she has been abjected by the so-called human order of the Bad Batch, her double amputation a form of social and bodily castration. Not simply dehumanised, she is turned into a non-object. So Arlen exercises her only option at this point if she is not to become the ultimate non-object, the corpse - to embrace the abject, smear herself with her own shit. What is interesting in this regard is that when Arlen loses her arm, a tattoo across the fingers of her severed hand reads 'FEAR.' Through this act of castration, Arlen loses the sort of fear that can be symbolised and articulated, allowing her access to a more primal, inarticulable fear, the horror of the utter annihilation of the self. Despite being maimed, she is then able to kill the cannibals and is rescued by the Hermit – a man who exists neither with the Bridge people nor at Comfort, played by an unrecognizable Jim Carey.

Arlen then becomes a 'citizen' of Comfort, a strange oasis that seemingly offers protection from the brutality of the Bridge, but which merely enacts that brutality in a much more sinister form. Comfort is little more than a shanty town, 'full of broken TVs, giant boomboxes, AK-47s, booty shorts, crinkled July Fourth decorations, ceaseless ecstasy-fueled raves, and Statue of Liberty Halloween costumes — all the detritus of Americana' (Tiffany, 2017). Unlike the Bridge people, The Dream makes a point of defining his social order based on the elimination of excrement – 'your shit, it leaves . . .because of me . . . to a place where no one thinks about it and no one smells it.' Yet the Dream fails to complete the process of abjection at the level of the social, reminding his followers every night that they are in fact social waste, the shit of society. He claims on the one hand that 'It's time to wake up,' while with the other he doles out LSD like communion wafers, and a sign outside his mansion reads, 'This is not real.' He claims to offer life, while outside of Comfort there is only death. But the life he offers is one of abject poverty and drug addiction – a re-creation of the lives they likely led outside of the wasteland. Like a benign drug lord, the Dream occupies a mansion, complete with running water, opulent furnishings, and an indoor swimming pool, while his 'constituents' live largely on the street with the rest of the detritus. He offers momentary relief from their abject status through the acid-induced sublime, but it never lasts. He is in this regard a perverse version of the patriarchal 'American Dream,' or what is left of it once no one really believes in it anymore. The Dream is the epitome of the abject ruler that Kristeva describes:

The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them . . . it curbs the other's suffering for its own profit . . . it establishes narcissistic power while pretending to reveal the abyss – an artist who practices his art as a 'business' (Kristeva 1982: 15-16).

Not only the ruler of Comfort, the Dream is also the one father. Like the father of Freud's primal horde, he is seemingly the only one who procreates in this place, suggesting that the future, if not the present, will involve incestuous relations with his own daughters.

Two perverse sub-cultures are thus at odds here – the one that necessitates cannibalism and the other incest. Yet the two taboos are not unrelated. Kristeva writes of primitive societies with no need for population control:

the desire to procreate . . . entails . . . the disappearance of the incest taboo and pollution rites. Such a relaxation of prohibitions . . . is accompanied by such a lack of the 'clean and proper' and hence of the 'abject' that cannibalism of the dead seems to be current practice (Kristeva, 1982: 78).

Indeed, as Tatar notes, 'incest and cannibalism are habitually linked to a precultural phase marked by the inability to differentiate' and 'some languages employ the same term for incest and cannibalism' (Tatar, 1992: 199). The Dream's obsession with procreation thus goes hand in hand with the cannibalism practiced outside of Comfort. And in fact, though there are dozens of pregnant women in the Dream's harem, there are no babies, no children. Strangely, all the Dream seems to produce is more pregnant women, as if they never give birth, never release the infants from their wombs. They are thus no better than the bestial cannibal women who consume Arlen's limbs, both representative of the devouring mother, herself a sort of cannibal who 'eats' her young so as not to give them up. They all even wear the same shirts that read, 'the Dream is in me.' This 'branding' of the women is another indication that we are dealing with the motif of consumption; in addition to what the Dream refers to as the 'economy of Comfort' – the mass production and sale of LSD - here there is also the mass production and consumption of infants.

Most of the citizens of Comfort seem content with the illusion of society that the Dream offers. Only the madman, Bobby (Giovanni Ribisi), seems to see the truth. Like a prophet or sage, he wanders through the streets of Comfort, distraught, mumbling 'You have to remember this one thing . . . If you forget everything else but not this, you have nothing to worry about.' Arlen asks him, 'What's the thing?' He replies, 'How should I know?

Find out for yourself.' Far from the meaningless ramblings of a madman, as Derrickson contends, this is 'a deceptively significant exchange about the mystery of existence itself; about what is of utmost importance in a desert world of suffering' (Derrickson, 2018). Filthy and deranged, Bobby is a devotee of the abject: 'A "something" that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me' (Kristeva, 1982: 2).

Arlen's exchange with Bobby ultimately convinces her to leave Comfort to wander alone in the desert: 'What is this place? . . . Leave Comfort . . . go far away.' She becomes at this point the epitome of Kristeva's deject, the one who embraces the abject:

Instead of sounding himself as to his 'being,' he does so concerning his place: 'Where am I?' instead of 'Who am I?' For the space that engrosses the deject, the excluded, is never one, nor homogeneous, nor totalizable, but essentially divisible, foldable, and catastrophic. A deviser of territories, languages, works, the deject never stops demarcating his universe whose fluid confines – for they are constituted of a non-object, the abject – constantly question his solidity and impel him to start afresh. A tireless builder, the deject is in short a stray. He is on a journey, during the night, the end of which keeps receding. He has a sense of the danger, of the loss that the pseudo-object attracting him represents for him, but he cannot help taking the risk at the very moment he sets himself apart. And the more he strays, the more he is saved (Kristeva, 1982: 8).

Like the Hermit, Arlen incessantly wanders, shifting between the delusional identity offered by the Dream and Comfort and the total absence of identity and the threat of total annihilation in the vast desert wasteland outside. In fact, her reaction to the delusional identity that the Dream creates through his collective drug-induced techno-raves is the opposite of the rest of Comfort's citizens. On the evening she accepts the LSD with the others, her immediate reaction is to leave Comfort. Arlen's LSD-induced trip away from Comfort and out into the vast desert in the middle of the night marks her as deject. It becomes an experience of the sublime, which, according to Kristeva, is linked with the abject; 'the abject is edged with the sublime' (Kristeva, 1982: 11). If Arlen could express her experiences, she would likely describe them as Kristeva does: 'the starry sky . . . a cluster of meaning, of colors, of words, of caresses, there are light touches, scents, sighs, cadences that arise, shroud me, carry me away, and sweep me beyond the things that I see, hear, or think' (Ibid: 12).

In this state, Arlen meets the cannibal Miami Man. Through this encounter, Arlen is able to pronounce the fear that has literally been separated from her – ‘Strange, isn’t it? Here we are, in the darkest corner of this earth, and we’re afraid of our own kind.’ This is one of the central themes of abject literature as Kristeva describes it. Quoting Céline, she writes, ‘It is of men, and of men only, that one should always be *frightened*’ (**Ibid: 142**). After this assertion, Arlen lays her head against Miami Man’s bare chest, a strange gesture, given that he is one of the cannibals she despises, a dangerous wolf in human clothing – ‘a stifled aspiration towards another as prohibited as it is desired – abject’ (**Ibid: 47**). Indeed, the abject reasserts itself boldly and violently in a harsh cut to the next scene – Arlen, lying on her back in the full light of day, no arm, no leg, abject. Miami Man has stolen her prosthetic leg and plans to use her to get his daughter back. What he doesn’t know is that it was Arlen who killed his child’s mother in an attempt to separate herself violently from the cannibalistic aspects of the Bridge. She then took the orphaned child to Comfort, where, in her drug-induced pilgrimage, she left her. The journey to rescue the child from the Dream and return her to her father pits Arlen, a double amputee, against the hulking cannibalistic Miami Man – each despises the other for what they are, abject. And yet they are also drawn to each other in a strange way that is different than mundane heterosexual attraction. They cannot tolerate each other – she is literally a piece of meat and he a cannibal – yet they find themselves bound together over the fate of the one child in the film. The evolution of their relationship is a perverse version of the ‘girl-meets-boy, girl-hates-boy, girl-falls-for-boy’ storyline, which will result in a strange deject couple.

It is Arlen who attempts to form a connection with Miami Man, to tame the beast so to speak, through their mutual abjection. Her first gesture is to show him her Bad Batch tattoo, asking him, ‘what’s your number?’ He refuses to answer. She then begins to point out other tattoos that she has and asks him about his. It is not so much about the content of their respective body art that is important here but the notion of bodily marking and how that ties in with the theme of abjection and in particular, about gender relations in such a lawless place. In their co-edited collection titled *Tattoo, Torture, Mutilation, and Adornment*, Frances E. Mascia-Lees and Patricia Sharpe discuss the gendered aspect of tattooing particularly with regard to the fact that woman is marked by language, ‘a cultural process by which her status as female is constructed and controlled . . . the mark of gender in language and society precludes women from taking up the position of Absolute Subject, even as it constructs us as female’ (**Mascia-Lees & Sharpe, 1992: 153**). Citing several instances in literature and film where a man deliberately marks a woman in order to subjugate and control her, the general idea is that while bodily marking is easily seen as

a voluntary act of identity solidification for men, for women, it always risks being a reflection of the larger cultural marking that she endures as female, one that positions her as partial: 'It is only by being marked in relationship to the unmarked male that women come into being, a being that is inevitably partial' (**Ibid: 154**).

In *The Bad Batch*, the gendered nature of bodily marking is complicated by the fact that all Bad Batch are involuntarily tattooed in the process of abjecting them from society, aligning all of them with the abject feminine. Arlen is additionally marked through her literal castration – a physical, bodily mark of absence and partiality. As Speed points out with regard to *Alien 3*, 'we have gone beyond a depiction of castration anxiety to exploratory research of what happens after the dismemberment has actually been performed' (**Speed, 1992: 146**). What we end up with is 'an image of the female body which no longer provides reassurance against castration anxiety in the male viewer' (**Ibid: 145**). Strangely, it is ultimately this maimed female form that will allow Miami Man to be re-humanized. Earlier in the film, he watches dispassionately as another woman, who he himself had maimed similarly to Arlen, begs him to stop torturing her; she is literally a piece of meat. We watch as he breaks her neck and very efficiently butchers her body for food. Arlen represents the same type of figure, but manages to make him realise that the absence she signifies is precisely what is left, the 'one thing,' which is, of course, nothing. 'Postmodernity,' writes Baudrillard, 'is the attempt to reach a point where one can live with what is left' (**qtd. in Speed, 1998: 125**).

Once Arlen manages to rescue Honey and reunite father and daughter, Arlen and Miami Man engage in what, in another context, would seem a rather banal exchange:

Arlen: 'What are you doin right now? You wanna hang out or somethin?'

Miami Man: 'You are confused, no?'

Arlen: 'Not really.'

Miami Man: 'Go back to Comfort. In this place is only death for you.'

Arlen: 'I'm not goin back there . . . I like it here.'

Miami Man: 'What do you like? Where is here? Look Around you. Is nothing.' (**The Bad Batch, 2017**)

The power of this seemingly lackluster exchange lies in the status of the 'nothing' that concludes it. This is the second time that Miami Man has uttered this word in an enigmatic exchange. Earlier in the film when he himself is rescued by the Hermit, he cries out in desperation, 'I know

nothing. I'm lost.' The Hermit wordlessly rummages through his shopping cart and pulls out an object, which he places in Miami Man's hand. It is a small plastic snow globe – a 'magic' one? A talisman? It's hard to say. It seems to be just another piece of the placeless, meaningless detritus strewn throughout Comfort, but perhaps that's the point. It is precisely representative of all the objects that have become non-objects and the people who have become un-people, the same sort of non-object that confronts the madman Bobby as an unsurpassable something, 'this one thing' that one must never forget.

For Arlen, this 'one thing' could not be found when she was still a member of society; it required her to be abandoned and even maimed. The one thing is a no-thing, symbolised by her double castration and by the loss of the fear tattoo that once donned the fingers of the hand that was removed. So when Miami Man says to Arlen, here there is nothing, he doesn't at first realise the truth he has uttered and that she has already come to accept; he has failed to incorporate and embody the loss that she presents to him and that she no longer fears:

If it be true that the object simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject, one can understand that it is experienced at the peak of its strength when that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very being, then it is none other than abject. The abjection of self would be the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural loss that laid the foundations of its own being (Kristeva, 1982: 5).

There is a certain liberation in this realisation, one that thus far Miami Man has not been able to achieve. Far from being a moment in which Arlen must depend on Miami Man for survival, a manifestation of feminine weakness and acquiescence, here she offers him access to this liberation, that of the deject. In her fearlessness, she reaches out with the one hand she has left to touch the hand of the mutilator, a profound gesture in such a situation. Not a plea, but an offering. What are we to make of this seeming reconciliation of the masculine and the feminine? Can we even call it that? He tells her to go back to Comfort. This would amount to returning to the trailer where she knows her life is shit but, per the Dream's promise, at least she doesn't see it or smell it. Where the Dream's promise will be reproduced hundreds of times in hundreds of his indoctrinated children who will carry out his legacy. She could be the mother of one or more of them.

At this point, unlike Arlen, Honey is still under the enchantment of The Dream. As Miami Man begins to understand Arlen's gesture, an invitation to join her in her deject status, Honey tears his hand from hers, demanding, in her one line of dialogue in the entire film, 'spaghetti because the other man gave me spaghetti.' She is wearing one of the t-shirts of the Dream's harem: 'The Dream is in me.' Miami Man walks away with her rabbit, his back towards her.

It is perhaps in the killing and eating of the rabbit that this deject 'family' establishes their own perverse relationship to ritual. The rabbit is in fact an important symbol in the film, one that has its own sort of evolution. The first time we see it is in a painting that Miami Man has created for his daughter. In the painting, Honey appears very much like the Madonna, and she is holding a rabbit that one might see as a Christ figure. This also projects a certain feminine innocence on Honey. We next see the rabbit when Honey and Arlen are in Comfort. Arlen buys Honey a rabbit for a pet, while moments before we had seen one unceremoniously beheaded. Honey brings her rabbit with her when she temporarily becomes part of the Dream's harem, symbolically losing her innocence as she acquiesces to this perverse patriarch in exchange for the luxuries he offers. When Arlen 'rescues' Honey from this fate, the Dream hands Honey the rabbit and says, 'take care of this rabbit.' While seemingly a kind paternal gesture, this generosity, as is always the case with the Dream, is undercut by the fact that we know that rabbits not only suffer a similar fate in Comfort as those who are cannibalised outside of Comfort, but that this particular rabbit, a symbol of Honey's innocence, has been tainted. When Arlen offers Miami Man 'her hand,' this 'ceremony' is celebrated in the sacrifice and consumption of the rabbit. To some extent, death re-assumes its meaning here; this death is not like the others.

The film ends with Miami Man, Arlen, and Honey sitting around the fire eating Honey's pet rabbit. Arlen and Miami Man smile contentedly at each other while tears stream down Honey's face. This would read as a scene of the reconstitution of the nuclear family but given the violent disarticulations of the film – disarticulations of bodies, of gender, of family relations, of the social sphere in general – such an image is no longer readable in terms of paternal law and order. And yet with a 1980s-style anthem playing in the background that sounds like it came straight out of a John Hughes film, one senses that there might be hope, even in the wasteland.

Arlen's future is radically uncertain, but in the end she seems to believe in something like providence – her own version of 'happily ever after.' As she expresses it, 'What if all these things that happened to us happened to us so the next things that are gonna happen to us can happen to us?' It is a

deject providence, symbolised by the seemingly random machinations of the Hermit. Like a new deject divinity, he says nothing but seems to see everything. And though distinctly understated, it is his machinations that ultimately propel and control the plot. Rotting and decrepit, he unceasingly trudges through the wasteland, never still, always moving, slowly, unceasingly, like the rotations of the stars. It's interesting to see him as the director in disguise, operating in a world that causes her infinite sadness, but that she cares for deeply, offering us the occasional snow globe when we seem to be lost. Don't you know? The world is contained in a little plastic bubble that someone shakes up now and then for fun. But oh, the whirling snow is awfully pretty.

In *The Bad Batch*, Amirpour offers a dark vision of contemporary society, but it is not untrue, in the same way that fairy tales are not untrue. *The Bad Batch* is a symbolic rendering of postmodern consumerism that takes us to its primal core. Confronted with what lurks there, our heroine battles monsters and sorcerers but, given the inescapable reality in which she finds herself, she cannot simply live happily ever after. Each of her options untenable, she accepts and embraces a partial identity and creates an in-between space for herself through which she will eternally wander. Criticisms of *The Bad Batch* that accuse the film of being purposeless fail to see that the journey that takes place within it, and the small measure of redemption gained, is the only way such a savage fairy tale could be told.

Kimberly Jackson is Professor of English at Florida Gulf Coast University, where she teaches in the fields of literary theory, cultural studies, horror studies, and the Gothic. Her scholarly work focuses on the post-patriarchal and post-feminist aspects of contemporary horror. She is the author of *Technology, Monstrosity, and Reproduction in Twenty-First-Century Horror* (Palgrave, 2013) and *Gender and the Nuclear Family in Twenty-First-Century Horror* (Palgrave, 2015), as well as co-editor of the collection *Horror Television in the Age of Consumption: Binging on Fear* (Routledge, 2018).

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To cite this article:

Jackson, K., 2020. Dejects and Cannibals: Postmodern Abjection in Ana Lily Amirpour's *The Bad Batch*. *Exchanges: The Interdisciplinary Research Journal*, 7(2), 134-152. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.31273/eirj.v7i2.476>.