# Feathers, Fangs, and Feminine Becoming-Animal: *Ginger Snaps* and *Black Swan*

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A high-school student begins menstruating and shortly thereafter develops fangs, claws, grey fur, and an insatiable desire for flesh and blood. A ballerina gets her first lead role and dances herself into a frenzy, sprouting swan feathers, red eyes, and webbed toes in her pursuit of perfection. In their depictions of grotesque animalistic metamorphoses that coincide with the social and bodily upheavals of feminine adolescence, John Fawcett's *Ginger Snaps* (2000) and Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan* (2010) exemplify a characteristic generic and tonal ambivalence within late-twentieth and early twenty-first century horror cinema as it attempts to negotiate cultural anxieties surrounding categorical instabilities of gender, sexuality, and species, anxieties that are rapidly increasing as technological advancements and climate crises heighten feelings of bodily alienation and instability.[1] Contemporary horror cinema expresses deep apprehension in the face of categorical limits as well as a longing for new, unanticipated forms of embodiment. Both *Ginger Snaps* and *Black Swan* illustrate and embody horror's ambivalence by foregrounding and thematising the taxonomic limits of foundational categories such as 'animal' and 'human', depicting bodily excess in the forms of menstruation, self-mutilation, and physical metamorphoses, and blending genres and tonalities, incorporating elements of body horror, melodrama, camp, science fiction, and black comedy. What aligns these two films and sets them apart from other horror films is that their violent and grotesque animalistic metamorphoses occur in tandem with and in response to the melodramatic upheavals of feminine adolescence, a framing that emphasises the significant overlap between psychoanalytic theories of abjection and Deleuzo-Guattarian philosophies of becoming.

Deleuzo-Guattarian philosophies of becoming and psychoanalytic theories of horror and abjection are frequently opposed as modes of critical and philosophical thought. Rather than holding these two critical approaches in opposition, this essay contends that contemporary horror cinema, and in particular, the subgenre of feminine-adolescent body horror that these two films fall within, configures abjection as a starting point for unanticipated transformations, rather than a limit where meaning falls apart. Typically, Deleuzian (and Deleuzo-Guattarian)

[1] *Black Swan*, dir. by Darren Aronofsky (Warner Brothers, 2010); and *Ginger Snaps*, dir. by John Fawcett (Motion International, 2000).

philosophy is framed as a radical alternative to psychoanalysis and other intellectual traditions predicated on binaries and dichotomies,[2] or what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari term 'arborescent' structures.[3] However, horror is the genre best suited to illuminate the significant overlap between the questions underpinning both Deleuzo-Guattarian philosophy and psychoanalysis, namely the instabilities of singular, bounded selfhood, the complex relationship between self and Other(s), the materiality of embodiment, and the limits of signification. In particular, feminine-adolescent horror is similarly concerned with transgressions of bodily and psychological limit points, and the simultaneous danger and promise of transformations and metamorphoses. When thought of in conjunction, these critical approaches provide insight into how contemporary horror negotiates pervasive social anxieties, not by attempting to contain these threats, but by creatively refashioning them as potentially liberatory or anticipatory of new modes of being.

Although each film emerged from a different cultural context – *Ginger Snaps* is an indie Canadian horror film with a robust cult following[4] and *Black Swan* is a star-studded mainstream Hollywood film with a well-known director (and an added layer of prestige due to Natalie Portman's Best Actress Oscar win for the film) – these contextual differences do not eclipse their shared concerns with femininity, bodily limit points, and animalistic metamorphoses. *Ginger Snaps* follows morose teenage sisters Ginger (Katharine Isabelle) and Brigitte (Emily Perkins) as they wait out their adolescence in their shared basement bedroom, staging bloody suicide photoshoots to pass the time and begrudgingly attending high school – what Brigitte refers to as a 'mindless little breeders' machine' and a 'hormonal toilet' – rolling their eyes at their immature classmates and overly enthusiastic mother, Pam (Mimi Rogers). On the night that Ginger begins menstruating for the first time, she is bitten by a werewolf, a supernatural intervention that allows her to circumvent the traditional, normative dictates of puberty and instead become an ever-changing wolf girl. From the moment she is bitten, Ginger begins a chaotic, violent transformation that leaves Brigitte troubled and desperate to bring her sister back to who she used to be. *Black Swan* focuses on Nina (Portman), a shy, uptight, perfectionist ballerina in New York City who lives in a cramped apartment with her abusive mother (Barbara Hershey) and devotes her entire life to dancing. Nina's entire world changes when she gets cast

[2] See Richard Rushton, 'Deleuzian Spectatorship', *Screen*, 50 (2009), pp. 45-53, doi:10.1093/screen/hjn086.
[3] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi (University of Minnesota Press, 2005), p. 17.
[4] This is the central concern of Ernest Mathijs's book *John Fawcett's Ginger Snaps* (University of Toronto Press, 2013), wherein he traces the film's production and reception history, detailing how and why it developed into a cult phenomenon.

in the lead role(s) of Odette/Odile in her company's production of *Swan Lake*. She begins having visions of her own transformation into a swan, a process that undoes her previously stable sense of self and allows her to blossom into a newly assertive, uncontrolled version of herself, open to new experiences and unconcerned with perfection. Despite these promises of freedom and newness, both films end with their protagonists in states of physical breakdown and disarray, reflecting horror cinema's characteristic ambivalence about radical departures from humanity.

The violent transformations in *Ginger Snaps* and *Black Swan* resonate significantly with Deleuze and Guattari's philosophical concept of becoming-animal, a process that involves a departure from one's stable human identity in favour of an endlessly shifting, nonsingular, relational becoming. This expansive philosophical framework guides my consideration of the metamorphoses in these two films, as its emphasis on unpredictability and the multiplicitous possibilities of change opens up space to untangle the generic and categorical ambivalence of these two films. As Eve Tuck notes, part of the richness (and difficulty) of Deleuzian philosophy is that it is simultaneously literal and figurative, a point that underscores the ambiguously supernatural transformations within these two films, and that hints at the generative possibilities of irresolvability.[5] Neither film 'resolves' questions of what it means to be human or animal, or whether the protagonists' metamorphoses are 'real' or imagined, explicable by science or magic or mental illness. Both films suggest that if humans are no longer necessarily human, if a person is no longer necessarily a singular being, and if a girl might also be a werewolf or a swan, then a relatively conventional body-horror film might also offer rich possibilities for thinking beyond stable categories and binaries.

**Multiplicitous Subjects: Becoming-Animal**

Deleuze and Guattari first introduced the concept of becoming-animal in their book *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980), a sprawling philosophical work that argues against linear, hierarchical, so-called 'arborescent' or 'molar' forms (institutionally normalised structures like psychoanalysis, biology, linguistics, capitalism, and systematic philosophy), and instead finds value, joy, and liberation in lines of flight, deterritorialisation, nomadic movements, and improvisational 'rhizomatic' or 'molecular' thinking.[6] Deleuze and Guattari conceptualise becoming-animal as an escape route, specifically in response to the

[5] Eve Tuck, 'Breaking up with Deleuze: Desire and Valuing the Irreconcilable', *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 23 (2010), pp. 635-50 (p. 637), doi:10.1080/09518398.2010.500633.
[6] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, pp. 17-18.

'power takeover by the signifier, [or] a subjectification of affects', which is to say a stifling of genuine expression or an attempt to organise and encapsulate experiences that exceed strictly established political and social structures.[7] Leaving behind one's singular human form may be the only option when faced with an impasse or blockage created by restrictive binary structures of gender and species, an act that Deleuze and Guattari consider 'a truly political option'.[8]

Becoming-animal does not proceed by resemblance, identification, or imitation, but rather, 'only [by] an exploding of two heterogeneous series on the line of flight composed by a common rhizome that can no longer be attributed to or subjugated by anything signifying'.[9] As one leaves behind their unified human form, they embark on a relational process of coming apart and back together again, incorporating new, non-human elements into their being, never quite reaching an endpoint but endlessly becoming in unexpected and unanticipated directions, exceeding and evading structures of signification and subjectification. Within the process of becoming-animal, there is no 'animal become', as it is not a process with a fixed outcome where one completes a transition from one state of being to another, but is rather an endless becoming, an infinitely proliferating middle with no 'start' or 'end' points.[10] Such endlessness cannot, however, be accommodated by the narrative constraints and time limits of mainstream cinema, and for the most part, *Ginger Snaps* and *Black Swan* do neatly narrativise their protagonists' experiences. Ginger's transformation begins the moment she is bitten by a werewolf and ends with her death at the end of the film, and Nina's metamorphosis commences with her casting as Odette/Odile in her ballet company's production of *Swan Lake* and climaxes during her opening-night performance. Yet as this essay demonstrates, despite these surface level reterritorialisations, there are elements of the characters' becomings that exceed, or cannot be contained by, conventional cinematic structures.

One way that the films do this is by visualising subjectivities that are multiplicitous and shifting, rather than singular and bounded, visually signalled by too-close relations, doubles, mirrors, and reflective surfaces. Ginger and Brigitte resemble each other so closely, with their gothic/Victorian dresses, long dark hair, hunched posture, and expressions of disdain, that they might as well be twins. Neither of them goes anywhere without the other, prompting their mother Pam to scold Brigitte that she need not follow Ginger around like her shadow. Nina is surrounded by doubles, mirrors, and reflective surfaces, whether in the ballet studio, costume-

[7] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 14.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 10.
[10] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 238.

fitting room, the bathroom, her bedroom, or in the form of her hallucinated doppelgänger who sometimes morphs into her fellow dancer and professional rival Lily (Mila Kunis). To Deleuze and Guattari, becoming and multiplicity are the same thing, meaning that the process of becoming implies that one no longer appears to be a singular, fixed entity, but rather a boundless, constantly shifting legion of relations.[11] In each film, this ever-shifting multiplicity is signalled by visual presentations of doubleness or multiple selves that blur the boundaries between self and Other. This notion of relational nonsingularity is one of the main differences between Deleuzian philosophy and psychoanalysis with its individualistic bent and adherence to binary structures of gender, subjecthood, and consciousness. Yet as the following analysis illustrates, when considered in relation to the generic ambivalence and bodily excess of horror cinema, the overlap between psychoanalytic concepts such as abjection and Deleuzo-Guattarian philosophy becomes clear, particularly their mutual concerns with intersubjectivity and border crossings and violations.

Literary scholar Gerald L. Bruns suggests that the anarchy of becoming is not just a logical or formal problem, but may also have social or what he terms 'asocial' significance.[12] By *a*social, Bruns seems to imply that the deterritorialisation of becoming-animal marks a real attempt to depart from one's previously well-defined form and become anarchic, unfixed, and illegible within the terms of overarching social structures. Bruns conceptualises it as 'a movement from unity to complexity, that is, from organization to anarchy, which is the mode of being of whatever is uncontainable within an order of things'.[13] The becomings in *Black Swan* and *Ginger Snaps* are animated by such an impulse toward kinetic, open-ended forms of embodiment that are difficult to contain, particularly within rigid social structures governing feminine embodiment and sexuality. Neither film allows for a total annihilation of legibility, yet nonetheless, each frames becoming-animal as a (violently) escapist process with social ramifications.

While there are surface-level differences between the social realms of the two films – *Black Swan* takes place in the rigid, mannered world of the New York City Ballet, *Ginger Snaps* within the bleak (fictionalised) Canadian suburb of 'Bailey Downs' – both films establish that these social settings are structured by restrictive patriarchal expectations of (adolescent) feminine embodiment and sexual expression. In *Black Swan*, the patriarchal underpinnings of

[11] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 249.
[12] Gerald L. Bruns, 'Becoming-Animal (Some Simple Ways)', *New Literary History*, 38 (2007), pp. 703-20 (p. 705), doi:10.1353/nlh.2008.0003.
[13] Bruns, 'Becoming-Animal', p. 704.

the world of professional ballet come to light through and are articulated by artistic director Tomas Leroy (Vincent Cassel),[14] who uses his powerful position and artistic temperament to justify his controlling and inappropriate behaviour. In particular, he regularly initiates and pursues sexual relations with his prima ballerinas, seducing Nina during a private rehearsal, and instructing her to go home and masturbate in order to enhance the sensuality of her performances. Tomas fosters an environment where his sexual attention comes along with, and is deemed necessary to, professional and artistic success. When Nina replaces Beth (Winona Ryder) as prima ballerina and Tomas's favourite, Beth completely loses her sense of identity and has a breakdown, during which she verbally attacks Nina, calling her a 'little whore', and later attempts suicide by walking into traffic. In the world of ballet, women's sexual desires are not only downplayed or ignored, but are forcibly configured as non-existent. Having spent her entire life within this dancerly milieu, Nina begins the film with no knowledge of her own sexual wants and a fearful attitude toward sex in general. She bristles when Tomas first asks her if she enjoys sex, and on more than one occasion, she is referred to as 'virginal', 'fearful', and 'frigid', a perfect embodiment of the White Swan Odette from *Swan Lake*. For Nina, there is seemingly no alternative to this fearfulness and ignorance of sex and sexual desire, because her internal world has been so fully shaped and structured by these externally imposed restrictions and expectations.

There is a more general or widespread air of repression in *Ginger Snaps*, reflected in the stuffy suburban organisation of Bailey Downs and the leering stares of the teenage boys who sit on the bleachers watching the girls play sports in gym class, yelling out lewd comments and cornering them after class to ask for dates. In the bleak, dead-end town of Bailey Downs, living within the confines and familiar scripts of heteronormativity – dating, marriage, reproduction, the nuclear family – seems to be the only option. Any deviation from this script is marked as aberrant and dangerous. For example, after Ginger begins her transformation, she becomes sexually ravenous and aggressive, pursuing anyone who crosses her path – her classmate Jason (Jesse Moss), local drug dealer Sam (Kris Lemche), and even her younger sister Brigitte. Her unapologetically heightened sexual appetite marks her as a 'freak', as she laments, alienating her from those around her because they become frightened of her, and leading her classmate Trina (Danielle Hampton) to call her names such as 'bitch' and 'slut'. In both films, young women are expected to be sexually responsive and receptive, but only in ways that reflect men's desires or maintain the patriarchal status quo. What the films have in

[14] 'Leroy,' or 'Le *roi*' translates to 'the king' in French, further emphasising his grandiose patriarchal position.

common is that once Ginger and Nina begin their animalistic becomings, the boundaries between self/Other, feminine/masculine, active/passive, and human/animal begin to blur, thus disrupting these simplistic social expectations by configuring embodiment and relationality as fluid, open, and unpredictable rather than fixed and unyielding. As Ernest Mathijs observes, the characters in these films are 'marginalized not as individuals, but because they aim to be their very own species'.[15]

In both cases, the films establish these restrictive social settings and then suggest that becoming-animal offers an escape route from the structures and limited options that keep people trapped and without options, unable to achieve personal or relational fulfilment. At the same time, this process is presented as troubling, violent, and socially alienating, with Ginger being ostracised for her sexual openness, and Nina labelled as 'sick' and mentally unwell as she rapidly changes form. Although the limitations of cinematic narrative and form cannot ultimately accommodate the endlessness and radical departures of becoming-animal, this ambivalence need not be an impasse or an endpoint, but rather an opportunity for 'valuing the irreconcilable', to use Tuck's provocative phrase.[16] The films confront big existential and ontological quandaries of what it means to be human, and where the line between human and animal lies. Both films trouble the very notion of separation between these terms by depicting their protagonists in liminal states, their recognisably 'human' bodies combined with animal characteristics, such as fangs, swan feathers, red eyes, wolf fur, and sharp claws. These varying states of in-betweenness suggest the fundamental instability of binary oppositions in general, not only between human and animal, but also masculine and feminine, alive and dead, and science and the supernatural. These dualistic terms cannot be reconciled with each other, nor can they be kept comfortably apart.

Beyond just pointing to the fact that these culturally foundational oppositions are unstable, cannot be resolved, and are easily unsettled, the films open up space to imagine creative alternatives. Tuck notes that for Deleuze, 'what performs as contradiction in society are actually a multiplicity of lines of flight that "flee in every direction"'.[17] Rather than become mired in the impasse of meaninglessness, or in the insufficiency of current categories to describe embodied experience, Deleuzian becomings allow these films to expand outward and imagine new possibilities. Both Ginger and Nina respond to the (lack of) choices they are presented with – in Ginger's case, the normative linear trajectory of puberty, heterosexual

[15] Mathijs, *John Fawcett's Ginger Snaps*, p. 58.
[16] Tuck, 'Breaking up with Deleuze,' p. 648.
[17] Tuck, 'Breaking up with Deleuze', p. 645.

courtship, marriage, and reproduction, and for Nina, acquiescing to controlling and abusive behaviour in order to remain the perfect daughter and prima ballerina – by spiralling out in unexpected directions, forging new paths that demonstrate that either obeying or rejecting social and cultural conventions are not the only two options. Horror cinema is particularly well suited for 'valuing the irreconcilable', as it is able to envision and imagine such 'lines of flight' through innovative special and practical effects and generic expectations of the supernatural, inexplicable, or fantastic, while also acknowledging and foregrounding its inherent limitations in terms of its artifice and durational constraints. Turning to the relationship between psychoanalysis and horror provides further insight into the way that contemporary horror cinema encodes and expresses cultural, social, and generic tensions and oppositions.

**Horror, Excess, Abjection**

The connection between horror cinema and psychoanalytic theory is a rich one, and scholars such as Robin Wood and Carol Clover have previously offered insight into the way that films such as *Halloween* (1978) and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) negotiate the gendered dimensions of Oedipal dynamics and castration anxiety.[18] Brigid Cherry notes that although psychoanalysis is largely disputed and critiqued within the practical field of psychiatry, 'Freudian psychoanalysis is nevertheless an application that still offers productive readings of various horror films and cycles', as it probes the seemingly timeless unconscious anxieties and pleasures that horror films draw upon and provoke.[19] One prominent psychoanalytic touchstone within horror-film scholarship, and one that has particular resonance with Deleuzo-Guattarian philosophy, is Julia Kristeva's conceptualisation of abjection as 'the place where meaning collapses'.[20] *Abject* refers to that which has been rejected or expelled in a subject's formation but that nonetheless haunts and confronts the subject as its limit or undoing, marking the place where language and signification break down. Bodily fluids, waste, sickness, and death bring the subject face to face with the inexplicable, with its outside, and with what cannot be incorporated into itself – that which must be actively rejected and denied, yet tolerated nonetheless. Kristeva narrates the confrontation with the abject as an encounter with something

[18] See Robin Wood, 'An Introduction to American Horror Film', in *Movies and Methods, Vol. 2: An Anthology*, ed. by Bill Nichols (University of California Press, 1985), pp. 195-220; Carol Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton University Press, 1992); *Halloween*, dir. by John Carpenter (Sony Pictures, 1978); and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, dir. by Tobe Hooper (Bryanston Distributing Company, 1974).
[19] Brigid Cherry, *Horror* (Routledge, 2009), p. 101.
[20] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Louis-Ferdinand Céline (Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 2.

that is understood as '[n]ot me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A "something" that I do not recognize as a thing.'[21] The nothing/something of abjection puts pressure on and constantly threatens to cross and violate the boundaries of the subject, generating feelings of anxiety and revulsion. Indeed, abjection produces anxiety precisely because it alerts the subject to the tenuousness and perhaps even illusoriness of bounded individuality.

For Kristeva, the feeling and cultural genre most closely aligned with abjection is horror, an idea that is later taken up and expanded upon by film scholar Barbara Creed. In Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine* (1993), she explores how different manifestations of female monstrosity in horror cinema index cultural fears surrounding feminine embodiment and sexuality, and contends that feminine monsters are threatening precisely because they confront the (masculine) viewer with that which he has abjected in order to cohere as a subject – the feminine, the maternal, the bodily. Kristeva emphasises the social and cultural functions of abjection in her explorations of 'the different ways in which abjection works within human societies, as a means of separating out the human from the non-human and the fully constituted subject from the partially formed subject'.[22] Ginger and Nina's respective transformations do not provoke horror only because they transgress the lines between human and non-human, but also and perhaps especially because they are partial, open-ended, becoming. Ginger ends the film almost totally transformed into a wolf, yet some of her old characteristics remain, as she walks on her hind legs and responds to human speech, her gaze focused and humanistic. Nina's form is similarly unstable and shifting, as she passes through multiple stages of becoming-swan, sometimes partially transformed, sometimes with white feathers, sometimes black, and sometimes appears entirely human again. Neither character resolves into a stable identity that upholds the symbolic order, with its clear boundaries between subject and object, man and woman, human and animal, but rather, remain in perpetual states of change and ambiguity, obscuring the very foundations of these binary oppositions.

Horror cinema more broadly tends to question the terms of such binary pairs, generating its strong cultural and spectatorial impact by envisioning monsters, creatures, and supernatural events that violate established rules of biology and bodily sovereignty. Linda Williams remarks that there seems to be a fundamental connection between horror and excess, placing horror (alongside pornography) under the 'extended rubric of melodrama' and contending that these 'body genres' depart from 'classical' forms due to their '"lapses" in realism, by "excesses" of

[21] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 2.
[22] Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (Routledge, 1993), p. 8.

spectacle and displays of primal, even infantile emotions, and by narratives that seem circular and repetitive'.[23] Formal excess – grotesque depictions of blood, mutilated bodies, soundtracks saturated with screams and cries at the expense of dialogue or music – spills out beyond the screen and encourages an (almost) mimetic relationship between horror films and their audiences, who jump, shiver, and cringe in response to the gory, violent, shocking, or repulsive onscreen spectacles, typically carried out on the bodies of victimised women. For Williams, horror cinema's excess – the direct impact that its depictions of shrieking victims, gore, and bodily fluids have on the spectator's body – prompts a fluid, nonbinary form of spectatorial identification and viewing pleasure that oscillates between active and passive, masculine and feminine, and victim and hero. This dynamic and genderfluid form of spectatorial engagement emphasises the insufficiency of any strict category to encapsulate the kinetic experiences of identification and embodiment. While her analysis does not ultimately depart from the overarching binary frameworks of psychoanalysis, Williams begins to conceptualise forms of spectatorial engagement and identification prompted by horror cinema's excess that are more fluid and diffuse than psychoanalysis typically allows for, somewhat anticipating contemporary horror's reappraisal of categorical fixity.

Throughout her essay, Williams specifically refers to slasher films, associated with adolescent franchises such as *Friday the 13th* (1980-2003) and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984-2003). Such films are exemplary of horror cinema's turn toward the body and away from the spectrally supernatural, a shift that Linda Badley connects to a postmodern cultural saturation of sexual and bodily imagery in the years following the sexual revolution in the 1970s.[24] Badley connects cultural discourses and imagery surrounding issues such as AIDS, LGBTQ+ rights, feminism, pornography, and political sex scandals to widespread fears about the unpredictability, uncontrollability, and unknown capabilities of the human body, arguing that horror cinema narrativises these fears in our post-Victorian, post-Freudian era.[25] Slasher films do this by confronting audiences with bodies turned inside out, violated by an overpowering force – a killer, perhaps supernatural, but oftentimes not – depicting blood, body parts, and innards leaking or pouring out of bodies, boundary crossings that destroy any stable sense of 'inside' and 'outside'. Through a campy excess of gore and superhumanly strong, often indestructible killers, slasher films confront audiences with human powerlessness in the face

[23] Linda Williams, 'Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess', *Film Quarterly*, 44.4 (1991), pp. 2-13 (p. 3), doi:10.1525/fq.1991.44.4.04a00020.
[24] Linda Badley, *Film, Horror, and the Body Fantastic* (Greenwood Press, 1995), p. 13.
[25] Badley, *Film, Horror, and the Body Fantastic*, p. 13.

of abjection, and the fragility of bodily integrity and life itself.

*Ginger Snaps* and *Black Swan* are also exemplary of this period in which horror films increasingly began to narratively, thematically, and formally approximate the relentless confrontations with abjection that have come to define late-twentieth/early twenty-first century North American life, yet stage such confrontations differently than slasher films. Ginger and Nina's bodies are transformed from within rather than dismantled from without, as occurs in the slasher film. This form of internal 'body horror' marks a departure from the aggressive phallic logic of the slasher, and instead presents an intimate and private violence that comes from within the body, a violence that is also indicative of a desire for expansion and transformation. Both 'strains' or subgenres approach the same issues, yet go about it differently and reach different conclusions. The majority of slasher films end ambiguously, retaining a sense of dread that even if the killer has been defeated, another might be around the corner. Body horror tends toward a less fatalistic open-endedness, suggesting that if the category of 'human' no longer sufficiently encapsulates embodied experience in the twenty-first century, there is also nothing to replace this term, and so we seemingly live in a perpetually liminal state of unbounded becoming, a state that provokes anxiety and excitement in equal measure. Instead of helplessness, body horror suggests openness, even if it is similarly terrifying.

This strain of body horror is where psychoanalysis begins to overlap with Deleuzian cinematic philosophy. Kristeva writes that, within aesthetic confrontations with the abject (specifically in literature), '"subject" and "object" push each other away, confront each other, collapse, and start again – inseparable, contaminated, condemned, at the boundary of what is assimilable, thinkable', a conceptualisation that raises questions about how such an experience translates into cinematic sounds and images.[26] If abjection marks the boundary of what is thinkable, might it also mark the limit of what is cinematically representable? The limits of representability similarly concern Deleuze, albeit somewhat differently. Throughout his two books on cinema, Deleuze refutes the notion of 'representation' altogether, contending that cinematic images are not representations *of* something, but are parts of the whole of existence with a privileged ability to express change, time, and movement within this whole. For Deleuze, cinema is the art form most able to express and emulate thought, and in particular, to emphasise that thought is not only a human activity, but a larger process that involves movements and changes in the non-human, inanimate, and natural worlds. To reflect this, Deleuze emphasises *movement* and *time* in cinema, rather than familiar film-studies subjects

[26] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 18.

such as narrative, character, theme, genre, or identity. Akin to his conceptualisations of becoming-animal, Deleuze de-emphasises the notion of resemblance or linguistic metaphor, instead configuring cinematic imagery as 'a plastic mass, an a-signifying and a-syntaxic material, a material not formed linguistically even though it is not amorphous and is formed semiotically, aesthetically, and pragmatically'.[27]

Deleuze acknowledges the insufficiency of language to describe or encapsulate the movements of cinema, characterising cinematic signification systems as belonging to 'non-linguistic semiotics', wherein meaning is not entirely lost, but is no longer beholden to a bounded linguistic system.[28] This notion of non-linguistic semiotics closely resembles the experience that abjection initiates, the breakdown of strict linguistic structure and signification. Williams begins to articulate this experience in her consideration of mimetic spectatorship and identificatory fluidity. If language structurally depends on the dichotomies of subject/object, outside/inside, and signifier/signified, abjection scrambles these binary pairs and generates a jarring sense of danger, causing the subject to freeze in terror, turn away, or else attempt to reject the non-object it is confronted with. Psychoanalytic discourse frames this as a deeply unsettling phenomenon, whereas Deleuzian philosophy (and body horror) sees generative potential in reframing the very foundations from which meanings arise. Deleuze writes: 'we no longer know what is imaginary or real, physical or mental, in the situation, not because they are confused, but because we do not have to know and there is no longer even a place from which to ask'.[29] What if, he asks, when confronted with abjection or limit points, the subject did not fall apart or turn away, but instead took off in a 'line of flight' that creatively reconfigured the very notion of fixed boundaries?

Ancient associations of abjection with the 'abominations' of 'sexual immorality and perversion; corporeal alteration; decay and death; [...] murder; the corpse; bodily wastes; the feminine body and incest' persist in films such as *Ginger Snaps* and *Black Swan*, yet such materials are not *only* treated with terror and revulsion, but rather, following horror's ambivalent shift toward the body, are framed as having emancipatory potential.[30] Each film tonally and stylistically embeds a sense of humour, curiosity, and even mundanity in relation to these abject materials, framing abjection as an ambiguous starting place, rather than an immobilising endpoint. Both films frame their metamorphoses as confrontations with abjection

[27] Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 28.
[28] Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p. 34.
[29] Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p. 7.
[30] Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, p. 9.

that initiate rhizomatic Deleuzian becomings, exemplifying the trend in contemporary horror cinema to thematise and envision the breakdown of strict binary categories that has accompanied the twentieth-/twenty-first century obsession with the limits and potentialities of the body.

**'A Goddamn Force of Nature': Bodily Fluid(s)ity and Ambiguous Becomings**

*Ginger Snaps* opens on a quiet grey suburb, the low hum of wind and electrical wires only punctuated by the sounds of dogs barking in the distance and a woman's rake scraping the grass as she collects crisp brown leaves. The placid dullness is almost immediately interrupted when the woman's child, playing in the sandbox feet away from her, lifts his hand from the sand and absentmindedly rubs blood across his face. The woman approaches her son, the camera creeping forward alongside her, and her gentle, sweetly musical inquiry – 'What have you got there?' – stops dead in the air as her expression drops into one of revulsion and panic. She reaches down and picks up a severed dog paw covered in blood with its bone protruding, immediately throwing it down and scooping up her son. The mother softly inquires after her dog, and the scene immediately cuts to a canted reverse shot, quickly zooming in on her face as she screams in terror, the piercing sound matched by the high-pitched violins on the soundtrack. The film's grotesque violence explodes to the surface as the camera rushes along the grass to reveal the remains of the dog, torn open, body parts and innards strewn across the ground in front of his doghouse.

These opening moments establish a number of the film's formal and thematic preoccupations: explosions of deep-crimson blood and bodies torn to shreds, the thin and blurry line between humans and animals, quiet banality juxtaposed with intense terror, and a sense of dark humour in the casual way the little boy plays with his dead dog's paw. Patricia Molloy suggests that the film's tonal atmosphere of bleakness, dread, and horror stems from the boring and restrictive experience of growing up female in a nondescript North American suburb. Although Ginger does not intentionally initiate her own becoming-animal – it begins as a result of a werewolf bite – the process provides her with an escape route from the stifling path to womanhood that such a location encourages, allowing her to instead morph into an ageless,

genderless, speciesless being.[31] Despite its initial promise of boundlessness, Ginger's becoming is, for Molloy, doomed from the start, yet she concedes that 'it at least gave [Ginger] some moments of glory and resistance to the boundaries of gender and biological determination before her own (inevitable) demise'.[32] When considered as a Deleuzian becoming, however, Ginger's demise is not necessarily so inevitable or so final.

On the surface, Ginger's becoming-animal takes the recognisable form of lycanthropy, a manifestation of human/animal hybridity with an extensive and rich mythic history, with roots in Indigenous rituals, medieval folk tales, and medical and psychological case histories.[33] Whereas the majority of cinematic depictions of werewolves such as *The Wolf Man* (1941) and *The Howling* (1981) focus on masculine transformations, *Ginger Snaps* emphasises the particularities of the relationship between femininity, animality, and supernatural monstrosity.[34] According to Chantal Bourgault du Coudray, nineteenth-century werewolf narratives associated male lycanthropy with a noble moral struggle against 'the beast within', whereas feminine lycanthropy was typically framed as a 'natural' extension of women's animalistic sexuality, or as punishment for their predilections for pleasures of the flesh.[35] *Ginger Snaps* takes up this archaic yet persistent association between feminine sexuality and animality, encoding a sense of critique by balancing sardonic humour and tragic violence in its alignment of Ginger's lycanthropic metamorphosis with her first period and sexual experiences. When Ginger describes her wolflike symptoms to the school nurse, she nods along and gently reassures Ginger that blood, hair, and carnal urges 'come with the territory' of puberty. Elizabeth Grosz writes that within Western cultures, 'there remains a broadly common coding of the female body as a body which leaks, which bleeds, which is at the mercy of hormonal and reproductive functions'.[36] Beyond the more general cultural sense that the human body is unpredictable and chaotic, as discussed by Badley, Grosz draws attention to the specific gendered anxieties surrounding embodiment, that *women's* bodies in particular are uncontrollable, beholden only to the chaos of nature rather than culture and language, and

[31] Patricia Molloy, 'Perpetual Flight: The Terror of Biology and Biology of Terror in the *Ginger Snaps* Trilogy', *Jump Cut*, 49 (2007), n. p. <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc49.2007/GingerSnaps/> [accessed 12 September 2022].
[32] Ibid.
[33] See Charlotte Otten, 'Introduction', in *A Lycanthropy Reader: Werewolves in Western Culture*, ed. by Otten (Syracuse University Press, 1986), pp. 1-18.
[34] *The Wolf Man*, dir. by George Waggner (Universal Pictures, 1941); and *The Howling*, dir. by Joe Dante (Embassy Pictures, 1981).
[35] Chantal Bourgault du Coudray, *The Curse of the Werewolf: Fantasy, Horror, and the Beast Within* (I. B. Tauris, 2006), p. 112.
[36] Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* (University of Indiana Press, 1994), p. 204.

therefore pose a threat to meaning and order.

For Ginger and Brigitte, menstruation is not so much an unknown threat as it is a symbol of conformity and assimilation. Alongside their nearly identical physical appearances, the sisters share an intense disdain toward social norms, refusing to listen when their mother tries to discuss puberty with them, making fun of the girls in their class who wear makeup and nail polish, and proclaiming their wish to hide in their basement lair instead of attending high school. The sisters agree with one another that they would rather be dead than find themselves 'moaning about cramps' in the tampon aisle or adhere to the rituals of high-school dating and sex. Toward the beginning of the film, when a classmate approaches Ginger and suggests they 'go out sometime', she stares at him with disgust for a prolonged moment and responds with a short 'no'. Ginger and Brigitte isolate themselves from other teenagers, only spending time with one another, either ignoring other people altogether or speaking in snappy, sarcastic tones to their peers, parents, teachers, and potential suitors. Layers of dark clothing and makeup, humour, irony, and disdain act as protection for the sisters. They shield themselves by obscuring any visual indication of their changing adolescent bodies in an attempt to avoid containment by reductive definitions of femininity as defined by physical characteristics.[37] The sisters attempt to remain in a state of undefinable suspension, neither children nor adults, men nor women, easily able to slip between the cracks of their small town, hiding within their black hoodies and Victorian dresses, cloistering themselves away in their bedroom.

Their shared orientation toward life is encapsulated by their blood oath/suicide pact: 'Out by sixteen or dead in this scene, but together forever. United against life as we know it.' The pact originates from the sisters' belief that there is next to nothing of value in this world as it is currently organised, save for their bond with each other. It is also an acknowledgement that some forms of relation might survive beyond the breakdown of meaning that comes with fundamental changes and boundary crossings, even past the boundary between life and death. The Fitzgerald sisters separate themselves from other people – in effect socially abjecting themselves – and attempt to live on the outskirts of humanity and of life itself. It is therefore hardly surprising when Ginger takes this desire even further by plunging headfirst into a non-human metamorphosis that allows her to skirt the edges of the categories that would contain her as human, as woman, as living. The sisters embrace their (self-inflicted) 'otherness' and configure their precious alliance, rooted in opposition to life and to all things normative, as stronger than death. This macabre pact is thus aligned with Kristeva's assertion that abjection

[37] Molloy, 'Perpetual Flight'.

'is an alchemy that transforms the death drive into a start of life, of new significance'.[38] In this film (and per their pact), death, the ultimate abjection, does not mark an end point, but rather, a point from which to interrogate the limits of human constructions of embodiment and relation by experimenting with biological indeterminism and relational nonsingularity.

Ginger's becoming-animal especially brings this point to life, beginning with a pivotal scene, shot through canted angles, in which Ginger and Brigitte walk through a playground at night before coming across another mutilated dog corpse that they decide to utilise in a grotesque prank against their school bully, Trina. Brigitte notices blood dripping down Ginger's leg, and mistakenly attributes the blood to the dog, in an emphasis of the thin line between human and animal, living and dead. Ginger touches the blood and proclaims: 'I just got the curse.' Forcefully underlining the double cultural connotation of 'the curse', moments later, she is violently attacked and bitten by a werewolf, initiating the point at which, to quote Deleuze and Guattari, 'the human being encounters the animal'.[39] Ginger emerges from this attack bloody and severely mangled, and by all logical accounts, her survival is unlikely. She confronts literal death and experiences the metaphorical death of her human self, and from this point on lives a Deleuzian becoming-wolf that is framed as a supernatural lycanthropic transformation. Ginger and Brigitte had previously associated the transition from adolescence to womanhood with conformity, with a life of subordination to male partners and the expectation that they devote their lives to bearing and raising children, stuck in the fenced-off cookie-cutter suburbia of Bailey Downs. The sisters consider death to be a much more desirable option than living in conformity, but once Ginger is bitten, realise that life and death are not the only two possible states of being. Initially, Ginger is alarmed and troubled by the physical changes she experiences (she screams at Brigitte, 'I can't have a hairy chest, B, that's fucked!') and by her rampant desire to 'tear everything to fucking pieces'. As the film progresses, however, Ginger becomes attuned to the exceptionality of her transformation and begins to embrace her increasing categorical indeterminacy, retaining some of her human features while also incorporating wolfish and, as Ernest Mathijs observes, felinic qualities, further underlining the multiplicity of becoming-animal.[40]

Instead of the dull predictability of heteronormative adolescence that Ginger anticipated, she begins to inhabit a kinetic state between human and animal, neither one nor the other, growing fangs, a tail, sharp claws, and grey fur, forging carnal relations that blur the

[38] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 15.
[39] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 239.
[40] Mathijs, *John Fawcett's Ginger Snaps*, p. 45.

lines between sex and violence with the people (and animals) that cross her path. Deleuze and Guattari write: 'In becoming-wolf, the important thing is the position of the mass, and above all the position of the subject in relation to the pack or wolf-multiplicity', asserting that becoming-animal is never singular, that 'you can't be one wolf, you're always eight or nine, six or seven'.[41] Becoming-animal rethinks conceptions of subjectivity and relationality as it proceeds by way of expansion, propagation, and occupation and involves the (re)discovery of the self as a multiplicity, akin to the way that some animals exist in bands or packs.[42] Ginger seductively implores those around her – Brigitte, Sam, Trina, her classmate and lover Jason – to join her in such a pack-like existence, blending into each other, swapping biological materials, ever-changing in a rhizomatic expansion. As Mathijs notes, the sisters' initial relationship (and their pact) anticipates this more extreme form of nonsingularity, their closeness suggesting that they are not discrete individuals, but one consciousness spread across two bodies.[43] Ginger attempts to incorporate the people around her into her becoming-wolfpack through too-close bodily contact, whether she is choking Trina, whispering in Brigitte's ear, pinning Jason down in the backseat of his car, or biting the school janitor.

Articulating the connection between becoming-animal, disease, and werewolf or vampire narratives, Bruns writes:

> the bitten subject is drained away by a kind of infection or contagion, and in turn is no longer containable within the alternatives of living and nonliving, human and nonhuman, man and beast, but who nevertheless remains abroad in the world, roaming in swarms or bands that consume whatever is around them.[44]

Echoing Badley's observations about contemporary body horror's obsession with disease, *Ginger Snaps* characterises lycanthropy as akin to an infection or illness, spread through blood and sexual fluids. Rather than being drained of life, however, after Ginger is 'infected', she outwardly embraces her own physical vitality and sexual autonomy, dressing in tight-fitting and revealing clothes, prowling down the school hallways relishing in the newfound attention she receives from her peers, showing off her wolfish fangs and silvery hair. Her monstrous and gruesome transformation does not destroy her, but rather, makes her feel, in her own phrasing, 'like a goddamn force of nature', more alive than ever. Becoming-animal reframes contagion as an integral part of relationality, as an important form of affective contact that in its

[41] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 29.
[42] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 239.
[43] Mathijs, *John Fawcett's Ginger Snaps*, p. 58.
[44] Bruns, 'Becoming-Animal', p. 705.

destruction is constructive of new forms.

What initially seems to be a 'curse' revitalises death-obsessed Ginger, as her transformation completely reimagines embodiment and relation, presenting lively alternatives to puberty, heterosexual monogamy, and womanhood. Ginger glimpses a form of existence where singularity does not exist, where one might resemble a teenage girl, but actually be an ever-shifting wolf/human, growing more powerful as others join the pack. Ginger's invitation to Brigitte to 'swap some juice' so they can become their 'very own pack' evokes the spectres of abjection and disease, the threat of mixing bodily fluids (particularly between family members), yet this threat is overshadowed by the openness and freedom promised by the multiplicity of becoming-wolf. Ginger's transformation prompts the realisation that she need not become any one thing, in particular not a woman in any straightforward sense, but rather to remain in a state of *becoming*.

According to Creed, horror films 'bring about a confrontation with the abject (the corpse, bodily wastes, the monstrous-feminine) in order to finally eject the abject and redraw the boundaries between human and non-human'.[45] *Ginger Snaps*, in keeping with contemporary horror's ambivalent obsession with bodily disarray, does not attempt to settle or resolve the slippery relationship between human and non-human, singular and plural. Echoing Creed, Matt Hills writes that horror cinema 'restores pre-Oedipal pleasures of "the abject" [...] before restoring the pleasurable structures and orders of the Symbolic'.[46] In his view and in Creed's (and in the overarching view of psychoanalytic film theory), horror films stage confrontations with what is abject, taboo, chaotic, and inarticulable, only to symbolically defeat or neutralise these elements in a reassertion of the social and symbolic status quo. In *Ginger Snaps*' world of relentless confrontations with abjection via bodily fluids (particularly blood and vomit), dead bodies, and partially transformed creatures, there is no stable and ordered equilibrium to return to. Rather than framing such abjection as a threat to be contained, the film envisions how its constitutive paradoxes might be a starting place for 'lines of flight' away from biological or social determinism, away from suburban malaise, toward a kinetic, open-ended becoming.[47]

**Graceful Terror and Feminine Adolescence in *Black Swan***

Feminine adolescence provides a guiding thematic frame for the generic ambiguity of both

[45] Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, p. 14.
[46] Matt Hills, *The Pleasures of Horror* (Bloomsbury, 2005), p. 46.
[47] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 9.

*Ginger Snaps* and *Black Swan*. Whereas *Ginger Snaps* adheres to the dominant quotidian definition of 'adolescent' – high-school aged teenagers in the midst of puberty – part of *Black Swan*'s ambivalence stems from the lack of clarity about how old Nina is supposed to be. On the surface she appears to be a young adult, performing with similarly aged dancers in a professional ballet company, yet she lives at home with her mother (who she calls 'Mommy') who feeds her, dresses her, and tucks her into bed at night. Catherine Driscoll's definition of 'female adolescent' as 'not necessarily teenagers and not exclusively young women either', but rather 'defined as in transition or in process relative to dominant ideas of Womanhood', is thus useful here, particularly her emphasis on *process* and *transition*.[48] Indeed, adolescence has particular resonance with Deleuzo-Guattarian becomings, as it is characterised by intense change, indeterminacy, and reformulations of one's body and affective connections. *Black Swan* melodramatises this connection, as Nina's delayed/interminable adolescence is interrupted and reformulated by a dizzying, expansive, multiplicitous becoming-swan.

Similar to Ginger and Brigitte's wilful avoidance of the social and physical experiences of puberty, Nina embodies a state of gendered ambiguity – not a girl, not quite a woman. Nina's juvenility is partially contextualised by the state of perpetual pre-pubescence that professional ballerinas find themselves trapped in. In her book on the history of ballet, Deirdre Kelly quotes scholar and former ballerina Susan Young, who states that

> remaining physically prepubescent fed into the practical, that is biomechanical – requirements of the female dancer. This is because a *ballerina* seeks to present the illusion of weightlessness, of occupying as little space as possible in order to suggest a chaste and unattainable woman-child.[49]

Whereas Ginger and Brigitte resist puberty through an obstinate assertion of their own nihilistic worldview, Nina's embodiment and gender expression are meticulously managed and organised by the structures and expectations of professional ballet. Quoting novelist Ryan Heppenstall, Kelly draws attention to how cultural elevation ungenders and dehumanises the ballerina, who is considered to be 'an idealized and stylized creature of the Theatre', with an 'eternal virginity about her', remaining forever 'inaccessible' and 'unravished'.[50]

*Black Swan* jarringly disrupts this pristine virginal unravishedness through frequent depictions of blood and gore – the rash on Nina's shoulder, her bloody finger as she pulls off a

[48] Catherine Driscoll, *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory* (Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 6.
[49] Deirdre Kelly, *Ballerina: Sex, Scandal, and Suffering Behind the Symbol of Perfection* (Greystone Books, 2012), p. 136.
[50] Kelly, *Ballerina*, p. 1.

hangnail, her hallucination of blood dripping into the water as she takes a bath, the gaping red wound in her stomach after she accidentally stabs herself while performing – signalling Nina's departure from her meticulously contained and managed self, evoking menstrual blood or the blood that might accompany one's first penetrative sexual experience, thus aligning her with the ambiguous pleasures of abjection. In an essay elaborating the rich and contentious relationship between horror film, ballet, and femininity, Charlotte Gough writes that the female dancer on film has been 'historically denied control of her own image and reduced to the body, while that body must also be used as a controlled instrument to meet the physical and aesthetic requirements of the dancing role and choreography, as well as of the audience(s)'.[51] *Black Swan* establishes these dynamics both in its filmic world and formal organisation, proffering Nina as a perfect embodiment of the tightly regimented, utterly devoted, softly feminine ideal ballerina, before this stability is shattered by Nina's becoming-swan and her experiences become 'increasingly violent and fragmented'.[52]

The film's tonal and generic inconsistency mirrors and heightens the contradictions of Nina's becoming-swan, in which she experiences ecstatic pleasure and aesthetic perfection at the same time as she descends into madness. Mark Fisher elaborates on *Black Swan*'s unique relationship to genre in his contention that it moves between melodrama, naturalism, and body horror (comparing the film to 'prime-period Cronenberg'), even arguing that it enacts a form of 'Irigarayan horror' wherein horror stems from the absence of any alternative to patriarchal constructions of feminine subjectivity and sexuality.[53] Steven Shaviro suggests that the film's emotional and bodily excesses form a bridge between horror, pornography, and melodrama (Linda Williams' 'body genres'), and that critical attempts to read the film through singular categories such as 'camp' and 'serious drama' lead to its fractured reception.[54] Responding to Fisher, Amber Jacobs poses a key question: 'Is there something about the horror genre which structurally prevents it from having a sense of the beyond?'[55] This provocative question suggests that perhaps horror, for all of its obsessions with categorical fluidity, bodily and

[51] Charlotte Gough, 'The Ballerina Body-Horror: Spectatorship, Female Subjectivity and the Abject in Dario Argento's *Suspiria* (1977)', *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies*, 17 (2018), pp. 51-69 (p. 53) <https://irishgothicjournal.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/the-ballerina-body-horror.pdf> [accessed 26 August 2024].
[52] Amanda Martin Sandino, 'On Perfection: Pain and Arts-Making in Aronofsky's *Black Swan*', *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, 12.3 (2013), pp. 305-17 (p. 306), doi:10.1386/jvap.12.3.305_1.
[53] Mark Fisher and Amber Jacobs, 'Debating *Black Swan*: Gender and Horror', *Film Quarterly*, 65 (2011), pp. 58-62 (p. 601) doi:10.1525/FQ.2011.65.1.58.
[54] Steven Shaviro, 'Black Swan', *The Pinnochio Theory*, 5 January 2011 <http://www.shaviro.com/Blog/?p=975> [accessed 5 November 2022]; Mathijs similarly suggests that the two 'stylistic streams' of *Ginger Snaps* are horror and melodrama (*John Fawcett's Ginger Snaps*, p. 28).
[55] Fisher and Jacobs, 'Debating *Black Swan*', p. 61.

relational chaos, and imaginative, unforeseen modes of being, cannot ultimately allow for a sustained vision of anything beyond or alternative to current social and bodily hierarchies and categories, particularly those that entrap women within the violences of objectification. Jacobs's contention that *Black Swan* not only reproduces but romanticises the terms of the 'patriarchal imaginary' is warranted to the extent that Nina begins the film as a demure, perfectly unresistant 'passive sexualized object', content to organise her life around externally imposed expectations without complaint, obsessively striving for technical perfection in her dancing to impress her instructors, and demonstrating nearly complete obedience to both Tomas and her terrifyingly overbearing mother.[56] Nonetheless, throughout the film, generic and tonal inconsistencies produce textual cracks within which a 'beyond' can be glimpsed – modes of being and relating with the potential to surpass or exceed the patriarchal imaginary, the boundaries between human and animal, and horror-film binaries of monstrousness and normality. Although *Black Swan*, like most horror films, ultimately sweeps away or forecloses access to this imagined 'beyond' through narrative containment, I would suggest that this does not necessarily render completely useless the film's glimpses, however brief, of alternative modes of being and relating. Nina's becoming-swan is an expression or instantiation of such a 'beyond' that undoes and reformulates all of her affective connections and relationships, including her relationship to Tomas, Lily, her mother, Beth, and most importantly, to her own body and its relationship to the world.[57]

Much like Ginger, Nina rediscovers herself as a multiplicity through these new and/or changed relationships, in a becoming that blurs and exceeds the boundaries between self and Other, singular and plural, human and animal. In a detailed reading of the film's relationship to Deleuzian philosophy, Simone Bignall explains Deleuze and Guattari's concept of 'ontological emergence', or the idea that subjectivities are multiplicitous, composed of elemental parts arranged in complex and always contingent relations.[58] Objects, environments, relations, personality traits, and preferences weave together to produce an ostensibly coherent singular self, yet such traits and qualities are always in motion, and can be swept away and altered at any time, particularly with a dramatic upheaval such as becoming-animal. Bignall describes Nina's elemental parts as including objects and qualities that define and surround her such as 'dancing, music box, shyness, broken toenail, ambition, frigidity, plush toys', and that these

[56] Fisher and Jacobs, p. 59.
[57] Simone Bignall, '*Black Swan*, Cracked Porcelain, and Becoming-Animal', *Culture, Theory, and Critique*, 54 (2013), pp. 121-36 (p. 130), doi:10.1080/14735784.2012.749110.
[58] Bignall, '*Black Swan*, Cracked Porcelain', pp. 130-31.

elements, along with Nina's external relationships, combine to create the (relatively) cohesive, stable figure called 'Nina'.[59] Becoming-animal involves the dissolution (or deterritorialisation) of a previously established stable, singular identity and the forging of new affective connections, creating assemblages by 'taking into the existing self new elements introduced with the new relationship[s]'.[60] Nina's becoming-swan proceeds through an incorporation of external elements – the earrings and lipstick that Nina steals from Beth's dressing room, the ecstasy tablet that Lily slips into her drink, a newfound enjoyment of sex prompted by encounters with Tomas and Lily – and the dissolution or transformation of her previous elements, including material objects such as her plush toys and ballerina jewellery box, objects that she once treated with care and invested with childish significance but later destroys and discards, in addition to more abstract traits such as passivity, frigidity, fearfulness, and subjugation to her mother.

Much like Ginger's transformation, alongside these material and physical changes that Nina experiences, her relationships change form, either shattering an abusive power dynamic as in the case of her mother; becoming sexual and then violently competitive in the case of Lily; or assertively self-assured as she is with Tomas toward the end of the film. In particular, the changes within Nina's relationship to her mother – the most centrally important relationship in her life – illustrate the continuity between abjection and Deleuzian becoming-animal. Following Kristeva's conceptualisation of maternal abjection, Creed writes that in horror films, 'the maternal figure is constructed as the monstrous-feminine', a figure that keeps her child locked in a too-close dyadic relationship with troubled access to the symbolic.[61] Nina's life is so controlled by her mother that she hardly seems to exist outside of her mother's clutches. She barely speaks, and when she does it is only ever responding to others using a quiet, gentle, childish voice, never asserting her own wants or needs. There is almost no separation between the two women; Nina is nearly swallowed up by her mother. This is particularly apparent in the domestic space of their apartment, where Nina is always looking over her shoulder, anticipating her mother's presence. If Nina is in the frame, her mother either passes in front of the camera, is framed beside or behind her or reflected in a mirror, or else her voice can be heard offscreen. Their bedrooms are directly across the hall from each other, and her mother sits and watches while Nina rehearses at home, mends her ballet slippers, and even sometimes while she sleeps. Nina has so little separation from her mother that she repeatedly (and nervously) wedges

[59] Bignall, p. 131.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, p. 12.

objects in front of the closed doors of her bedroom and bathroom to steal a moment or two of privacy.

Instead of attempting to separate 'the symbolic order from all that threatens its stability, particularly the mother and all that her universe signifies', as Creed notes that many horror films do, *Black Swan* offers Nina's relational, open-ended becoming-swan in place of the (re)establishment of symbolic stability and order.[62] Just as Ginger swerves around the conventional experiences of puberty in her lycanthropic transformation, Nina separates from her mother's control, not in order to align herself with normative adult femininity, but to forge an entirely different path through her becoming-swan. The film does not attempt to neutralise the abject amorphousness of this maternal bond, but reconfigures and reimagines its terms through Nina's becoming, in what Bignall calls the 'destructive-creative processes of transformation'.[63] Nina pulls away from her mother, transposing the too-closeness of their bond into sexual ecstasy in her relationships with Tomas and Lily, and into a bodily metamorphosis in her relationship to her role as Odette/Odile in *Swan Lake*. In Nina's becoming-swan, the abject feminine closeness between Nina and her mother, the amorphous blurring of the two women's subjectivities, is refashioned into a generative multiplicity. The parts of Nina that were defined by her mother's control and manipulation are shattered and swept away, replaced with newfound self-sufficiency, perhaps even self-obsession, incorporating the sexual energy between herself, Tomas, and Lily, swan-like physical characteristics, and a thrilling sense of defiance and abandon in her dancing.

One of the key moments of Nina's becoming takes place during a sexual encounter with Lily, wherein the previously established contrasts between the women provide a point of departure to trace and develop their multiplicitous relation. The breakdown of this previously established opposition, symbolised by their costumes and hairstyles – Nina is always dressed in pink and white, her hair pulled back in a tight bun, whereas Lily always wears black, her hair loose and tousled – outward demeanor, and approach to ballet (succinctly encapsulated in Lily's observation to Nina: 'You really need to relax'), suggests the radical potential promised by the process of becoming-animal. Lily loosens Nina up, encouraging her to share the details of her relationship with Tomas, making jokes, offering her drugs, and sharing a cigarette with her in the dance studio. By the time Lily shows up at Nina's door to apologise for interfering

[62] Creed, p. 14. Some examples of films that do this include *Psycho*, dir. by Alfred Hitchcock (Paramount Pictures, 1960); *Carrie*, dir. by Brian De Palma (United Artists, 1976); and *The Brood*, dir. by David Cronenberg (New World Pictures, 1979). Creed suggests that such a separation might not even be possible, a position that this film elaborates via Nina's becoming-animal.
[63] Bignall, '*Black Swan*, Cracked Porcelain', p. 125.

in her rehearsal process by discussing her performance with Tomas behind her back, it is clear that this new relationship plays an important role in Nina's becoming-swan. Channelling Lily's independence and laid-back confidence, Nina is emboldened to go out for drinks and dancing despite her mother's protestations, to drink alcohol and take ecstasy, and to engage in passionate sex with Lily in her locked bedroom after slamming the door in her mother's face. Bignall writes that during this encounter, Nina and Lily 'share a mutual becoming-swan', as Lily's swan-wing tattoo seems to fuse into her body and come to life, and Nina's eyes turn swan-red and she sprouts tiny white feathers along her arms.[64] These aesthetic shifts, particularly the way that Lily's tattoo becomes animated, signal the difference between symbolic representations and the visceral bodily alterations of becoming-animal.

The boundaries between the two women blur and break down throughout this encounter as their bodies intertwine, Nina's face periodically morphs into Lily's, and Lily calls Nina 'sweet girl', a nickname given to Nina by her mother. Bignall characterises this encounter as enacting 'molecular' change, described by Deleuze and Guattari as the process through which animals 'continually transform themselves into each other, [and] cross over into each other' through sustained affective proximity.[65] For the first time in the film, Nina's becoming is physically shared, her swan-like characteristics crossing over to Lily's body as well. The encounter additionally reflects Deleuze and Guattari's contention that becoming is a process of desire, producing 'a thousand sexes, which are so many uncontrollable becomings', positing a form of existence that does not proceed by filiation, genealogy, or easily legible genders or sexualities, but rather, ever-expanding chains of multiplicity, suggesting the queer potentiality of this process.[66] Parts of Nina combine with parts of Lily as they blend and morph into each other, sweeping away their previously established selves and entering into a multiplicitous assemblage that is both destabilising and transformative.[67]

Beyond Nina and Lily's relationship, the entire film is structured by a symbolic black-swan/white-swan dichotomy, relentlessly evoked through dialogue, costumes, décor, and the overarching *Swan Lake* narrative. Written in 1876 by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, *Swan Lake* tells the story of Odette, a beautiful young maiden who is cursed by the evil wizard Rothbart and turned into a white swan. Odette meets young Prince Siegfried in the forest and they fall in love. Only with the Prince's proclamation of eternal devotion can Odette be permanently

[64] Bignall, '*Black Swan*, Cracked Porcelain', p. 124.
[65] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 249.
[66] Deleuze and Guattari, p. 278.
[67] Bignall, '*Black Swan*, Cracked Porcelain', p. 132.

transformed back into a girl. At the last minute, her evil twin, Odile, the black swan, tricks and seduces the Prince into falling in love with her, thus leaving Odette cast aside and alone. Rather than live the rest of her life as a swan, Odette commits suicide by throwing herself into the lake. In Nina and Lily's sexual encounter, these binary black/white, Odile/Odette dichotomies are deterritorialised through the formation of a queer multiplicity and thus Nina, becoming-multiple and becoming-swan, is able to experience sexual ecstasy ('letting go') for possibly the first time in her life. The overarching narrative structure that *Swan Lake* provides the film is (temporarily) shattered by this hallucinatory and ecstatic encounter that brings Nina and Lily's relationship to a new level of intimacy as they momentarily become boundaryless.[68]

Nina's newly formed external relations are accompanied by and interlaced with physical metamorphoses, wherein her body increasingly traverses the boundaries between human and swan through its molecular incorporation of animalistic qualities. At various times, her eyes turn red (like those of a black swan), she finds black feathers piercing through the rash on her skin, her legs snap backwards like bird's legs, her neck stretches out and becomes an S-shaped swan's neck, and her toes become webbed. During the opening night performance of *Swan Lake*, Nina undergoes the most dramatic and all-encompassing bodily metamorphoses in the entire film: as she *fouettés* across the stage as the Black Swan, black feathers sprout out of her skin and up her arms, until eventually she has two large black swan wings. Nina's becoming-swan reaches new heights as one quarter of her human form is entirely swept away and reconfigured as a black swan, at the same time as she reaches the apex of her performance, dancing with passion and abandon as she never has before, eliciting thunderous applause from the audience and piles of flowers thrown at her feet.

In this opening-night performance, Nina emphatically proves that she can embody both the delicate fearfulness of Odette and the exhilarating sensuality of Odile. This triumphant performance goes beyond professional achievement, however, and is more importantly a demonstration of Nina's confident inhabitation of the multiplicity of becoming, moving between her human form and that of a black swan *and* a white swan. During Nina's tearful final dance as Odette, delicate white feathers sprout up and down her arms as she glides and spins across the stage, in a much more subdued version of her Black Swan transformation, additionally evoking her earlier ecstatic encounter with Lily. The film stages a final stark and jarring confrontation with abjection as Nina approaches the climax of her performance, her artistic triumph marred by a gaping wound in her stomach, the result of (accidental) self-

[68] Bignall, '*Black Swan*, Cracked Porcelain', p. 124.

mutilation in a hallucinatory moment of madness between performances. In the throes of abjection, Nina ascends to the top of a platform before the final moments of her performance, gazing at the audience, her mother, and her fellow performers, wavering between what Kristeva articulates as 'the *fading away* of all meaning and all humanity, burnt as by the flames of a conflagration, and the *ecstasy* of an ego that, having lost its Other and its objects, reaches, at the precise moment of this suicide, the height of harmony with the promised land'.[69] Nina gracefully leaps off of the platform, and just before the film ends, calmly states to Tomas: 'I felt it. Perfect. It was perfect.' Perhaps Nina takes her becoming too far, past the point of bodily legibility, but this final ecstatic confrontation with abjection leaves open the possibility that this might be 'the start of new life, of new significance' for Nina, in an echo of Ginger and Brigitte's promise to sustain their sisterly bond even after their physical deaths.[70] Although both films end with their protagonists lying in pools of blood, the alchemical forces of abjection driving both Nina's and Ginger's respective transformations leave open the possibility that such an outcome is not fatal or final, but a place from which to take off in an unexpected line of flight.

**Conclusion(s)**

In a brief essay on Deleuze and spectatorship, Richard Rushton articulates the shared investments of Deleuzian philosophy and psychoanalytic film theory, or what he refers to as '*Screen* Theory' after the British journal associated with structuralist theory in the 1970s and 80s. He writes: 'If the project of *Screen* Theory was one of transforming subjectivities so that they would no longer be subjects, then Deleuze's cinematic philosophy is from the beginning one which tries to go beyond subjectivity.'[71] Referring to later works by scholars such as Steven Shaviro and Laura Marks, he points out that 'much of the work on Deleuze that has purported to redirect the debates that informed *Screen* Theory are not really repositioning such debates', but are instead just replaying them.[72] Following Rushton's line of thinking, this essay suggests the significance of the relationship between psychoanalysis and Deleuzian philosophy through a consideration of the boundaries and limit points of horror cinema. While neither *Ginger Snaps* nor *Black Swan* ends happily in any traditional sense, their generic ambiguity and envisionings

[69] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 18.
[70] Kristeva, p. 15, emphasis in original.
[71] Rushton, 'Deleuzian Spectatorship,' p. 49.
[72] Rushton, p. 46.

of abject becomings produce an open-endedness that suggests possibilities for new lines of thinking about subjectivity, species, and categorical boundaries.

The relationship between these critical frameworks raises a number of questions: what new epistemological investments and orientations might arise from their synthesis? Could cinematic engagements with the radically destabilising experiences of abjection and becoming extend the possibilities of representational signification? Beyond film, how might this relationship materially contribute to shifting conceptualisations of boundaries between genders, species, and bodies? While it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide definitive answers to such questions, I have worked to demonstrate how contemporary horror cinema engages Deleuzian philosophy, envisioning the process of becoming-animal as a 'line of flight' with the potential to reconfigure or expand rigid psychoanalytic structures that frame abjection as an endpoint or ultimate limit. The realm of horror that both Nina and Ginger inhabit is ultimately inhospitable to their attempts to radically reconfigure identity and embodied existence, yet it seems that as long as there are structures and categories restricting such boundaryless expressions, there will be attempts to leave those structures behind and rhizomatically exceed all notions of woman and animal, ballerina and swan, teenager and werewolf.