The fatal attractions of apocalyptic endings and the voyeuristic appeal of disasters seem to be on the margins of rational reflection and scientific inquiry. The human response to horror, even when its fascination is conceded, is subject to a silencing taboo. An awed reverence is paired with a declaration of ‘shock,’ and a veil of silence is discreetly drawn over the ‘remains’ and over our response as well. It is as if a ‘theory of horror’ is beyond the pale of rational inquiry. What is ‘horrible’ and what the normal human response to horror might be constitute an indeterminate zone of extreme experience some would prefer to leave unexplored. There are, of course, clinical definitions and physiological indices for a person in cardiovascular ‘shock.’ Yet the term is also used, apparently metaphorically, to refer to our moral and emotional responses to catastrophe, destruction, and loss. The shock that we identify as the response to horror is a blanking out, an impenetrable non-behaviour. This emotional ‘shutting down’ of speechlessness, numbness, denial, and passivity is taken at face value as a psychological function, or dysfunction, too sensitive and inward – one might say too spiritual – to explore.

Julia Kristeva, a psychoanalyst whose writings draw upon both clinical experience and literary criticism, does touch upon the notion of horror in an attempt to develop a theory of ‘abjection.’ Her intensely desolate inquiry into identity formation in human self-consciousness, and how this process has its parallel in the writing of poetry and novels, uncovers the rudimentary traces of the psychology of the compulsive gaze upon disaster and the fascination of apocalyptic endings. Implicit in such a theory is an alternative to the repugnant dismissal of apocalyptic thought as simple ignorance or an ‘abnormal’ obsession with death and destruction. To the extent that abjection, in Kristeva’s sense,
is a theory of development and not a pathological syndrome, it points the way to understanding the psychological basis of what I have described as the narrative structure of time and historical meaning.

Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection is a professionally courageous, frankly autobiographical, analysis of what Kristeva calls the horror of abjection. Her inquiry centers on the reciprocal process of identity formation and emerging linguistic competence in the individual. It is not a theoretical account of the psychological effects of catastrophes or collective dread as social phenomena. Indeed, Kristeva develops the concept of abjection in part through memories of her own childhood experiences and memories. It is a strikingly physical and sensual response.

Loathing an item of food, a piece of filth, waste, or dung. The spasms and vomiting that protect me. The repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and muck. The shame of compromise, of being in the middle of treachery. The fascinated start that leads me toward and separates me from them.

Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection. When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk....

Kristeva does not extend the sensibility of abject loathing and horror, of fear and revulsion – nor their behavioural correlates, fascination and obsession – to apocalyptic disjunctures or disasters. Nevertheless the parallels are evident in artistic and literary portrayals of end-time horror. One thinks, for example, of the headmaster’s madly enthusiastic description of the torments of Hell in James Joyce’s Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, and the genre of ‘Last Judgment’ paintings, best epitomized by Hieronymus Bosch. In these works there is realised in a graphic sense what Kristeva portrays in her elaborate theory of inevitable psychic alienation as the ‘normal’ development of linguistic, psychic, and sexual individuation. Both Bosch and Kristeva present remarkably similar landscapes of utter abjection: monstrous deformity, defilement, androphagy, torture, and despoliation. The ‘end’ of the world – human destiny as a journey and as a final judgment – is an eternal Hades. It is a nightmare experience, a holocaust, a fantastic fate of inhuman horror and suffering.

Bosch’s scenes and our response to gazing at them are strangely recalled by the elements of intense fascination, obsessive voyeurism,