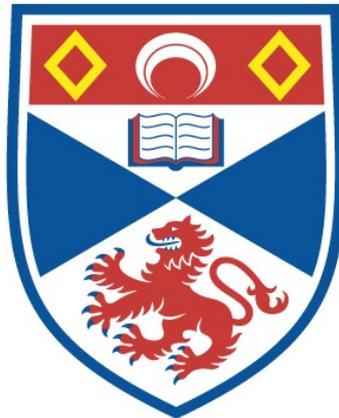


CINEMA OF EXPOSURE:  
FEMALE SUFFERING AND SPECTATORSHIP ETHICS

Kathleen Scott

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD  
at the  
University of St Andrews



2014

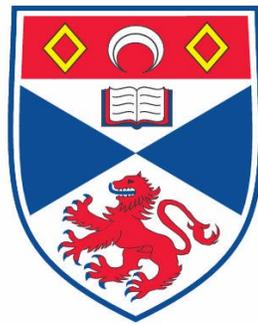
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August 13, 2014

## Abstract

This thesis explores the intersection of phenomenological, bio-political and ethical facets of spectatorship in relation to female suffering and gendered violence in contemporary film produced in Europe (mainly drawing on examples from France) and the United States. I argue that the visceral and affective cinematic embodiment of female pain plays a vital role in determining the political and ethical relationships of spectators to the images onscreen. Drawing on phenomenological theory, feminist ontology and ethics (primarily the work of Hélène Cixous), as well as the ethical philosophies of Gilles Deleuze and Jean-Luc Nancy, I establish the bio-political and ethical positions and responsibilities of spectators who encounter female suffering in film. In doing so, I highlight the ways in which adopting a phenomenological approach to theorizing and practicing spectatorial perception can open up new areas of ethical engagement with (and fields of vision within) controversial modes of filmmaking such as European New Extremism and body horror.

I analyze how suffering female bodies embody contemporary corporeal, socio-political and ethical problematics in what I define as the “cinema of exposure.” I argue that through processes of psychosomatic disturbance, films within the cinema of exposure encourage spectators to employ a haptic, corporeally situated vision when watching women experience pain and trauma onscreen. I explore how encounters with these suffering female bodies impact spectators as political and ethical subjects, contributing a crucial bio-political dimension to existing work on spectatorial engagement with cinematic affect.

The goal of this thesis is to highlight the continued importance of feminist critiques of gendered and sexualized violence in film by attending to the emotional, physical, political and ethical resonances of mediated female suffering. This thesis contributes productively to those areas of film and media studies, women’s studies and feminist philosophy that explore the construction of female subjectivity within contemporary culture.



## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all those at the Department of Film Studies at the University of St Andrews for their support. Thank you to faculty members Robert Burgoyne, Leshu Torchin, Tom Rice, Joshua Yumibe, Dina Iordinova, Brian Jacobson, Elisabetta Girelli, Lucy Fife Donaldson and Stefanie Van De Peer. Special thanks to Dennis Hanlon for convening my Viva and assisting in the submission process. Thank you to Karen Drysdale for all of her valuable administrative help for the past four years. I would also like to thank the members of my cohort, as well as other PhD students with whom I shared my time at St Andrews: Pasquale Cicchetti, Chelsea Wessels, Beatriz Tadeo Fuica, Raluca Iacob, Matthew Holtmeier, Fredrik Gustaffsson, Diana Popa and Sarah Soliman.

A special thank you to my supervisor David Martin-Jones for his tremendous guidance and support, and for braving nightmares and insomnia for four years in order to watch the films analyzed in my thesis.

Thank you to my external examiners, Martine Beugnet and Sarah Cooper, for their insightful and encouraging feedback. Thank you as well to other scholars who took an interest in my work: Robert Sinnerbrink, Catherine Wheatley, Tarja Laine, William Brown and Libby Saxton.

Thank you to the Wellesley College Fellowship Committee for supporting this project in its final stages.

Thank you to my family and friends for their love and support, at home and abroad: Joyce, Mike and Shyra Scott; Elisabeth, Christer and Anton Jannesson; Emily Lauren Kim; Nora Keller; Arleta Majoch; Bethany Lerch; Mary Lee Brown; Lily Ferris; Charles Schafaieh; Christophe Verboomen; Surina Diddi; and Julia Wu. Special thanks to Rachel Lewis.

For their generosity and faith, all my love and gratitude to Katherine and Jeffrey Barnett, the finest hosts any penniless graduate student could ask for.

Lastly and most importantly, much love to my parents and Sarah Paige for making my education possible. Thank you.

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## **Introduction**

### **Cinema of Exposure: Ethical Spectatorship and the Bio-politics of Female Suffering**

Pain is within reach. If I stretch out my arm I touch you, and that is intimacy. I can count the eyelashes of this suffering. I would be able to taste the tears. Never before has a face turned to mine in that way. Ever closer it presses against me, and I follow it face to face. It's not even true that there is air between us; I consume it. It is in me like a sacrament. Maximum visual acuity.

Jean Epstein 1993, 239

For photographs to accuse, and possibly to alter conduct, they must shock.

Susan Sontag 2003, 81

## **Introduction**

This thesis explores the intersection of phenomenological, bio-political and ethical facets of spectatorship in relation to female suffering and gendered violence in contemporary film produced in Europe (mainly drawing on examples from France) and the United States. I argue that the visceral and affective cinematic embodiment of female pain plays a vital role in determining the political and ethical relationships of spectators to the images onscreen. Drawing on phenomenological theory, feminist ontology and ethics (primarily the work of Hélène Cixous), as well as the philosophies of Gilles Deleuze and Jean-Luc Nancy, I establish the bio-political and ethical positions and responsibilities of spectators who encounter female suffering in film. In doing so, I highlight the ways in which adopting a phenomenological approach to theorizing and practicing spectatorial perception opens up new areas of bio-political and ethical engagement with (and fields of vision within) controversial modes of filmmaking such as European New Extremism and body horror.

I analyze how suffering female bodies embody contemporary corporeal, socio-political and ethical problematics in what I define as the “cinema of exposure.” I argue that through processes of psychosomatic disturbance and reflection, films within the cinema of exposure encourage spectators to employ a haptic, corporeally situated vision when watching women experience pain and trauma onscreen. I explore how encounters with these bodies impact spectators as political and ethical subjects, contributing a crucial bio-political dimension to existing work on spectatorial engagement with cinematic affect.

I define the cinema of exposure as those films that envision female bodily suffering in a physically disturbing and politically provocative aesthetic register, giving rise to critical thought processes that interrogate the bio-political foundations of cinematic style and spectatorial perception. This disturbance is engendered by the use of unsettling affect that is comprised of both sensual impact and bio-political import regarding sexual difference and gender. The cinema of exposure opens up spaces of intimate psychosomatic proximity to suffering women onscreen. Such proximity allows spectators to gain a critically nuanced understanding of the complex ways in which their perception of female suffering intersects with contemporary bio-political constructions of the female body. An ethical mode of feminist spectatorship arises from this encounter with painful cinematic affect, as such affect encourages spectators to reflect on the bio-political dimensions of female suffering in a sympathetic and compassionate manner. I argue that the cinema of exposure consciously employs disturbing affect in order to render female suffering unpleasurable for spectators,

and thus performs a feminist ethical function in disrupting dominant cinematic codes that present this suffering as an erotic spectacle.

The cinema of exposure is a minor feminist cinema in terms of its privileging of affective experiences with overtly gendered and sexually differentiated dimensions. Furthermore, the minor (but increasingly visible) role of feminist and female filmmaking in the French and U.S. film industries renders possible modes of envisioning female suffering that depart from those imagined from a masculinist or patriarchal perspective (Tarr and Rollet 2001, 5; Wilson 2005, 219-20). I argue in the chapters that follow that certain female filmmakers have a distinctly gendered relationship to and mode of imaging female suffering.

In addition to the minor position of feminist filmmakers and films in France and the U.S., the style of the cinema of exposure intertwines affective disturbance with political critique in a way that majoritarian patriarchal cinema does not. I situate the aesthetic designs and narratives of the minor feminist cinema of exposure in relation to the contemporaneous socio-political landscapes in which it is produced and consumed. For example, at several points I reference the regressive bio-political regulation of women's bodies in recent U.S. politics, referred to by feminist activists as a "War on Women." This "war" involves legal and ideological mechanisms that seek to restrict women's bodily agency and self-determination, oftentimes by opposing and rescinding the rights granted to women in the course of the second-wave feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Examples of this bio-political regulation include the curbing of abortion and reproductive rights, the subtle and explicit legitimization of male violence as a suitable countermeasure to "excessive" displays

of female sexuality and the reconstitution of women's "proper" roles as domestic and maternal subordinates in an era of economic instability. (Historically, backlashes against feminist movements have been linked to economic downturns. Coppock, Haydon and Richter note that "[d]uring economic recession, and encouraged by monetarism, there has been a revival of ideas which suggest that women do not have a right to paid employment" [1995, 147]. This reactionary stance manifests itself in economic and labor policies that evince a "dominant belief in women's 'natural' roles as wives and mothers, contained and restricted within the private sphere" [Coppock et al. 1995, 147].)

Throughout this thesis, I address the relevance of the cinema of exposure to the War on Women and various other socio-political situations that have bearing on the forms of each film and the political and ethical dimensions of spectators' engagement with them. I therefore retain a focus on the female subject in film, whose gendered and sexually differentiated specificity continue to determine politicized notions of ontology and ethics. This specificity pertains especially to spectators' political and ethical relationship to the sexual assault of women onscreen, which I discuss in detail in several chapters.

The relationship between spectators and female sufferers in the cinema of exposure involves psychosomatically intimate and disturbing forms of engagement. Visceral cinematic affects facilitate this engagement by encouraging sensual and thoughtful reactions and responses on the part of spectators. Haptic visuality, a mode of vision in which the eye takes on a tactile

function and perception is synaesthetically de-organized, establishes this embodied interaction with the screen. Haptic visuality denies spectators optical knowledge and objectifying distance by functioning as a form of non-mastering, interrupted touch. I explore the ways in which the cinema of exposure evokes haptic visuality by shocking the bodies of spectators with affective imagery that must be viewed with an incarnate eye embodied in the flesh of observers.

I do not limit the cinema of exposure to contemporary Western cinema; however, for the purposes of brevity and clarity I focus on European and U.S. cinema in this thesis. This focus on Western cinema is also structured by my theoretical and philosophical framework, which draws mainly upon Western philosophy, ontology and theories of gender and sexual difference. At times, this cinema of exposures arises from the conscious efforts of filmmakers to envision female suffering as an unpleasurable, disturbing experience and situate its unsettling affective impact in relation to contemporaneous gender and sexual biopolitics. The cinema of exposure can also occur in more “mainstream” films that convey female suffering and subordination in a visceral manner, but which address the gendered biopolitical dimensions of this suffering more implicitly. Although spanning the divide between “art” and “mainstream” films, the films within the cinema of exposure share a politicized aesthetics of female suffering that encourages spectatorial compassion and critical thinking.

In establishing spectators’ bio-political and ethical relationship to female suffering in the cinema of exposure, I draw on the philosophies of Gilles Deleuze (including his work with Félix Guattari), Jean-Luc Nancy and Hélène Cixous. From Deleuze, I employ the concepts

of the Body-without-Organs, becoming-woman, the time-image, the shock to thought, minor cinema and an ethics of belief in the world.<sup>1</sup> Nancy's ethical ontology of co-existence informs my understanding of spectators' intimate proximity to the affective impact of the cinema of exposure.<sup>2</sup> I use Cixous's concept of *écriture féminine* (writing-in-the-feminine) to articulate the relationship of cinematic affect to feminist modes of spectatorship and filmmaking.<sup>3</sup> I explicate these philosophical concepts later in the chapter; for now, I note that I draw on these specific concepts because each recognizes and advocates modes of embodied being-in-the-world conducive to feminist praxis (including the act of cinematic spectatorship).

In the cinema of exposure, critiques of the bio-political conditioning of female bodies routinely involve subjecting women to experiences of pain and suffering. *Martyrs* (Pascal Laugier, 2008) serves as an illustrative example in this regard, as it employs disturbing and horrifying affect to shock audiences into an awareness of the patriarchal and misogynistic bio-political foundations of female suffering. *Martyrs* focuses on the friendship of Anna (Morjana Alaoui) and Lucie (Mylène Jampanoï), two young women interned at an asylum for abused children in France. Lucie escapes in order to exact revenge on her childhood

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<sup>1</sup> See Deleuze 1989; 1995; 2003; and 2006; and Deleuze and Guattari 1986; 2004; and 2009.

<sup>2</sup> See Nancy 1993; 2000; 2002; 2005; and 2008.

<sup>3</sup> See ~~Nancy 1993; 2000; 2002; 2005; and 2008.~~ Cixous 1976; 2000; and Clément 1986.

<sup>3</sup> See Cixous 1976; and Cixous and Clément 1986.

tormentors, and Anna experiences gruesome tortures of her own as she attempts to help Lucie come to terms with her traumatic past.<sup>4</sup>

*Martyrs* directly addresses the themes explored in this thesis by envisioning female torture and suffering as bio-political constructs based on patriarchal, misogynistic and racist ideologies and institutions. The tortures undergone by Anna and Lucie derive from a conspiracy of religious and military complexes, capitalist wealth and patriarchal familial institutions obsessed with gaining knowledge from subjecting women to pain and deprivation. For example, as a child Lucie was held captive and tortured by a white family in the suburbs. This family is headed by a couple credited only as “le père” and “la mère” (“the father” and “the mother”), generic names that immediately connect their “private” roles within the family to their function as oppressors of subjects embodying bio-political difference. Le père and la mère have installed a vast system of torture chambers underneath their house, a spatial configuration that suggests a foundational link between the exploitation and oppression of minority women and the prosperity and illusory “normality” of dominant populations.

The gendered dimensions of Anna and Lucie’s torture intersect with the bio-political dimensions of race. The actresses who portray Anna and Lucie are ethnic minorities: Alaoui (Anna) was born in Morocco, and Jampanoī (Lucie) is of Chinese descent. Anna’s surname in the film is Assaoui, indicating that she is of North African or Arab descent. The torture of the gendered and racial “other” by a white bourgeois family reflects widespread Western bio-

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<sup>4</sup> *Martyrs* is a French-Canadian co-production. The film was shot in Québec, and is set in France (Turek 2008).

political histories of gender and racial inequality and exploitation. (In this regard, the positioning of Anna and Lucie at the margins of dominant subjectivity invites a comparison with the two minority female outlaws in *Baise-moi/Fuck Me* [Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi, 2000], to be discussed in Chapter 4.)

*Martyrs* combats this exploitative subordination of the minority female body by envisioning solidarity in the friendship of its two female protagonists. This female solidarity reflects the emphasis on feminist solidarity and support networks in current feminist praxis by embodying the ways in which collective female action challenges the torture and abuse of women. *Martyrs* also encourages solidarity between spectators, Anna and Lucie by placing the former in intimate proximity to the two women's experiences of pain. Traumatic and disturbing cinematic affect enacts a sympathetic and compassionate alignment and co-existence with the suffering of the female protagonists (rather than mimicking or replicating it for the "enjoyment" of spectators).

*Martyrs* makes female suffering painful for spectators by viscerally enacting the gruesome and methodical torture of Anna and Lucie, highlighting in particular its seemingly endless repetition. Examples of traumatic and disturbing affect include shaky, handheld camerawork and low-key lighting that visualize Lucie's nightmarish hallucinations, in which she is attacked repeatedly by a monster embodying her guilt at being unable to save another female torture victim. Only spectators and Lucie can see this monster; this alignment of visions encourages spectators to experience a more intimate physical and emotional engagement

with Lucie's pain than would otherwise be possible. *Martyrs* also establishes sympathetic spectatorial alignment with female suffering through structures of temporality that approximate Anna's incoherent point-of-view during her torture: rapid fades convey separate shots in a disjointed manner that approximate her losses of consciousness as she is punched, kicked and flayed. The camera focuses almost exclusively on Anna's face in close-up and extreme close-up shots during these torture sequences, clearly aligning spectators with her suffering while rendering her torturers as anonymous bodies inflicting pain in a brutal and unjust manner.

These torture sequences present what I will describe throughout this thesis in Deleuzian terms as "shocks to thought" that encompass the disturbing affective resonances of the cinema of exposure, as well as spectators' awareness of the relationship of female suffering to bio-political constructions of gender and sexual difference. In *Martyrs*, the intimate proximity of spectators to visceral images of Anna and Lucie in pain demonstrates the fact that, as Deleuze writes, "you can't escape the shock which arouses the thinker in you" (1989, 156). Regarding thought, this shocking imagery encompasses the self-reflexive links made by the film between female suffering and the act of witnessing. Such links encourage spectators to interrogate their ethical and bio-political positions in relation to Anna and Lucie's pain. For example, the postscript of the film suggests a long history of associating suffering (especially that of women) with a "vision" that brings knowledge and enlightenment:

martyr: nom, adjectif  
du gree "marturos":  
témoin

martyr: noun, adjective  
from the Greek "maturous":  
witness

The speech given to Anna by a female interrogator known only as “Mademoiselle” (Catherine Bégin) bluntly states the purpose of torturing young girls: to gain access to the philosophical mysteries underpinning human existence, as “[i]t turns out that women are more responsive to transfiguration, young women.” The trauma to which these young girls are subjected, “that small, easily opened crack, makes them see things that don't exist,” according to Mademoiselle. This traumatized vision supposedly facilitates the acquisition of knowledge by a secret society of wealthy white “pillars of society” of which Mademoiselle is a member.

In connecting female pain and suffering to bio-political institutions, *Martyrs* politicizes seemingly “private” experiences of female torture; that is, the film encourages spectators to *feel* and *perceive* these tortures as bio-political acts of domination, rather than isolated incidences of private pathology. This political aspect of the film is reflected in the austere mise-en-scène of the cell in which Anna is isolated and ritualistically tortured, during scenes that recall the sufferings of Joan of Arc envisioned in films such as *La passion de Jeanne d’Arc/The Passion of Joan of Arc* (Carl Theodor Dreyer, 1928) and *Procès de Jeanne d’Arc/The Trial of Joan of Arc* (Robert Bresson, 1962). However, *Martyrs* differs from these films by refusing to posit spiritual redemption as a positive outcome of female suffering. Instead, the scenes of torture within the film expose the gendered dimensions of female suffering. The ending of *Martyrs*, in which Mademoiselle shoots herself after the dying Anna whispers a supposed “revelation” in her ear, critiques patriarchal and misogynistic bio-

political institutions that construct female suffering as somehow “meaningful,” in that it contributes to philosophical projects inquiring into profound mysteries of human existence.

The exposure of female suffering as meaningless in this regard does not, however, mean that watching female suffering is meaningless, or, even worse, an exercise in gaining sadistic pleasure from the pain of others. Rather, *Martyrs* employs disturbing and traumatic affect in order to encourage a very different sort of psychosomatic transformation on the part of spectators: an awareness of the bio-political dimensions of female suffering and subordination in film. This awareness forms part of what I characterize as a feminist ethics of spectatorship, which involves a particular recognition of the ways in which ideological constructions of gender and sexual difference impact upon spectators’ bio-political and ethical relationship to female suffering.

Throughout this thesis, I discuss films like *Martyrs* that make female suffering painful and disturbing to watch, constituting a minor feminist cinema that exposes and critiques the bio-political dimensions of female suffering. Although women in this cinema of exposure suffer, they are not “victims” as one would encounter in a slasher film, for example.<sup>5</sup> Even though Anna and Lucie have been abused, they take direct action to challenge institutions of female torture and as such are not “victims.” Rather than endorsing female victimization, their torture exposes the fact that women’s suffering in film is often inextricably linked to patriarchal and misogynistic bio-political networks of power and domination.

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<sup>5</sup> For more information on the victimized, yet active and “heroic” Final Girl in slasher films, see Clover 1992. I will discuss the figure of the Final Girl further in Chapter 1.

The chapters that follow further explore the ethical positions and responsibilities of spectators when confronted with the bio-political facets of mediated female suffering. Chapter 1 expands upon the matrix of bio-politics, female suffering and spectatorship ethics in discussing the ways in which cinematic portrayals of domestic abuse expose gender inequalities structuring relationships between women and men. Chapter 2 focuses specifically on the bio-political dimensions of the suffering pregnant body in film, understanding its pain and dismemberment as metaphors for violent conflicts taking place within the national body politic. Chapter 3 discusses how unsettling cinematic portrayals of female self-mutilation encourage a compassionate vision on the part of spectators, while also exposing the gendered aspects of certain practices of self-harm. Chapter 4 explores the ways in which films focusing on female relationships employ visceral affect to disturb patriarchal demonizations of female solidarity, as well as establish relationships of sympathetic compassion between spectators and suffering female protagonists. These analyses clearly illustrate that the disturbing depiction of female suffering in the cinema of exposure engenders a minor feminist mode of spectatorial vision that is attentive to the bio-political and ethical registers of female pain.

Before outlining the philosophical framework of my arguments, I briefly discuss the advancements in film and cultural theory that relate to the bio-political and

phenomenological approach to cinematic affect and spectatorial ethics I develop in this thesis.

### **Foucault: Bio-power, Bio-politics and Performative Resistance**

The work of Michel Foucault on power offers a useful framework with which to explore bio-political constructions of female suffering and gendered violence in the cinema of exposure.

In *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: The Will to Knowledge* (1990 [1976]), Foucault contests the assumption that power operates solely through discourses and laws that repress sexuality and “the body” more generally. Rather, history consists of a series of archaeological layers in which the human body has been constructed as a subject by disciplinary apparatuses operating via diffused and impersonal networks of power.

Foucault provides a valuable historical contextualization of the processes by which bio-political epistemes govern conceptions of the types of bodies we inhabit and the specific uses to which they are put. An understanding of how bodies are considered to function differently in specific historical and socio-political contexts is relevant to spectatorship in terms of how perception is theorized as a bio-political practice. I will discuss the Foucauldian concepts of bio-political power and performative resistance as they relate to perception and spectatorship.

#### *Bio-political Power*

Foucault defines power as the perpetual negotiations and battles of “force relations” (1990, 92-3) within a certain socio-historical context. He outlines an “analytics of power” that describes power as a technology with positive functions that exceed the realm of repressive law. Power is productive, non-hierarchical and multiple; it emanates from every sphere of

society, and is not solely the provenance of specific institutions (such as the nation-state or the church) that claim a monopoly on its use (Foucault 1990, 82, 90-6). Foucault argues that gaining a degree of autonomy from hegemonic bio-political institutions and ideologies requires acknowledging that power *creates* knowledge rather than solely reveals or represses it.

According to Foucault, power transformed in the seventeenth century from the right to order the death of certain subjects into sovereignty over living bodies. Since the nineteenth century, this power has manifested itself in two distinct areas in relation to sexuality: anatomic-politics and bio-politics. Anatomic-politics encompasses the disciplining of the body as if it were a machine, with the aim of training it to perform tasks efficiently and respond to surveillance and punishment in a docile manner (Foucault 1990, 143, 139). Bio-politics occurs at the macro level of populations, and concerns regulatory methods such as the measurement of birth rates, mortality rates, longevity and other statistics meant to reflect the standardized achievement of physical “health.” Anatomic-politics and bio-politics form what Foucault terms a bipolar technology of life (“bio-power”) aimed at “the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations” (Foucault 1990, 140).

Foucault describes sexuality as “an especially dense transfer point for relations of power” (1990, 103). Sexuality falls within the purview of a bio-political economy that generates and regulates bodily sensations and pleasures according to dominant ideologies. Bodily

sensation, especially in its sexual dimension, is “the most speculative, most ideal, and most internal element in a deployment of sexuality organized by power in its grip on bodies and their materiality, their forces, energies, sensations, and pleasures” (Foucault 1990, 155).

This bio-political production of sexuality occurs along lines of sexual difference and gender. Specifically, Foucault discusses the “hysterization of women’s bodies.” This hysterization is enacted through, as he describes it:

a threefold process whereby the feminine body was analyzed – qualified and disqualified – as being thoroughly saturated with sexuality; whereby it was integrated into the sphere of medical practices, by reason of a pathology intrinsic to it; whereby, finally, it was placed in organic communication with the social body (whose regulated fecundity it was supposed to ensure), the family space (of which it had to be a substantial and functional element), and the life of children (which it produced and had to guarantee, by virtue of a biológico-moral responsibility lasting through the entire period of the children’s education): the Mother, with her negative image of “nervous woman,” constituted the most visible form of this hysterization. (1990, 104)

Women’s bodies (specifically, their reproductive capacities) thus played a definitive role in establishing their subordinate status and restricted social functions. This confluence of biological “knowledge” and social norms illustrates the ways in which bio-power operates along the dual axes of bodily materiality and ideology in a manner attentive to gender and sexual difference.

Foucault’s theory of productive bio-power has been subsequently employed by other cultural theorists and philosophers as a framework for understanding the bio-politics of bodily materiality, including its gendered and sexual differentiated dimensions. In writings such as *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (1993) and *Undoing Gender* (2004), Judith Butler explores the impact of bio-political norms upon the construction of bodily subjectivity from a queer

and feminist perspective. Butler defines bio-political norms, specifically those governing gender and sexuality, as symbolic and material demands made upon subjects. Butler argues that these norms (instead of innate desires or traits) mold subjectivity, as “to become subject to a regulation is also to become subjectivized by it, that is, to be brought into being as a subject precisely through being regulated” (2004, 41). Gender roles are thus ideological constructs that must be performed constantly, whose historicity is hidden under a façade of naturalness.

Butler is particularly concerned with the performance of gender as “the *reiterative* and *citational* practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (2004, 2).

Performance thus expresses the strength of bio-political norms to determine bodily comportment and practices. That is, bodies reconfirm the gender binary and the structural inequalities this binary entails through routinized performances of its dictates. Butler characterizes this conditioning of subjectivity as a form of gendered bio-political production, “a form of social power that produces the intelligible field of subjects” (2004, 48).

### *Resistance to Bio-power*

Butler’s work poses a key question regarding the ability of spectators as bio-political subjects to resist the dominant forms of bio-power that regulate their bodily practices and desires. I argue that even though performance may express and intensify dominant patriarchal and

misogynistic bio-political norms, it also provides the means of resistance. Butler writes that performances that challenge or “queer” the norm:

show us how the norms that govern contemporary notions of reality can be questioned and how new modes of reality can become instituted. These practices of instituting new modes of reality take place in part through the scene of embodiment, where the body is not understood as a static and accomplished fact, but as an aging process, a mode of becoming that, in becoming otherwise, exceeds the norm, reworks the norm, and makes us see how realities to which we thought we were confined are not written in stone. (2004, 29)

Here Butler describes an embodied mode of performance that challenges (rather than simply reproduces) dominant bio-political norms.

I consider spectatorship to be a mode of performative perception. Throughout this thesis I explore the ways in which bodies respond differently to cinematic affect under feminist bio-political frameworks that consider vision to be haptic and corporeally situated. As a discursive institution, the cinema both “transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it” (Foucault 1990, 101). The cinema of exposure offers one such site of potential resistance to dominant patriarchal and misogynistic power. The films that I discuss are without a doubt controversial in terms of their visceral presentations of female bodily suffering and gendered violence. However, out of these presentations arise possibilities of feminist exposure and opposition. That is, certain types of affective cinematic aesthetics *invite* or *encourage* (rather than demand or coerce) spectators to respond and engage in manners amenable to female and feminist bodily agency and expression. This alternative perception is embodied and haptic, extending vision beyond the disincarnate and omniscient eye and mind.

I employ a Foucauldian framework in order to draw attention to the bio-political dimensions of spectators' bodily comportment and perception, as well as to highlight potential sites and modes of resistance to dominant bio-political institutions and practices. My thesis contributes to this line of thought by exploring how female suffering in the contemporary cinema of exposure communicates its bio-political affects to spectators, as well as how this sensual and critical engagement with affect relates to feminist modes of seeing female pain "otherwise."

I complement my explorations of the bio-political dimensions of female suffering in the cinema of exposure with analyses of its phenomenological impact on spectators. I discuss phenomenological and haptic theory in the next section.

### **Phenomenological and Haptic Film Theory**

Phenomenology offers a productive understanding of spectators as corporeally situated beings. Within a phenomenological understanding of cinematic spectatorship, the encounter or proximity of filmic images and spectators creates cinematic affect. Contemporary haptic film theory has its antecedents in the phenomenological and materialist thought of philosophers such as Walter Benjamin, Sergei Eisenstein and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

In his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version" (2008 [1935-6]), Benjamin argues that film can institute a revolutionary politics of

the body. He explicitly mentions the socio-historical conditioning of perception when arguing that the “aura” of an artwork never disappears, although the ways in which it is received may change: “*Just as the entire mode of existence of human collectives changes over long historical periods, so too does their mode of perception.* The way in which human perception is organized – the medium in which it occurs – is conditioned not only by nature but by history” (Benjamin 2008, 23). Benjamin describes the political dimension of film in haptic terms, as a shock that “jolted the viewer, taking on a tactile [*taktisch*] quality” (2008, 39). However, he accuses this tactility of manipulating the regressive desire of spectators to be entertained, rather than offering a more “progressive” bio-political shock to thought. According to Benjamin, filmic affectivity thrills spectators by fostering an obsession with the cults of celebrity and spectacle that prevents them from achieving class consciousness (2008, 34).

Soviet film theorist and filmmaker Eisenstein would later explore the potential of shocking haptic imagery to produce spectators who actively co-create (rather than passively absorb) cinematic affect. Eisenstein defines film spectatorship as a co-production between spectator and film. He argues that any form of contact between two entities, be they two filmic images joined in montage or spectators and film, constitutes acts of shock and creation that render sensation possible (Eisenstein 1948, 17). Spectatorial attention to cinematic affect establishes the existence of the image, as “the desired image is *not fixed or ready-made, but arises – is born*” (Eisenstein 1948, 34) at the moment of perception. The affective impact of images is therefore the result, rather than the cause, of sensuous relations between film and spectators, the latter of whom have agency in determining how they interact with the screen.

Benjamin's and Eisenstein's materialist approaches to cinema bear affinities with later phenomenological philosophy, particularly that of Merleau-Ponty. Within his framework of empirical realism, Merleau-Ponty predicates human consciousness on a form of embodied perception that denies the Cartesian division between the mind and the body. The body is not an intermediary between an abstract consciousness and the world, but is rather "the living envelope of our actions" (Merleau-Ponty 1963, 188). Sensuous interaction with the world requires a material body integrated with the mind and soul: the body devoid of thought is merely an animate corpse, while the mind and the soul rely on the body as a means of expression. Sensations and thoughts flow through this body irrespective of organ boundaries (Merleau-Ponty 1963, 207-9, 219).

Merleau-Ponty argues, along similar lines as Eisenstein, that the perceiver and their object co-create the perceived entity when they come into contact, as the "retinal image, to the extent that I know it, is not yet produced by the light waves issuing from the object; but these two phenomena resemble and correspond to each other in a magical way across an interval which is not yet space" (1963, 219). There are no signifiers that refer to predetermined signifieds; there is only the perception of objects as they exist to embodied beings in *this* world. Merleau-Ponty offers a compelling definition of the subject as a being embodied in the world whose "perspectival knowledge" (1963, 186) perceives fragments of its objects, rather than completely knowing and mastering them. However, I depart from his theoretical

framework in arguing that spectators' encounter with cinematic affect *produces* certain bio-political subjectivities (rather than describing this encounter with film as a relation of subject to object).

The work of contemporary phenomenological and haptic film theorists retains Merleau-Ponty's focus on experiential existence, while also detailing the socio-political dimensions of spectatorship. This contemporary work arose partly in opposition to the dominance of psychoanalytic apparatus theory in the field of Film Studies in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>6</sup> For example, Steven Shaviro polemically refutes psychoanalytic apparatus theory in his examination of the bio-political elements of embodied spectatorship in *The Cinematic Body* (1993). In the course of defining scopophilia as a passive and masochistic activity that allows spectators to abjectly immerse themselves in cinematic spectacle (1993, 49), Shaviro does not argue that spectators' bodily engagement with the cinema is determined completely by biology. Rather, the body and perception are always already products of social conditioning, as "there is no essential nature, no spontaneous being, of the body; social forces permeate it right from the beginning" (Shaviro 1993, 135). According to Shaviro, spectators must embrace their own masochistic debasement before asignifying images in order to free their bodies from dominant discourse.

Vivian Sobchack, whose work draws heavily on Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of being-in-the-world, also describes spectators as subjects engaged in embodied relationships with film. Sobchack considers spectators and film to be simultaneously viewing subjects and viewable

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<sup>6</sup> For examples of psychoanalytic apparatus theory, see Baudry 1986; Metz 1982; and Mulvey 1986.

objects that mutually constitute one another via haptic and synaesthetic modes of perception. These reversible relations between screen and spectators form what Sobchack terms “cinesthetic subjects,” or alliances of bodies and films which “subvert their own fixity from within, commingling flesh and consciousness, reversing the human and technological sensorium, so that meaning, and where it is made, does not have a discrete origin in either spectators’ bodies or cinematic representation but emerges in their conjunction” (2004, 67). Meaning emerges from (and does not pre-exist) the affective impact of images on spectators, who as “enworlded” beings are able to tactilely embrace the screen with a haptic vision (Sobchack 2004, 187). Sobchack thus retains Merleau-Ponty’s dialectical understanding of spectators and films as subjects and objects of one another’s gaze. However, her theory approaches my own in her recognition of the haptic potential of optical vision and the mutual creation of affect and meaning on the parts of spectators and films.

Sobchack’s conception of haptic visuality differs in this respect from haptic visuality as theorized by Laura U. Marks. Marks distinguishes between haptic and optical vision, arguing that optical vision is a “distance” sense that results in identification with diegetic figures (2000, 187), while haptic vision is “a kind of visuality that is not organized around identification...with a single figure, but that is labile, able to move between identification and immersion” (2000, 188). Marks bases her distinction between haptic and optical vision on the work of art historian Alois Riegl, who also distinguished between haptic and optical art. According to Marks, for Riegl figures in haptic art exist on the same plane as the

background space, while figures in optical art are distinct from this plane. The separation of figure and plane in filmic images thus motivates an exclusively optical mode of vision (Marks 2002, 4-5). Marks's work makes valuable connections between haptic vision and spectators' physical, emotional and psychological engagement with film. My thesis extends Marks's understanding of haptic visuality by exploring the specific impacts of gender and sexual difference in eliciting a tactile form of vision.

More recent writing on cinema spectatorship as corporeal experience continues to stress the haptic potential of vision. In *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (2009), Jennifer Barker reiterates Merleau-Ponty's and Sobchack's conceptions of film and spectator as both viewing subjects and viewable objects. Barker argues that a tactile proximity between films and spectators occurs on the levels of the skin, musculature and viscera. Thus, in the encounter with film, "touch is not just skin-deep but is experienced at the body's surface, in its depths, and everywhere in between" (Barker 2009, 2). The affective resonances of viewing experiences arise from this corporeal engagement of the two bodies, situated between the "shrieks, laughter, and tears" of spectators and the "shockingly vibrant color, musical crescendos, and extreme close-ups" of the cinema (Barker 2009, 148).

Barker argues that this emotional and physical proximity engenders sympathy with films and diegetic characters on the part of spectators. She defines sympathy as a form of mimesis that occurs between the bodies of spectators, films and characters due to similarities in their expressive and perceptive functions. As Barker explains, spectatorial sympathy for diegetic characters "derives from our muscular empathy with them, and so to take a sensual approach

to the analysis of these films is to grasp their meanings and their significance more fully than a strictly aesthetic, narrative, thematic, psychological, or historical approach might do” (2009, 92). This process occurs in the cinema of exposure when spectators adopt a sympathetic attitude towards female suffering, which is often conveyed in a visceral and disturbing manner.

Martine Beugnet’s explorations of visceral imagery and tactile vision in what she terms the contemporary French “cinema of sensation” are proximate to my own interest in female suffering in the cinema of exposure. Beugnet argues that the cinema of sensation intertwines affective engagement with politicized thought. This combination encourages physical, emotional and intellectual responses on the part of spectators to cinematic narratives and formal designs. In particular, Beugnet discusses haptic aesthetics within the cinema of sensation that induce in spectators “those borderline states that reveal the inherent vulnerability of the self” (2007, 7).

The disturbing tactile imagery of the cinema of exposure destabilizes the subjectivity of spectators in a similar manner. Furthermore, the cinema of exposure also contains political and ethical dimensions related to modern and contemporary Western society. Like the cinema of sensation, I argue that the cinema of exposure reveals those political elements that remain hidden in mainstream and majoritarian cinema by imaging “historical realities caught in the (impossible) process of erasure” (Beugnet 2007, 46). However, my project departs

from that of Beugnet in its specific emphasis on female suffering, as well as its theorization of a feminist structure of sympathetic co-existence between spectators and film (to be discussed in detail later).

In line with these phenomenological and haptic film theorists, I characterize spectatorship as a physical, emotional and intellectual relationship in which the bodies of spectators respond corporeally to the affective resonances of film. I build on this work by focusing specifically on the bio-political and ethical facets of spectatorial vision in the encounter with female suffering. I argue that the relationship of spectators to the disturbing affects of female suffering in the cinema of exposure involves processes of critical thought and reflection arising from the phenomenal intelligence of the lived body. Tactile moments of supposedly “excessive” horror and shock are not instances of unwarranted sensationalism, but rather constitute key elements of the political and ethical relationship of spectators to the screen. Haptic visuality allows spectators to realize potential subversions of optical primacy in the cinema of exposure, providing them with the opportunity to assume politically aware and ethically engaged spectatorship positions that do not debase the carnal intelligence of the lived body. Specifically, haptic perception of female suffering can construct feminist viewing positions that combine the transformations of thought and subjectivity encouraged by visceral cinematic aesthetics with narrative critiques of patriarchal and misogynistic forms of violence against women.

### **Perception, Gender and Sexual Difference**

The political and ethical dimensions of perception, especially in relation to female suffering, are further complicated when bio-political factors such as gender and sexual difference are taken into account. Several scholars have considered the gendered and sexualized specificities of female corporeal experience; however, my thesis is unique in focusing on spectators' phenomenal and bio-political engagement with female suffering in contemporary cinema.

Laura Mulvey popularized feminist critiques of cinematic representations of women with her seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1986 [1975]). Similar to Jean-Louis Baudry and Christian Metz, Mulvey considers immersion in Hollywood narrative cinema to lead to an unconscious (and thus ideologically problematic) identification with the sadistic gazes of the camera and the diegetic male protagonist. However, she departs from her predecessors in analyzing voyeurism and identification from a gendered perspective. Mulvey claims that the pleasure of the male spectator derives from two modes of vision: sadistic and fetishistic scopophilia and narcissistic identification (1986, 208). The male spectator always identifies with the male protagonist as the possessor of the gaze, who looks upon and objectifies the woman, defined by her "*to-be-looked-at-ness*" (Mulvey 1986, 203). Woman-as-image represents a lack of phallic power and a fear of castration (Mulvey 1986, 202, 204). Mulvey calls for the replacement of patriarchal Hollywood cinema with a "cinema of unpleasure," of "dialectics, passionate detachment" (Mulvey 1986, 209) in which spectatorial awareness of the cinematic apparatus destroys sadistic and narcissistic forms of male

pleasure.<sup>7</sup> Although my analyses of female suffering in the cinema of exposure depart from Mulvey's psychoanalytic approach to classical Hollywood cinema, I retain her interest in exposing the ways in which dominant patriarchal regimes of vision continue to objectify and subordinate women.

More recent phenomenological understandings of female experience have greater relevance to my thesis. In a collection of essays entitled *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like a Girl" and Other Essays* (2005 [1990]), Iris Marion Young explores the disciplining of female bodily comportment in patriarchal and misogynistic societies. Young takes a sexually differentiated approach to her analyses of female bodily experiences such as pregnancy, breastfeeding and menstruation, noting that "[b]ecause much feminist reflection begins from the socio-historical fact that women's bodily differences from men have grounded or served as excuses for structural inequalities, inquiry about the status and malleability of bodies in relation to social status is for us a matter of some urgency" (2005, 4). I employ Young's analyses of how women's bodily comportment gestures towards experiences of oppression and exploitation in my explorations of female suffering in the cinema of exposure.

In the realm of philosophy, Alia Al-Saji further theorizes how reflective corporeal perception is attuned to the construction of bodily differences related to sex and gender. Al-Saji proposes sensory-motor hesitation as a means of adopting a critical-ethical form of vision that makes difference visible in a non-objectifying manner. Hesitation, understood here as a

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<sup>7</sup> In her work on photography and ethics, Susan Sontag interrogates the politically and ethically problematic act of witnessing bodily suffering in photography in a manner that parallels Mulvey's critique of the sadistic voyeurism of the masculine gaze. See Sontag 1979 and 2003.

Bergsonian practice of conscious interruption and experimentation, allows the time and space for critical reflection to acknowledge and interrogate learned habits of objectifying vision. This objectifying vision elides otherness and affect within the field of vision by “forgetting” certain institutional and social foundations:

Through repetition and habituation, a particular order of difference and meaning becomes norm – a certain level becomes *the* level according to which we see, receding itself from visibility...When it forgets this blindspot of social and bodily habituation, critical vision overreaches its bounds...It forgets its historicity and contingency and takes itself to be absolute (Al-Saji 2009, 384)

A non-objectifying hesitant vision, in contrast, reflects critically on the bio-political and historical factors that shape it. This critical reflection exposes the objectification and erasure of “othered” bodies as a bio-political (rather than natural) habit. Hesitant perception “creates an opening in habits and makes them visible for themselves and within the world...Hesitation is the surprised revelation of a blindspot in vision, of invisibles to which vision is indebted, of an affective field wider than that of visible objects” (Al-Saji 2009, 380).

In sum, a learned objectifying vision can be re-learned as critical-ethical vision through practices of hesitation alive to the interruptive otherness of affect. It is thus not a question of seeing others who were not there before, but of seeing “otherwise” (Al-Saji 2009, 379) so that these erased others become visible. Affective experiences such as those provided by the cinema of exposure thus have the potential to alter modes of spectatorial perception by revealing gendered blind spots and bio-political prejudices structuring and limiting vision. Disturbing cinematic affect interrupts and fractures objectifying and normalizing habits by

making visible “abnormal” (Al-Saji 2009, 385) events that restructure the visual field, opening up space for critical-ethical reflective vision in the process.

Having established the existing theories relevant to my interest in the phenomenological dimensions of spectators’ engagement with female suffering, I will now demonstrate how certain philosophical concepts elaborated by Deleuze, Nancy and Cixous underpin my understanding of the bio-political and ethical relationship of spectators to the cinema of exposure.

### **Deleuze**

Scholarship inspired by the work of Deleuze (and Guattari) has become increasingly popular in the field of Film Studies in the last several decades, as understandings of spectatorship as a phenomenological practice have become more prominent and the influence of psychoanalytic apparatus theory has waned. Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy is a form of what D.N. Rodowick terms “transcendental empiricism” (2010, xix), similar to Merleau-Ponty’s empirical realism. This transcendental empiricism provides an alternative to a Cartesian transcendental idealism that divorces the subject from their environment and separates the anatomical and perceptive from the spiritual and thoughtful capacities of the body.

Regarding spectatorial interaction with female suffering in the cinema of exposure, several concepts elaborated by Deleuze support my discussions in key ways. These include the Body-without-Organs (BwO), becoming-other and becoming-woman, the time-image and its

haptic qualities, the shock to thought, minor political cinema and an ethics of belief in the world. I will provide brief introductions to these concepts and their value to this thesis.

*The Body-without-Organs, Becoming-other and Becoming-woman*

Deleuze and Guattari's postulation of the BwO and the processes of becoming-other and becoming-woman helpfully elucidate the ethical relationship of female suffering to the biopolitical aspects of spectatorial subjectivity and perception.

Deleuze and Guattari define the BwO as a disorganized entity open to making connections or "assemblages" with other bodies and environments (2004, 177). This conceptualization of a deterritorialized, machinic assemblage radically disrupts any understanding of the subject as an autonomous body removed from the world. The formation of the BwO is intimately connected to a process that Deleuze and Guattari term becoming-other, or continuous destabilizations, openings up and transformations of bodies engaged in the world. Deleuze and Guattari argue that becoming does not constitute a form of identification or imitation, even with nonfigurative entities such as the film screen (2004, 263). Becoming is best described as a process of approximation via contagion: "catching" a virus from the particles of other bodies and becoming-other by approximating their intensities and speeds. This becoming takes place at the molecular rather than the molar level. That is, instead of changing molar forms, bodies experience fluctuations in intensity that cause them to create an assemblage in which the organized organism becomes the formless body: "becoming is to

extract particles between which one establishes the relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness that are closest to what one is becoming, and through which one becomes” (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 300). According to Richard Rushton, cinema allows spectators to engage in transformative processes of becoming-other by “placing oneself where one is not, of becoming someone or something one is not. That is, cinema...offers the possibility of becoming other than what one is, of being someone (or something) else” (2009, 51).

Becoming-woman designates a specific mode of becoming-other. Deleuze and Guattari describe becoming-woman as the initial disintegration of unified subjectivity that allows for all other molecular becomings-other. Deleuze and Guattari employ the term “woman” to connote a bio-politically minoritarian status rather than actual women as a social identity group. The human “Man” is the status at the top of the historical bio-political hierarchy. He is the hegemonic symbolic standard against which all other statuses are measured and judged inferior. The ideal of “Man” is inherently majoritarian, even if actual men are not. Deleuze and Guattari stress that becoming-woman is not the assumption of the molar female form, but rather that it is indistinguishable from minoritarian molecularity: “man is the majoritarian par excellence, whereas becomings are minoritarian; all becoming is becoming-minoritarian” (2004, 320).

Becoming-woman is compatible with feminism in its deterritorialization of bio-political prejudices and prohibitions; specifically, those related to gendered and sexed bodies. In this thesis, I employ the concept of becoming-woman to describe transformative affective experiences undergone by female diegetic characters and spectators of any sex or gender who

encounter female suffering in the cinema of exposure. However, I depart from Deleuze and Guattari in identifying feminist spectatorial iterations of becoming-woman that do not erase sexual difference in a machinic process of molecularization. Rather, the political and ethical forms of spectatorial vision that I describe acknowledge the importance of gender and sexual difference (along with other bio-political axes of difference) in determining the different types of transformations and modes of vision that bodies experience. I propose a theory of cinematic spectatorship as becoming-woman in which spectators and film need not necessarily fuse and become a BwO, as theorists such as Barbara Kennedy suggest (2002), but in which contagious haptic visuality fosters an intimate proximity or co-existence between the two. My conception of becoming-woman is thus distinct in its insistence on the continued relevance of gender and sexual difference in determining how bodies engage with and are transformed by female suffering in the cinema of exposure.

My emphasis on the creation of bio-political meaning during spectatorial becomings-woman also diverges from Patricia MacCormack's postulation of the "cinesexual subject."

MacCormack defines the cinesexual subject as an inhuman assemblage of spectator and film with desires that cannot be organized within sexual binaries, similar to a Deleuzian BwO.

MacCormack admits of no signification in the cinesexual subject's experience of film. She argues that recognition of narrative conventions destroys productive desire by imprisoning the cinesexual spectator within oppressive dialectical social regimes such as capitalism, which demand bodily coherence and utilitarian modes of expression. The cinesexual subject

thus has an ethical responsibility to become an inhuman assemblage through a love of sensuous and asignifying cinematic images (MacCormack 2008, 3-4, 15, 148-9).

MacCormack's discussion of the ethical import of spectators' bodily disintegration and the liberation of desire marks an important contribution to Deleuzian film theory. However, unlike MacCormack I do not claim that an ethical engagement with cinematic images requires viewing them as fundamentally asemiotic. Images are not devoid of symbolism, but can instead be thought of as affective as well as significant. The ethical and bio-political components of my project thus address cinematic meaning and significance, in addition to affect. I explore the ways in which the corporeal engagement of spectators with the cinema of exposure transforms the bio-political and ethical import of female suffering onscreen.

### *The Time-image*

In addition to the process of becoming-woman, Deleuze's concept of the time-image radically disrupts the stable and static ontological status of the spectator. In *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (2006 [1983]), Deleuze classifies cinematic images prior to World War Two as perception, affection or action-images. These categories collectively designate the movement-image. Movement-images subject time to the dictates of movement by, as David Martin-Jones writes, structuring time "around a sensory-motor regime that moves from perception, through affection, to action," seemingly mimicking human processes of perception (2011, 27). For example, many classical Hollywood films employ action-images that maintain sensory-motor links in order to achieve narrative continuity.

*Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (1989 [1985]) details the emergence of the time-image in the post-war period. The time-image is a purely optical-sound image released from the sensory-motor schema of the movement-image. Narrative causality ceases to determine the behavior of figures and the organization of spaces in the time-image. Time-images inspire creative thought in spectators by requiring them to perceive film without complete knowledge or mastery of its contents (Deleuze 1989, 54).

I draw on Deleuze's notion of the "suprasensory relations" (1989, 158) of the time-image to argue that images within the cinema of exposure signify through synaesthetic affect. Writing elsewhere on the haptic and synaesthetic nature of perception and imagery as they relate to the work of Francis Bacon, Deleuze notes that "[b]etween a color, a taste, a touch, a smell, a noise, a weight, there would be an existential communication that would constitute the 'pathic'...moment of the sensation" (2003, 31). A similar pathic sensuality applies to time-images within the cinema of exposure, which employ sensual intensity to convey emotion and thought to spectators. Rodowick argues that time-images free thought from the confines of existing structures of signification and allow for "new modes of existence" (1997, 196). A radically different spectatorial subjectivity based on the continual transformation of the self replaces identifications that restrict modes of existence to pre-determined categories. Transformed spectators engage in ethical acts of thinking productively and creatively, which is "not to recall or reconsider the past, but rather to invent the future" (Rodowick 1997, 202).

In the cinema of exposure, I argue that time-images render female bodily suffering visible in its gendered and sexually differentiated dimensions. The disturbing and traumatic affective resonance of this suffering “forces us to think” (Deleuze 1989, 189) of the bio-political aspects of what spectators encounter onscreen through and with their bodies. In order to fully appreciate how cinematic images encourage spectatorial thought, the processes of thinking and becoming-other also need to be understood in relation to Deleuze’s concept of the shock to thought.

### *The Shock to Thought*

In *Cinema 2*, Deleuze describes the shock to thought as a form of communication between film and spectators in which intensity and affect disrupt codified sensory-motor patterns of perception and cognition. The shock to thought “is the shock wave or the nervous vibration, which means that we can no longer say ‘I see, I hear’, but I FEEL, ‘totally physiological sensation’. And it is the set of harmonics acting on the cortex which gives rise to thought, the cinematographic I THINK” (Deleuze 1989, 158). The disruptive nature of this shock is at once physical and thoughtful, in that it fosters a corporeal transformation in spectators that leads to the creation of new thoughts and experiences: “*a shock to thought... communicat[es] vibrations to the cortex, touching the nervous and cerebral system directly...It is as if cinema were telling us...you can’t escape the shock which arouses the thinker in you*” (Deleuze 1989, 156).

The concept of the shock to thought defines the relationship of spectators to film as one of intimate physical, emotional and psychological proximity without conflation or fusion.

Deleuze describes the shock to thought as a form of dialogue between film characters, filmmaker and audience that is established through film form specifically:

the composition does not simply express the way in which the character experiences himself, but also expresses the way in which the author and the viewer judge him, it integrates thought into the image...A circuit which includes simultaneously the author, the film and the viewer is elaborated. The complete circuit thus includes the sensory shock which raises us from the images to conscious thought, then the thinking in figures which takes us back to the images and gives us an affective shock again. (1989, 161)

In the chapters that follow, I draw upon the concept of the shock to thought to explore how the visceral and disturbing aesthetics of the cinema of exposure encourage spectatorial awareness of the gendered and sexually differentiated dimensions of vision and female suffering. In particular, I discuss how the shocks to thought regarding gender and sexual difference in the cinema of exposure constitute it as a minor feminist cinema that exposes “what doesn’t let itself be seen” (Deleuze 1989, 168) in majoritarian patriarchal modes of perception and filmmaking.

### *Minor Cinema*

The concept of minor cinema borrows from the notion of minor literature as described by Deleuze and Guattari in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1986 [1975]). Deleuze and Guattari define minor literature as a politicized deterritorialization of the structure and usage of majoritarian language. Minor literature has three distinct traits. Firstly, it deterritorializes the majoritarian language from within. It dismantles and transforms codified modes of production and communication in order to create alternative ways of being in the world,

allowing each author to “be a sort of stranger within his [sic] own language” (Deleuze and Guattari 1986, 6). Secondly, minor literature expresses the collective desires of a future community or “people to come.” Every utterance of minor literature takes on collective value, as a “revolutionary enunciation” that “produces an active solidarity” in marginalized peoples (Deleuze and Guattari 1986, 17). Lastly, the political nature of minor literature collapses distinctions between public and private conflicts and struggles, as “its cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986, 17).

In *Cinema 2*, Deleuze argues that minor cinemas, what he also terms “modern political cinemas,” mirror the features of minor literature. Minor cinema deterritorializes majoritarian cinematic language from within by destabilizing its codes and clichés and employing them in the interest of marginalized, “minor” peoples (Deleuze 1989, 217). Minor cinema also expresses the collective desires of a “people to come” who, unlike the oppressed yet clearly imaged groups in classical political cinema, are missing. Much like the minoritarian writer, the minoritarian filmmaker must therefore invent rather than reveal a previously constituted people (Deleuze 1989, 221). The collapse of the public and private realms also occurs in minor cinema, as “private” conflicts and struggles take on political value. As Deleuze writes, “the private element can thus become the place of a becoming conscious...no boundary survives to provide a minimum distance or evolution: the private affair merges with the social – or political – immediate” (1989, 218). As I discuss at length in Chapter 1, this collapse of the public and private realms within minor cinema dovetails with second-wave feminists’ insistence that “the personal is political”: all personal relationships contain

political dimensions that connect them immediately to public ideologies and institutions. Finally, minor political cinema images “intolerable” situations for its minoritarian characters. Minor cinema “testifies...to the impossibility of living in these conditions, for the colonized person who comes up against an impasse in every direction. It is as if modern political cinema were no longer constituted on the basis of a possibility of evolution and revolution...but on impossibilities...the intolerable” (Deleuze 1989, 219). Throughout this thesis I describe what I term “rape culture” as a “permanent state of a daily banality” (Deleuze 1989, 170) that the cinema of exposure envisions as intolerable for female characters and feminist spectators.

By virtue of its willingness to explore disturbing subject matters and aesthetic modes excluded in majoritarian patriarchal cinemas, the cinema of exposure constitutes a minor feminist cinema that “tear[s] a minor literature away from its own language, allowing it to challenge the language and making it follow a sober revolutionary path” (Deleuze and Guattari 1986, 19). Here, my argument regarding the cinema of exposure as a minor feminist cinema departs from Alison Butler’s characterization of women’s cinema as minor cinema. Butler argues that the work of certain female filmmakers constitutes a “displacement” or “dispossession” of majoritarian cinematic language, and as such contains a feminist political dimension (2002, 20). I contribute a critical focus on the bio-political and ethical dimensions of affect, aesthetics and vision by identifying minor feminist modes of envisioning and perceiving female suffering in the work of both female and male filmmakers. As a minor

feminist cinema, the cinema of exposure employs aesthetic shocks to thought that effect the becoming-woman of spectators; that is, their becoming-aware of the bio-political aspects of female suffering in film. This awareness has ethical as well as bio-political resonances.

### *The Ethics of Belief in the World*

Before discussing Deleuze's ethics of a belief in the world in detail, I must first distinguish between morality and ethics in his thinking. For Deleuze, morality encompasses the idealized values to which we feel obligated to adhere, while ethics is, as Rodowick explains, "an immanent set of reasoned choices" (2010, 97) that connect us with the reality of *this* world. A Deleuzian ethics of choosing to believe in the world thus provides an alternative to metaphysical theories of morality that force one to follow prescribed modes of living. Similar to Nietzsche's concept of the eternal return, a Deleuzian ethics of belief in this world is a form of thought "that forgets what it thinks it knows and thereby becomes an active power capable of engaging an emergent future" (Bogue 2010, 119). According to Deleuze, ethical existence entails responding to an immanent reality, instead of structuring existence according to what was thought possible in the past.

Regarding cinematic spectatorship, I do not argue that opening the body to cinematic affect is an automatically ethical act. This assumption would be particularly problematic regarding violent images, whose bio-political impacts are often the source of contentious debate.

Rather, a Deleuzian ethics of creating the future becomes possible when spectators encounter female suffering in the cinema of exposure, which has the *potential* to generate feminist thought and action. When disturbing affect in the cinema of exposure deterritorializes

patriarchal and misogynistic codes of meaning, spectators realize that they have been biopolitically conditioned to perceive images of female suffering as erotic spectacles and become cognizant of ways of seeing “otherwise.” This realization of choice is what Deleuze has in mind when he praises the “powers of the false” (1995, 126, 172) for allowing productive and creative forms of desire to challenge discursive knowledge of bodily subjectivity.

The Deleuzian concepts of becoming-other, becoming-woman, the time-image, the shock to thought, minor cinema and the ethics of belief in the world all have bearing upon my explorations of the bio-political specificities of female suffering in the cinema of exposure. Furthermore, these concepts aid in illustrating the ethical roles and responsibilities of spectators who encounter this suffering. To further explore the bio-political and ethical dimensions of female suffering and spectatorial vision, I turn to the ethical ontology of Nancy.

### **Nancy**

Nancy’s writings on ontology, ethics and politics furnish important concepts for exploring spectators’ phenomenological, bio-political and ethical engagement with the cinema of exposure. These concepts include co-existence or being-with; bodily intrusion, exposure and groundlessness; and a co-existence of body and mind in what Nancy terms the *corpus*. I

briefly introduce these concepts here, and clarify their usefulness when employed in relation to spectators' relationship to female suffering in the cinema of exposure.

### *Co-existence, Sympathy and Compassion*

Like Deleuze and Guattari's postulation of the BwO and becoming-other, Nancy's concept of co-existence or being-with disrupts the unified and autonomous Western subject. Nancy outlines this theory of fractured co-existential subjectivity in *Corpus* (2008 [1992]) and *Being Singular Plural* (2000 [1996]), writings on the construction of bodies and political communities. Nancy draws on Heidegger's notion of *mitsein*, or "being with," in defining his use of the term as the notion that all existence is co-existence. According to Nancy, subjects are constituted both in their distance from and proximity to other subjects. Subjects are separate from one another, allowing them to have different identities. However, these identities only exist in their difference from the identities of other subjects. This fundamental relationality renders subjectivity as a social being-with, or what Nancy refers to as being singular plural. Beings singular plural do not constitute a common body or substance. Rather, they exist in a community in which each self shares with others the condition of being different from one another (Nancy 2000, 76-7, 81, 186-7). Nancy writes that:

From the very start, the structure of the "Self," even considered as a kind of unique and solitary "self," is the structure of the "with."...From the very beginning, then, "we" are with one another, not as points gathered together, or as a togetherness that is divided up, but as a being-with-one-another. Being-with is exactly this: that Being, or rather that *to be* neither gathers itself as a resultant *commune* of beings nor shares itself out as their common substance. (2000, 96)

Nancy's belief that co-existence is established through touch is of importance regarding the haptic style of the cinema of exposure. Touch provides the means by which beings singular

plural co-exist with one another. Since co-existence is the foundation of existence, tactile contact with others allows bodies to experience their separate subjectivities: “we should say, not that ‘I,’ body, am touched and touch in turn – that I’m sensed – but rather try to say...that ‘I’ is a touch” (Nancy 2008, 131). A co-existential touch places bodies in relationships of proximity rather than fusion, as its “tact isn’t concentrated, doesn’t claim – as does Cartesian touch – the privilege of an immediacy that would fuse all senses and ‘sense.’ Touching...is also local, modal, fractal” (Nancy 2008, 87). Regarding the cinema of exposure, I argue that spectators engage in a haptic co-existence with disturbing affects of female pain. This fractured intimacy engenders relations of sympathetic compassion with female suffering, while also ungrounding stable and fixed ontological positions.

Nancy’s postulation of a tactile, compassionate co-existence between subjects relates directly to my understanding of the political and ethical relationship of spectators to female suffering in the cinema of exposure. Namely, a sympathetic and compassionate sharing of painful female experience constitutes a key element of a feminist ethics of spectatorship. In her writing on spectatorial empathy and sympathy, Tarja Laine draws on recent findings in cognitive science to argue that “shared circuits” in the brain allow for “an intuitive sharing of emotions and sensations” (2011, 17) between spectators and films. Laine relates this biological information to spectators’ engagement with film, first by distinguishing clearly between empathy and sympathy:

When we experience empathy, it is as if we feel the other’s emotion as our own. We spontaneously and contagiously focus our emotional attention on the other’s situation,

and this may occur without any feelings of good will toward the other...By contrast, sympathy often seems to entail a positive regard or a more than superficial concern for the other person, for it occurs less contagiously. (2011, 46)

In her distinctions between empathy and sympathy, Laine draws on Murray Smith's explorations of spectatorial engagement with diegetic characters. Smith argues that spectators' emotional, psychological and physical relationship with a particular film is determined mainly by their attitude towards diegetic characters, as "characters are central to the rhetorical and aesthetic effects of narrative texts" (1995, 4). These relationships can often be characterized by feelings of empathy or sympathy. As in the work of Laine, Smith understands empathy as imagining the feelings of others through processes of emotional stimulation, motor and affective mimicry and automatic reactions – what he terms "imaginative substitution" (1995, 96). By way of contrast, sympathy involves the *sharing* of affects, emotions and physical experiences between the bodies onscreen and those of spectators. Sympathy is thus a matter of participatory togetherness in the manner of a Nancean co-existence, rather than fusion or mimicry. Murray posits a cinematic "structure of sympathy" (1995, 5) involving processes of recognition, alignment, and allegiance between spectators and diegetic characters. Alignment and allegiance pertain especially to spectatorial engagement with film aesthetics, as they encompass the ways in which formal devices place spectators in spatio-temporally, psychologically and ethically proximate positions to specific diegetic characters.

Laine and Smith productively categorize empathetic and sympathetic responses, which helps us to better understand specific modes of spectatorial engagement with film. What I propose as the tactile and critical relationship of spectators to female suffering in the cinema of

exposure may be properly termed compassion or sympathy, instead of empathy. Compassion and sympathy involved physical and emotional levels of engagement in which spectators maintain both an intimate proximity to and irreducible distance from film and diegetic characters. This tension allows for a com-passionate (the *com* implying a Nancean withness, a sharing of feelings and passions) relation to the screen that allows for the exposure and sharing of physical and emotional experiences without fusion and mimesis, or, conversely, detachment and alienation. Throughout this thesis, I discuss how the stylistic features of female suffering in the cinema of exposure construct feminist spectatorship modes of compassion and sympathy.

I note parenthetically that Nancy's ontology of proximate co-existence with other bodies bears some similarities to Emmanuel Levinas's ethics of encounter with the "Other." A Levinasian ethics of encountering the radical alterity of the Other is founded on responsibility and respect for difference. According to Levinas, subjects have an ethical responsibility to encounter the *visage* of the other, and in doing so affirm their absolute alterity. As ethical beings, subjects must refrain from committing a form of altercide in which they would incorporate the other into a totalizing ontology of the same (Levinas 1979, 80-1, 195-7, 213-14; 2006, 51).

Regarding film spectatorship, the corporeal proximity of spectators to the screen allows for what Sarah Cooper calls a Levinasian "space of responsibility" (2007, 85) in which

spectators take up the ethical task of sympathizing with certain characters, while also affirming their absolute alterity.<sup>8</sup> A Nancean ontology of co-existence departs from this ethical framework by insisting on the fundamental *sharing* of existence. That is, although existence is partitioned among individual subjects, for Nancy we can only speak of it in a relational sense as that which all subjects have in common with one another. The ethical ontologies of both Nancy and Levinas stress proximity to and responsibility towards others; however, Nancy's emphasis on a fundamental relationality disallows the category of the absolute Other proposed by Levinas.<sup>9</sup> Instead, Nancy privileges the sharing of experience through relations of sympathy and compassion.

### *Intrusion, Exposure, Groundlessness*

Bodily intrusion, exposure and groundlessness constitute key elements of a Nancean co-existence. In "L'Intrus/The Intruder" (2002), an essay Nancy wrote after receiving a heart transplant, he understands the body as a fundamentally split or fragmented stranger that constitutes an essential element of the self while also remaining withdrawn from it. Nancy describes this body intersected by strangeness as "a gaping open [which] cannot be closed...I am closed open. There is in fact an opening through which passes a stream of unremitting strangeness" (2002, 10). The body is thus always already exposed to and intruded upon by the world, existing as "the dangerous faultline of rupture" (Nancy 2000, xii) between self and others. This exposure and intrusion reveal a bodily and ontological groundlessness that

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<sup>8</sup> See also Cooper 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Although I do not have the space to discuss this topic fully here, I note that Levinas has been critiqued by feminist philosophers for his designation of the Other as a specifically feminine position. See Braidotti (1993); Cooper (2007); Ettinger (2004); Irigaray (1986; 1991); and Perpich (2005).

resonates with Deleuze and Guattari's concept of becoming-other, in that both posit bodily subjects as continually destabilized and transforming entities.

Nancy's ethico-political project of destabilizing Western metaphysics extends to a rethinking of perception as well as subjectivity. Ginette Michaud writes that for Nancy all sensual experiences, including those involving works of art, involve haptic modes of perception that cannot be classified according to one sense category; engagement with art and the world is a *methexis* characterized by participation and contagion (2005, 119). Each work of art creates its own haptic sensual regime, and this haptic creation is fundamentally political in that hapticity signals a being-with of the senses. This inter-expressive, synaesthetic dimension of perception constitutes bodies as beings-exposed to affective encounters with art, other bodies and the world, rather than autonomous metaphysical subjects. A Nancean co-existence or being-with art and media thus presents, as Michaud writes, "the subject as a diaspason [interval]...We suddenly discern in this position...how this seemingly aesthetic question in fact at its core...carries the question of the political – in this instance the image of the people, of their discord and clamor, of their *being-with* that is not *being together*" (2005, 111).

Haptic perception of film thus has the potential to make politically minor modes of spectatorship possible, particularly in relation to female suffering. A spectatorial being-exposed to female suffering is achieved through viscerally affective experiences that transform the self-contained, disembodied subject into a *corpus* traversed by the intensities

and bodies it encounters (Nancy 2008, 81). The cinema of exposure exposes the spectatorial body or *corpus* to painful affects of female suffering that de-objectify codified and normalized modes of vision, making visible the minor aesthetic and political spaces of haptic perception and sympathetic response.

### *The Body/Mind of the Corpus*

A Nancean ethos of co-existence also provides a useful articulation of the relationship between the body and the mind, especially as this concerns spectatorial engagement with cinematic affect. Nancy thinks of the body as the limit point between sense and matter, an “intervallic space” where “sensory sense and intelligible sense...merely inter-express each other” (2008, 65). Nancy terms this intervallic body of sense and matter the *corpus*, an entity that exists “at the limit of sense, as an opening or spacing of discrete places...a rupturing or fracture” (James 2006, 131) of the body as it is normally conceived. Diane Perpich understands the corpus as the limit over which existence is both divided and shared, making co-existence possible:

In *Corpus*, it is the notion of corpus itself that is employed in an attempt to overthrow the barriers that divide body and meaning, matter and mind. Nancy’s challenge to the pervasiveness of the holistic understanding of body is launched in the name of showing us the alterity that inhabits every body “at its heart” and of developing an ontology according to which bodies are conceived not as objects or things in any of the usual senses. The ontology of being-with that Nancy develops...thinks bodies as the spacing between, the border or line of separation that allows beings to appear as distinct from one another but that equally serves as the point of their connection and contiguous existence. Bodies, for Nancy, do not *have* limits, they *are* limits” (2005, 85)

Touch breaks down the borders between the body and thought, and bodies only exist in their exposure to and contact with thought. Body, thought and mind thus touch one another

without immersion or fusion; they exist only across the distances through which they make contact, taking place as “a passage, a transport from border to border” (Nancy 2008, 113). The body is always in thought, functioning as the body of thought and any truly proper thinking on the body.

We can thus think of bodies as intervallic spaces between sense and thought over which spectatorial existence with film is shared. Understanding spectators as Nancy does bodies in general, as material and mindful co-existents with the world (and the cinema) via disruptive and sensual affect, resonates clearly with Deleuze’s argument that “[t]here is as much thought in the body as there is shock and violence in the brain. There is an equal amount of feeling in both of them” (1989, 205).

Nancy’s thinking of bodies as essentially exposed, intruded upon and open to the exterior world (or, as the spaces or intervals over which this exposure, intrusion and openness take place) becomes potentially problematic when the ideological and bio-political dimensions of bodily specificity are taken into account. I think specifically of the bio-political construction of gendered and sexed bodily suffering in film, and the problematic implications that terms such as “exposure” and “intrusion” have for women. Nancy has faced criticism from feminist scholars for his insistence that the body exists as fundamentally exposed, intruded upon and fragmented, without adequately considering the potential impact that this may have

for feminist projects seeking to realize women's right to control their own bodies. For example, Perpich notes that:

Nancy's ontology is seemingly at odds with a host of feminist discourses for which bodily integrity is an almost unquestioned good...it is legitimate to wonder whether Nancy's conception of bodies as subject to a law of inevitable, multiple intrusion is not in some ways a very white, masculine move, attached to a horizon and history of privilege that should give feminists and others pause (2005, 85-6).

Existing writing on Nancean philosophy and cinema does not, in my view, fully consider the important implications of exposure and intrusion for female bodies. For example, Laura McMahon's *Cinema and Contact: The Withdrawal of Touch in Nancy, Bresson, Duras and Denis* (2012) details Nancean deconstructions of subjectivity and touch in modern and contemporary French film. McMahon provides compelling and insightful readings of film through the lens of Nancean ontology, but does not touch upon the relation of this ontology to the construction of gender and sexual difference in film in great depth, even though she discusses cinematic portrayals of the rape and physical abuse of women. Consequently, the bio-political dimensions of bodily difference are somewhat effaced by the non-specific way in which "bodies" are defined in the writings of Nancy and those influenced by him.

Although I employ Nancean terminology throughout, I also interrogate the relevance and limits of concepts such as intrusion and exposure when discussing female bodily suffering specifically.

### **Feminist Theory**

Feminist writings on media, ontology and ethics provide the final component of my theoretical paradigm. In the chapters that follow, I draw on the work of feminist theorists and philosophers Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Elisabeth Grosz and Rosi Braidotti, among

others, to support my analyses of how spectators engage politically and ethically with suffering female bodies in the cinema of exposure. The philosophical concepts of these feminist theorists complement those of Deleuze and Nancy, as they emphasize the experiential and bio-political aspects of corporeality. However, Cixous et al. focus explicitly on the impact of gender and sexual difference on embodiment and vision, and as such add a critical feminist dimension to my understanding of spectatorship politics and ethics in relation to the cinema of exposure. I will briefly introduce my interest in Cixous and Irigaray here, as their works pertain especially to the bio-political dimensions of perception and female embodiment, and are thus employed extensively throughout.

*Cixous and Irigaray: Écriture féminine and Visioning-with*

In exploring how the cinema of exposure expresses gendered and sexually differentiated features of female suffering, I draw on Cixous's concept of *l'écriture féminine*, or "writing-in-the-feminine." I propose a mode of visioning-in-the-feminine that resonates with spectators in tactile and political registers, allowing for an intertwining of sensual and intellectual mechanisms in perception. I will discuss visioning-in-the-feminine fully in a later chapter; for now, I will introduce the key features of writing-in-the-feminine and its relevance to female suffering in the cinema of exposure.

Cixous first articulated the concept of *écriture féminine* in her essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976 [1975]). Here Cixous describes writing-in-the-feminine as acts through

which woman asserts her presence in art, society, politics, philosophy, history and all other spheres of life through the writing of her own experiences and thoughts (1976, 875, 880). Although Cixous acknowledges that writing-in-the-feminine cannot be defined in any set terms, she writes that it will nevertheless be “marked by woman’s seizing the occasion to speak, hence her shattering entry into history, which has always been based on her suppression... To become at will the taker and initiator, for her own right, in every symbolic system, in every political process” (1976, 880).

The most salient feature of writing-in-the-feminine in relation to spectatorial engagement with the cinema of exposure is its “conjoining [of] body and thought” (Conley 1991, 94). Writing-in-the-feminine achieves corporeal thought by introducing alternative modes of production in which women write from their subjective bodily experiences. This experiential writing establishes connections with the body that has been stolen from women and objectified in various masculinist and patriarchal discourses (with Cixous identifying Freudian psychology as the most prominent among these). As Cixous explains:

By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display – the ailing or dead figure... the cause and location of inhibitions. Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time. Write your self. Your body must be heard... To write. An act which will not only “realize” the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal (1976, 880)

I note here that Cixous does not restrict the ability to write-in-the-feminine solely to female authors or artists. Rather, women are much more likely to engage in this type of feminist production, as they have direct bodily experience in suffering exploitation and subordination

under dominant patriarchal and misogynistic ideologies and practices (Cixous 1986, 81). In Chapter 4, I discuss the ways in which female filmmakers in France vision-in-the-feminine. However, this does not preclude any non-female filmmaker from visioning-in-the-feminine.

Like Cixous, Irigaray argues that feminine and feminist production, whether it involves writing or any other form of expression, aims at preventing the erasure of female bodies from the field of the visible. Indeed, the female and feminine have most often been characterized in terms of lack and invisibility in dominant discourses surrounding ontology and subjectivity. (According to Griselda Pollock, Freud himself termed the feminine the “blind spot” of psychoanalytic theory [2004, 35, 37]). Irigaray identifies the subordination and invisibility of the feminine as a structuring component of patriarchal and misogynistic regimes of perception, specifically those pertaining to the visual field. She writes in *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985 [1974]) that the woman is doomed to invisibility within these paradigms because she is castrated:

Now the little girl, the woman, supposedly has *nothing* you can see. She exposes, exhibits the possibility of *a nothing to see*... This is the odd, the uncanny thing, as far as the eye can see, this nothing around which lingers in horror, now and forever, an overcathexis of the eye, of appropriation by the gaze... Woman's castration is defined as her having nothing you can see, as her *having nothing*... *Nothing to be seen is equivalent to having no thing. No being and no truth.* (47-8)

The visceral affects of female pain in the cinema of exposure counter this erasure by laying bare the bio-political dimensions of gendered suffering and invisibility.

Irigaray's concept of shared vision, or visioning-with, provides a compelling example of how co-existential and non-objectifying vision makes female and feminine experience visible in a feminist manner. Irigaray defines shared vision as perception that is influenced and transformed by the subject's encounters with alterity. In her alternative to a hegemonic objectifying vision, Irigaray proposes a mode of perception that is both aware of blind spots within the field of vision and experienced in tandem with others (2004, 399). She argues that, through experiencing shared vision, we learn to see previously invisible bodies. Irigaray suggests, along similar lines as Al-Saji, that viewers can transform the visible field if they expose and challenge patriarchal and misogynistic erasures and subordinations of the female body. This visioning-with also resonates with a Nancean ontology of co-existence: bodies look and exist differently when they recognize that they do so with others. In this manner the visible field constitutes an open horizon of potentially transformative modes of seeing and experiencing "otherwise."

Feminist concepts such as writing-in-the-feminine and visioning-with have come under various critiques since their elaboration in the 1960s and 1970s. Specifically, critics argue that such concepts offer essentializing perspectives on female experience based on women's supposed closer proximity to the "natural" body, and extrapolate attributes based on these relations that fit more with socio-cultural assumptions about women rather than any innate biological traits. For instance, Perpich notes of Irigaray's theorization of sexual difference that "[t]here are statements that sound essentialist and that seem uncritically to promote a view of women's divinity and closeness to nature...[and] there is a tendency to speak about women in general seemingly ignoring significant differences between them" (2003, 395).

Given these concerns with certain feminist concepts, the question thus becomes how we can employ their useful elements to discuss spectatorial perception and female suffering in the cinema of exposure while avoiding any essentialization.

Regarding visioning-in-the-feminine and visioning-with in the cinema of exposure, avoiding essentialization is possible if we think of each process as a mode of envisioning female suffering that fosters a psychosomatic *awareness* of how gender and sexual difference influence spectators' bio-political and ethical positions. That is, visioning-in-the-feminine designates a critical-ethical vision that meditates reflexively on gender and sexual difference, engaging in the political task of making visible the specificity of female corporeal suffering. In this sense Al-Saji's articulation of critical-ethical psychosomatic hesitation recalls Cixous's belief that writing-in-the-feminine must reflect critically on the masculinist and patriarchal foundations that have structured, disciplined and effaced female bodies and femininity through practices of denigration and exclusion. Indeed, Cixous describes the processes of unlearning and rewriting normative modes of artistic production as attempts "to change our dulled senses" (Cixous qtd. in Conley 1991, 46) – terms that echo Al-Saji's focus on disrupting codified sensory-motor schemas through hesitation. Writing-in-the-feminine also allows us to understand the Deleuzian concept of becoming-woman as a feminist process by insisting on the non-erasure of sexual difference and gender in the transformations of bodies.

Feminist theories of embodiment and perception open up avenues through which spectators can challenge normative assumptions regarding the bio-political dimensions of gender and sexual difference when encountering female suffering in film. However, the understandings of the various roles played by affect in this matrix remain somewhat underdeveloped. For example, Al-Saji does not differentiate between different types of affect or state which types interrupt unconscious, habitual modes of vision. I argue specifically that affective experiences of disturbance and shock in the cinema of exposure open up the space for a critical-ethical mode of perceiving female suffering.

## **Conclusion**

A feminist ethics of spectatorship in relation to the cinema of exposure thus establishes physical and emotional proximity – a sympathetic and compassionate co-existence – to female suffering through embodied response to its affective sensuality and bio-political resonances. This theoretical framework of proximity and co-existence describes ethical spectatorship as experiencing filmic affect in a haptic manner, allowing it to impact the flesh of corporeal spectatorial subjects without immersion or fusion. Spectators are disturbed and shocked (to thought) by their proximity to images of female pain in the films I employ to illustrate this feminist bio-politics and ethics of spectatorship.

My thesis integrates studies on the bio-political dimensions of female embodiment; elements of phenomenological and haptic media theory; as well as the philosophies of Deleuze, Nancy and Cixous in exploring the political and ethical relationship of spectators to female suffering in the cinema of exposure. Different chapters highlight different theoretical concepts as

necessary. Chapters 1 and 4, for instance, provide a theoretical focus on the philosophies of Deleuze and Cixous, incorporating that of Nancy less frequently. Chapters 2 and 3 bring the work of Nancy to the fore.

Chapter 1 explores links between the historical and political contexts of female suffering in the cinema of exposure and a feminist ethics of spectatorship. In order to clearly illustrate how specific historico-political contexts structure the bio-political and ethical relationship of spectators to female suffering in film, I compare *Antichrist* (Lars von Trier, 2009), an example of the contemporary cinema of exposure, to female suffering in earlier Western film from the late 1960s. U.S. horror and thriller films in the period from the late 1960s to the late 1970s began to link patriarchal violence to ocular vision, critiquing both in minor feminist presentations of cinematic affect in relation to female suffering. *Wait Until Dark* (Terence Young, 1967) images this gendered divide of male violence and female suffering by narrating the experiences of a young blind woman who survives physical, emotional and psychological torment at the hands of men. I discuss *Antichrist* in relation to *Wait Until Dark*, as the former similarly connects patriarchal knowledge and violence to the subordination of women. Both films also encourage a physical and emotional sympathy or compassion with female sufferers through an awareness of the gendered dimensions of their pain. This sympathy is engendered by a minor feminist aesthetics of proximity in which spectators engage intimately with female suffering, taking part in transformative becomings-other and co-existences with film.

Chapter 2 focuses on the ethical relationship of spectators to contemporary French New Extremist and body horror films that feature violent assaults on pregnant female bodies. This chapter specifically discusses cinematic presentations of suffering pregnant women whose pain and dismemberment serve as metaphors for social divisions, inequalities and conflicts within the French body politic. I employ Nancy's ethical ontology of co-existence to link the rape and assault of women to neo-colonialism and the fracturing of the "imagined national community" (Anderson 1991, 6), as well as to discuss the relevance of each to a feminist spectatorship ethics. The viscerally affective impacts of pregnant female suffering in *Irréversible/Irreversible* (Gaspar Noé, 2002) and *À l'intérieur/Inside* (Alexandre Bustillo and Julien Maury, 2007) encourage a haptic feminist vision on the part of spectators, who co-exist *with* the suffering women in each film. Contemporary French New Extremist films such as these illustrate the painful intimacy of being-with film, as it is a cinematic tendency dedicated to disturbing hegemonic notions of bodily experience and subjectivity with transgressive aesthetic practices.

Chapter 3 addresses the ways in which suffering women in both French and U.S. film experience transformative self-other relations *within* their own bodies, and details the relevance that these internal dynamics have for a feminist ethics of spectatorship.

Specifically, I explore how cinematic depictions of female self-mutilation engender a spectatorial bio-politics and ethics of intimate proximity to female suffering. I draw on phenomenological and haptic film theory to determine how spectators form compassionate and disturbing connections with films in which the boundaries of female skin are broken in

affectively wounding and tactile manners. Employing *Dans ma peau/In My Skin* (Marina de Van, 2002) and *Black Swan* (Darren Aronofsky, 2010) as case studies, I argue that the disturbingly tactile aesthetic features through which these films present scenes of female mutilation open up spaces of ethical proximity to female suffering, generating Deleuzian shocks to thought that interrogate the status of female embodiment in contemporary Western society. The viscerally unsettling aesthetics of *Dans ma peau* and *Black Swan* also foster relationships of sympathetic compassion toward the suffering female protagonists, especially for spectators with a heightened awareness of the bio-political realities of such suffering.

Finally, in Chapter 4 I argue that *Ne te retourne pas/Don't Look Back* (Marina de Van, 2009) and *Baise-moi/Fuck Me* (Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi, 2000) serve as cinematic iterations of a feminist visioning-in-the-feminine. Both films are works by female filmmakers that envision female experiences of suffering in shocking and disturbing registers, often evoking haptic vision on the part of spectators. This corporeal spectatorial response is necessarily comprised of bio-political and ethical dimensions, as it engages with the conscious re-visioning of female suffering, sexuality and subjectivity under patriarchal regimes of disciplining and exploitation. I draw on Cixous's concept of writing-in-the-feminine to propose a minor feminist mode of visioning-in-the-feminine that resonates with spectators in a sensual register, while also exposing the gendered and sexed bio-political dimensions of female suffering.

## Chapter 1

### **Blindness, Hysteria and Becoming-woman: A Feminist Ethics of Embodied Spectatorship**

Dark is dangerous. You can't see anything in the dark, you are afraid. Don't move, you might fall...And we have internalized this fear of the dark. Women haven't had eyes for themselves. They haven't gone exploring in their house. Their sex still frightens them. Their bodies, which they haven't dared enjoy, have been colonized.

Hélène Cixous 1986, 68

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I explore the ways in which the historical and political contexts of female suffering in the cinema of exposure relate to a feminist ethics of spectatorship. The recent European New Extremist film *Antichrist* (Lars von Trier, 2009) clearly posits patriarchal violence as a primary source of female suffering, the psychoanalytic pathologizing of female hysteria and the disembodiment of vision. As such, *Antichrist* meditates on the gendered dimensions of vision and violence. The film self-consciously exposes misogynistic regimes of perception in a minor feminist manner by coding patriarchal ocular vision as a sadistic means of disciplining and controlling female bodies.

U.S. horror and thriller films in the period from the late 1960s to the late 1970s began to critique patriarchal violence and ocular vision in a similar manner by providing alternative presentations of female suffering and spectatorial perception. Female blindness in particular served as a common trope through which these films linked male violence with female subordination. Current horror and thriller films centering on the experiences of blind women tend to de-politicize blindness as a metaphor for female difference and feminist

“awakening.”<sup>10</sup> In contrast, earlier films such as *Peeping Tom* (Michael Powell, 1960), *Wait Until Dark* (Terence Young, 1967), *Blind Terror/See No Evil* (Richard Fleischer, 1973) and *Eyes of Laura Mars* (Irvin Kirschner, 1978) expose the voyeuristic potential of masculinized ocular vision in explicit manners, coding this vision as a sadistic means of subjugating women. I will discuss *Wait Until Dark* in relation to *Antichrist*, as it in particular images this gendered division of male optical violence and female suffering by narrating the experiences of a young blind woman who survives physical, emotional and psychological torment at the hands of men. I draw on the history and theory of second-wave feminism to explore how *Wait Until Dark* employs female blindness as a metaphor for the bio-political subordination of women. I also identify connections between this minor feminist film and the suffering of women in the current cinema of female exposure.

*Wait Until Dark* employs the trope of female blindness to suggest that ocular vision operates as a patriarchal means of power through which women are subordinated to men. Furthermore, the film envisions this power dynamic as operative within the “private” confines of the heterosexual couple. This critique of patriarchal violence contains strong links to modern and contemporary second-wave feminist movements in the U.S. and Western Europe. *Antichrist*, meanwhile, horrifically embodies the gendered dimensions of domestic abuse and female suffering by envisioning the deadly conflicts between a male psychiatrist

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<sup>10</sup> Examples include *The Eye* (David Moreau and Xavier Palud, 2008); *Gin gwai/The Eye* (Oxide Pang Chun and Danny Pang, 2002); *The Haunting of Marsten Manor* (Dave Sapp, 2007); *Los ojos de Julia/Julia's Eyes* (Guillem Morales, 2010); *Red Dragon* (Brett Ratner, 2002); and *The Village* (M. Night Shyamalan, 2004).

and his depressed and grieving wife. Much like the war of the sexes depicted in *Wait Until Dark*, the shockingly gruesome conflicts between husband and wife impart a bio-political history of female suffering and psychosis (involving cliterodectomy, hysteria and accusations of witchcraft) with overtly gendered dimensions.

The aesthetic designs and narrative contents of *Antichrist* and *Wait Until Dark* envision female suffering and trauma in ways that negotiate the experiences of women under patriarchal and misogynistic bio-political regimes. The deployment of affect in politically strategic ways in each film gestures towards minor sensory regimes: alternative modes of perception (and ways of understanding spectatorship) that are corporeally situated and aware of the ways in which women have been historically objectified and subjected to suffering in the media. Within this framework, cinematic affect takes on a feminist ethical function in directly challenging objectifying and indifferent modes of viewing female bodies in pain. As such, *Antichrist* and *Wait Until Dark* are examples of a minor feminist cinema of exposure that interrogates the political dimensions of female pain in a critical and sympathetic manner. Both films stage wars of the sexes that encourage a physical and emotional compassion with female sufferers through an awareness of the gendered dimensions of their suffering.

This co-existential compassion is engendered by an aesthetics of proximity in which spectators engage intimately with the affective shocks of each film, taking part in a transformative becoming-other and co-existence with the screen. The affective shocks to thought provided by haptic imagery in *Wait Until Dark* and *Antichrist* establish a physical and emotional co-existence of spectators and screen that is entangled with cognitive

understanding and assessment, embodying Beugnet's claim that "in all fine horror, shock is the gateway between the plane of sensation and that of discourse" (2007, 45). Both films institute shocks to thought in which the gender dynamics onscreen impart a feminist ethics of spectatorship to viewers: viewers become aware of the gendered and sexually differentiated foundations of female pain through the disruptive and shocking use of affect. Spectators are transformed – they become-other – through this co-existence with visceral and disturbing instances of female pain.

I illustrate these becomings-other with in-depth readings of *Wait Until Dark* and *Antichrist* that integrate a history of modern Western feminism with Deleuze and Guattari's concept of becoming-woman, Nancy's ethos of co-existence and Cixous's revisionist definition of female hysteria as a proto-language of feminist rebellion. However, before exploring each film in-depth, I will first discuss the relationship of phenomenology to feminist praxis and the impact of both upon horror film scholarship.

### **Phenomenology and Feminism**

In this thesis, I use "feminism" in the plural sense of the term. It is impossible to refer to feminism as a unified practice or set of beliefs, particularly within a theoretical discourse transformed by post-modernist challenges to objective truth and collective political action. Western feminism has undergone numerous transformations throughout its history; indeed, the majority of recent works on feminist theory note that the conception of a unified

movement was always a myth concealing the fragmented natures of different feminisms and their diverse, and at times oppositional, relationships with one another (Genz and Brabon 2009, 4, 159; Hollows 2000, 34). In this chapter I am interested in Western feminisms from the 1960s to the present day, the context and time period in which *Wait Until Dark* and *Antichrist* were produced. Exploring feminism in these historical periods allows insight into the ways in which the aesthetics and narratives of each film enact spectatorial becomings-other that are influenced by feminist politics and ethics.

The first and second-wave feminist movements in the 1910s, 1920s and 1970s inherited several biases from Enlightenment thought (such as somatophobia, or fear of the body, and the disembodiment of optical vision) that resulted in hostility towards any “politics of the body” (Jones 2003, 369). Both the fear of the body and privileging of the eye were biopolitical prejudices originating in the equation of the mind with ocular vision in Enlightenment thought, “the very name [of which] demonstrates the continuing connection between light and reason, the separation of sight from its bodily integument” (Fausch 2003, 427). Second-wave feminists of the 1960s and 1970s focused on generating positive symbolic representations of women in the public sphere, rather than questioning the erasure of the lived body in critical theory – even though gender stereotypes and inequality were supposedly grounded in bodily sexual difference. This suppression of the body is understandable, as second-wave feminists were concerned with challenging the reduction of female subjectivity to biology, as well as disproving the disparaging equation of femininity with “excessive” bodily symptoms such as sexual desire and emotion. For this generation of

feminists, a focus on the body, the site upon which the patriarchal gender binary was based, would seem to run the risk of regressive essentialism.

The dismissive attitude towards a politics of the body waned in the 1980s, when embodiment and affective experience began to play larger roles in feminist praxis. This reversal of political strategy was largely due to “the idea that the denigration of emotion was part and parcel of the cultural devaluation of women” (Friedman 2000, 209). The shift in critical opinion allowed feminist politics to be grounded in the corporeal bodies of women, as well as challenge ideological binaries that dichotomized the mind and body (as well as other gender and sex binaries such as male-female and gay-straight).

Following from this feminist history and praxis, my theory of a minor feminist mode of spectatorship as becoming-other and co-existence considers the status of the body as a bio-political construct, as well as a material reality. As Deborah Fausch writes, “[t]o take this course is to claim, not that the feminine is bodily, but that the bodily is feminist – not that a concern with the body is a guarantee of nonoppressive attitudes, but that a nonoppressive attitude would include a regard for the bodily” (2003, 426). Spectators can overcome the erasure of the body and abstraction of vision in a feminist manner through a minoritarian process of becoming-woman during spectatorship. Namely, the intimate physical, emotional and psychological proximity to female suffering transforms spectators as embodied political and ethical subjects. This becoming-woman is produced by the corporeal engagement of

human creativity with the affective nature of film images; it cannot be primarily located in either, but is borne of their interaction and transforms both with each act of perception. This becoming-woman through film spectatorship constitutes a bio-political act of making oneself a minority in order to deterritorialize hegemonic patriarchal structures and languages (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 116-18). The molecular approximations of female pain established through cinematic shock in horror and thriller films such as *Antichrist* and *Wait Until Dark* disorganize the bodies of spectators and expand their ability to engage with sensuous stimulation. In this manner sensory hierarchies are deterritorialized into a synaesthetic hapticity when human perception encounters cinematic affect.

As I will now discuss, the vast majority of scholarship on horror film privileges the reading of narrative content over affective engagement, and thus does not directly address the potentially transformative bio-political hapticity of the genre.

### **Horror Film Scholarship**

Much theoretical criticism has been written on the topic of cinematic horror, with various monographs and anthologies offering highly illuminating approaches to the genre from historical, socio-cultural, psychoanalytic, feminist, queer, philosophical and aesthetic perspectives.<sup>11</sup> These works provide extremely valuable critical engagements with horror; however, the vast majority does not examine horror from a phenomenological or haptic perspective. Phenomenological and haptic film theories are thus able to offer productive new

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<sup>11</sup> See Berenstein 1996; Britton et al. 1979; Carroll 1990; Cherry 2009; Freeland 1999; Grant 1984; Hanich 2010; Hutchings 2004; Jancovich 2002; Lowenstein 2005; Magistrale 2005; Pinedo 1997; Prince 2004; Sharrett 1999; Silver and Ursini 2000; Tudor 1989; and Williams 1991.

insights into the powerful role played by physical and emotional affect in spectators' political and ethical encounters with horror film. In order to illustrate how my phenomenological and bio-political exploration of horror films such as *Wait Until Dark* and *Antichrist* departs from more firmly established critical models, I will briefly outline the two major theoretical approaches to horror: anthropology and psychoanalysis, both of which privilege cognition and identification over affective engagement and corporeal thought.

Noël Carroll's *The Philosophy of Horror, or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (1990), which explores the emotive states inspired by viewing horror film, has been particularly influential in the field of horror film scholarship. Carroll approaches horror from an anthropological perspective, and is concerned with how humans respond cognitively to the fear-inducing diegeses and figures of the genre. Although what Carroll terms his "cognitive/evaluative" theory of horror cinema is predicated on the emotional and sensational responses of viewers, he characterizes these responses as conditioned solely by cognition. Carroll argues that cognitive reflection precedes emotional affect, the latter of which "has been caused by the subject's cognitive construal and evaluation of his/her situation" (1990, 27). Spectators perceive the object of horror primarily via cognitive means, which then determine the appropriate emotional response. Carroll maintains that the pleasures sought in horror film spectatorship arise from the desire of spectators to know the unknowable, which is represented by the horrific object or monster as revealed through the narrative.

In contrast to Carroll's belief that fear requires a conscious terror of or disgust for specific monsters or killers within the diegesis, phenomenological readings of horror films recognize moments of visceral shock that exceed a purely narrative explanation or motivation. Carroll argues that such instances of pre-cognitive affect are of secondary importance when compared with viewers' intellectual investment in narrative fictions. However, I argue that viewers' affective responses to the screen cannot be reduced wholly to cognition or motivated completely by fear of particular narrative entities. Rather, events of shock are just as fundamental to experiences of horror as a desire to uncover the "truth" behind the diegetic monster. I also refute Carroll's claim that emotional affect necessarily depends upon the organization of perceptual information by a stable internalized knowledge system. If feelings of pleasure, fear, shock and disgust are understood instead to exist on a synaesthetic continuum, they do not have to be rigidly separated by reflective categorization. Instead, they may occur simultaneously as a response to moments that disturb the hierarchy of the senses.

In an alternative manner, film scholars writing on horror within a psychoanalytic framework of sexually differentiated and gendered identification are mainly concerned with the effect of the sadistic male "Gaze" on the "passive" and "feminized" diegetic female character. Carol Clover's *Men, Women and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (1992) offers the most extensive psychoanalytic treatment of gendered spectatorship of cinematic horror. Clover proposes a bisexual model of spectatorial identification based on the "Final Girl" of modern horror: a heroine who is intelligent, chaste, androgynous and violent when defeating the killer. According to Clover, these traits constitute a sufficiently "active" figure with

whom male audiences can empathetically identify (1992, 34-6, 40). Clover characterizes the masculinized Final Girl as an “identificatory buffer” (1992, 51) for male spectators, through which the latter can masochistically explore traditionally “feminine” experiences of victimization and terror.

Clover posits cross-gender identification as a crucial element of (male) horror spectatorship, and thus provides a valuable expansion of psychoanalytic film theory beyond the notion that male spectators must identify with diegetic figures of a corresponding gender or sex.

However, Clover’s work is similar to Mulvey’s later writing (1999) in its pessimistic outlook regarding the feminist potential of cross-gender identification. Clover contends that the masculinized Final Girl manages to subvert the belief that women are fundamentally passive when confronted with male violence. However, this Final Girl ultimately cannot overcome the phallogentrism of the modern horror film, whose discourse is “wholly masculine, and females figure in it only insofar as they ‘read’ some aspect of male experience” (1992, 53). Male spectators must choose between identifying sadistically with the monster or killer or masochistically with the victimized Final Girl, while the identification options of female or female-identifying spectators (much less an acknowledgement of their existence) receive little to no attention.

Although anthropological, cognitive and psychoanalytic theories dominate the field of horror film scholarship, certain theoretical frameworks diverge from these. Anna Powell provides

one such departure with her Deleuzian exploration of horrific cinematic affect in *Deleuze and Horror Film* (2005). Powell discusses the ways in which the aesthetic properties of horror films destabilize spectator control and bodily coherence in order to create a BwO via contamination, rather than identification via representation. She proposes Deleuze and Guattari's process of schizoanalysis as a non-pathologizing alternative to identification that allows for masochistic spectatorial and filmic becomings-other. Powell's illuminating juxtapositions of psychoanalytic apparatus and Deleuzian readings of films such as *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) exemplify how employing different theoretical paradigms results in radically different conceptualizations of spectatorship. Psychoanalytic apparatus theory demands a focus on the spectator's cognitive assessment of narrative elements, while a haptic, Deleuzian approach explores the molecular becomings-other made possible by shocking cinematic imagery. My project builds on Powell's exploration of horror by widening the theoretical scope beyond Deleuzian theory to include more recent developments in haptic and phenomenological film theory, as well as considering the bio-political and ethical implications of female suffering from a feminist perspective.

The bio-political and phenomenological dimensions of female suffering illustrate the close relationship between haptic vision, shocking cinematic affect and feminist politics and ethics. The potential for subversion of patriarchal and ocularcentric ideologies and practices is especially germane to horror films such as *Wait Until Dark* and *Antichrist*, as both encourage a haptic visuality in spectators that involves transformative feminist processes of becoming-woman. Throughout my discussions of both films I explore the bio-politics of spectatorial perception in relation to female suffering: how this perception is influenced, shaped and at

times inhibited by socio-historical context, and how minor feminist modes of filmmaking and perception transgress patriarchal and misogynistic bio-political norms.

### **Blindness, Hapticity and the War of the Sexes in *Wait Until Dark***<sup>12</sup>

In order to clearly illustrate how contemporary films such as *Antichrist* employ shocking affect to convey female trauma and subordination within patriarchal culture, I will first discuss how previous films such as *Wait Until Dark* began to link male violence with female suffering in a manner designed to shock and disturb audiences. *Antichrist* further develops this mode of filmmaking by exposing the relationship of female suffering to male violence and privilege in a more overt manner. Through aesthetic and narrative devices, *Wait Until Dark* links male ocular vision with the violent disciplining of the female body, and suggests haptic visuality as a feminist alternative to misogynistic practices of ocular perception. This alternative vision constitutes the film as a minor cinema that articulates a feminist mode of perceiving cinematic affect and understanding gender relations onscreen. The ethical relationship of spectators to the haptic imagery of *Wait Until Dark* relates directly to the political praxis of second-wave feminism, establishing a clear link between a feminist spectatorship ethics and the historical and political context in which the film was produced.

*Wait Until Dark* is part of a group of films made in the U.S. in the 1960s and 1970s that focus on a blind woman's encounter with violent forms of patriarchal vision. The popularity

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<sup>12</sup> I previously wrote an essay on haptic visuality in *Wait Until Dark* for an undergraduate Contemporary Film Theory module at King's College London. This essay has not been published.

of films such as these indicate that the complex bio-political matrix of gender, sexual difference and perception was becoming a topic of increasing interest to filmmakers and media scholars alike.<sup>13</sup> For example, *Peeping Tom* explicitly links male vision and sexual desire with the objectifying impact of the cinematic apparatus. Like *Wait Until Dark*, *Blind Terror* presents a story of female self-reliance and liberation through the figure of a young blind woman (Mia Farrow) forced to defend herself against the attacks of a murderous male voyeur. *Eyes of Laura Mars* marks an interesting development in its narrative of a female photographer (Faye Dunaway) whose vision is compromised by the disturbed psyche of a male serial killer obsessed with her violent advertising images of women in pain. The fact that the killer turns out to be a police detective who also happens to be Dunaway's lover echoes *Wait Until Dark* in its suggestion of "invisible" violence and terror lurking in intimate relationships. All of these films suggest a link between patriarchal norms and objectifying forms of vision that harm women. This linkage gestures towards the bio-political registers of personal relationships between women and men in a way that reflects the ideology of second-wave feminism and one of the core tenets of minor political cinema as defined by Deleuze (namely, the collapse of any distinctions between the public and private realms).

Blindness features prominently in *Wait Until Dark*'s critique of patriarchal ocularcentrism. Susy Hendrix (Audrey Hepburn) has been recently blinded in a car accident, and as the film begins is still adjusting to life without sight. She lives in an apartment in New York City with her photographer husband Sam (Efrem Zimbalist Jr.), who insists that she be completely self-sufficient – save the occasional help around the house from Gloria (Julie Herrod), a

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<sup>13</sup> See Citron et al. 1978; Johnston 1973; and Mulvey 1986.

young girl who lives in the apartment above them. One night while Sam is busy at a photo shoot, Susy's survival skills are put to the test when she must outwit three criminals who terrorize her in search of a doll filled with heroin that was given to Sam by a dead associate of the men. Mike (Richard Crenna), the kindest of the trio, pretends to have been in the Marines with Sam in order to gain Susy's confidence, while Carlino (Jack Weston) impersonates a policeman and tries to bully Susy into disclosing the whereabouts of the doll. When these attempts fail, the menacing and deranged Roat (Alan Arkin) adopts various disguises in an attempt to force Susy to confess. Susy finally discovers that the men are playing an elaborate and deadly game, and must battle Roat, who is determined to kill her, in the darkened apartment at the climax of the film. After prolonged assaults involving gasoline and knives, Susy stabs Roat to death before the police and Sam arrive.

The blind heroine of *Wait Until Dark* defeats her male tormentors by employing haptic vision and tactile knowledge, while the latter rely exclusively on optical sight. Spectators follow the blind female protagonist in her becoming-haptic by immersing themselves in the optical darkness of the climactic finale, during which their visions align with hers and that of the film in a relationship of compassionate physical, emotional and psychological proximity. Aesthetic encouragement of a proximate haptic visibility creates space for a feminist mode of spectatorship that contests male violence and domination, both of which are characterized in the film as operating via a distanced optical vision.

*Wait Until Dark* contains startling haptic imagery (such as the finale, discussed in detail later in the chapter) that shocks the bodies of spectators, illustrating the ways in which phenomenal perception has the capacity to propel the transformative becoming-woman of spectators. The haptic and synaesthetic shock to thought in the climactic moments of *Wait Until Dark* reinforces its narrative critique of patriarchal and misogynistic norms of subjectivity established through a regime of optical vision. I depart from existing interpretations of the film regarding this feminist shock to thought. For example, Susan Crutchfield argues that *Wait Until Dark* terrifies both spectators and the blind female protagonist by depicting the latter's touch as the abject (non)vision of the "Other." Crutchfield concludes that the film fails in its "attempts to appropriate a tactile language or sensation for visual modes" (1999, 282). In a similar manner, Johnson Cheu argues that *Wait Until Dark* appropriates the gaze of the blind female protagonist in order to protect the hegemony of optical sight and reinforce the position of the female as a powerless minority (2009, 481, 484). In contrast, I argue that the blindness of the female protagonist in *Wait Until Dark* constitutes her strength (as opposed to her "disability" or weakness) in relation to figures of patriarchal ocularcentrism such as Sam and Roat. Susy's blindness ultimately proves to be the source of her survival, rather than her helplessness and submissiveness.

My reading of *Wait Until Dark* illustrates the means by which the film merges a plot critical of patriarchal optical hegemony with a style that approximates the becoming-haptic of the female protagonist. I begin by discussing the narrative elements of the film that constitute its critique of optical hegemony. I then explore how the convergence of haptic imagery and corporeal spectatorial perception during the climax of the film engenders a becoming-haptic

and becoming-woman. Finally, I relate the haptic style and critique of patriarchal ocularcentrism within the film to the political tenets of second-wave feminism, in order to articulate how the film constructs a feminist ethics of spectatorship that prefigures that of *Antichrist* and the contemporary cinema of exposure.

### *Patriarchal Optical Hegemony*

*Wait Until Dark* posits optical vision as a violent framework through which male seers dominate their environment and suppress the feminist potential of haptic vision. The narrative establishes the patriarchal underpinnings of this hyper-optical visibility by drawing parallels between Sam and Roat, the most violent of the intruders, in order to convey a shared reliance on optical vision as a tool of male supremacy.

Sam's profession as a photographer dictates his cruel and indifferent treatment of Susy at the beginning of the film. He clearly considers her to be inferior due to her lack of sight, and is obsessed with her achieving autonomy and self-sufficiency. Sam's condescending attitude towards Susy manifests itself in his infantilizing treatment of her; he interacts with her as if she were an immature child who must be taught not to rely on the aid or basic kindness of others. For example, he refuses to help her when she drops a saltshaker from the kitchen table and must crawl on the floor searching for it, only offering the glib encouragement of "You can find it by yourself." He insists that she use boiling water to defrost the icebox – surely a dangerous task for a newly blind woman to attempt by herself. Even after she has been through the harrowing ordeal of surviving Roat's attacks, Sam refuses to make Susy's

life any easier by insisting that she stagger over to *him* in an apartment full of policemen and debris: “I’m over here, Susy, I’m over here.”

Susy, ever the obedient pupil, diligently respects Sam’s orders and seems constantly afraid of his reproaches, making comments such as “Don’t tell Sam you helped me. I’m supposed to be learning total self-sufficiency” and “We’ve got to do it Sam’s way!” Sam appears obsessed with transforming Susy into, as she puts it, “the world’s champion blind lady.” Sam privileges a hyper-optical visuality that he considers superior to any forms of perception arising from the imperfect flesh of Susy’s body. Sam performs the role of the knowledgeable male “doctor” who will “fix” Susy, prefiguring the gendered split in patient-doctor roles in *Antichrist*.

The psychopathic Roat functions as the masculine upholder of optical hegemony after Sam leaves the apartment. Roat is especially averse to the power of touch to bring him into physical contact with other people, whom he obsessively keeps at a distance. He wears gloves at all times in order to avoid identification through fingerprints. He orders Mike and Carlino never to get near him and constantly wipes surfaces that they have touched, claiming that “You just signed your names all over this place” with careless tactility. Roat also fanatically safeguards his optical vision by wearing sunglasses at all times, even inside Susy’s apartment at night.

Roat attempts to defeat Susy by employing optical sight to his advantage, a weapon that she eventually uses against him. He becomes hysterical when Susy breaks the lights in Sam’s

dark room at the end of the film, sensing the endangerment of his optical superiority. His subjectivity is premised on a hyper-optical vision that attempts, as Marks writes of a purely optical vision, to “bend its object to its will” (2002, 19) rather than allow itself to transform and be transformed, to become-other, in its interactions with its environment.

In addition to their mutual privileging of optical vision, several plot points establish direct parallels between Sam with Roat that connect the two men more overtly. Sam forgets his burning cigarette in an ashtray as he departs for his photo shoot, a thoughtless and rather selfish oversight for the husband of a blind woman to commit. Susy panics when she smells something burning, and frantically calls the police before Mike arrives and extinguishes the flames. Roat later terrorizes Susy in a similar manner by shoving burning newspaper into her face, achieving through malice what Sam did through negligence.

Roat (as well as Mike) also infantilizes Susy in a condescending manner reminiscent of Sam’s treatment of her. When Susy insists to Sam that she heard on the radio that a woman was murdered in the area near their apartment, Sam accuses her of fibbing like an attention-starved child: “You’re making it up, Susy.” When Susy tells Mike that she does not know the combination to the safe in their apartment, he also accuses her of lying: “Susy, you’re making that up.” When she later refuses to give Mike the doll, he loses his temper and shouts that “Damn it, you act as if you were in kindergarten!” During Susy’s final encounter with Roat, in which she reluctantly fetches the doll for him, he praises her by saying “Oh,

that's a good girl. Go to the head of the class." Just before Sam leaves for work Susy amiably berates him for harshly criticizing her lack of self-sufficiency, asking "Sam? Are you looking at me?" before sticking her tongue out at him. She later uses the same question to defend herself against Roat: she enquires "Mr. Roat? Are you looking at me?" before temporarily blinding him by throwing chemicals used to develop photographs in his eyes. Roat is obviously the more sinister figure of hyper-optical visibility, but the parallels between him and Sam effectively illustrate that the difference between their optical privilege is only a matter of degree.

### *The Haptic Climax as Feminist Bio-politics*

The critique of optical vision in the plot sets the stage for the haptic imagery in the finale of the film, during which the negative representation of patriarchal optical hegemony merges with the aesthetic critique conveyed by the affectively shocking impact of the images. The climactic sequence establishes a tactile proximity between the perceptions of spectators, the film and Susy that embraces the imperfections of embodied vision. Spectators are infected with Susy's tactile vision, and are encouraged to become-haptic and become-woman by encountering images with the incarnate body instead of the abstract mind and eye.

The climactic becoming-haptic and becoming-woman of spectators occurs when Susy and Roat engage in a prolonged and increasingly violent confrontation. Roat has murdered both Mike and Carlino at this point, and expects to dispense with Susy in short order after forcing her to reveal the whereabouts of the doll. The scene takes place at night, which, along with the fact that Susy has removed all of the light bulbs from their fixtures after learning that the

men are actually trying to steal the doll, explains the almost total absence of light. The action begins just after Mike has told Susy that he and Carlino killed the unstable and homicidal Roat. However, Roat manages to run over Carlino in his car before they are able to kill him, and stabs Mike just as the latter is leaving Susy's apartment. Susy screams out Mike's name as his body falls down the staircase with a series of sharp thuds and Roat padlocks the door with a chain. Roat then pours gasoline all over the floor and furniture, before holding burning newspaper to Susy's face until she agrees to give him the doll. Susy trips over Mike's body on her way to the kitchen, and Roat shoves her into a chair so that she can collect her nerves and he can pontificate on his ability to outsmart his victims and accomplices.

Tactility comes into play in an explicit manner as Roat tortures Susy by stroking her face with a piece of sheer fabric, insisting mischievously that it is his hand. He then orders her to stand up and go to the bedroom, just before she throws chemical developer into his eyes. Susy manages to smash the remaining light in Sam's darkroom as Roat clutches his face in pain. Her vision aligns with those of spectators and the camera for the first time at this point, when the darkroom light hits the floor and the screen goes black. Spectators hear Susy and Roat's labored breathing as Susy informs him that she has his knife. The advantage offered to Susy by the optical darkness proves short-lived, however, as Roat triumphantly proclaims that he has matches and proceeds to light one and advance towards her. Susy once again gains the upper hand by picking up Roat's gasoline jug and throwing gasoline directly on

him, which forces him to quit lighting matches. Gasoline even gets on the camera lens for a brief moment, revealing the vulnerability of the optical vision of the camera as it succumbs like Roat and spectators to the infective nature of Susy's becoming-haptic. Susy orders Roat to throw her the matches and tap on the ground with her cane so she knows where he is sitting. Susy has turned Roat's reliance on optical mastery against him, as light now operates as a danger rather than a form of protection against Susy's non-optical sensorium. (In this regard the battle between Susy and Roat bears a striking resemblance to that between the wheelchair-bound L.B. Jeffries [James Stewart] and Lars Thorwald [Raymond Burr] in *Rear Window* [Alfred Hitchcock, 1954], in that both Susy and Jeffries compromise the optical vision of their attackers as a means of survival.)

Susy lights matches one by one in order to prevent Roat from coming near her. The interim periods when the matches are not lit plunge the screen into darkness. Bodily tension and suspense build as spectators' aural perception informs them that Susy and Roat are struggling in the darkness: Susy to get to the door leading out of the apartment, and Roat to find a source of light. Roat finally discovers the refrigerator in the corner of the kitchen and opens the door to infuse the apartment with a faint fluorescent glow. He then forces Susy to relinquish the knife and matches, and she agrees to give him the doll if he promises not to harm her. After retrieving the doll from a wastebasket under the kitchen sink, Susy surreptitiously grabs a knife from the counter while Roat extracts the heroin from the inside of the doll. Roat then begins to drag Susy toward the bedroom, ignoring his earlier vow to leave without hurting her with an implied threat of rape. The images become progressively darker as the two retreat from the refrigerator light.

Suddenly, a shriek of violins on the soundtrack alerts spectators to the fact that Susy has stabbed Roat in the stomach. The aural shock of these images encourages a haptic and synaesthetic visuality that denies complete optical clarity, as sonorous elements heighten the sense of bodily terror and confusion. This sequence firmly establishes the minor synaesthetic perception of spectators: they must hear the action instead of visually seeing it. Susy leaves Roat lying in the shadowy hallway and rushes towards the door, screaming for help but unable to unlock the chain. She then decides to escape through the kitchen window, and stumbles down the stairs towards the window over the sink. However, Susy never reaches the window. Roat unexpectedly leaps out of the darkness to the left of the frame, lunging towards Susy with the knife he has pulled out of his chest. This disturbing moment of shock and terror re-establishes optical sight, and is accompanied by another shriek of violins. The confusion of optical sight and sound, as well as the bodily co-existence of spectators with the film and diegetic characters, enables a fully haptic experience of the images. These images constitute a moment of tactile proximity to the film that is both physical and cognitive in its force and appeal.

Indeed, this sequence is premised on the concept of contact in a variety of ways: the contact of Susy and Roat, as their physical altercation reaches deadly proportions; the mutual approach of spectators and images via embodied, haptic perception; and the intimate proximity between spectators and Susy as each becomes-haptic in adopting an imperfect mode of perception. The finale presents spectators with what Jean Epstein describes as the

ultimate close-up, in which the bodily shock and terror of spectators places them in a position of tactile proximity to the screen:

The close-up modifies the drama by the impact of proximity. Pain is within reach. If I stretch out my arm I touch you, and this is intimacy. I can count the eyelashes of this suffering. I would be able to taste the tears. Never before has a face turned to mine in that way. Ever closer it presses against me, and I follow it face to face. It's not even true that there is air between us; I consume it. It is in me like a sacrament. Maximum visual acuity. (1993, 239)

Visibility is not reduced in this instance, but rather heightened by a chaotic and disturbed perception that blends optics with touch.

Advertisements for *Wait Until Dark* upon its initial release indicate that the filmmakers strove to create viewing conditions that placed spectators in an intimate physical, emotional and psychological proximity to the vision of its blind female protagonist. For example, the original trailer for the film warns spectators that:

During the last eight minutes of this picture the theatre will be darkened to the legal limit, to heighten the terror of the breathtaking climax which takes place in nearly total darkness on the screen. If there are sections where smoking is permitted, those patrons are respectfully requested not to jar the effect by lighting up during this sequence. And of course, no one will be seated at this time. ("Wait Until Dark [1967] Trailer")

To approximate the actions occurring in the film as closely as possible, theatre lights were switched off one by one as Susy smashed lights onscreen ("Wait Until Dark Trivia" 2011). According to reports of test screenings before the official release of the film, the audience was "gasping and shrieking with fright" (Harris qtd. in Johnson n.d.) as the theatre lights were extinguished in this manner during the darkened climax of the film. (This creation of an immersive viewing environment places *Wait Until Dark* within the tradition of William Castle "gimmick" films such as *The Tingler* [1959], in which the filmmaker provoked a

synaesthetic mode of perception in audiences by installing a “Percepto” [vibrating buzzer] beneath each theatre seat. The insistence on maintaining an uninterrupted focus on *Wait Until Dark* also recalls Hitchcock’s attempts to promote interest in the terrifying elements of *Psycho* [1960] by not allowing any patrons to enter the theatre after the film had started.) The disturbing haptic imagery in the finale of *Wait Until Dark* conveys its shocking phenomenological and bio-political force by startling spectators. Robert Baird argues that the startle effect, or what he terms “affective punctuation” (2000, 13), constitutes a key sensual element of film. This is true especially in horror and thriller films such as *Wait Until Dark*, which induce a state of apprehensive fear in spectators through the use of startle effects that signal radical shifts in pacing and tone (Baird 2000, 20). The instance of startle when Roat leaps out from the dark edge of the frame shocks spectators to thought by clearly envisioning the gendered positioning of the male as the aggressive intruder and the female as the target of his sudden violence. As I will argue later in the chapter, this shock to thought regarding gender clearly envisions the supposedly “safe” domestic space as a dangerous threat to the emotional and psychosomatic well being of women.

Furthermore, this startle effect strengthens spectatorial compassion for Susy by approximating her experience of terror and shock. The sensual and haptic immediacy of the climax fosters a sense of compassionate solidarity with Susy on the part of spectators that I understand as a process of becoming-woman. In approximating her imperfect vision, spectators rely on bodily feeling (rather than optical knowledge) in experiencing the scene.

This haptic viscosity deterritorializes optical vision by allowing bodies to become-woman through proximity to Susy, “extract[ing] particles between which one establishes the relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness that are closest to what one is becoming, and through which one becomes” (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 300).

This approximation of speeds, movements and particles that Deleuze and Guattari term becoming has special resonances for the relationship of spectators to (to borrow Clover’s term) a Final Girl such as Susy who deterritorializes binary categories (vision-touch, mind-body) with her disruption of codified norms of perception. Susy and spectators become-woman by practicing minoritarian forms of perception, and thus engage in what Braidotti identifies as a particularly *feminist* becoming-woman undergone by nomadic subjects. This nomadic subject is a feminist “political fiction” that “make[s] ‘woman’ the referent of the intensity of becoming of all, but especially of women” (Braidotti 1994, 4, 115).

I thus depart from Deleuze and Guattari’s definition of becoming-woman as a process aimed at deterritorializing gender and sexual difference to create a machinic BwO freed from such binaries. Instead, I argue that any notion of becoming-woman must allow for the gendered and sexed specificity of the female and feminist political subject. As a feminist nomadic subject, Susy undertakes forms of haptic deterritorialization and becoming-woman grounded in the materiality of her sexually differentiated body. Her haptic viscosity provides the means by which cinematic affect deterritorializes spectators in their own processes of becoming-woman. This sympathetic proximity between the bodies and visions of Susy and

spectators, their mutual becoming-woman, thus operates as a feminist praxis through affective contagion and approximation.

The narrative and aesthetic critiques of patriarchal ocularcentrism in *Wait Until Dark* align with certain contemporaneous practices of second-wave feminists, including protesting male violence against women and fostering an awareness of the political nature of *all* relationships (including those occurring inside the home). The political and ethical positions of spectators are bound up with the proto-feminist stance taken by Susy and the film as they seek to embody haptic vision and subvert patriarchal norms of perception.

Second-wave feminism, broadly defined, was a collection of feminist movements in the West (mainly the U.S. and U.K.) during the 1960s and 1970s that sought collective political action on a number of issues affecting women. These actions included critiquing the institutions of family and marriage, as well as addressing issues related to female sexuality, reproductive rights, labor rights and legal inequalities. Guided by the mantra that “the personal is political,” this movement sought to provide women with the political and economic tools to grant themselves a sense of personal empowerment in their daily lives. In particular, second-wave feminists worked towards exposing the myth of the “happy housewife” who was content to perform unpaid work in the home in order to raise her children and support the career of her husband (Genz and Brabon 2009, 52; Hollows 2000, 3-5). As reflected in the pioneering work of Mulvey in the 1970s, second-wave feminism also exposed the ways in

which mainstream and majoritarian media dehumanized and objectified women.<sup>14</sup>

Additionally, second-wave feminists demanded that law enforcement and judicial systems define and prosecute gendered and domestic violence as serious crimes.

*Wait Until Dark* addresses the issues of domestic violence against women and the relegation of women to the private sphere by placing the action exclusively within the confines of the home (as does *Antichrist*, as I will discuss later in the chapter). Contradicting the commonly held belief of post-World War Two “new traditionalism” that marriage and the home provided women with a safe haven from male violence and exploitation (Genz and Brabon 2009, 51-2), *Wait Until Dark* specifically locates this violence in the private space occupied by the family and, tellingly, in the figure of the husband. Coppock et al. argue that the majority of violence against women occurs in the supposedly safe home, “the very place where women are most at risk from those with whom they have established relationships” (1995, 178-9). *Wait Until Dark* thus aligns with second-wave feminist thinking in its vivid articulation of the nightmare of being trapped in the home and subjected to male violence.

The film conveys this entrapment by isolating Suzy within a stifling *mise-en-scène*. For example, figures of bars proliferate within the apartment living room where the majority of the action takes place: a stairway with a barred railing leads from the doorway to the floor of the apartment, an unused bedframe with a barred heading occupies the wall opposite the

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<sup>14</sup> For example, the feminist activist group New York Radical Women led protests at the 1968 Miss America contest. 400 women marched outside the pageant, comparing the treatment of women in the pageant to livestock and burning what they termed “instruments of female torture” such as high heels, curlers, make-up and bras. Two years later, The Angry Brigade protested the Miss World contest in London. Protesters disrupted the televised competition, calling it a “cattle market” and throwing flour and ink bombs on the stage.

staircase, vertical blinds perpendicular to the stairway separate Sam's darkroom from the rest of the living area and the shuttered design of both the blinds and the cabinets in the kitchen are visible across from the darkroom. This spatial arrangement encloses Susy on all four sides. In five separate instances, the camera frames Susy in the bars of the staircase, the blinds in the darkroom and the vertical bars of light cast by the streetlamp filtering through the blinds. These particular staging and lighting devices emphasize her imprisonment within the domestic sphere. Significantly, Susy bursts through the blinds of the darkroom and "breaks through" this entrapment only when she takes direct action in defeating Roat.

*Wait Until Dark* was produced during a time when second-wave feminists were struggling to have domestic violence recognized as a crime that should be addressed by the legal system, rather than dismissed as the private male prerogative of boyfriends, husbands and fathers. Organizations such as the National Organization for Women (NOW) and the Center for Women's Policy Studies were established during the late 1960s and early 1970s to advocate for an end to laws that discriminated against abused women. The battered women's movement also formed around this time, as statistics revealed domestic abuse to be a national social epidemic. Although reliable statistics on domestic violence in the U.S. in the 1960s are few and far between, those that do exist provide evidence of its widespread prevalence. A study conducted in Chicago in 1965-66 found that 46 percent of all crimes against women took place in the home ("Herstory" 1999). A decade later, the first National Family Violence Survey reported that domestic violence occurred in 28 percent of U.S. marriages, and 12

percent of wives admitted to being physically abused by their husbands. However, due to the social stigma surrounding domestic violence, the authors doubt the accuracy of these figures and hazard that actual rates may have been much higher (Straus and Gelles 1986, 466, 471). Serious political action to counter domestic violence was not taken until the 1970s, when NOW organized the National Task Force on Battered Women/Household Violence (“Herstory” 1999).

For many years domestic violence remained a marginalized issue within the realms of politics and law enforcement, despite the laudable efforts of feminist activists to bring it to the fore of societal consciousness. *Wait Until Dark* obliquely references this fact by having Carlino pose as a policeman who colludes in the abuse of Susy instead of offering her any assistance. The bleak political circumstances in which abused women found themselves in the 1960s was indeed made worse by a legal system in which “police have not taken the problem seriously, rarely arresting perpetrators. When battered women persevered and tried to press charges, district attorneys often refused to support their cases, and the cases that did make it to court were likely to be dismissed” (Ghez and Marin 2003). In 1975, a full eight years after *Wait Until Dark* was released, the International Association of Chiefs of Police training manual instructed police officers to separate the couple and then leave the scene of the crime (Straus and Gilles 1986, 474). Domestic violence thus continued to be considered a “private” matter by those with the power and authority to prosecute it as a criminal offense.

As previously discussed, the striking parallels between Sam and Roat clearly reveal subtextual references to domestic violence. Before Susy is physically abused by Roat, she is

psychologically abused by Sam in the way that he infantilizes and demeans her. There is also the suggestion of physical abuse that lingers in the interactions between Sam and Susy early in the film; for example, his insistence that she thaw the icebox with boiling water by herself. The film hints that Sam deliberately places her in situations in which she is likely to hurt herself, in seeming punishment for her blindness and inability to conform to his patriarchal and ocularcentric standards.

As a consequence of constantly catering to Sam's desires and attempting to live up to his expectations, Susy's submissive behavior suggests abuse before the criminals enter her apartment. Feminist theorists write of the changes in a woman's behavior when she is in an abusive relationship, noting that the woman "tends to develop a heightened awareness of what her partner wants and needs in order to accommodate his wishes and whims, all in the attempt to minimize his violent reactions" (Friedman 2000, 219). This behavior is manifested in nervous comments Susy makes about Sam, such as "Don't tell Sam you helped me" and "We've got to do it Sam's way!" Like Susy, abused women "often suffer from low self-esteem, feelings of shame and guilt, and a sense that they are trapped in a situation from which there is no escape" ("Domestic Violence" 1998) – such as being confined to the home by an abusive partner, or being under siege from attackers determined to kill them. This feeling of entrapment sometimes gives rise to situations in which the abused woman "eventually strikes back and harms or kills the abuser" ("Domestic Violence" 1998), as Susy

does at the end of the film, because their isolation offers no other alternative to ending the violence.

Roat assumes the position of a male abuser whom Susy must satisfy when her husband leaves the home. We can thus view Roat as a *physical* and *explicit* manifestation of Sam's *emotional* and *implicit* violence against his wife. Namely, Sam and Roat are strikingly similar regarding their proclivity for the violent bio-political conditioning of the female body. This explains why Sam fails in fulfilling the role of masculine protector: he only arrives at the apartment after Roat is dead, too late to help Susy in defeating his alter ego. Roat's attacks physically hyperbolize Sam's sadistic urge to discipline Susy, illustrating that "[i]t is...the unpredictability of men's violence, from lovers, friends, acquaintances or strangers, which often reveals to women the 'stranger' in the men they thought they knew" (Coppock et al. 1995, 179).

The paralleled behaviors of Sam and Roat closely follow what domestic violence experts term the three stages in the cycle of domestic abuse: the tension-building, violent and honeymoon phases. During the tension-building phase, the abuser emotionally and mentally terrorizes their partner, while the latter attempts to placate the abuser in order to avoid confrontation. Seen from this perspective, Susy's obsession with doing everything just as Sam commands in order to gain his approval takes on an explicitly sinister cast. This tension building is followed by the violent phase, during which the abuser terrorizes their partner with outbursts of physical assault. This is the point in the film when Roat replaces Sam, so that the latter can estrange himself from the violence implicit in his emotional abuse of Susy

and continue to be seen as the “good” husband. Finally, the cycle ends with the honeymoon phase, when the abuser calms down and vows to never harm their partner again. After this point the cycle repeats itself with a new tension-building phase (“Domestic Violence” 1998). The final scene of the film clearly illustrates this honeymoon phase when Sam rushes into the apartment after the police and tearfully embraces Susy. The reuniting of husband and wife conveys the sense that this extraordinary ordeal is over, and that happily ever after awaits the couple.

*Wait Until Dark* may be considered reactionary in its displacement of physical violence onto a male figure other than the husband, as well as in its final positioning of Sam as the “good” husband in relation to the “bad” intruder. Furthermore, the past work of director Terence Young in the James Bond series of films does not suggest a particularly feminist agenda on his part (Young directed *Dr. No* [1962], *From Russia with Love* [1963] and *Thunderball* [1965]). However, the subtle connection of Sam with Roat, along with the structural similarity of the film’s narrative to the cycle of domestic violence, allow me to read *Wait Until Dark* “against the grain” as (proto-)feminist. Understanding the cyclical nature of domestic violence compromises the seemingly “happy” ending of the film, during which, as previously mentioned, Sam insists that Susy stumble over to *him*. This ending suggests that Sam will continue to abuse Susy by demanding that she conform to his needs and desires. This reading of *Wait Until Dark* as proto-feminist is supported by the altered narrative of *Nowhere in Sight* (Douglas Jackson, 2001), a remake in which the blind female protagonist

(Helen Slater) ultimately discovers that her boyfriend (Andrew McCarthy) is in league with the criminals. *Wait Until Dark* implicitly implicates the husband in the abuse of the female protagonist, instead of directly exposing his behavior as cruel and sadistic. However, the film contains a suggestion of domestic violence and abuse that later films such as *Nowhere in Sight* and *Antichrist* expose in a more explicit manner.

The fact that multiple men abuse, terrify and exploit Susy throughout the film suggests that the violent male disciplining of the female body is not the prerogative of a single sadistic individual such as Roat, but rather is built into the very fabric of social relations in a culture that permits and even celebrates domestic abuse (I will make a similar argument regarding “rape culture” in *Irréversible* and *Baise-moi*). In *Wait Until Dark*, U.S. society is depicted as one governed by violent patriarchal structures in which men such as Sam, even if not directly violent themselves, reap the benefits of female suffering and subordination. Coppock et al. write that “[t]he fear or actual experience of violence...enables men to assert power directly and maintain patriarchal relations. All men are the beneficiaries of this physical domination and many participate to a degree” (1995, 31). A culture of pervasive male violence against women operates in conjunction with patriarchal institutional frameworks that subordinate the needs and concerns of women to those of men, instilling a sense of inferiority in women that does not need the explicit threat of physical violence in order to function effectively. Violence thus underpins male privilege without being present in each and every of its manifestations. It is an underlying force that permeates social institutions such as heterosexual marriage, including that of Susy and Sam. Coppock et al. identify this structure of violence as a “male protection racket” in which “good” men are needed to protect women

from the “bad” – a disempowering patriarchal concept that distorts the fact that “the most likely source of violence...is the ‘protector’ himself” (1995, 32).

*Minor Political Cinema and a Feminist Ethics of Spectatorship*

In *Wait Until Dark*, patriarchal violence intertwines with ocularcentrism to construct a violent mode of being in the world that subordinates the female body to a disembodied and mastering optical vision. In this respect, haptic perception constitutes an important element of a feminist ethics of spectatorship. In Deleuzian terms, the becoming-woman and becoming-haptic of Susy and spectators experienced during moments of shocking, tactile terror in *Wait Until Dark* make the majoritarian patriarchal language that speaks only in optical vision stutter. The stuttering, minoritarian blindness of haptic perception challenges optical hegemony by allowing spectators to perceive-otherwise: to practice alternative modes of spectatorship that do not involve identification with a voyeuristic male “Gaze” or entail a sadistic-masochistic binary of cinematic pleasure. Haptic imagery in the climax of the film incorporates physical tactility into the perception process, providing a stylistic alternative to patriarchal and misogynistic forms of disembodied ocular vision.

This envisioning of an alternative to normalized modes of perception designates *Wait Until Dark* as a minor cinema as described by Deleuze in *Cinema 2*. Hapticity introduces a tactile and “imperfect” mode of minor feminist vision that deterritorializes patriarchal ocular perception from within, employing optical sight while also subverting its dominance by

approximating a position of blindness. This minoritarian hapticity creates a shock to thought that operates via synaesthetic imagery and vision; as Deleuze writes, “this is the shock wave or the nervous vibration, which means that we can no longer say ‘I see, I hear’, but I FEEL, ‘totally physiological sensation’. And it is the set of harmonics acting on the cortex which gives rise to thought, the cinematographic I THINK” (1989, 158).

The deterritorialization of majoritarian patriarchal ocularcentrism in *Wait Until Dark* has its correlate in the politicization of private relationships. As I have argued, the film obliquely suggests that “private” marital dynamics and conflicts have political dimensions that expose gender and sexual inequalities. The film collapses private conflict within the marriage of Suzy and Sam with the political struggles of second-wave feminism, as both expose the biopolitical underpinnings of personal relationships between women and men. This collapse of the public and private realms constitutive of feminism reflects Deleuze’s argument that minor political cinema politicizes private struggles, as “the private element can...become the place of a becoming conscious...no boundary survives to provide a minimum distance or evolution: the private affair merges with the social – or political – immediate” (1989, 218).

Furthermore, the becoming-woman and becoming-haptic of Susy and spectators engendered by the haptic imagery of the film constitute political actions that transcend the historical and political limits of second-wave feminism. *Wait Until Dark* continues to be relevant in a current socio-political climate in the U.S. in which women continue to face the threat of domestic violence: 31 percent of women in the U.S. report being physically or sexually

abused by their male partners (Ghez and Marin 2003), a higher percentage than in the mid-1970s.

Although *Antichrist* was produced over four decades later in a different historical and political environment, it too exposes the patriarchal underpinnings of female suffering within the heterosexual couple relationship. *Antichrist* constructs a feminist mode of spectatorship by employing haptic images of female suffering that encourage corporeal, emotional and psychological becomings-other.

#### **“Freud is dead, isn't he?": Gender Politics and Female Pain in *Antichrist***

Like *Wait Until Dark*, *Antichrist* charts the bio-political dimensions of female suffering and gendered violence within the heterosexual couple in a manner that is amenable to feminist viewing praxis.

*Antichrist* depicts the violent breakdown of a couple's relationship following the death of their young son Nic (Storm Acheche Sahlstrøm). The couple, who are referred to in the film only as He, the husband (Willem Dafoe), and She, the wife (Charlotte Gainsbourg), retreats to Eden, their cottage in the wilderness outside of Seattle. The purpose of this retreat is to allow the wife to overcome her inconsolable grief at the death of their son and repair their faltering marriage. He, a cognitive behavioral therapist, attempts to guide her through the stages of grief, while She rebels against his paternalistic and condescending regime of

therapy. Eventually the simmering antagonisms of their relationship erupt in violence, culminating in castration and death.

*Antichrist* met with jeering, catcalls and fainting spells at its premiere at the Cannes Film Festival in May 2009. It won the first anti-prize awarded by the Ecumenical Jury, which labeled the film “the most misogynist movie from the self-proclaimed biggest director in the world” (“Anti-prize” 2009). At a press conference following the film’s premiere, a journalist from the *Daily Mail* demanded that von Trier “explain and justify why you made this movie,” to which Trier replied that he was “the best film director in the world” (Lim 2009), and thus owed no explanations or apologies to anyone. Trier defended the film further by stating “I can offer no excuse for ‘Antichrist’...other than my absolute belief in the film – the most important film of my entire career!” (Collett-White 2009; Von Trier 2009).

Scholars have interpreted *Antichrist* as an enactment and critique of Christian mythology and ethos; namely, woman’s original sin and the expulsion of humanity from the Garden of Eden (Mandolfo 2010; Zolkos 2011). However, I take an alternative approach in focusing on gender politics within the film, making reference to certain (anti-)religious elements as they relate to this. I also take an alternative approach to von Trier’s work in emphasizing the haptic and phenomenological dimensions of *Antichrist*, as opposed to a psychoanalytic approach that is, as Linda Badley argues, “ubiquitous in his oeuvre” (2011, 6). In this sense the work of Badley (2011), Caroline Bainbridge (2004) and Magdalena Zolkos (2011) on the traumatic use of affect in von Trier’s films is more aligned with my present project, although I depart from this discourse in defining the affective dimensions of *Antichrist* more

specifically as *hysterical*. My emphasis on hysteria as an affective mode of communication between the female protagonist, the film and spectators clearly elucidates the connections between female suffering, gendered violence and a feminist mode of spectatorship.

I argue that the instances of female suffering and hysteria in *Antichrist* foreclose spectatorial pleasure as far as possible, and display an acute awareness of the importance of gender and sexual difference in producing and structuring this suffering. By envisioning female hysteria in a visceral, tactile manner that fosters a sympathetic physical, emotional and psychological proximity to She, *Antichrist* serves as an example of a minor feminist cinema aware of the historical and political history of women's psychosomatic suffering. I closely analyze scenes that re-imagine representational codes of female pain in a feminist manner. Specifically, the use of hysterical affect in *Antichrist* makes spectators aware of the gendered bio-political foundations of female suffering in patriarchal ideology and praxis. The aesthetics of the film (along with processes of narrative alignment) foster a sympathetic proximity to the female protagonist, and deterritorialize her pain in ways that encourage a feminist becoming-woman during spectatorship.<sup>15</sup>

Like the shocks to thought in *Wait Until Dark*, this viscerally-induced awareness of gender dynamics in *Antichrist* is conveyed through a narrative that dramatizes power inequalities

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<sup>15</sup> Of course, I will not deny that He also suffers horribly in *Antichrist*. However, I argue that the form of the film approximates She's hysterical pain and rage (rather than his indifferent and rational point of view). This approximation of female psychosomatic experience exposes the gender and sexual inequalities at the root of She's suffering, and thus necessitates a focus on the ways in which the film sympathetically embodies her pain specifically.

between the sexes to the point of radical exposure; namely, through imaging the physical confinement of a woman by her more “knowledgeable” and “rational” husband. I will begin by discussing how *Antichrist* presents hysterical psychological trauma and physical pain as gendered forms of suffering through the body of She. In addition to expressing a historically and bio-politically specific mode of female suffering, hysteria also functions as a language of feminist rebellion against patriarchal norms; I explore the dual nature of this affective and embodied form of communication in *Antichrist*. I also argue that the film serves as a minor feminist cinema that disrupts normative codes of mediated female pain in order to expose the patriarchal foundations of female suffering.

#### *Hysteria, Sexual Difference and Female Suffering*

The prologue of *Antichrist* horrifically images the death of young son Nic (who falls out of a window in their apartment several stories up while his parents are having sex) as the trauma that induced She’s hysteria. The film then jumps ahead one month to her hospitalization, after which She has outbursts in which she sobs uncontrollably, is taciturn and uncommunicative with her husband, and confesses that she wants to die. Her extreme and seemingly inconsolable grief manifests itself as paranoia, resentment and rage directed at her husband, who patiently tries to “heal” her during their retreat to Eden.

The gendered roles of hysteric and doctor performed by She and He reflect the gendered and sexually differentiated history of hysteria as a “female malady.” Historically, hysteria has often been designated a form of suffering afflicting women. In *Studies on Hysteria* (1957 [1895]), Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud identify women’s domestic occupations (or lack

thereof) as especially conducive to hysterical states, and exclusively feature female hysterics as their case studies (the most famous being Anna O.) (1957, 13). Breuer and Freud briefly mention the work of French neurologist and hysteria specialist (and Freud's former teacher) Jean-Martin Charcot as an important precedent to their work. Charcot's studies of female hysterics in his Salpêtrière clinic in Paris in the 1880s established the bio-medical paradigm of the "uncontrollable" female patient disciplined and "cured" by a stern and rational male doctor. This paradigm also eroticized certain "feminine" traits of female hysterics such as powerlessness and dependence on male doctors and family members (Showalter 1985, 10-11, 90-1).

This gendered and sexually differentiated history has influenced the traditional portrayal of hysteria in Western film as a dangerous and possibly occult female affliction. Many films dating from the past several decades portray female hysteria as an erotic spectacle comparable (or leading) to female witchcraft. To give just one example, *The Devils* (Ken Russell, 1971) tells the story of a sexually repressed, nymphomaniac hunchback nun (Vanessa Redgrave) who becomes hysterical after her lustful advances towards Catholic priest Father Grandier (Oliver Reed) are rebuffed. The film features extended scenes of hysterical female convulsions and torture by the clergy filmed in a Grand Guignol style that invites audiences to take pleasure in the spectacles of sexualized female "insanity" and suffering.<sup>16</sup> This cinematic eroticization of hysteria coincided with a cycle of soft-core (or

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<sup>16</sup> For an extensive study of female psychosis in film, see Janisse 2012.

bordering on) witch films in the 1960s and 1970s that depicted an oftentimes hysterical and physically tortured female witch as a source of sexual spectacle.<sup>17</sup> According to Catherine Clément, majoritarian patriarchal cinema such as this presents female hysteria as a source of pleasure, as “[w]ith the circus and the cinema, we have moved into the institutionalization of hysteria: spectacle cashing in on the exchange of money” (1986, 13). There is currently a resurgence of films and television series focusing on female witches.<sup>18</sup>

I argue that *Antichrist* departs from this discourse by embodying She’s rage and anxiety, thereby making female hysteria painful and disturbing for spectators to encounter. The film refuses to eroticize female hysteria or witchcraft. Instead, the film makes female pain and recrimination physically, emotionally and psychologically unsettling and painful for spectators, and thus constitutes an alternative mode of visioning and viewing female suffering onscreen. In this regard, *Antichrist* is a form of minor feminist cinema that employs visceral affect to convey the pain of the female protagonist in an intimate and critically aware manner.

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<sup>17</sup> Films include *Baba Yaga/Kiss Me, Kill Me* (Corrado Farina, 1973); *Black Sunday* (Mario Bava, 1960); *Blood on Satan’s Claw* (Piers Haggard, 1971); *Daughters of Satan* (Hollingsworth Morse, 1972); *El espejo de la bruja/The Witch’s Mirror* (Chano Urueta, 1962); *Horror Hotel* (John L. Moxey, 1960); *The Initiation of Sarah* (Robert Day, 1978); *Kill, Baby, Kill* (Mario Bava, 1966); *Mark of the Devil* (Michael Armstrong and Adrian Hoven, 1969); *Satan’s Slave* (Michael Gough, 1976); *Summer of Fear/Stranger in Our House* (Wes Craven, 1978); *Virgin Witch* (Ray Austin, 1971); *The Wicker Man* (Robin Hardy, 1973); *The Witch* (Damiano Damiani, 1966); *The Witches* (Cyril Frankel, 1967); and *The Witchmaker* (William O. Brown, 1969).

<sup>18</sup> Films include *Beautiful Creatures* (Richard LaGravenese, 2013); *Black Death* (Christopher Smith, 2010); *Carrie* (Kimberley Peirce, 2013); *The Countess* (Julie Delpy, 2009); *Da Hip Hop Witch* (Dale Resteghini, 2000); *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* (Scott Derrickson, 2005); *Hansel & Gretel: Witch Hunters* (Tommy Wirkola, 2013); *The Initiation of Sarah* (Stuart Gillard, 2006); *Into the Woods* (Rob Marshall, 2014); *Mother of Tears* (Dario Argento, 2007); *Season of the Witch* (Dominic Sena, 2011); *Snow White and the Huntsman* (Rupert Sanders, 2013); *Wake the Witch* (Dorothy Booraem, 2009); *The Wicker Man* (Neil LaBute, 2006); *The Witch’s Sabbath* (Jeff Leroy, 2005); *Witching & Bitching* (Álex de la Iglesia, 2013); and *The Woods* (Lucky McGee, 2006). Television series include *American Horror Story* (2011-present); *The Originals* (2013-present); *Salem* (2014-present); *Sleepy Hollow* (2013-present); and *Witches of East End* (2013-present).

*Antichrist* deterritorializes female suffering from a minor position by clearly exposing the gendered dimensions of hysteria; namely, the film presents She's hysteria as the outcome of a microcosmic war of the sexes in which female pain is pathologized by male knowledge. In her extensive study of female hysteria, Elaine Showalter recounts that in the early 1800s, Romantic discourse designated female sexual and reproductive organs (specifically, the ovaries) as the origins of hysterical symptoms, thus designating sexual difference as the determining factor in its diagnosis (1985, 10). The term "hysteria" itself derives from the Greek word for "womb," and thus suggests the prevailing view that "women were more vulnerable to insanity than men because the instability of their reproductive systems interfered with their sexual, emotional, and rational control...theories of female insanity were specifically and confidently linked to the biological crises of the female life-cycle" (Showalter 1985, 55).

This vilification of female reproductive and sexual capacities as the origin of insanity and disease suggests that male terror of unbridled female sexuality and independence operates as a subtext to the male doctor-female hysteric dynamic (Showalter 1985, 74). *Antichrist* exposes this subtext by suggesting that He views the aggressive sexual behavior of She as the urges of an irrational, hyper-sexual monster whose libido must be stifled if she is to be "cured" of her hysteria and depression. We can take as an example one scene towards the beginning of the film, before the couple goes to Eden, in which She initiates sex with her husband in a physically demanding manner. Although He consents to have sex with her, he

also admonishes her that, as a doctor and a patient, they should not be engaging in this type of physical relationship (he also claims that sexual activity is not healthy in her fragile state). This sexual control and disciplining turns into revulsion and hatred by the end of the film when He (possibly) hallucinates her appetite for sexual satisfaction as the cause of their son's death, and strangles her to death.

The characterization of He as a rational and intellectually superior doctor conforms to the traditional position of the male doctor in cases of female hysteria. Showalter writes that the Victorian age was dominated by a "moralistic, domineering, and masculinist generation of doctors" who sought to "cure" female hysterics "through paternalistic therapeutic and administrative techniques" (1985, 121, 17-18). This patriarchal "moral management of female insanity" (1985, 97) as described by Showalter was a brutal manifestation of gender inequality "intended to establish the male doctor's total authority...the medical ideal of a full and radical cure took the form of a kind of moral checkmate – the complete submission of the patient to the physician's authority, with a full confession of moral wretchedness and the various tricks and artifices involved" (1985, 137). *Antichrist* emphasizes this war of the sexes by employing sparse mise-en-scène and low-key lighting throughout that shrouds much of the images in darkness, highlighting instead the toxic relationship of the male and female protagonists as they clash with one another.

A comparison with Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1899) further illustrates the gender binary operative in the case of female hysteria and marital discord presented in *Antichrist*. Gilman's short story recounts the gradually growing hysteria

of its female protagonist and narrator, an unnamed young wife and new mother confined to a remote country home in order to undergo a “rest cure” under the supervision of her physician husband, who takes great pride in determining and enforcing his wife’s treatment. Like She in *Antichrist*, the female narrator of *The Yellow Wallpaper* was an intellectual and writer before experiencing hysteria and depression.

The narrator’s husband adopts a paternalistic attitude towards his wife by demanding passivity and ignorance of her condition on her part, exacerbating the power inequality within their marriage by placing him in a position of superior knowledge. This compulsory infantilization and subjugation of the woman by her husband “enacts the sexual violence that some nineteenth-century American feminists saw reproduced in the relations of male doctors and female patients” (Showalter 1985, 142). In *Antichrist*, She fosters an awareness of this gendered division of control by accusing her therapist husband of always having to be smarter than others (“But you’re just so much smarter, aren’t you?”), acknowledging the pleasure he gains in treating her like an invalid (“I never interested you, until now that I’m your patient”) and expressing resentment towards his meddling in her grief process after the death of their son. Indeed, He refuses to allow her the medication prescribed by her (real) doctor and subjects her to a dangerous regime of “exposure therapy” (Zolkos 2011, 182) in a way that, as I shall argue, codes his detachment and rationality as patriarchal and misogynistic traits.

Like *Antichrist*, *The Yellow Wallpaper* serves as a metaphor for the imprisonment of the female hysteric within the walls of patriarchal familial and medical institutions. And although *Wait Until Dark* does not depict female hysteria directly, it too links female confinement within the home and lack of self-determination to the dominance of male knowledge and instruction. In this respect, both *Wait Until Dark* and *Antichrist* draw upon a minoritarian history of gender dynamics in gothic horror or melodramatic literature and film targeted at female audiences in which the seemingly loveable husband is suspected or revealed to be an abuser who emotionally manipulates or physically tortures his wife to the point of hysteria.<sup>19</sup>

One scene in *Antichrist* in particular reminds one of Sam's contemptuous attitude towards Susy in demanding self-sufficiency of her. He takes She on several hikes in the woods surrounding Eden, in order to "cure" her of her seemingly irrational fear of touching the ground with her feet. One morning, as part of her regime of exposure therapy, He sets her the task of walking from stone to stone along a short pathway. Even though she insists that she "can't do this," he firmly tells her that "Yes, you can. You can, and you will." He assures her that he will walk with her, but reneges on this promise as the camera cuts to an extreme close-up of her bare foot slowly stepping on the grass, accompanied by the amplified sound of her heaving, panicked breathing. Afterwards, he smugly proclaims "You did it! You learned something" – although what exactly she is supposed to have learned is not clear. His triumphant tone is subsequently undercut by the image of a dead baby bird falling from a tree and being consumed by a mound of ants. By ironically juxtaposing the banal cruelty of

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<sup>19</sup> For an extensive study of this literature and film, see Modleski 1982.

nature with He's patriarchal humanism, this particular irrational cut encourages spectators to consider the conceited futility of his therapeutic efforts. In a later scene, She openly mocks these therapeutic methods by freely walking on the grass and jumping in puddles of water, telling him sarcastically that: "Look. I'm well again. I'm cured. You're so clever. I'm fine."

In addition to imaging hysteria as a sexually specific form of female suffering under patriarchal bio-political domination, the hysteria of She also embodies revisionist feminist understandings of female hysteria. Instead of an erotic spectacle or an expression of "natural" female psychosomatic weakness and subordination, *Antichrist* presents She's hysteria as a mode of female rebellion against patriarchal ideologies and institutions. This characterization aligns with feminist departures from the traditional definition of hysteria as a natural symptom of female or feminine weakness. (When She informs her husband "Freud is dead," she echoes the feminist rejection of Freud's definition of female hysteria as a manifestation of [both figurative and literal] castration.)

According to Cixous, hysteria functions as a feminist proto-language that arises from within patriarchy to destabilize its codes and norms; that is, hysteria operates as an alternative mode of being in the world through which women protest their bodily and ideological subordination to men, and express desire and agency outside of the bounds of patriarchal understandings of proper female and feminine behavior. Cixous's feminist re-definition of

hysteria resonates in a historical sense as well, as the label of “hysteric” was often applied to women who demonstrated “excessive” independence: women who refused to marry or have children; young girls who did not obey their fathers or display interest in suitably “feminine” occupations and duties; and suffragettes and feminists (Showalter 1985, 145, 161).

Cixous describes the female hysteric in alternative terms as a woman who “begins to speak in other ways,” that is, with “a force capable of demolishing those [masculine and patriarchal] structures” (1986, 154-5) of domination and control. In her joint text with Cixous, Clément also identifies masculinist and patriarchal ideological institutions as instigators of female hysteria. Clément’s description of the female hysteric as a figure akin to a witch or sorceress persecuted by male inquisitors closely approximates the characterization of She that audiences encounter in *Antichrist*:

As long as the sorceress is still free, at the sabbat, in the forest, she is a sensitivity that is completely exposed – all open skin, natural, animal, odorous, and deliciously dirty. When she is caught, when the scene of the inquisition is formed around her, in the same way the medical scene later forms around the hysteric, she withdraws into herself, she cries, she has numb spots, she vomits. She has become hysterical. (1986, 39)

Insofar as She’s hysteria presents an embodied mode of communication that seeks to disturb and deterritorialize patriarchy from within, it aligns with Deleuze and Guattari’s description of minor literature as an alternative lineage of writing within majoritarian literature. As I outlined in the introductory chapter, Deleuze argues in *Cinema 2* that the features of minor cinemas mirror those of minor literature: the deterritorialization of a majoritarian language from within, the collapse of the public and private realms and the collective enunciation of a “people to come.”

*Antichrist* operates as a minoritarian mode of filmmaking by embodying the voice of the hysterical woman silenced by patriarchal discourse. *Antichrist* deterritorializes the dominant relationship of spectators to mediated female pain and hysteria by presenting it as a traumatic disruption of pleasure and subjectivity. That is, the film hystericizes spectators by offering “depictions of physical, psychological, and structural-linguistic violence...[that] resist the transformation of the violent image into a consumable product of cinematic entrainment” (Zolkos 2011, 178). The images convey an awareness of the gendered foundations of female hysteria and suffering by provoking spectators to experience a Deleuzian shock to thought in which gender violence becomes visible.

The suffering of She in the throes of hysteria does not suggest a teleological solution to the impasse of gender violence contributing to its existence, but rather exposes the current condition of hystericized women as unbearable, or, as Deleuze would term it, *intolerable*. *Antichrist* conveys a minoritarian feminist stance through intolerable aesthetics that are painful and disturbing for spectators to encounter. I will provide a close reading of arguably the most affectively intolerable of these sequences, in order to clearly demonstrate how affect is linked to a feminist spectatorship ethics in which spectators practice a minor feminist mode of vision.

I will focus on the scene in which She performs a clitoridectomy on herself. Immediately prior to this scene, He discovers through photographs and Nic’s autopsy report that She had

been neglecting Nic, and may have been responsible for injuries sustained by the child before his death. When he confronts her with this knowledge, she attacks him and accuses him of trying to leave her. After overpowering and straddling him, She crushes his penis with a block of wood before bolting a wheel to his leg. She throws the wrench used to tighten the bolt underneath the porch of the cottage and wanders off into the woods. When He regains consciousness and discovers what has happened, he crawls outside to search for the wrench. He eventually takes shelter in a foxhole in the root of a tree, where she comes searching for him through the darkness and fog. Thanks to a noisy raven also hiding in the foxhole, she finds him and drags him back to the cottage.

She then gives herself a clitoridectomy in a harrowing sequence that crosscuts between her mutilation and a flashback to (or perhaps fantasy of) Nic's death. She first retrieves a rusty pair of scissors and lies naked from the waist down on the floor of the cottage next to He. She holds the scissors against her torso and hips, which are covered in blood and dirt. She puts her hand on her vagina before the camera cuts to an alternative presentation of Nic's death scene, in which spectators clearly see that She saw her son climbing up to the window and did nothing to stop him. The camera then cuts back to the present time, in which she sobbingly asks her husband to hold her. The camera maintains its focus on her vagina in extreme close-up as she cries and brings the scissors closer, exacerbating fearful anticipation and terror on the part of spectators. This fear proves to be well founded, as she then takes the scissors to her vagina and, with shaking hands, cuts off her clitoris. She screams in pain as blood spurts out of the wound. The entire sequence (other than Nic's death) is rendered in

close-up and extreme close-up shots, creating an overwhelming proximity to She's bodily mutilation that is extremely disturbing and upsetting for spectators to experience.

This horrifically affective enactment of female genital mutilation envisions a real history of women's psychosomatic suffering under patriarchal and misogynistic bio-medical regimes. Showalter, for instance, details the horrible fate of "hysterical" women at the hands of Dr. Isaac Baker Brown in the 1860s:

The most extreme and nightmarish effort to manage women's minds by regulating their bodies was Dr. Isaac Baker Brown's surgical practice of clitoridectomy as a cure for female insanity. Brown was a member of the Obstetrical Society of London who became convinced that madness was caused by masturbation and that surgical removal of the clitoris, by helping women to govern themselves, could halt a disease that would otherwise proceed inexorably from hysteria to spinal irritation and thence to idiocy, mania, and death...Clitoridectomy is the surgical enforcement of an ideology that restricts female sexuality to reproduction. The removal of the clitoris eliminates the woman's sexual pleasure, and it is indeed this autonomous sexual pleasure that Brown defined as the symptom, perhaps the essence, of female insanity...With their sexuality excised, his patients gave up their independent desires and protests, and became docile childbearers. (1985, 75, 77)

*Antichrist* self-consciously links She's hysterical guilt and shame regarding sexual pleasure to her exposure as a "bad" wife and mother in a manner that critiques the real history of female hysteria and sexual mutilation. This linkage, combined with the film's more general concern with exposing the gendered dimensions of female suffering and illness, designates the pain of clitoridectomy as an outcome of bio-politically determined ideologies and practices that classify the sexually desirous and pleasure-seeking woman as a hysteric and witch. This awareness of hysteria as a gender-specific form of female suffering designates the film as a minor feminist cinema. By consciously depicting the gendered dimensions of

female hysteria and encouraging an affective approximation of She's trauma, the film challenges (rather than endorses) the misogyny that is at the root of her suffering.

This aesthetic proximity and narrative alignment engenders a feminist ethics of becoming-woman during the act of spectatorship. The bodies of spectators are deterritorialized through the encounter with painful affect onscreen, embarking upon a becoming-woman in which they approximate the visceral affects of She's pain on a molecular level, rather than "identify" with her as a molar figure. *Antichrist* thus encourages spectators to form a sympathetic relationship to female suffering in a sensual manner, from a minoritarian position. (My argument that the film portrays She in a sympathetic manner is supported by the fact that von Trier and Gainsbourg have identified the character as partially a surrogate for von Trier; furthermore, the director has often stated his affinity with his female protagonists [Gross 2009; Zolkos 2011, 180].)

For example, in the clitoridectomy sequence the boundaries of the spectatorial self become porous when exposed to powerfully affective images of brutal pain and mutilation. Spectatorial bodies are reconfigured in their simultaneous proximity to and repulsion from the suffering female body onscreen. This proximity without fusion constitutes a Nancean co-existence, in which spectators recognize and bear witness to the suffering of the other without conflating themselves with them. Nancy himself argues that the body of the hysteric undergoes a series of transformations or becomings-other, in that this body constitutes "something that opens up in pain or pleasure, and does not withdraw, something that *makes room* for a passage through the limit, rather than hardening it" (2008, 2). The bodies of

spectators are traversed by She's female hysteria, the bio-political dimensions of which are exposed by the film. That is, as I have argued throughout this chapter, the deterritorialized bodies of spectators are encouraged to become-woman, and to become ethically aware and critical of the gendered foundations of She's hysteria and sexual mutilation, when they come into intimate physical, emotional and psychological proximity to her suffering.

In *Antichrist* and *Wait Until Dark*, castration and blindness operate similarly as metaphors for patriarchal definitions of women as "lack." In a short essay entitled "Medusa's Head" (1997 [1922]), Freud writes that the female genital organs inspire terror in men, as women's physical and psychic "castration" implies the threat that men may be castrated as well. Braidotti explains that this male fear of the female genital organs as evidence and agents of castration reveals an anxiety stemming from a lack of vision with which to see the (interior) sex organs of the female. That is, according to the Freudian paradigm of castration, for men "there is *nothing to see* in that dark and mysterious region, the imagination goes haywire. Short of losing his head, the male gazer is certainly struck by castration anxiety" (Braidotti 1994, 82). Just as Susy is physically blind owing to a car accident in *Wait Until Dark*, in *Antichrist* the female protagonist "blinds" herself through castration. The blind and hysterical female protagonists of *Wait Until Dark* and *Antichrist* thus disrupt patriarchal ideology and thought by demonstrating haptic visuality and hysteria as minor modes of communication in which the personal sufferings of women become political exposures of systemic misogyny and patriarchy.

*The Feminist Ethics of Viewing Female Pain*

Carleen Mandolfo argues that the films of von Trier explore “gendered violence, especially in the form of self-sacrifice” (2010, 285). She observes that *Breaking the Waves* (1996) and *Dancer in the Dark* (2000) celebrate female sacrifice in the service of male interests in an uncritical manner, not sufficiently addressing the gendered dimensions of such sacrificial suffering. In contrast, *Dogville* (2003) presents a “hermeneutics of justice” in which female suffering is exposed as *meaningless*. This radical shift undercuts the association of women and femininity with an ethos of self-sacrifice in von Trier’s previous films.

In contrast to the claims of misogyny which initially surrounded *Antichrist* at its premiere, when considered in relation to von Trier’s canon I argue that the film offers a hermeneutics of justice (as opposed to a hermeneutics of sacrifice) in which female suffering is exposed as meaningless in relation to masculinist and patriarchal interests and values. The female antichrist refuses the martyrdom accepted by the self-sacrificial female protagonists in *Breaking the Waves* and *Dancer in the Dark*, as the former’s pain and suffering do not reveal any transcendental “truths” or “better worlds” for her husband. In this sense Rob White correctly points out that “[c]alling *Antichrist* ‘misogynist’ is an opt-out from serious engagement, a critical short cut which reduces the film to the schematics of unconscious desire that von Trier so artfully dismantles in order to reach out to more visceral, counterscientific causalities” (2011). *Melancholia* (2011), von Trier’s next film after *Antichrist*, also sympathetically approximates the psychosomatic suffering of the female protagonist by focusing on a depressed bride (Kirsten Dunst) who welcomes the end of the world as an alternative to marriage and corporate work.

In *Antichrist*, a minor feminist spectatorship position involves a sympathetic and compassionate solidarity with instances of female suffering that refuse sacrificial “meaning,” that “*do no redemptive work and offer no salvific promise*” (Zolkos 2011, 186). This positioning is established through aesthetically induced approximation of the physical and emotional pain of She (such as in the cliterodectomy sequence previously described). Compassionate solidarity with She’s suffering is also achieved through processes of narrative alignment with her in which He figures as a smug figure of masculine rationality who emotionally and physically manipulates and abuses his wife for his own intellectual satisfaction. (For example, his rather cruel insistence on putting her through painful regimes of therapy and obsession with finding a rational reason for her anxiety and depression.)

Instead of redeeming her husband, She’s hysteria and pain allow for the becoming-woman of spectators and film. Bodil Marie Stavning Thomsen writes of She’s violently destructive anger that “[t]he female, anti-Christian rage develops in a way that profoundly transforms not only the characters, but also the body of the film” (2009, 3). For instance, the harrowing cliterodectomy sequence sensually conveys the severity of her grief and rage. This grief slowly evolves into physically disturbing images of violence against herself and her husband. In addition to infecting the images themselves, the violent affects of She’s physical rage shock spectators and facilitate their becoming-woman. She herself refers to the corporeality of her emotions when she notes of her anxiety at the beginning of the film, “This is physical. This is dangerous.” This transformation, or becoming-woman, grounds perception in the

lived bodies of spectators and allows for an ethical being in *this* world that contests He's disembodied rationality in a feminist manner. That is, *Antichrist* "is critical towards forms of masculinity which have lost their relation to the body" (Buch-Hansen 2011, 122), rather than characterizing female nature as fundamentally cruel and irrational.

We can thus link haptic visuality and the concept of becoming-woman to Nietzsche's belief in the ethics of engaging with *this* world. Nietzsche identifies transcendentalism as the hallmark of a Christian denial of the world as it exists. He claims that Christianity deforms reality by imposing norms and laws that are not of this world. Only a life lived in *this* world is ethical, because it increases the power of the body to act and be acted upon. Becoming-woman grounds perception in the lived bodies of spectators and allows for an ethical mode of being that signals a decision to engage with *this* world, instead of resorting to transcendental worlds immune to the actions and affections of human bodies. In this sense He functions as one of the theologians so despised by Nietzsche, with psychoanalytic doctrine as his religion instead of Christianity. (Indeed, Deleuze and Guattari argue that the theologian is reincarnated in the figure of the psychoanalyst [2000, 108, 112-13, 269, 332]. This interpretation is further strengthened by the fact that Dafoe portrayed Jesus Christ in Martin Scorsese's 1988 adaptation of *The Last Temptation of Christ*.)

Haptic visuality is an ethical mode of spectatorship in Nietzschean terms because it does not seek to divorce the body from a transcendental mind or soul that must be "cured" of its base material urges. The becoming-woman encouraged in haptic modes of perception firmly locates film spectatorship in the body as it exists in and transforms *this* world, rather than in a

static, transcendental mode of being. Haptic visuality compliments the materiality of becoming-woman, which is always rooted in the worldly experiences of the body.

In *Antichrist*, She embodies the immanent ethics proposed by Deleuze, Guattari and Nietzsche, all of whom define the ethical in terms of the powers of the body to affect and be affected by the world. An openness to and belief in *this* world are ethical, while obedience to transcendental laws dictated from an otherworldly exterior is evidence of what Nietzsche terms a “slave morality” (1990, 135). Becoming-woman via haptic visuality is then an ethical process by virtue of the *embodied proximity* of spectators to female suffering. Perception, and specifically optical vision, is no longer transcendental and idealized, or divorced from this world. Rather, it is a material touch that approaches the tactile body of the film. *Antichrist* depicts a female protagonist who violently contests the static being and transcendental disembodiment of the subject within classical Western ontology, and employs this ethics of encounter to embody spectators through their own becoming-woman. As the bodies of spectators come into haptic proximity with female suffering, subjectivity is expanded beyond the ideal of the autonomous and unified self.

More specifically in terms of a Deleuzian ethics of belief in the world, *Antichrist* functions as a time-image film that envisions an *intolerable* situation for female characters within a banal reality of patriarchal and misogynistic culture. As an iteration of minor political cinema, *Antichrist* images and dramatizes the intolerable physical and ideological subordination of

women within patriarchy and their impossible position within its hierarchical structure, instead of celebrating its eventual dismantling in a utopian manner (Deleuze 1989, 219). As Deleuze writes, “it is not in the name of a better or truer world that thought captures the intolerable in this world, but, on the contrary, it is because this world is intolerable that it can no longer think a world or think itself” (1989, 169-70).

*Antichrist* exposes the intolerable position of sexually transgressive women such as She, whom patriarchal philosophy and praxis define as a monstrous and hysterical “other” (Braidotti 1994, 80). *Antichrist* thus constitutes a cinema of the seer that breaks the sensory-motor schema in favor of directly imaging the hallucinations, anxieties and potentially false memories of the female hysteric, who “finds himself [sic] struck by something intolerable in the world, and confronted by something unthinkable in thought” (Deleuze 1989, 169). Spectators are encouraged to become-seer in the act of witnessing She’s suffering in intimate proximity, extending an ethical dimension to the feminist bio-political import of the film. *Antichrist* is polemical and disturbing, its images providing a shock to thought regarding gender inequality and violence rather than a healing or positive teleological future in which women are “liberated” from patriarchy and misogyny. (In its dystopian outlook, *Antichrist* bears similarities to the French New Extremist film *Baise-moi*, to be discussed in Chapter 4.)

Several features further designate *Antichrist* as a time-image film. The use of potentially hallucinatory or “false” interludes and flashbacks disrupt the sensory-motor schema constitutive of movement-image cinema. For example, the potentially false flashback to Nic’s death in the cliterodectomy sequence presents a time-image in that “[t]he

images...[are] produced in such a way that the past is not necessarily true” (Deleuze 1989, 131). Spectators are not certain of what is true and what is false; or, rather, the differences between the two become indiscernible in favor of an *invention* of time, what Thomsen refers to as a “Dionysical celebration of time as becoming and as continuous transformation” (2009, 8). “[P]urely optical and sound situation[s]” (Deleuze 1989, 3) also disrupt the sensory-motor schema of the narrative at regular intervals by conveying no causal links to the main storyline. These disruptions include slow-motion shots of dying (and talking) animals, as well as unidentified figures trekking through dark foliage at night. This invention of time through fantasies, flashbacks and strange visions of nature initiates a Deleuzian and Nietzschean ethics of belief in this world, as it allows the film to creatively impact and transform the reality of its world. Von Trier verifies this disjointed temporality in his statements on the genesis of the film, in which he reveals that “[s]cenes were added for no reason. Images were composed free of logic or dramatic thinking. They often came from dreams I was having at the time...The film does not contain any specific moral code and only has what some might call ‘the bare necessities’ in the way of a plot” (Von Trier 2009).

The Nietzschean themes of *Antichrist* also suggest a time-image structure. In the making of his film, von Trier was inspired by Nietzsche’s *The Antichrist* (1990 [1895]), as well as *Offret/The Sacrifice* (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1986), an earlier film that also draws on Nietzschean philosophy to explore existential angst at the dawn of World War Three (*Antichrist* is

dedicated to Tarkovsky).<sup>20</sup> Regarding the bio-politically and ethically minor dimensions of temporality in the film, it is helpful to note that Deleuze's concept of the repetition of difference was influenced by Nietzsche's concept of the eternal return. Nietzsche likens the eternal return to *amor fati*, or the love of fate, that requires that one live their life in such a way as to will it to occur again and again. For the purposes of analyzing *Antichrist*, I employ Deleuze's interpretation of the eternal return as a return of difference rather than sameness. In Deleuze's view the eternal return does not determine the paths that the future is to take, but rather affirms the contingency that the future can have in relation to the past (Reynolds 2004).

*Antichrist* images a Nietzschean ethics of time in which spectators learn to critique the wrongdoings of the past without forgetting them or allowing them to limit the potential of the future. For example, She breaks with past understandings of female hysterics as passive, erotic spectacles by hysterically embodying and expressing female rage and sexual desire, immediately politicizing her pain by making "private" gender performances and dynamics political. *Antichrist* also re-writes a history of female suffering in imaging the gendered bio-political dimensions of female hysteria for a cinema-going public. Elizabeth Grosz echoes the call in *Antichrist* for a different future of gender relations when she argues that contemporary feminist movements could potentially benefit from the ability to overcome a nihilistic relationship with the past. Grosz argues that contemporary feminism must:

remember what one needs to move on to the future with more resources than the present can provide, while at the same time forgetting what one must, what has hurt,

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<sup>20</sup> Von Trier states that his interest in the philosophy of Nietzsche began as early as age 12 (Thomsen 2009, 1; Badley 2011, 9).

damaged, injured, or rendered one passive... To make something positive of this past without betraying it, without repeating or continuing it, to produce a future that both breaks with the past yet at the same time refuses to disown it – this seems to be the very condition of all *radical politics*... at stake in this Nietzschean problem of the force of history is the degree to which the status of resistance (of the present/the future) is linked to, revives and transforms, the power (of the past). (2004, 119)

*Antichrist* reflects the current bio-political landscape regarding gender politics by making public the seemingly private dimensions of gendered violence and female psychosomatic “disease.” The way in which He seeks to control and discipline She’s body and mind testifies to the continued pervasiveness of this dynamic in structuring “personal” relationships between the sexes. For example, the current War on Women in the U.S. addresses systemic socio-political inequalities and prejudices structured along the lines of gender and sexual difference, particularly those concerned with regulating the bodily agency of women in the name of the “public good.” He’s determination to regulate She’s sanity and sexuality and punishment of her for refusing the roles of “good” wife and mother accord with the misogynistic and patriarchal control of female bodies operative within the conservative elements of the War on Women.

In its reflections and refractions of contemporaneous gender politics, *Antichrist* bears similarities to *Wait Until Dark*. Although *Antichrist* is less metaphorical (rather, it is horrifically literal) in its critique of the concept of female “lack” (in the guise of castration rather than blindness), both films envision female suffering and male violence as issues relating to codified gender and sexual inequalities. The suffering of the female protagonist in *Antichrist* encountered by spectators does not suggest much progressive enhancement in

women's rights over the past forty years. However, I argue that we should not dismiss the potential of the film to envision a critical history of women's suffering for contemporary audiences, as well as provide a minor feminist mode of perceiving and being in the world.

Showalter argues that female hysteria exists on a spectrum with feminist praxis in that both “struggl[e] to redefine women's place in the social order” (1985, 161). Specifically, *Antichrist* gestures towards female and feminist solidarity with She's hysterical suffering – a collective enunciation embodied by the multitude of women converging upon He in the final shot of the film. In its references to the bonds among women perceived to be witches in the fifteenth century, as well as in its depiction of a morbidly dysfunctional marriage, *Antichrist* presents an alternative to the normative Oedipal “daddy-mommy-me” social formation critiqued by Deleuze and Guattari (2004, 2009). Instead, the film graphically envisions the destructive way in which the “couple-form has come to dominate all relationships, particularly in arthouse films about bourgeois life,” and insists that “there is also, or was, a sisterhood, and the fear of this female bond (with each other and with an unholy vision of nature) is invoked” (Power 2011). The work of female French New Extremist directors, to be discussed in Chapter 4, renders the feminist potential of female solidarity much more explicit.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have argued that *Wait Until Dark* and *Antichrist* envision gendered and sexually differentiated forms of female suffering that encourage spectators to take a critically and historically aware approach to the images that they encounter. As minor political films,

each encourages an alternative feminist mode of haptic perception that exposes and challenges the objectification and eroticization of female subordination and suffering. This minor viewing strategy encompasses shocks to thought in which the gender dynamics depicted onscreen impart a feminist ethics of spectatorship to viewers. Such a feminist ethics of spectatorship collapses distinctions between private gender dynamics and public discourses on the bio-political dimensions of female experience, while also embodying female suffering in a sympathetic and compassionate manner.

Employing haptic visuality as a minor viewing strategy encourages spectators to engage physically and emotionally with a cinema of exposed female bodies, and as such fosters a Deleuzian ethics of belief in the body as the foundation of experience and a source of radical political change. Deleuze writes that we need “an ethic or faith” that is:

simply believing in the body. It is giving discourse to the body, and, for this purpose, reaching the body before discourses...Artaud said the same thing, believe in the *flesh*...Our belief can have no object but ‘the flesh’, we need very special reasons to make us believe in the body...We must believe in the body, but as in the germ of life, the seed which splits open the paving-stones, which has been preserved and lives on in the holy shroud or the mummy’s bandages, and which bears witness to life, in this world as it is. (1989, 172-3)

Given the strong ties of traditional Western masculinity to understandings of the ideal subject as disembodied (Connell 1995, 186-7), feminism must play a leading role in establishing an ethics of haptic and corporeally situated film spectatorship. Female suffering in the cinema of exposure necessitates a spectatorship ethics that works *through* the body, not against or apart from it by privileging audiences’ rational self-awareness and conscious distance from

images. To enact feminist spectatorship practices that do not take masculinist disembodiment as the ethical norm, spectators must engage their bodies in the materiality of the screen and the transformative becomings-other offered by haptic visuality.

Haptic visuality allows spectators to sensuously, politically and ethically engage with female suffering by creatively expanding the belief in what a body is capable of achieving. The becomings-woman effected through embodied interaction with *Wait Until Dark* and *Antichrist* operate as lines of flight into blindness and hysteria that incorporate the imperfect flesh of spectators in the viewing process. Female blindness and hysteria are bio-politically minoritarian contagions to which the bodies of spectators are laid bare when exposed to the screen.

## Chapter 2

### Spectatorship Ethics and the Suffering “Pregnant Parisian Woman”

Rape is the zero act; it is the negation of sex itself, the negation of all relation, the negation of the child, the negation of the woman. It is the pure affirmation of the rapist in whom a “pure identity”... finds nothing better than the submission to the ignoble mimicry of what it denies: relation and being-together.

Jean-Luc Nancy 2000, 155

#### Introduction

In this chapter I explore the bio-political and ethical relationship of spectators to suffering pregnant women in the cinema of exposure. I focus specifically on presentations of suffering pregnant bodies in French New Extremist films *Irréversible/Irreversible* (Gaspar Noé, 2002) and *À l'intérieur/Inside* (Alexandre Bustillo and Julien Maury, 2007). I argue that the pain and dismemberment of pregnant women in each film embody social divisions and violence within the French body politic. *Irréversible* and *À l'intérieur* convey this pain and dismemberment to spectators through visceral and disturbing affective registers that expose the patriarchal and misogynistic underpinnings of female suffering. This exposure encourages spectators to adopt a compassionate attitude towards the suffering pregnant female body, thus enacting a minor feminist mode of spectatorship.

My theoretical framework for this chapter draws on Nancy's ethical ontology of co-existence, which clearly articulates the ethical and political ramifications of bodily interactions between subjects. Contemporary French New Extremist films illustrate the

unsettling intimacy of co-existing with film, as it is a cinematic tendency deeply concerned with destabilizing hegemonic notions of bodily experience and subjectivity with disturbing aesthetic practices. I employ the concept of co-existence to link “extreme” cinematic affect to a feminist mode of haptic spectatorship. The affective viscosity of New Extremist films encourages a haptic spectatorial vision that includes a compassionate emotional, physical and psychological proximity to female suffering.

The function of the pregnant woman as a metaphor for the French body politic in *Irréversible* has several political and ethical dimensions that allow the film to construct a complex structure of female suffering and post-colonial critique. In one respect, this woman partially embodies the white, heterosexual, bio-politically “normal” subject who is violated by an “other” from the exterior. However, in a more important sense the formal design and narrative structure of the film encourage spectators to adopt an attitude of sympathetic compassion toward her suffering, enacting a Nancean co-existence with her pain in its gendered and sexually differentiated aspects. Her rape, presented in the film as a gendered and sexual differentiated form of suffering, characterizes her as a bio-politically minoritarian subject despite her proximity to normative subjectivity. This particular female subject is thus not a straightforward embodiment of the normative body politic, especially as she is “abnormalized” by her gendered suffering and pregnant status.

In *À l'intérieur*, “others” arising from both the interior and exterior of the body violate the heterosexual, bio-politically “normal” pregnant female subject. The extremely brutal depiction of female suffering encourages spectators to engage in a disturbed co-existence

with the film, establishing a proximity that I describe in Nancean terms as a sympathetic and bio-politically aware mode of co-existing with female pain. Through form and narrative, *À l'intérieur* also employs female suffering to critique the exclusionary dimensions of the French body politic; namely, the suffering of the pregnant female protagonist exposes the fact that the other is already interior to the body (politic). In both films, the deployment of visceral affect makes the bio-political dimensions of female suffering visible. This affective visibility engenders shocks to thought that encourage spectators to become aware of the ways in which the suffering of pregnant female bodies intersects with post-colonial political discourse in French society.

My explorations of *Irréversible* and *À l'intérieur* connect assaults on pregnant women to the ontological relations of subjects with one another within the context of the French national community. However, the political and ethical perspectives of these films on female embodiment and pregnancy have resonances for the wider Western cultural and political landscape in which France is situated. For example, the current political battles in the U.S. over women's rights to bodily control and reproductive health (what I referred to in the introductory chapters as a War on Women<sup>21</sup>) reveal the widespread prevalence of contentious

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<sup>21</sup> In 2013 and 2014, debates over fetal personhood and reproductive rights loomed large in the U.S. political landscape. In 2013 alone, the states of North Carolina, North Dakota, Texas and Wisconsin passed or attempted to pass legislation banning abortion after 20 weeks, or in some cases after the detection of a fetal heartbeat. A Republican Party-sponsored nationwide bill banning abortion after 20 weeks passed the House of Representatives in July 2013. Increased medical requirements have also led to the widespread closing of abortion clinics and reproductive health centers across various states (Eckholm 2013; "North Carolina: Abortion Curbs Await Governor's Decision" 2013; Peters 2013; "Requirement for Abortion Providers in Wisconsin Is Blocked by a Federal Judge" 2013; Schwartz 2013).

debates surrounding female bodily status in the Western world. As I will explore in the contexts of *Irréversible* and *À l'intérieur*, these current political debates surrounding the rights of female subjects to bodily self-determination manifest themselves within the narratives and aesthetic designs of the cinema of exposure.

I begin by giving brief overviews of French New Extremism as a contemporary cinematic trend, as well as pregnancy in U.S. and European horror and thriller films. I also detail feminist thinking on pregnant embodiment and its relationship to contemporary Western understandings of political subjectivity and community. I then explore the ways in which understandings of ethical co-existence and pregnant embodiment relate to the suffering of pregnant women in the cinema of exposure, which I demonstrate by focusing on the specific aesthetic designs and narrative trajectories of *Irréversible* and *À l'intérieur*.

### **French New Extremism**

Along with Chapter 4, this chapter focuses on what scholars and critics commonly refer to as New Extremist cinema. (The cinema of exposure is a mode of imaging female suffering in a feminist bio-political and ethical manner, and thus may occur in New Extremist and body horror cinemas without being synonymous with either.) French New Extremism is a contemporary cinematic trend and field of critical and scholarly interest. New Extremist cinema gained in popularity (and notoriety) in France in the mid to late 1990s, as directors such as Catherine Breillat, Claire Denis, Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi, Bruno Dumont, Philippe Grandrieux, Gaspar Noé, Jacques Nolot, François Ozon and Marina de

Van, among others, began featuring scenes of explicit sex and violence in their films.<sup>22</sup> New Extremist narratives commonly center on violence and its repercussions and sexual relations in crisis, often combining the two to startling effect. Stylistically, the visceral aesthetics of the films mirror their disturbing subject matter. Although New Extremist films do not share a specific stylistic approach to their material, they do share a tendency to depict violence and sexuality in stark and brutal manners. In this sense the style of these films constitutes an integral element of their subject matter, in that it reflects and offers commentary upon events in the diegeses.

Critic James Quandt coined the term “New Extremism” in a famously inflammatory article excoriating the movement for its explicit use of sex and violence to no apparent purpose. Quandt argues that the visceral aesthetics of New Extremist films do not have the same claim to political progressiveness held by earlier “extreme” films from the 1960s and 1970s. According to Quandt, New Extremist films express a morally bankrupt form of nihilism that repels audiences without offering any productive critiques of contemporary social or political conditions. After singling out and dismissing numerous New Extremist films for their

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22 French New Extremist films by these filmmakers include *5x2* (François Ozon, 2004); *À ma sœur!/Fat Girl* (Catherine Breillat, 2001); *Les Amants Criminels/Criminal Lovers* (François Ozon, 1999); *Anatomie de l'infer/Anatomy of Hell* (Catherine Breillat, 2005); *Baise-moi/Fuck Me* (Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi, 2000); *Carne* (Gaspar Noé, 1991); *La chatte à deux têtes/Porn Theater* (Jacques Nolot, 2002); *Dans ma peau/In My Skin* (Marina de Van, 2001); *Enter the Void* (Gaspar Noé, 2009); *L'humanité* (Bruno Dumont, 1999); *L'Intrus/The Intruder* (Claire Denis, 2007); *Irréversible* (Gaspar Noé, 2002); *Un lac/A Lake* (Philippe Grandrieux, 2008); *Regarde la mer/See the Sea* (François Ozon, 1997); *Romance* (Catherine Breillat, 1999); *Seul contre tous/I Stand Alone* (Gaspar Noé, 1998); *Sex is Comedy* (Catherine Breillat, 2002); *Sombre* (Philippe Grandrieux, 1998); *Trouble Every Day* (Claire Denis, 2001); *Twentynine Palms* (Bruno Dumont, 2003); and *La vie nouvelle/A New Life* (Philippe Grandrieux, 2002).

insistent need “to break every taboo, to wade in rivers of viscera and spumes of sperm, to fill each frame with flesh...and subject it to all manner of penetration, mutilation, and defilement” (2004, 127-8), Quandt concludes that the “authentic, liberating outrage – political, social, sexual – that fueled such apocalyptic visions as *Salò* and *Weekend* now seems impossible, replaced by an aggressiveness that is really a grandiose form of passivity” (2004, 132).

Academic film scholars have proved more amenable to the disconcerting subject matter and style of French New Extremist cinema. Beugnet draws a compelling connection between the “excessive” aesthetics of New Extremist cinema and an anti-capitalist ethics of embodiment in *Cinema and Sensation: French Film and the Art of Transgression* (2007 [2001]). She argues that the synaesthetic brutality of what she terms the “cinema of sensation” offers spectators access to a sensual ethics realized in and through bodily response rather than disembodied, rational thought processes. Beugnet defines this ethics as one that valorizes excess in order to combat a capitalist utilitarianism that objectifies human bodies for profit. According to Beugnet, the bodily shocks provided by the disturbing aesthetics of the cinema of sensation “undermine the very distinction between subject and object...indifference, detachment, are thus offset by sensual empathy and embodiment” (2007, 58-9). In this regard the “extreme” violence depicted in the films proves to be a necessary correlate to the social critiques presented in their narratives, as this violence “is simply the irreducible echo of the inexcusable suffering that takes place in our reality, the manifestation of that which remains in ‘excess’ of historical and moral reasoning” (Beugnet 2007, 46). Beugnet relates the aesthetics of the cinema of sensation to an anti-capitalist ethics in an extremely

productive manner that is unique in its proposal that spectators' bodily sensations produce ethical thought.

Tim Palmer approaches New Extremist cinema from a more practical level in *Brutal Intimacy: Analyzing Contemporary French Cinema* (2011). Palmer defines New Extremism, or what he terms the *cinéma du corps*, as “an on-screen interrogation of physicality in brutally intimate terms” (2011, 57). He discusses at length the innovations and experiments in formal devices such as digital photography and sound that allow New Extremist films to image events onscreen in increasingly startling manners.

In addition to the work of Beugnet and Palmer, recent edited collections such as *Rape in Art Cinema* (ed. Dominique Russell, 2010) and *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe* (eds. Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall, 2011) also indicate an increasing interest in and critical re-evaluation of New Extremist cinema. This literature addresses a wide array of the thematic and stylistic elements of French New Extremist films, without concentrating specifically on spectators' bio-political and ethical relationship to female suffering. More work remains to be done on how violent assaults on women relate to the bio-political landscapes envisioned within these films, as well as the circumstances of their production and consumption. It is with this lacuna in mind that I turn my attention to spectators' political and ethical relationship to female suffering in *Irréversible* and *À l'intérieur* (and, in

Chapter 4, *Ne te retourne pas* and *Baise-moi*). However, first I will provide a brief overview of pregnancy in Western horror film and feminist thought.

### **Pregnancy in Horror Film and Feminist Thinking on Pregnant Embodiment**

Depictions of pregnancy necessarily differ according to the stylistic and narrative specificities of the films in question, as well as the time period and socio-cultural context of production. However, the treatment of pregnancy within Western horror and thriller genres provides the best point of comparison with New Extremist films.<sup>23</sup> Writings on pregnancy in film by Teresa de Lauretis (1984), Jean-Louis Baudry (1976) and Gaylyn Studlar (1988) discuss the ideological import of cinematic representations of the maternal and familial. However, they fail to address the aesthetic and affective properties of pregnant bodies in film, or how these relate to the political and ethical concerns of the films in question (Fischer 1996, 24-7). As Lucy Fischer notes, the existing literature on pregnancy in film commonly argues that the fear of pregnant and maternal bodies expressed within the horror genre reflects the ideological context in which these films are made; namely, Western societies that view pregnancy as a liminal, unnatural and repulsive bodily state (1996, 22, 24-7). Barbara Creed has persuasively argued that, within Western culture, the pregnant or maternal body serves as a monstrous agent of castration who demonizes female reproductive power (1993).

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<sup>23</sup> Western horror and thriller films featuring pregnancy include *Absence* (Jimmy Loweree, 2013); *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979); *Baby Blood/The Evil Within* (Alain Robak, 1990); *The Brood* (David Cronenberg, 1979); *Children of Men* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2006); *Embryo* (Ralph Nelson, 1976); *Eraserhead* (David Lynch, 1977); *Frontière(s)/Border(s)* (Xavier Gens, 2007); *Grace* (Paul Solet, 2009); *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* (Curtis Hanson, 1992); *Hell Baby* (Robert Ben Garant and Thomas Lennon, 2013); *It Lives Again* (Larry Cohen, 1978); *It's Alive* (Josef Rusnak, 2008); *It's Alive* (Larry Cohen, 1974); *It's Alive III: Island of the Alive* (Larry Cohen, 1987); *Lemming* (Dominik Moll, 2005); *Prometheus* (Ridley Scott, 2012); *Rosemary's Baby* (Roman Polanski, 1968); and *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn, Part 1* (Bill Condon, 2011).

More recently, Kelly Oliver has provided a wide-ranging exploration of the political and ideological functions of pregnant bodies within contemporary Hollywood genre films (2012).

The suffering of pregnant bodies in French New Extremist films such as *Irréversible* and *À l'intérieur* departs from that of other horror films regarding the trope of monstrosity. Instead of presenting pregnant bodies as anomalous threats *to* the social order, these films emphasize the threats to pregnant bodies that arise *from* the social order itself. This shift gestures towards revisionist understandings of pregnant and maternal embodiment within feminist philosophy and cultural theory. I will briefly outline the thinking of Simone de Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva and Iris Marion Young on the subject of pregnant embodiment.

Revisionist feminist understandings of pregnant embodiment are premised on the fact that classical Western theories of subjectivity excluded pregnant bodies from what was considered a “normal” mode of being. Michelle Boulous Walker argues that Western male philosophers often position the maternal woman as a figure of pure alterity, “othered” and excluded from the category of the proper subject because she complicates ontological norms of the solitary and unified self (1998, 9). Ambiguous or liminal bodily states such as pregnancy haunt the borders of the ideal Western subject, establishing its boundaries but also threatening to disrupt and destabilize its hegemonic status. The statuses of women as subjects are altered by changes in their physicality, a situation that discloses the bio-political construction of female bodily subjectivity.

Beauvoir understood the pregnant body as a battleground between the woman and the fetus in which the woman becomes “other,” both to others and to herself. In *The Second Sex* (1974 [1949]), Beauvoir argues that a pregnant woman’s subjectivity is structured by her womb, forcing the woman to occupy the position of the “other” in relation to “normal” non-pregnant subjects. According to Beauvoir, this internal alterity arises from the invasion of the fetus, figured here as an unwelcome intruder into the female body. Beauvoir describes this invasion by the fetus as an attack by a foreign, parasitic “species” that “batters upon” the pregnant woman, who “feels that she herself is no longer anything” (1974, 543, 25, 553) but her pregnancy. “Disgust and horror, then, are the tropes with which Beauvoir stages this confrontation between man and his Other” (Zerilli 1992, 126), at once exposing patriarchal fears of the pregnant female body while also reluctant herself to part with the metaphysical ideal of the isolated and autonomous subject.<sup>24</sup>

Kristeva shares with Beauvoir what Linda Zerilli terms “the view that the maternal body is the site of a radical splitting of the female subject” (1992, 113). However, Beauvoir and Kristeva have vastly different views on the ontological nature of this split, for, as Zerilli goes on to explain: “Beauvoir’s fairly horrific vision of maternity as a process devoid of female agency bespeaks what appears to be her nostalgia for a sovereign subject whose unity and claim to mastery have been challenged by postmodern theorists like Kristeva” (1992, 111-12). In Kristeva’s alternative understanding of pregnancy, the splitting or fragmentation of the pregnant woman is due to her negotiation of the tension between nature and culture,

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<sup>24</sup> See Betterton 2006; Hird 2007; and Lundquist 2008 for further analyses of Beauvoir’s understanding of pregnancy.

rather than fetal invasion: “a mother-woman is rather a strange ‘fold’ which turns nature into culture, and the ‘speaking subject’ into biology...this heterogeneity, which cannot be subsumed by the signifier, literally explodes with pregnancy – the dividing line between nature and culture” (1985, 149).

Young also conceives of the pregnant female body as a split subject. She employs the phenomenological writings of Merleau-Ponty, as well as those of Adrienne Rich (1976) and her own personal accounts of being pregnant, to explore pregnancy as a bodily experience. Young argues that the female subject is “split” or “doubled” by the unique bodily state conferred by pregnancy, which “challenges the integration of my body experience by rendering fluid the boundary between what is within, myself, and what is outside, separate. I experience my insides as the space of another, yet my own body” (2005, 49). Anxiety often attends this splitting or doubling; as Young explains, “[e]specially if this is her first child she experiences the birth as a transition to a new self that she may both desire and fear. She fears a loss of identity, as though on the other side of the birth she herself became a transformed person, such that she would ‘never be the same again’” (2005, 55).<sup>25</sup> As I argue in relation to *Irréversible* and *À l’intérieur*, the feminist understanding of pregnancy as an encounter

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<sup>25</sup> More recently, feminist scholars have exhibited a renewed interest in the corporeal and emotional dimensions of pregnancy, labor, post-partum experiences and motherhood, undertaking various studies that address issues such as body image, eating habits, physical transformations and maternal-fetal relationships. See Bailey 2001; Casper 1997; Clark et al. 2009; DiPietro et al. 2004; Gross 2010; Johnson 2010; Johnson, Burrows and Williamson 2004; Lymer 2011; Malson and Swann 2003; Markens, Browner and Press 1997; Nicolson 1998 and 1999; Nicolson, Fox and Heffernan 2010; Shaw 2007; and Warren and Brewis 2004.

between a host and an invader (or, at least a foreigner) is reflected in metaphorical understandings of the French nation.

### ***L'enceinte parisienne* and the Post-colonial French Body Politic**

Ben McCann observes that “the Parisian border has been traditionally referred to as *l'enceinte parisienne* – or the ‘pregnant Parisian woman’” (2008, 232).<sup>26</sup> Guy Austin also notes the resurgence of the concept of *l'enceinte parisienne* in recent French political life:

The iconography of motherhood and of newborn infants – in part a legacy of Catholicism – was employed by the Vichy regime and at the Liberation. As recently as February 2010, in an echo of such iconography, government investment publicity presented the image of a pregnant Marianne under the slogan “La France investit dans son avenir [“France invests in its future”].” ...Marianne was dressed in white and seemed to incarnate the joys of motherhood as well as its future benefits for the nation (2012, 106).

Nancy concurs with this description of the French body politic as *l'enceinte parisienne* by arguing that, ever since Jean-Jacques Rousseau developed his concept of the social contract in the mid-eighteenth century, the French national community has been “made up principally of the sharing, diffusion, or *impregnation* of an identity by a plurality wherein each member identifies himself only through the supplementary mediation of his identification with the living body of the community” (1991, 9 [italics mine]).

This conflation of the pregnant female body with the real and ideological spaces of the city and nation lends credence to my argument that the suffering undergone by the pregnant female protagonists in *Irréversible* and *À l'intérieur* allegorizes violence within the contemporary French body politic. Specifically, I argue that the suffering of the pregnant

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<sup>26</sup> See also Olivier 2007.

female protagonists in both films embodies the socio-political exclusion of bio-political “others.”

Historians trace the exclusivity of the national community in France to its republican system of governance, which involves a centralization of political authority that places a high premium on egalitarianism in the public sphere. This republican egalitarianism has impacted national attitudes towards subjects who demonstrate physical markers of difference, such as racial, ethnic and sexual minorities. Although the spirit of egalitarianism dictates that “in their dealings with the state, individuals should be treated without regard for their religious, national or ethnic origins” (Hargreaves 2007, 192), the emphasis on equality has led to a general unwillingness to recognize the importance of difference in structuring social hierarchies. The insistence on equality and homogeneity obscures practices of discrimination and exclusion, as well as the fact that the “othering” of certain bio-political subjects was necessary for the creation of the modern, post-colonial national community.

*Irréversible* and *À l'intérieur* reveal contemporary political inequalities to be a legacy of France’s post-colonial modernization project, which established a modern national identity on a paradigm of social exclusivity. Kristin Ross describes this undertaking in detail in *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (1995). Ross highlights two important aspects of this modernization drive that are relevant to the depictions of political community in *Irréversible* and *À l'intérieur*: the elevation of

heterosexual coupledness to the status of the ideal social relation, and the pervasive “home in the suburbs” fantasy that motivated these couples to abandon the city for the supposedly safer and more homely suburban and ex-urban areas.

During the post-war and post-colonial period of the 1950s to the 1960s, the middle-class heterosexual couple was presented as the ideal social relation around whom the French nation could rally and establish a modern identity. The idealized heterosexual couple was an especially important element in the drive to assert a sense of national purpose and pride in the wake of France’s defeat in Algeria in 1962. Ross explains that the “construction of the new French couple is not only a class necessity but a *national* necessity as well...called upon to lead France into the future, these couples are the class whose very way of life is based on the wish to make the world futureless and at that price buy security” (1995, 148). This valorization of coupledness in the post-colonial period also entailed a loss of shared ties within the larger national community. The pre-war tendency to organize social life around larger networks of family, friends and community members was replaced by the couple formation (Ross 1995, 127).

Whereas *Irréversible* presents the home of the couple as a space of brief (if temporary and insufficient) respite from a menacing social order, *À l’intérieur* features the full-scale invasion of the domestic sphere by “others” haunting the borders of the imagined national community. I will first discuss how *Irréversible* relies on the figure of the suffering pregnant woman to critique a hierarchical and exclusionary *enceinte parisienne*, as well as enact a feminist spectatorship ethics of compassionate sympathy for female suffering.

### **Rape, Female Embodiment and the Ethics of Sympathy in *Irréversible***

*Irréversible* depicts one harrowing night in the lives of three main characters. Marcus and Alex, a couple played by Vincent Cassel and Monica Bellucci, go to a house party with their friend Pierre (Albert Dupontel), who also happens to be Alex's former lover. The film begins at the end of the diegesis, at a gay S&M club in Paris called the "Rectum," where Marcus and Pierre have gone in search of a pimp known only by the name La Tenia, or "The Tapeworm" (Jo Prestia). La Tenia is a regular at the club who had brutally raped Alex in an underpass earlier that night. The film then proceeds to take spectators through the events of the night in reverse order. Each scene progresses further back in time, depicting the events leading up to and following the crucial rape sequence. The final scene ends at the beginning of the diegetic story: Alex and Marcus leisurely make love in their apartment before going to the party, blissfully unaware of the events to come. The epilogue of the film departs from the diegesis by featuring a pregnant Alex lounging in the park on a sunny day, destabilizing the reality of everything spectators have witnessed.

*Irréversible* met with both acclaim and condemnation upon its premiere at the 2002 Cannes Film Festival. Of the 2,400 people in the audience, over two hundred are reported to have walked out, and over twenty to have fainted or become physically ill ("Cannes Film Sickness Audience" 2002). A Cannes official attending the premiere stated "I've never seen this at the Cannes festival. The scenes in this film are unbearable, even for us professionals" (Society for the Promotion of Community Standards 2003). However, those who did remain until the

end of the screening gave the film a five-minute standing ovation (Society for the Promotion of Community Standards 2003). After its premiere at Cannes, the film became a lightning rod for controversy due to the intense physical, emotional and psychological reactions experienced by spectators at various screenings.

My discussion of *Irréversible* focuses on the links between sexual violence, the gendered body politic and the ethical positions and responsibilities of spectators in relation to female suffering. In terms of sexual violence, the violent behavior towards minoritarian subjects such as women, transsexuals and gay men within the film reflects the reality of a “rape culture”<sup>27</sup> in which dominant patriarchal and heteronormative institutions accept and celebrate the abuse of bio-political “others.” I first describe how this hierarchical bio-political organization is rendered affectively through visceral and gruesome depictions of murder and rape, highlighting the significance of the violation of the pregnant female body. I then address the broader bio-political implications of this violence in the context of contemporaneous French politics, as well as explore how the film positions spectators as political and ethical subjects. I argue that the aesthetics of *Irréversible* encourage an attitude of compassionate sympathy towards the raped and assaulted female protagonist, and that this sympathy constructs a feminist ethics of spectatorship.

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<sup>27</sup> For more information on rape culture or “public rape,” see Horeck 2004.

The rape of Alex reflects the common occurrence of sexual assault in New Extremist cinema.<sup>28</sup> Rape as a plot device often links the bodily violation of subjects to larger biopolitical problematics within France, addressing social prejudices and inequalities relating to sexuality and gender. Several recent works that discuss the general subject of rape in film have relevance to my reading of Alex's rape in *Irréversible*. Sarah Projansky provides an in-depth exploration of cinematic sexual violence in *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture* (2001). Projansky argues that, since the 1980s, a post-feminist discourse hostile to the emancipatory aims of second and third-wave feminisms informs even those films that display a sincerely critical attitude towards rape. Despite their aspirations to feminist critiques of sexual violence, films such as *The Accused* (Jonathan Kaplan, 1988) condone rape culture by drawing causal links between women's independent or "irresponsible" behavior and their rape, blaming women's presence in masculine realms (such as the military) for rape and placing the impetus for legal justice and reform on women (Projansky 2001, 30, 107, 117).

Tanya Horeck broaches the topic of community in her investigation of rape as public spectacle. Horeck defines what she terms "public rape" as "representations of rape that serve as cultural fantasies of power and domination, gender and sexuality, and class and ethnicity" (2004, 3). She argues that these representations reflect Western socio-sexual contracts in which the body politic is both disrupted and united through the act of rape, and outlines the

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<sup>28</sup> Other French New Extremist films featuring rape (of both females and males) include *5x2*, *Les amants criminels*, *À ma sœur!*, *Baise-moi*, *Carne*, *Romance*, *Sombre* and *Twenty-nine Palms*.

role that filmic representations of rape play in creating a community of spectators.

Specifically, Horeck claims that images of rape in mass media constitute “public, collective fantasies” (2004, 9) that reinforce the symbolic and bodily subordination of women – a bio-political hierarchy that I term rape culture.

In my analysis of rape in *Irréversible*, I focus on the opening sequence in the Rectum and La Tenia’s rape of Alex. The physical brutality on display in these sequences, as well as their specific stylistic designs, expose the violent repercussions that social inequalities have on bio-politically minoritarian subjects within the French body politic. These scenes also foreground the ethical dimensions of spectatorship in shocking and unsettling manners.

### *The Rectum*

At the beginning of *Irréversible*, spectators are dragged along with Marcus and Pierre into the bowels of hell. The sequence opens with a wildly careening camera that spirals from the tops of the surrounding buildings down towards the entrance of the Rectum, lending the scene a nerve-wracking, disorienting tone that persists as the camera descends to the level of the club. Before the camera moves underground, spectators hear from the whispers of the men loitering outside that a “blood crime” has occurred, and see the unconscious and battered body of Marcus carried out on a stretcher. Pierre also emerges from the Rectum in police custody. Men who have been drawn to the club by news of a violent altercation taunt Pierre for being a “philosopher shit” who is going to be raped in prison. At this point, spectators do not know what has transpired in the Rectum to lead to such an ignoble conclusion to the two men’s quest for justice. This lack of knowledge augments the

disorienting effect of the unhinged camera, furthering the opaque and ominous tone of the sequence.

The camera briefly joins Pierre in the back of the squad car before cutting to the next scene in the sequence, which occurred immediately prior to Marcus and Pierre's arrest. Spectators gradually realize that the film has transported them into the Rectum as the camera snakes rapidly over red-lit tunnels, affording brief glimpses of fornicating men in its shadowy interiors. Although the murky light renders Marcus and Pierre difficult to see, spectators hear them arguing about the purpose of their hunt for La Tenia. Pierre warns Marcus that he is in danger of losing his humanity if he murders La Tenia, begging him to "Stop. Stop now. You're not a man. You're an animal. Even animals don't seek revenge." Marcus counters that it is his right and duty to avenge Alex's rape.

Marcus weaves his way through the club, penetrating further and further into its depths as he alternatively threatens and pleads with several men to reveal the whereabouts of La Tenia. The camera follows his path closely; it spirals with abandon in his wake, constantly twisting and turning through the dimly lit and narrow passageways of the club to sickening effect. The frenetic movement of the camera, which clings closely to the bodies of Marcus and Pierre in extreme and medium close-ups, prevents spectators from getting a firm grasp on the spatial layout of the club or Marcus's and Pierre's positions within it. The dark lighting also frustrates knowledge: pronounced red, brown and black tinted lights obstruct and obscure

vision rather than facilitate it. This visual confusion adds to spectators' physical and emotional unease as the sequence hurtles towards its sinister conclusion.

Sound also contributes heavily to spectators' aversion to the action onscreen. The soundtrack, which was composed by Thomas Bangalter of the electronic duo Daft Punk, is underpinned by what can be described as a frequency of nausea during the beginning of the film. The opening credits feature a low electronic humming whose tones shift ominously from a steadily throbbing drone to sudden bursts of drumbeating, complimenting the twisting letters of the titles. The Rectum sequence also includes sound that has the effect of disturbing and repelling viewers. Noé explains that this was his intention: "we added these really low waves, infra-waves, so that during the first half of the movie you have a 27-hertz frequency that's usually used in riots to make people run away" ("National Film Theatre Interviews: Gaspar Noé" 2002). This frequency of nausea functions as an aural manifestation of the dystopian atmosphere of the club.

The long duration of the Rectum sequence intensifies this discomfort and confusion by augmenting the wildly disconcerting cinematography and murky visuals. Although the scene in the Rectum is actually composed of several different shots, Noé digitally removed the cuts in post-production to simulate one continuous flow of action ("National Film Theatre Interviews: Gaspar Noé" 2002). The seeming lack of cuts presents the scene as a thirty-minute following shot in which viewers hurtle through the club alongside Marcus and Pierre. Eugenie Brinkema recognizes this spatio-temporal fluidity as the shattering of linear time, creating a Deleuzian crystal-image that she describes as a form of intrusive bodily trauma:

“[t]ime is bending, slowing, speeding. There is no now...[this is] the crystalline explosion of time, of the past. This is time getting fucked in the ass” (2005, 33).

Towards the end of the sequence, a frustrated Marcus approaches two men in the corner of a large room and demands that they take him to La Tenia. Marcus begins to shove one of the men before punching him in the face. Spectators cannot clearly see who is hitting whom due to the low lighting and constantly jerking camera, but can hear bodies hitting one another as a group of men gather excitedly around the fight. Events take a turn for the worse as the man whom Marcus is fighting pins him to the ground and, with a sickening crunch that spectators hear even over the jeers of the crowd, breaks his arm backwards until it sticks out at an unnatural angle. The man then stands over Marcus’s prostrate body and begins to unzip his pants, implying that he is going to rape Marcus. However, Pierre manages to come to the rescue in a rather gruesome fashion. He lunges out of the left side of the frame and bashes the rapist’s face over and over with a metal fire extinguisher, not stopping until his head is a bloody mess on the floor of the club. The long duration of this murder renders it almost unbearable to watch; there are no cuts or fades that would allow spectators to withdraw from the violence, or provide a respite from Pierre’s horrific repetition of blows.

The repugnantly affective aesthetic design of the Rectum sequence criticizes such violence by making it physically sickening for spectators to watch, rather than celebrating it as a morally justified act of revenge presented in a visually pleasing manner. This affective

repulsion sensually evokes the bio-political inequalities presented through the narrative of the film. Specifically, the Rectum sequence images violent sexual hierarchies that preclude any understanding of bodies as intersubjective; that is, as engaged in a Nancean co-existence in which subjects recognize and respect one another for their common differences. This sequence inaugurates in particular the strains of homophobia and sexism that run throughout the film, indicating the extent to which such prejudice permeates attitudes towards particular bio-political subjects (such as gay men, women and transsexuals) who stray from the white, male, heterosexual Western norm.

The constant barrage of homophobic sentiments expressed both by and towards Marcus and Pierre indicate the extent to which prejudice allows men in the Rectum to consider others as objects to be violated. According to Horeck, rape functions as a guarantor of hierarchical social relations such as these by degrading “rapeable” bodies as mere objects without agency or power (2004, 50). The man in the Rectum attempts to establish dominance over Marcus by violently subjugating the latter’s body to his own. This near rape serves as an example of the ways in which rape functions as a spectacle that is, as Horeck states of public rape, “at once essential, yet disruptive to, the social order” (2004, 11). However, Marcus is not a clear “victim” in the film, as he also objectifies and abuses others. In later scenes in which Marcus hunts for La Tenia throughout the city, he loudly vocalizes his homophobia and misogyny. *Irréversible* thus critiques Marcus’s position of prejudice and privilege just as much as it condemns his near rape through repulsive and horrifying affect.

The film refuses to vilify the bio-politically marginalized gay men in the Rectum in a straightforward manner that would mimic Marcus's hierarchical and exclusionary worldview. (In fact, Noé inserted himself into the Rectum sequence as a masturbating gay man in order to pre-empt any charges of demonizing the gay community [Stringer 2003].) For example, the film presents Pierre's response to the threat of violation faced by Marcus as no more socially responsible than the act it prevents. Pierre, the intellectual professor of history who spends the entire night warning Marcus of the futility of his eye-for-an-eye approach to exacting revenge for Alex's rape, is the one who commits the horrific act of violence that mimics La Tenia's repetitive assaults on Alex later in the film. Pierre pummels the face of the man who nearly sodomizes Marcus so many times that his head becomes deformed. Unbeknownst to Pierre and Marcus (and to spectators at this point), La Tenia is in the Rectum when this occurs, watching and cheering from the sidelines. Alex's rapist gazes at Pierre with awe and excitement as the latter murders the club-goer, perhaps reminiscing about the way in which he smashed Alex's blood-drenched head against the pavement in the underpass over and over until she lost consciousness. The fact that the story ends, and the film begins, with such a nihilistic conclusion to Marcus and Pierre's quest for justice allows spectators to bear witness to the futility of violent revenge in challenging a pervasive culture of rape.

The Rectum sequence provides a paradigmatic example of the ways in which *Irréversible* employs repellent affect and spatial hierarchies to represent violent bio-political relations

within the body politic. Both the Rectum and rape of Alex sequences place those bodies occupying the “bottom rungs” of the social hierarchy in subaltern settings: the underground Rectum and the Métro underpass signal a descent into the abnormalized and underprivileged elements that the social order is keen to repress (such as gay culture, sexual abuse and economic disenfranchisement). The fact that the Rectum is located underneath the street gestures towards the social discrimination endured by the gay community, which has literally been forced to occupy an underground space.

Similarly, the setting of La Tenia’s rape of Alex in an underpass below the street renders his assumption of economic inequality between the two in spatial terms. La Tenia’s almost constant references to Alex’s supposed wealth stand out in this sequence; he repeatedly refers to her in terms such as “high-class bitch,” “high-class swine” and “fucking rich bitch.” The perceived economic disparity between Alex and La Tenia in no way excuses his actions. Rather, the film references contemporary socio-economic disparities in France in order to implicate these disparities in the violent lack of co-existence occurring onscreen. Noé himself describes the spatiality of the film as a critique of socio-economic inequalities in the tradition of *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927):

you have an architecture in *Metropolis*...close to the one in my movie. There you have the gutters of the city with the poor people fighting in an underground world [against privileged people living above]. And the people in [*Irréversible*] live in the top of a building, and they seem quite rich, or maybe they have money from a rich family. Alex seems to be living a little bit on her money...So there’s a little bit of rich and poor, up and down, light and dark. (qtd. in Sterritt 2007, 315)

As *Irréversible* progresses, the vertical height of the settings is gradually elevated from the subterranean Rectum. The party Alex leaves before she is raped takes place several stories

up in an apartment building, a height that is emphasized when the three protagonists rise in the elevator to meet their affluent friends. In the epilogue, the film ends with the camera ascending higher and higher, spiraling away from the park where Alex is sunbathing, up and away into the sky. However, before reaching such lofty heights, the camera clings to the suffering and pain of Alex.

### *The Rape of Alex*

During the rape of the pregnant Alex, which occurs after the Rectum sequence in the plot (although it occurs earlier in the diegesis), spectators encounter an explicit assault on the female body. The scene begins late at night as Alex exits a house party alone because she is angry with Marcus for flirting with other women and using cocaine. She tries to hail a taxi, but a woman loitering nearby tells her that the underpass leading to the Métro will be safer. Alex's descent into the underpass exposes spectators to a rather hellish atmosphere in which dim, red-tinted lighting glazes over dirty concrete and graffitied walls. The passageway is empty except for La Tenia, who is pinning one of his prostitutes up against the wall. However, he allows the prostitute to run away as Alex approaches and he turns his violent attentions towards her instead. He puts a knife to her throat, forces her to the ground and anally rapes her for an unbearable nine minutes.

A similarly sickening effect materializes from the rape of Alex as from the scene in the Rectum, although the formal means used to convey this effect are quite different. First of all,

the camera is static as opposed to itinerant, and the shot endures for the entire length of the rape. This anchoring of the camera provides a sharp contrast to the restlessly roving camera and opaque imagery featured in the rest of the film; there are no wild movements or indiscernible visuals to shield spectators from the unremitting violence of the rape. Instead, spectators bear witness to sexual violence without devices of temporal or visual elision that would fragment the rape into more tolerable pieces, or prevent them from having to witness it altogether. Time seems to expand during this scene as the rape goes on and on, testing the limits of what spectators can tolerate. The fixed camera encourages spectators to limit their vision to the horrific immediacy of what is happening on the concrete of the underpass, not allowing for erotic suspense or an omniscient viewpoint – what Metz terms the “generalized striptease” (1982, 77) afforded through a distanced voyeuristic gaze.

The camera is also placed at a low height, roughly approximating the level of Alex’s prostrate body on the bottom of the underpass. The repellent affect of the rape arises from the relentless violence of the entire scene rather than any strict identification or conflation with Alex based on spectators’ spatial approximation of her position. However, the low camera height nevertheless expresses Noé’s attempt to align spectators with Alex, a formal decision that the director justifies in explicitly *ethical* terms as avoiding any possible eroticism arising from sharing the rapist’s point of view (“National Film Theatre Interviews: Gaspar Noé” 2002). During this scene spectators are indeed asked to make an ethical choice: to refrain from identifying with the rapist, and instead sympathize with Alex. This encouragement of choice is rooted in the form of the film itself. As Douglas Keesey notes, “[f]aced with a clear choice, the viewer must emphatically resist the temptation to identify

with the stalker/rapist. It is for this reason that Noé brings an end to the camera's ambivalent movement – lustful versus empathetic – and attempts to ground it for good in empathy with Alex” (2010, 97).

The alignment established between spectators and Alex should not suggest that the camera itself performs the violent act of “raping” spectators into an awareness of the brutal realities of sexual violence. Instead, I understand embodied engagement with Alex's suffering as an ethical form of bearing witness to violence in which spectators physically sympathize with those on whom such violence is inflicted without directly experiencing the invasive penetrations themselves. Spectators engage in a co-existence that is characterized by disturbed compassion – by affective proximity and experiential distance – rather than specular pleasure structured by positions of domination and subordination. This is what Nancy describes as the bodily compassion of co-existence, “the contagion, the contact of being with one another in this turmoil” (2000, xiii). The brutal, yet distanced presentation of rape prohibits what Projansky criticizes as any “comfortable positions for viewing rape” (2001, 118), which, while perhaps easier to watch and less likely to be considered controversial, can also be more ethically problematic for spectators.

In order to facilitate this compassionate co-existence, the spatial positioning of the camera creates what Smith terms a “structure of sympathy” based on processes of spatio-temporal alignment and moral and ethical allegiance. I discussed Smith's “structure of sympathy” in

the introductory chapter, noting that this structure involves the *sharing* of affect, emotion and physical experience, rather than fusion or mimicry. Smith writes that when he as a viewer sympathizes with a character, “I do not simulate or mimic her occurrent mental state. Rather, I understand the protagonist and her context, make a more-or-less sympathetic...judgement of the character, and respond emotionally in a manner appropriate to both the evaluation and the context of the action” (1995, 86).

The term “alignment” connotes a spatio-temporal attachment to certain characters in which “spectators are...provided with visual and aural information more or less congruent with that available to characters” (Smith 1995, 75). Alignment is not necessarily point of view. For example, the camera positioning in the rape scene aligns spectators with Alex’s position without replicating her point of view. The close proximity of the camera to her anguished facial expressions provides a heightened level of access to her subjective experience that would be lacking in a proper point of view shot. Smith identifies visual access to a character’s face as a particularly successful way of fostering an alignment with them, as (in Western thinking) the face is thought to express interior emotional states and exterior corporeal experiences in a more direct and powerful manner than other parts of the body (1995, 159-60). The film also aligns spectators with Alex without conflation in other scenes throughout the film. For instance, Noé often employs following, frontal and over-the-shoulder shots that closely approximate her movements and field of vision. Keesey argues that these following shots encourage a voyeuristic and objectifying relation to Alex (2010, 97). However, I argue that we can understand this intimate engagement with Alex as a form of alignment, rather than scopophilia.

Allegiance involves the spectatorial sympathy that can arise from this alignment, depending on how the film in question constructs certain characters as moral or ethical beings. Smith writes that allegiance:

denotes that level of engagement at which spectators respond sympathetically ...towards a character...It rests upon an evaluation of the character as representing a desirable (or at least, preferable) set of traits, when compared with other characters within the fiction...Thus, when a character to whom I am morally sympathetic is placed in a dangerous situation, I may experience unease or fear for the character. When the sympathetic figure is tortured by a villainous character, I am outraged and frustrated...All of these particular emotions...depend on the underlying sympathetic allegiance. (1995, 62-3)

Allegiance thus comprises a moral evaluation of characters not included in alignment.

However, Smith argues that both allegiance and alignment require spectators to engage emotionally and physically with film without mimetically replicating the emotions or physical events taking place onscreen (1995, 85). Spectators are encouraged to feel an allegiance with Alex, as she is obviously the more sympathetic and morally preferable character in the rape scene. Furthermore, throughout the rest of the film Marcus and Pierre are portrayed as rather immature and obnoxious male companions for Alex, encouraging spectatorial allegiance with her instead of them. For example, in the party sequence previously mentioned, Marcus humiliates Alex by drinking to excess, taking drugs and flirting with other women, while Pierre harasses her about their sexual history. This spectatorial allegiance with Alex is compounded by the camerawork, which aligns spectators with Alex by following her spatial trajectory through the party.

Reception studies research on audience reactions to *Irréversible* suggest that the degree to

which spectators choose to sympathize with Alex's suffering is influenced by their gender or sex. In her study on audience responses to the film, Melanie Selfe reports that most audience members identified "co-violated" and "co-witness" as the positions available for them to occupy. Selfe relates that "although both co-violated and co-witness positions were recurrent features of male embracer responses, for female viewers only the co-witness position seemed to work positively" (2008). She concludes that this gendered split reflects the fact that "[t]he co-violated viewing position, which proved both the most intense and potentially transformative for men, was perhaps too close for comfort for women and less likely to yield any major new insight, thus failing to be worth the ordeal" (Selfe 2008). Although I do not restrict spectatorial positions to either co-violated or co-witness according to gender or sex, these responses indicate that a sympathetic separation from Alex is a viewing strategy employed by women to ethically relate to the suffering female character. An ethical engagement with the rape scene is thus premised on proximity to and distance from female suffering, as well as the choice to reflect critically on this suffering.

Sympathetic compassion for female suffering during the rape scene in *Irréversible* involves physical and emotional forms of engagement in which spectators maintain both an intimate proximity to and an irreducible distance from the experiences of Alex. Spectators are physically and emotionally *compelled* and *repelled* by the scene, in a double movement that simultaneously invites and wards off touch. This tension between proximity and distance allows for a compassionate co-existence with female suffering, the *com* of compassion implying a with-ness, a sharing of emotions and physicality. The affective force of the scene reaches out to touch spectators in a haptic manner, attempting to blur vision and touch.

Alex embodies this striving for haptic compassion as she extends her hand towards the camera in a physical gesture of pain that demands an ethical response from spectators. This compassion allows for the exposure and sharing of physical and emotional pain without fusion or mimesis, or, on the other hand, detachment and alienation. However, Alex fails to actually touch spectators. The failed hapticity of the scene, the invitation to and interdiction against touch, performs an ethical function in allowing for the sensual impact of cinematic images upon the bodies of spectators without completely collapsing the two. This interrupted hapticity constitutes what Marks calls a “look that acknowledges both the physicality and the unknowability of the other” (2002, xviii). Alex’s grasping hand embodies a mode of fractured touch opposed to a violently invasive penetration that destroys the other. According to Nancy, rape constitutes a form of penetration that is a perversion of Alex’s co-existential touch: “[i]f I penetrate the form of a body, I destroy it, I dissolve it as form and then make it into a mass, a rotting or a mass grave.” (2008, 127). La Tenia’s consideration of Alex as “dead meat” presents just such a denial of an ethical co-existence that acknowledges and respects ontological and bodily difference.

In *Cinema 2*, Deleuze asks if we “do...not have a subjective sympathy for the unbearable, an empathy which permeates what we see?” (1989, 18). *Irréversible* encourages spectators to adopt just such an emotionally and physically sympathetic vision towards the unbearable situation faced by women within cultural and political climates that condone violence. The film expresses the unbearable elements of rape culture through visceral aesthetics that

provide spectators with a shock to thought regarding bio-political inequality. In addition to its unbearable aesthetics, the disordered temporality of the film allows the rape of Alex to generate a shock to thought that encourages audiences to reflect critically on the political and ethical dimensions of the events that lead up to and follow it. In fact, Deleuze describes the temporal and spatial trajectory of a raped adolescent girl in *Appunti su un fatto di cronaca/Notes on a True Story* (Luchino Visconti, 1953) in terms that recall the tracking shot of Alex immediately preceding her rape in *Irréversible*: “a slow tracking shot follows the empty path of the raped and murdered schoolgirl, and comes back to the fully present image to load it with a petrified perfect tense, as well as with an inescapable future perfect” (1989, 38). The remainder of *Irréversible* clearly envisions this “inescapable future perfect” of an unbearable rape culture by introducing the events leading up to the rape after the event itself, imbuing the scene with a sense of intolerable inevitability.

However, this intolerability encourages spectatorial solidarity with Alex, rather than nihilistic passivity. Solidarity with Alex stands in opposition to feelings of pity, disgust and shame that spectators may feel for bodies dehumanized through suffering and pain. Solidarity designates a mode of feminist perception in which spectatorial witnesses to suffering and pain are aware of the gendered underpinnings of such violence, and able to sympathize with the female sufferer on account of this awareness. This solidarity fosters an ethical relation of proximate sympathy with the suffering female protagonist of *Irréversible*.

*The “Ideal Couple,” Rape Culture and the Ethics of Co-existence with Female Suffering*

*Irréversible* encourages spectators to sympathize with Alex’s pain and violation, thus affording a feminist solidarity with her on physical and emotional levels. The film also presents her rape as a metaphor for the violent intrusion of the “other” upon the French body politic. In this sense *Irréversible* is akin to the “home invasion” strand of the horror genre (of which *À l’intérieur* is a more straightforward example),<sup>29</sup> in that the white, middle-class, heterosexual body of the pregnant Alex substitutes as the “dwelling place,” or the invaded home of the French national community – *l’enceinte parisienne*.

In the introduction to this chapter, I argued that Ross presents the ideal (white, middle-class, heterosexual) couple and the “home in the suburbs” fantasy as ideological constructs through which the post-colonial French body politic excluded its bio-political “others” in the interest of modernization (1995, 127, 148). *Irréversible* exposes the ideal couple and the home in the suburbs fantasy as racist, sexist and homophobic denials of co-existence and bio-political difference.

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<sup>29</sup> Other horror and thriller home invasion films include *Black Christmas* (Bob Clark, 1974; Glen Morgan, 2006); *La casa sperduta nel parco/The House on the Edge of the Park* (Ruggero Deodato, 1980); *A Clockwork Orange* (Stanley Kubrick, 1971); *The Collector* (Marcus Dunstan, 2009); *Desperate Hours* (Michael Cimino, 1990); *Firewall* (Richard Loncraine, 2006); *Funny Games* (Michael Haneke, 1997); *Funny Games U.S.* (Michael Haneke, 2007); *Hard Candy* (David Slade, 2005); *Haute Tension/Switchblade Romance* (Alexandre Aja, 2003); *Hostage* (Florent-Emilio Siri, 2005); *If I Die Before I Wake* (Brian Katkin, 1998); *Ils/Them* (David Moreau and Xavier Palud, 2006); *Lakeview Terrace* (Neil LaBute, 2008); *The Last House on the Left* (Wes Craven, 1972; Dennis Iliadis, 2009); *Pacific Heights* (Joel Schlesinger, 1990); *Panic Room* (David Fincher, 2002); *The Purge* (James DeMonaco, 2013); *Secuestrados/Kidnapped* (Miguel Ángel Vivas, 2010); *The Strangers* (Bryan Bertino, 2008); *Straw Dogs* (Sam Peckinpah, 1971; Rod Lurie, 2011); *Trespass* (Joel Schumacher, 2011); *Wait Until Dark* (Terence Young, 1967); and *When A Stranger Calls* (Fred Walton, 1979; Simon West, 2006).

The film presents Marcus and Alex as a seemingly ideal couple in the penultimate scene of the film, in which they are lounging in bed before the party. The intimacy between the two lends the scene a romantic, oneiric quality that sets it apart from the explicit violence and aggressive aesthetics featured in the rest of the film. In this way the film hyperbolizes the divorce of personal lives from socio-political inequality and exclusion, as the focus of upper-middle class life moves inward to the “interior of a new vision of conjugality and an ideology of happiness” (Ross 1995, 11). The choice of Cassel and Bellucci as the main actors is important regarding this ideology of coupledness. Cassel and Bellucci were married at the time of filming and often appeared in films together, furnishing them with the status of an “ideal couple.”<sup>30</sup> Although born in Italy, Bellucci in particular is considered a “national muse” and cultural icon in France (Keesey 2010, 98). In the immediate post-war period, celebrity couples such as philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre and Beauvoir and actors Yves Montand and Simone Signoret were considered ideal couples (Ross 1995, 128-33). The inclusion and critique of the ideal couple construct in *Irréversible* suggests that a national desire to inhabit a utopian domestic space away from social and political problems prevails.

The critique of the fantasy of escape into the suburbs in *Irréversible* compliments that of the idealized heterosexual couple. In its sanitized presentation of heteronormative family values, the epilogue of the film provides a sarcastic commentary on the ability of normative subjects to escape the dystopian cityscape of Paris: a pregnant Alex appears in an overhead shot as

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<sup>30</sup> Bellucci and Cassel separated in 2013. They also appeared together in *Agents Secrets/Secret Agents* (Frédéric Schoendoerffer, 2004); *L'appartement/The Apartment* (Gilles Mimouni, 1996); *Come mi vuoi/As You Want Me* (Carmine Amoroso, 1997); *Compromis* (Sébastien Sort, 1998); *Dobermann* (Jan Kounen, 1997); *Méditerranées* (Philippe Bérenger, 1999); *Le pacte des loups/Brotherhood of the Wolf* (Christophe Gans, 2001); *Le plaisir (et ses petits tracas)/Pleasure (And Its Little Inconveniences)* (Nicolas Boukhrief, 1998); and *Sheitan* (Kim Chapiron, 2006).

she reclines in a brightly lit, verdant park. She and the other white parents look on as their children play in the sprinkler. This scene is completely devoid of the signifiers of “abnormal” difference or vice redolent throughout the rest of the film. The camera movement slowly begins to mimic the rotations of the sprinkler, spiraling around faster and faster as it tilts up and away into the sky to the tune of Beethoven’s Symphony No. 7 in A major. The park eventually becomes a pulsing white screen. The scene then cuts to black, and spectators are offered the parting wisdom that “Le temps détruit tout” (“Time destroys all things”), one of the first lines spoken in the film.

This final scene critiques the teleological claims of modernity to socio-economic progression and its promises of inclusive wealth and happiness. The dizzying “white flight” from social chaos and sexual and economic inequalities enacted by the ascent of the camera into the sky indicates an inconceivable future apart from the all-pervasive violence of the diegesis. Ross describes this national fantasy as “a world where all sedimentation of social experience has been leveled or smoothed away, where poverty has been reabsorbed... a world where class conflict is a thing of the past, the stains of contradiction washed out in a superhuman hygienic effort, by new levels of abundance and equitable distribution” (1995, 11). Although post-war socio-economic conditions in France necessarily differ from those in the early 2000s, the inequalities witnessed in *Irréversible* expose the failure of modernization to realize its avowed national utopia founded on social equality and widespread wealth. Instead, the film depicts a bio-political order rife with socio-economic disparity and violence,

dictated by what Lee Edelman describes as a form of “reproductive futurism” in which the pregnant woman and expected child express “the fetishistic fixation of heteronormativity” (2004, 21).

This intensely violent conflict is not confined to the threats presented to Alex’s pregnant body in the form of La Tenia. The absence of responsibility towards others also invades the ideal couple of Marcus and Alex. The diegesis and temporal structure of the film emphasizes the lack of co-existence between Marcus and Alex by drawing overt parallels between Marcus and La Tenia. For example, the two men share an objectifying and demeaning attitude toward Alex. After learning of the rape, Marcus does not rush to see Alex in the hospital, even though she is in a coma and may not live through the night. Instead, he drags Pierre along on his hunt for La Tenia, oblivious to the latter’s admonitions that he cut the “B-movie revenge crap” that “won’t make Alex any better.” Marcus regards Alex as a piece of property, whose violation must be punished because it is more a crime against him rather than against her. When Marcus hires two hit men to find and kill Alex’s rapist, it becomes apparent that his quest for revenge is motivated by the need to affirm his own masculinity. One of the hired killers first assures Marcus of his right to hunt down and punish Alex’s rapist, asserting that “Blood calls for revenge. Vengeance is a human right.” When Marcus seems unsure, the man taunts him by saying that “This is a man’s business. No pussies allowed.” The insinuation that Marcus will forfeit his masculinity if he does not murder La Tenia finally convinces him of the need to do so, a decision that cements his proprietary attitude towards Alex and perpetration of violence in the name of male privilege.

Marcus is not the only person who assumes that he owns Alex. La Tenia refers repeatedly to Alex's "man" while raping her, and seems to take more pleasure from the violation of another man's property than from the rape itself. Alex operates as a mere object of exchange circulating between Marcus, La Tenia and also Pierre, who is still infatuated with her and eager to discuss their sex life before she began dating Marcus. None of the men in the film views Alex as a subject with a status equal to their own; they must instead reduce her to an object of sexual desire or a target for violence in order to interact with her.

Along with Marcus's domineering attitude toward Alex, the reversed chronology of the film suggests his similarities to La Tenia by implicating him in a rape culture structured and sustained through the physical and ideological subordination of female bodies. Marcus's acts of physical and verbal intimidation after the rape, which spectators encounter before the rape itself, gesture towards the pervasiveness of a rape mentality in which women and sexual minorities are constantly subjected to the threat of violence. For example, La Tenia screams various derogatory sexual terms at Alex while he is raping her, and Marcus employs strikingly similar language as he hurls racist, misogynistic and homophobic epithets at cabbies, prostitutes and patrons of the Rectum in his desperate hunt for La Tenia. In particular, Marcus's threats of violence towards a transsexual street prostitute echo La Tenia's abuse of Alex to a frightening degree. Both La Tenia and Marcus pin their victims against alley or underpass walls and hold sharp objects to their throats (La Tenia has a knife, and Marcus uses a shard of broken glass) as a means of harassment and intimidation. These

visual and behavioral parallels between Marcus and La Tenia make clear that any attempt at ethical reparation through violence only perpetuates the suffering that it is supposed to redress, rather than leading to any sort of justice or redemption. (I also identified this conflation of the “good” male partner with the “bad” intruder in films such as *Wait Until Dark* and *Antichrist*. Each film exposes the patriarchal conspiracy of a “male protection racket” [Coppock et al. 1995, 32] as a contributing factor to female suffering in situations of domestic violence.)

Furthermore, the scene of Marcus and Alex having sex at home before the party has a menacingly premonitory resonance that would be lacking if the scene did not follow La Tenia’s rape of Alex. Alex and Marcus lounge naked in bed before Pierre calls to remind them of their plans. Marcus taunts Alex with the notion that she must “pay” him sexually for having to spend the evening with her ex-boyfriend, telling her “You decide, you pay.” Although presented in a jesting manner, this suggestion of sexual coercion, along with Alex’s cries for Marcus to stop, proves a distressing harbinger of the rape to come, which spectators have already witnessed and which casts Marcus’s behavior in a sinister light. Marcus then voices a desire to have anal sex with Alex (“I wanna fuck your ass”), a remark that aligns his desire with La Tenia’s later sodomizing of Alex, as well as the comments the latter makes during the rape (“I’m gonna fuck your ass”).

*Irréversible* depicts a bio-political order devoid of any ethics of shared existence or responsibility, even between members of the “ideal” couple. The film envisions a hierarchical bio-political structure that violently punishes and excludes “othered” subjects in

order to maintain positions of domination and subordination. This structural lack of co-existence is echoed in the film's portrayal of social interactions and intimate personal relationships in which "[t]he Self remains alone in itself even as it emerges out of itself. What is properly lacking or passed over in this false emergence is the moment of the *with*" (Nancy 2000, 78).

However, *Irréversible* does not pass over this ethical co-existence on the levels of aesthetic design and affective impact, in that these encourage spectators to adopt a position of sympathetic compassion towards the suffering female protagonist. As I now discuss, *À l'intérieur* also employs the suffering of its pregnant female protagonist to critique inequality and exclusion within the post-colonial French body politic, as well as enact a feminist spectatorship ethics of sympathetic and compassionate co-existence.

***“Ouvre-moi ta porte...que je t’ouvre le ventre”<sup>31</sup>: À l'intérieur and the Other***

The advertising tagline of *À l'intérieur* quoted above succinctly summarizes its employment of the pregnant female body as a metaphor for the embattled French body politic. The gruesome and prolonged evisceration of the pregnant body by a figure of otherness confronts spectators with a bloody bio-political and ethical encounter with female suffering.

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<sup>31</sup> “Open your door...so I can open your womb” [Translation mine]

Like *Irréversible*, the events of *À l'intérieur* take place in a single night. Sarah (Alysson Paradis) is a photojournalist and expectant mother whose husband died in a car crash four months previously. Sarah was driving the car when it crashed, and is heartbroken and bitter as a result of this cruel twist of fate. She demands to be left alone in her house on the outskirts of Paris the night before she undergoes an induced birth. However, the quiet night at home Sarah had planned takes a turn for the worse when she is visited by La Femme (Béatrice Dalle), a stranger determined to take Sarah's fetus at any cost. A bloody battle involving guns, knives, spears and knitting needles ensues as Sarah tries to defend herself and her fetus from La Femme. However, Sarah's efforts are doomed to failure in the face of La Femme's increasingly vicious attacks. The body count eventually includes Sarah's mother, her boss, three policemen, an innocent bystander and finally Sarah herself.

My discussion of *À l'intérieur* attends to pregnant female embodiment as it intersects with the bio-political norms of the French body politic and the political and ethical positions of spectators in relation to female suffering. *À l'intérieur* explores this intersection through the destruction of the pregnant body and the home, which usually function as sites of security that physically separate the interior from the exterior. I argue that the stranger La Femme serves as a violent and destructive manifestation of Sarah's fetus, thus presenting the pregnant body as a painful battleground between ideal normalcy and abnormal alterity – like Alex's body in *Irréversible*, an embodied metaphor for the French body politic.

However, a key difference is that, in *À l'intérieur*, alterity arises from both within *and* without the pregnant female body, resulting in a different conception of the role of the “other” within the imagined national community. Drawing on recent scholarship on the

gendered and sexually differentiated facets of pregnant embodiment and subjectivity, I argue that the presentation of the pregnant body as a battle between fetal invader(s) and female host has overt bio-political and ethical dimensions from the perspectives of feminism and post-colonialism. This battle takes on added bio-political resonance when we consider that the action of *À l'intérieur* is set against the backdrop of the autumn 2005 riots in Paris, which found the disenfranchised immigrant citizens of the *banlieues*<sup>32</sup> facing off against the police and conservative government.

#### *The Fetal Intruder and the Pregnant Body Politic*

Beauvoir's understanding of the fetus as an invasive "other" finds a cinematic manifestation in the battles between Sarah, her fetus and La Femme in *À l'intérieur*. The film participates in a discourse of fetal personhood by horrifically personifying the fetus in the figure of La Femme, in order to position both as unwelcome intruders upon the body of Sarah. The film derives much of its shocking affect from this personification, which gruesomely allegorizes the experience of childbirth as an invasion and evisceration of the female body by an unknown "other." The juxtaposition of this personification with the 2005 Paris riots also gestures toward the attitude of the body politic towards welcoming invasive "outsiders." Before La Femme enters the diegesis, *À l'intérieur* draws on an iconography of fetal personhood by privileging ultrasonographic images of the fetus. The opening shots of the

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<sup>32</sup> The term *banlieues* designates suburban communities outside of major cities in France. Rioting has routinely taken place in those *banlieues* experiencing high levels of poverty, discrimination and social exclusion. The 2005 riots referenced in *À l'intérieur* took place in Clichy-sous-Bois, a Parisian *banlieue* composed largely of citizens of African descent.

film show a fetus inside a womb, accompanied by a muffled voice that spectators assume to be Sarah's (they do not learn until the end of the film that La Femme was pregnant as well). The voice assures herself in soft tones that her baby is "finally inside me. No one will take him from me. No one can hurt him now. No one," right before spectators see the fetus slam against the wall of its mother's stomach from the impact of the car crash. Throughout the film, and especially during the height of La Femme's attacks on Sarah, the camera cuts to shots inside the womb eleven times. These shots depict the fully developed fetus as a person registering human emotions such as fear and anxiety. The film employs these sonogram images to draw overt parallels between the fetus and La Femme. For example, the images of La Femme breaking the glass windows of Sarah's house mimic the fetus slamming against the wall of the womb in various shots. The indeterminacy of Sarah's murky, underdeveloped photographs of La Femme resemble the sonogram images of Sarah's fetus that spectators glimpse while she is at the hospital at the beginning of the film.

Feminist scholars in the medical and social sciences have noted that the increased use of ultrasonographic technology beginning in the 1940s contributed to a disembodiment of pregnancy, as it privileged visible evidence of pregnancy over the pregnant women's more tactile and kinesthetic mode of relating to the fetus. This technological development had the somewhat paradoxical effect of encouraging pregnant women to understand pregnancy as an invasion of their bodies. In addition, the concurrent medicalization of pregnancy as an "illness" requiring treatment and surveillance led pregnant women to de-emphasize their embodied relation to the fetus (Barker 1998; Betterton 2006; Crossley 2007; Lyerly 2006;

McLeod and Baylis 2006; Nicolson et al. 2010; Ruddick 2007; and Young 2005).<sup>33</sup> In some cases, sonogram technology elided the pregnant female body altogether. Myra J. Hird writes that:

The foetal iconography inaugurated by the 1965 publication of *Life* magazine, and so familiar today, depicts the foetus as an autonomous being. As Katz Rothman describes, "...the fetus in utero has become a metaphor for 'man' in space, floating free, attached only by the umbilical cord to the spaceship. But where is the mother in that metaphor? She has become empty space" (in Smyth, 2005: 29. See also Duden, 1993). Through a disciplinary and political framework interested in dominating nature and controlling 'life' via observation and management, the foetus as autonomous embodiment has been severed from the mother, whose own autonomy has been fundamentally questioned. (2007, 15)<sup>34</sup>

Technological developments conferring personhood upon the fetus and de-emphasizing the embodied subjectivity of the pregnant woman have been augmented by recent court cases in the U.S. and France ruling that fetuses are persons with rights that often supersede those of the bodies that they inhabit (Ruddick 2007).

The sonogram images of the fetus in *À l'intérieur* construct it as a person invading Sarah's body, and in this manner express Sarah's displeasure in her pregnancy and immanent delivery. Owing to the pain she suffered with the loss of her husband, Sarah shows little interest in the birth of her child; she seems to want the fetus removed from her body so she can move on with her life. Sarah experiences what I have been describing as the feeling

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<sup>33</sup> Sonogram and ultrasound images are also used regularly by pro-life demonstrators in the U.S. to construct the fetus as a person with the right to life.

<sup>34</sup> See also Bordo 1993.

common among pregnant women that their body is being “invaded” by the fetus, “taken over by an unknown and even hostile stranger” (Kitzinger 1978, 78).

This view is supported by bio-medical and political understandings of pregnant bodily ontology as a conflict of “self” and “other.” For instance, research on immunology and pregnancy has attempted to solve what Aryn Martin and others have termed the “immunological paradox of pregnancy” (2010, 35): the idea that pregnant women’s immune system should attack the fetus as a foreign body. Martin argues that scientists and researchers within the field of immunology have traditionally understood fetal cells as foreign bodies invading the pregnant woman. In fact, the pregnant body is often described in language that figures it as a nation invaded by hostile foreign fetal cells – bodies that the immune system should naturally reject and expel in the interest of survival. This understanding of maternal-fetal relations as one of antagonism and combat (if not total warfare) manifests itself in the common use of terms such as “insurgent” or “unruly immigrant” (Martin 2010, 40) to describe fetal cells in the field of biogenetics.

This biogenetic definition of maternal-fetal relations has influenced sociological understandings of the relationships between subjects within political communities. For example, Hird draws upon the work of sociologist David Schneider to argue that European and North American understandings of biology determine their conceptions of community (Hird 2004, 221).<sup>35</sup> In the fields of contemporary Western philosophy and politics, the subject is normally understood in a manner that reflects the bio-medical ideal of the bounded,

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<sup>35</sup> See also Hird 2007 and Martin 2010.

unified and autonomous body. In an analogous fashion, the body politic of the nation-state is understood as an internally unified and self-contained entity. The “healthy” bodies of both individual subjects and national political communities are thus constituted along borders that expel foreign agents of disease and difference.

In staging the battles between Sarah, the fetus and La Femme against the backdrop of the autumn 2005 riots in the Parisian *banlieue* of Clichy-sous-Bois, *À l'intérieur* connects this understanding of pregnancy as an invasion of the normative subject to the exclusion of the racial, ethnic and religious “other” from the French body politic, imaging the ways in which the dichotomy of “inside” and “outside” plays a decisive role in structuring the national community. Ross, for example, notes the tendency of France’s colonial past to be erased from its official history, as it is seen to be “an ‘exterior’ experience, added on but not essential to French historical identity” (1995, 196). This denial of history is related directly to the “othering” of bio-political minorities, as they are effectively expelled from a national community that “separat[es] itself off from what it views as an extraneous period irrelevant to its true national heritage” (Ross 1995, 196).

As I argued in the introduction to this chapter, violence often results from this mode of relating to immigrants and post-colonial subjects as bio-political “others.” The *banlieues* of Paris experienced frequent riots in the 2000s (Hargreaves 2007, 125, 136). The riots in Clichy-sous-Bois in 2005 referenced in *À l'intérieur* indicate the extent to which a divisive

approach to community dictated the internal hierarchy of the body politic. This particular case of rioting sparked when two minority youths were electrocuted after being chased into an electrical substation by the police (Hargreaves 2007, 67). The rioting areas were subsequently host to what have been described as “the most serious civil disturbances experienced by the nation in almost forty years” (Hargreaves 2007, 8). During a period of three weeks beginning on October 27<sup>th</sup>, thousands of cars were burned, as were a large number of buildings; over a hundred police were injured; and just under three thousand people were arrested after rioters opened fire on the police (Falksohn et al. 2005; Sahlins 2006). (Riots also occurred in Parisian *banlieues* in 2007, the year in which *À l’intérieur* was released.) The outbreak of rioting in 2005 was attributed to high levels of unemployment among the immigrant and ethnic minority residents of the *banlieues*, violently manifesting the “deep-seated socio-economic inequalities exacerbated by entrenched patterns of discrimination against immigrant minorities originating in former colonies” (Hargreaves 2007, 1). Sociologists Alec Hargreaves and Laurent Mucchielli insist that these riots were a clear expression of political protest rather than random incidences of mob violence, with the former noting that attacks targeted specific objects and groups (such as the police) that were “seen as representatives of an exclusionary and repressive social order” (2007, 135-6).

The appearance of the riots on television news programs in *À l’intérieur* suggests that national anxiety about the “outside” invading the “inside” was exacerbated by certain conservative political leaders in positions of political power and domination. During the riots in 2005, French Minister of the Interior Nicolas Sarkozy infamously referred to rioters in the *banlieues* as “racaille,” meaning “rabble” or “scum,” and afterwards continued to suggest

that immigrants were destroying the social fabric of France (“Nicolas Sarkozy Says France Has Too Many Foreigners” 2012). When elected president in 2007, Sarkozy created the Ministère de l’Immigration, de l’Intégration, de l’Identité nationale et du Développement solidaire (Ministry of Immigration, Integration, National Identity and Codevelopment) in order to exercise greater control over immigrant flows, reduce the number of immigrants allowed into France and remove illegal undocumented workers already in residence. A newscaster makes a veiled reference to Sarkozy in his role of Minister of the Interior, whose “racaille” comment in 2005 did indeed provoke additional violence in the *banlieues*:

... which has been going on since last November 27<sup>th</sup> and the accidental death of two French citizens from immigrant families. Rioting has since spread throughout underprivileged areas of the Paris suburbs as well as other major cities. Mass transit passengers as well as police and firefighters have been injured. Over 300 communities have been affected, 4,900 vehicles set ablaze, while scores of businesses, homes and places of worship... More than 2,000 immigrants involved in the riots... The interior secretary’s inflammatory comments, much quoted in the press this morning, exacerbated an already...

This national fear of the “outside” invading the “inside” suggested by the riots is horribly realized within the home and body of Sarah as the security of each is invaded and destroyed. In this regard Sarah’s pregnant body serves as an explicit figuring of *l’enceinte parisienne*, the “pregnant Parisian woman” who metaphorically embodies the nation-state under attack from within and without.

Two sequences of *À l’intérieur* in particular present the pregnant woman as an embodied metaphor of the self-other model of national community: the attacks that take place in the bathroom, and the scene in which Sarah gives birth with the aid of La Femme. Close

readings of the affective dimensions of both sequences demonstrate how the film employs female suffering to construct certain political and ethical attitudes towards the pregnant female body and the post-colonial “other.”

### *Bathroom Sequences*

For the majority of the film Sarah locks herself in the bathroom, and La Femme attempts to break in by periodically stabbing, hacking and kicking at door. While trapped in the bathroom, Sarah often crouches near the door and puts her ear against the wall in order to hear where La Femme is in the house and what she is doing. When Sarah is in this position, she looks exactly as if she is listening for the heartbeat or movement of a child inside the womb. In this regard La Femme is clearly analogous to the fetus, which spectators learn is an unnamed girl from Sarah’s doctor at the beginning of the film. Both the fetus and La Femme are terrifying specters of strangeness within and without Sarah’s body that transgress the boundaries between interiority and exteriority. (We can also note here the importance of casting and performance in eliciting anxious and fearful responses from spectators. Those spectators familiar with Dalle from previous roles as an unstable and violent free spirit in *37°2 le matin/Betty Blue* [Jean-Jacques Beineix, 1986] and a flesh-eating vampire in *Trouble Every Day* may greet the character of La Femme with a certain trepidation upon seeing Dalle knock on Sarah’s door in the middle of the night.)

In this regard Sarah metaphorically embodies the traditional French nation, whose identity and body (indeed, the very *reproduction* of the national community) are under threat from alien forces. On this topic, Ross writes of not only the ontological but also the bodily threat

that racial and ethnic “others” were considered to present to the physical welfare of the national French community. Ross argues that in postwar France a high social premium was placed on cleanliness, taking as her examples the boom in consumer cleaning products for the body and home during this period. Ross describes this need for cleanliness as bordering on the pathological, and links it to national efforts to modernize the country. Beugnet concurs with Ross on this point, noting that post-colonial France adopted a “new cult of cleanliness” in order to effect “the safe relegation of its colonial history to the past” (2007, 46).

In reality, far from ushering in a utopia free from conflict or socio-economic inequality, this hygienic effort involved spatially segregating non-European immigrants from the majority population in the interests of hygiene and security. Immigrants were commonly associated with inadequate levels of cleanliness, sparking fears that the native population would succumb to various contaminations if they occupied the same physical spaces as these outsiders (Ross 1995, 11, 73, 151, 156). The brightly lit, sparsely furnished bathroom in *À l'intérieur* envisions this obsession with hygiene and security by offering an appropriately aseptic and sterile space in which Sarah can take refuge. Its clean and sterile mise-en-scène is spectacularly destroyed as the dazzling white walls become progressively covered in blood and viscera. Early in the film Sarah’s boss Jean-Pierre describes the riots as a “bloody mess in the burbs,” a very apt description for the state of Sarah’s home after La Femme begins butchering everyone who crosses the threshold.

In addition to the fetus and La Femme, another figure of alterity occupies the space of the bathroom. Abdel (Aymen Saïdi), an Arab youth, has been arrested by three policemen because they suspect him of burning cars during the riots. After taunting Abdel for being a Muslim (on Christmas) and promising to arrest his “homeys back in the hood,” the police bring him along as they check up on Sarah. La Femme quickly dispatches with the first two policemen (she stabs one in the eye socket with a knitting needle and uses a gun to blow off the head of another), before the last officer enters the house with Abdel in tow. The officer and Abdel cautiously approach the bathroom, where they find Sarah crouching behind the sink in the midst of what the policeman describes as a “fucking war zone.” The inclusion of Abdel, a figure of the excluded national other, within this zone contributes an ethnic and racial dimension to the battle between Sarah and La Femme. As Leila Wimmer notes, an ethnic minority character from the *banlieue* often “connotes racial and social exclusion, a space within the French context that is often the object of moral panic” (2011, 131). Similar to the fetus and La Femme, Abdel signifies an “other” invading the pristine and hygienic space of the idealized French nation, immediately politicizing the battles being fought inside the house.

The setting of the bathroom as the stage of confrontation between Sarah and La Femme relates directly to Nancy’s ethical imperative to recognize our fundamental co-existence with figures of alterity. Namely, this confrontation clearly signals a denial of co-existence and the ethical responsibility to share space with the other. The pregnant Sarah, a figure of the reproduction of the white, wealthy, middle-class French community, takes refuge in the space of the home associated with making oneself clean, with expelling the abject, in order to

separate herself physically from the unclean stranger who has come to contaminate and destroy her home and body.

### *Birth Sequence*

In addition to referring to the riots, Jean-Pierre's invocation of a "bloody mess" also expresses the common, yet often socially unacceptable fear of giving birth on the part of women. A nurse at the hospital vocalizes these fears at the beginning of the film when she gleefully tells Sarah "It's horrible, having children. In my own case, it took thirteen hours to deliver it...my first baby. Oh, murder. I mean murder. I was in such fucking pain."

"Horrible...fucking pain" does indeed describe the birth of Sarah's daughter. Sarah's water breaks during the climax of the film as she is scrambling up the stairs to evade La Femme. After Sarah shrieks "The baby's coming!" the camera holds a static straight-on shot in close-up as La Femme calmly slices into Sarah's belly button with a pair of scissors. Sarah, already drenched in blood, screams in agony as La Femme splits open her torso and reaches her hand inside the womb to remove the baby. The camera cuts back to a wider shot to show dark red blood oozing down the staircase. La Femme then slowly rocks the child back and forth as the camera moves up Sarah's eviscerated body in a slow tracking shot, lingering on the umbilical cord dangling from her stomach and the lack of expression in her deadened eyes.

The camera largely adopts La Femme's point of view in the birth sequence by employing over-the-shoulder shots that approximate her vantage point over Sarah's laboring body. Sarah's head is cut out of the frame in these shots, as the camera privileges a visualization of her swollen belly as a wound being opened up by La Femme. Female suffering in this scene is thus treated differently than Alex's rape in *Irréversible*: the latter film encouraged a detached proximity to Alex's pain, fostering a disturbed yet sympathetic and compassionate co-existence with her suffering. In the birth scene in *À l'intérieur*, the camera encourages spectators to approximate the vision of the "other" (La Femme) in order to clearly image the post-colonial French national community as a co-existence of bio-political differences.

However, the highly unpleasurable affective impact of Sarah's pain in this sequence also encourages spectators to adopt a position of disturbed compassion towards her suffering, a fact that complicates any treatment of her as the true "villain" of the film. Rather, in this sequence the proximity of spectators to female pain precludes "identification" with molar figures, and involves instead a disruptive intimacy with the open physical, emotional and psychological wounds of both Sarah and La Femme. Although employing a Levinasian (rather than Deleuzian or Nancean) framework, Cooper identifies such a withdrawn immediacy as a key element of ethical modes of spectatorship based on approximation rather than identification, in which "a closeness...serves paradoxically to register both the other characters' and our own distance from those filmed. It is the ability not to take the place of the characters by identifying with an image, that facilitates recognition of responsibility" (2007, 85).

By placing the birth of Sarah's child in proximity to La Femme's attacks and the riots, the birth sequence links affective compassion for female suffering with an awareness of the exclusion of the bio-political "other." *À l'intérieur* thus gestures towards revisionist understandings of subjectivity and political community as destabilized beings-in-common with alterity, facilitated through exposures to bodily and ontological difference in which "[t]hat which is not a subject opens up and opens onto a community whose conception ...exceeds the resources of the metaphysics of the subject." (Nancy 1991,14). The disturbing haptic imagery of the film provides shocks to thought that link an ethical practice of spectatorial compassion and co-existence with critical thinking on socio-political prejudice and exclusion.

### *The Bio-political and Ethical Positioning of Spectators*

In his writings on political community, Nancy explores how subjects relate ethically to those who are considered exterior to their selves: the other, the stranger, *l'intrus*. Nancy argues that it is ethically impermissible to forcibly integrate the stranger into one's own mode of being, as the erasure of difference would deny the being-with-one-another that allows unique subjects to share and partition space without fusion or hierarchy:

To exclude all intrusiveness from the stranger's coming is...neither logically acceptable nor ethically admissible. If, once he is there, he remains a stranger, then for as long as this remains so – and does not simply become "naturalized" – his coming does not stop: he continues to come, and his coming does not stop intruding in some way: in other words, without right or familiarity, not according to custom, being, on the contrary, a disturbance, a trouble in the midst of intimacy. (2008, 161)

Nancy characterizes the ethical “welcoming” of the stranger as an acceptance of their intrusion and exteriority as a fundamental element of the self, whose “truth is its exteriority and its excessiveness: its infinite exposition” (2008, 170) to the world.

The most obvious stranger in *À l'intérieur* is La Femme, the mysterious assailant who will stop at nothing to take the fetus from Sarah’s womb. In *À l'intérieur*, the real social suffering of the intruder (namely, their exclusion from the national community) is conveyed to spectators through the intertwining of politicized historical allegory and shocking cinematic affect. This political affect encourages a minor mode of spectatorship that is aware of the gendered and racialized dimensions of cinematic violence.

Just as the stranger La Femme intrudes upon the body of Sarah, the visceral and aggressive aesthetics of *À l'intérieur* intrude upon spectators to create a disturbed co-existence of bodies and screen. The violent shocks of the film are affective encounters that engage spectators in a destabilizing communal bond, introducing a “trouble in the midst of intimacy” (Nancy 2008, 161). Nancy’s description of co-existence as a disturbing form of intimacy certainly applies to spectators’ relationship to *À l'intérieur*, in that being-with this film allows spectators to experience a tactile and shocking intimacy with the screen. This intimacy constitutes an ethics in which spectators realize the *with* of being, *being a spectator as a being-with film*. Spectatorial selves co-exist with filmic affect: the very idea of the self becomes the affective *with* between spectators and the screen rather than individual, isolated bodies. Nancy calls this affective bond between bodies an ethics of compassion, describing it

as “the contagion, the contact of being with another in...[their] turmoil. Compassion is not altruism, nor is it identification, it is the disturbance of violent relatedness” (2000, xiii).

However, as I mentioned in the introductory chapter, Nancy’s insistence on welcoming intrusion must be qualified if it is to be of use to feminist readings of female suffering in the cinema of exposure. Namely, in order to make feminist use of Nancy’s ethos of co-existence we must retain his distinction between a co-existential touch and a violent and destructive penetration. Spectatorial compassion with Sarah involves tactile co-existence rather than penetration. The film establishes this unsettling proximity to her suffering by imparting affective shocks that function as invitations to and interdictions against contact. This proximity, or approach and withdrawal of cinematic and spectatorial bodies, avoids a violent penetration akin to those experienced by women such as Sarah and Alex during acts of assault and rape. Nevertheless, the intersection of female suffering and (or *as*) post-colonial critique certainly involves ethical risks, as the latter is largely achieved through the gruesome imaging of the former.

Through its parallel depictions of the fetus and La Femme, *À l’intérieur* exposes and critiques the fantasy of the clean, sterile reproduction of the bio-politically “correct” French subject by imaging the “other” as always already *à l’intérieur*, or inside the body (politic). Recent work on pregnant embodiment as a form of co-existence mirrors this cinematic exposure by challenging the characterization of pregnancy as a battle between the “host”

pregnant woman and the invasive and parasitic fetus. New scientific research in the field of immunology suggests that pregnant bodies cannot be so neatly classified as either “themselves” or “others” – even internally. In a newly discovered process called “microchimerism,” fetal cells persist in the female body long after the fetus has left the womb, and maternal cells are found in adults. J. Lee Nelson describes microchimerism as the immigration of cells between bodies exposed to one another:

Recent studies suggest that each of us possesses – in addition to the trillions of cells descended from the fertilized eggs we once were – a cadre of cells we have acquired from other, genetically distinct individuals. In utero we receive an infusion of them from mom. And women who become pregnant also collect a sampling shed by the developing embryo. That cells cross the placenta is not surprising. After all, the tissue that connects mother and child is not an impenetrable barricade. It is more like a selective border crossing, allowing passage, for instance, of materials needed for the fetus’s development. What is remarkable, however, is the extent to which migrant cells can persist in their new host, circulating in the blood and even taking up residence in various tissues. (2008)<sup>36</sup>

Although *À l’intérieur* envisions alternative feminist understandings of pregnant embodiment as a metaphoric (and literal) site of bloody and destructive warfare between host and invader, its aesthetic design also enacts a co-existence of film and spectators on the level of affective impact. The co-existence of spectators and film embodies alternative understandings of pregnancy, political community and perception as forms of co-existence with alterity. This affective co-existence also compliments the film’s critique of the imagined French political community as an exclusionary bio-political order built upon the demonization and “othering” of minoritarian subjects.

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<sup>36</sup> See also Hird 2004.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has argued that *Irréversible* and *À l'intérieur* expose spectators to the suffering of pregnant female bodies in order to allegorize the contentious relationship of the national body politic to its bio-political “others.” Both films offer brutal critiques of post-colonial politics in France, and as such perform the ethical function of encouraging spectators to reflect on power inequalities within the national political climate. The gruesome and visceral aesthetics of each film provide shocks to thought that engender a politicized and compassionate relationship to female suffering, while also fostering an awareness of gendered, sexualized and racialized modes of subordination and exclusion. The intersection of female bodies and post-colonial critique remains a complex and uneasy one from a feminist ethical standpoint, a “bloody mess” inscribed within the forms of the films and upon the bodies of spectators who encounter them.

## Chapter 3

### Female Skin Mutilation and a Feminist Cine-ethics of Proximity

I feel it distinctly; it is much stronger than a sensation: never has the strangeness of my own identity, which I've nonetheless always found so striking, touched me with such acuity.

Jean-Luc Nancy 1992, 10

#### Introduction

In the previous chapter, I focused on the relationship of female suffering to the bio-political and ethical issues surrounding the exclusion and “othering” of minoritarian subjects. In this chapter, I address how female bodies in the cinema of exposure experience self-other relations *within* their own bodies, and the relevance that these internal dynamics have for a feminist spectatorship ethics. Specifically, I explore how filmic depictions of female self-mutilation employ disturbing and shocking affect to engender a feminist politics and ethics of intimate proximity to female suffering.

I draw on phenomenological and haptic film theory to determine how spectators form intimate bonds with films in which the boundaries of female skin are violated in wounding and tactile manners. Employing *Dans ma peau/In My Skin* (Marina de Van, 2002) and *Black Swan* (Darren Aronofsky, 2010) as case studies, I argue that disturbing scenes of skin mutilation open up spaces of ethical proximity to female bodily suffering, generating shocks to thought that interrogate the status of female embodiment in contemporary Western society. The aesthetics of *Dans ma peau* and *Black Swan* also foster relationships of sympathy with

and compassion towards the suffering female protagonists, especially for audiences with a heightened awareness of the bio-political realities of such suffering.

My theoretical framework for this chapter draws on a variety of philosophical concepts to articulate the connection between visceral images of female self-mutilation and a feminist spectatorship ethics of proximity. Nancy's ethos of co-existence accounts for the ways in which spectators' exposure to the sensual impact of cinematic affect in *Dans ma peau* and *Black Swan* encourages processes of embodied thinking. This co-existence takes place in the sharing of space encouraged by affectively contaminating cinematic imagery: tactile and sensual scenarios of female mutilation invite bio-political and ethical response and responsibility on the part of spectators.

I combine the ethical philosophy of Nancy with Deleuze and Guattari's concept of becoming. I draw on the process of becoming-other (specifically, becoming-woman) to describe the female protagonists' gendered experiences of pain, alienation and trauma in *Dans ma peau* and *Black Swan*. The concept of becoming works particularly well with an understanding of spectatorship as a co-existence with film, in that each privileges bodily proximity and transformation in effecting ethical ways of being in the world and interacting with others.

Thinking of the cinematic screen as a skin through which co-existence and becoming-other take place foregrounds the importance of corporeal sensation in spectatorship ethics. The

skins of spectators approach those of the self-mutilating female protagonists in *Dans ma peau* and *Black Swan*, approximating the transformations glimpsed in images of self-inflicted violence and pain. Spectators relate to these women as distinct others with whom they share a troubling intimacy. Co-existential spectatorship ethics is thus intimately related to the formal aspects of film that open up spaces of proximity to female suffering.

First, I describe phenomenological understandings of skin and its function within the cinematic horror genre. I then explore the bio-political dimensions of female skin mutilation in *Dans ma peau* and *Black Swan*. Specifically, I elaborate on the ability of painful and traumatic affect to engender a feminist ethics of spectatorship in relation to female suffering.

### **The Cinema Screen as Shared Skin**

Phenomenological conceptions of embodied flesh clearly emphasize proximity in describing the relation of embodied subjects to their environment. Merleau-Ponty argues that embodied being-in-the-world requires a “carnal relation...with the flesh of the world,” the latter being the basic “element of Being...the concrete emblem of a general manner of being” (1968, 84, 139, 147). The chiasmic “universal flesh” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 137) of the world links bodies in a participatory relation in which “this flesh of my body is shared by the world, the world *reflects* it, encroaches upon it and it encroaches upon the world” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 248). Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty describes this intertwining of flesh as a mode of co-existence with alterity: he writes that when he enters into affective relations with others, “I am then drawn into a coexistence of which I am not the unique constituent and which founds the phenomenon of social nature as perceptual experience founds that of physical nature”

(1983, 222). For Merleau-Ponty, as for Nancy, existence is always co-existence with the world and the others with whom it is shared.

In cinema and media scholarship, phenomenological theorists have characterized film as a fleshy, sensual membrane with which the bodies of spectators engage intimately. Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener argue that this phenomenological approach to spectatorship posits a proximity of spectatorial and cinematic skins that disturbs any stable “relation between inside and outside; it designates a transitional and uncertain liminality with respect to where the self becomes the world and vice versa...in the cinema, the confusion, transformation and transgression between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, between Self and Other, is of a foundational nature” (2010, 111). This preoccupation with a self-other relationship between spectators and screen is borne out in much of film theory focusing on the skin, including that elaborated by Marks, Barker and Laine.

Marks describes the cinematic screen as a skin through which spectators establish tactile relations with images. She argues that film is a pellicular medium able to evoke cultural memories in spectators through the employment of haptic imagery. Specifically, the sensual aesthetics of experimental films directed by minority filmmakers convey memories of home to spectators living in diaspora. Marks classifies these images as haptic because spectators lack the sense of power and self-unity before the image that they experience when viewing conventional narrative films with a purely optical visuality (2000, 149, 151, 161-2).

In a related vein, Barker identifies the skin (along with the muscles and viscera) as one of the primary bodily topographies through which spectators establish corporeal relationships with film. Drawing on the phenomenological thinking of Merleau-Ponty and Sobchack, Barker describes the embodied encounter of spectators with film as one of haptic proximity through which the bodies of both are constituted: “[w]e do not ‘lose ourselves’ in the film, so much as we exist – emerge, really – in the contact between our body and the film’s body...a complex relationship that is marked as often by tension as by alignment, by repulsion as often as attraction” (2009, 12, 19). Indeed, as elicited by the disturbing aesthetics of *Dans ma peau* and *Black Swan*, spectators’ bodily interaction with film involves revolt and refusal as much as the appeal to touch, imaging Barker’s contention that embodied engagement with cinema “is rife with pain and suffused with pleasure, and...both are spoken most eloquently and understood most deeply through the touch of skin upon skin” (2009, 67).

Laine also conceives of the screen as a skin shared between spectators and film via affective imagery. Laine describes skin as a “medium of intersubjective connection” (2006, 1) between the screen and spectators that structures their encounter. She argues that the sharing of skins experienced by spectators and film destroys any clear-cut boundaries between the two, as each is constituted in the encounter with the other (2006, 10-11). Laine argues that the shared skin of spectators and film becomes particularly agitated when subjected to violent images, and astutely observes that many horror and thriller films invite a comparison between the cinematic screen and skin (2006, 101-4). These films often betray an obsessive

interest in the skin through brutal and disturbing aesthetics that mimetically enact the mutilations and transformations of the skin occurring in their narratives.<sup>37</sup>

In *Les yeux sans visage/Eyes Without a Face* (Georges Franju, 1960) and *La piel que habito/The Skin I Live In* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2011) in particular, the skin figures as a guarantor of isolated, autonomous subjectivity and a physical marker of unique identity.

Both narratives center around the fanatical quests of doctors to bring back a dead or severely injured woman by returning her damaged skin to its original wholeness and beauty.

According to these male doctors, the skin constitutes the female subject; the mutilation of this membrane annihilates subjectivity and completely estranges the mutilated subject from her body and proper identity. This particular attitude conforms to psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu's understanding of the role played by skin in constituting subjectivity. Anzieu argues that an individual's skin comprises their ego; he characterizes the skin as "a mental image of which the ego of the child makes use during the early phases of its development to represent itself as an ego containing psychical contents, on the basis of the experience of the surface of the body" (1989, 40).

The importance of skin in establishing subjectivity helps us to understand why its mutilation has become a privileged site of horror in the cinema. Discussing the stripping of the skin in

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<sup>37</sup> Horror and thriller films in which obsession with skin or its mutilation figure prominently include *Comforting Skin* (Derek Franson, 2011); *The Fly* (David Cronenberg, 1986); *The Human Centipede* trilogy (2009, 2011, 2014); *La piel que habito/The Skin I Live In* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2011); *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991); and *Les yeux sans visage/Eyes Without a Face* (Georges Franju, 1960).

horror and thriller films such as *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991), Laine explains that it “stands for horror for both female and male viewers: the flayed women represent a threat to the inner and outer border through which subjectivity is constituted” (2006, 9-10). In a similar approach, Creed draws on Kristeva’s concept of the abject to argue that skin mutilation in horror film evokes “border anxiety” regarding the commingling of the inside and outside of the body (1993, 10-11).

The mutilation of the skins involved in spectatorship (those of characters, spectators and the film itself) is simultaneously an exscribing of identity and an exposing of oneself to the world, experiencing proximity to alterity via affective images of pain. According to Nancy, this exposure to the otherness of affect creates bodies as singular selves in the first place, as “[t]he “self”...does not preexist sensation: its most particularized property confounds itself with its affection” (1993, 18). This affective subjectivity is also inextricably bound up with spectators’ political and ethical relationship to female suffering in the cinema of exposure. In order to illustrate how the spectatorial encounter with the skin of the suffering female protagonist relates to a feminist politics and ethics of proximity, I will first delve inside the cinematic skin of *Dans ma peau*.

### **“Does this leg really belong to you?”: Female Bodily Alienation and Mutilation in *Dans ma peau***

*Dans ma peau* concerns the increasingly erratic behavior of Esther (played by director Marina de Van), a young businesswoman on the verge of professional and personal success. Esther works for an international market analysis firm. Her admiring boss Daniel (Thibault

de Montalembert) has just promoted her from an analyst to a junior project leader, much to the consternation of jealous friend and co-worker Sandrine (Léa Drucker). Esther's personal life is also progressing smoothly: she has a seemingly happy relationship with loving boyfriend Vincent (Laurent Lucas), with whom she is on the hunt for an upscale apartment. However, cracks begin to show in Esther's orderly life after she suffers a large gash in her leg while wandering outside during a party. After this incident Esther exhibits a childlike fascination with cutting and piercing her own skin. She slowly begins to eschew her professional and personal duties in order to indulge in increasingly dangerous acts of self-mutilation, alienating her friends, colleagues and boyfriend in the process. Her anti-social behavior and self-imposed isolation culminate in a solitary rendezvous in a hotel room, where she may take her mutilations to the point of self-destruction.

*Dans ma peau* garnered widespread attention in the wake of its sensational premiere at the Cannes Film Festival in 2002 (Palmer 2006, 171). In my analysis of *Dans pa peau* (as well as that of *Ne te retourne pas* in the following chapter), I build on existing scholarly interest in the work of De Van while also considering the underexposed feminist and ethical dimensions of her filmmaking practice. Specifically, I address the ways in which Esther's self-mutilations critique the subordinate status of female bodies in contemporary Western societies by abstractly expressing women's anxieties about corporate careerism and the institutions of marriage and family. I argue that, in placing spectators in close proximity to the skin of the self-mutilating Esther, the aesthetic design of the film encourages a

sympathetic and compassionate (rather than judgmental and horrified) relationship to her suffering. This haptic sympathetic proximity engenders a shock to thought regarding the gendered dimensions of Esther's suffering, gesturing toward the bio-political challenges faced by female bodies in modern, globalized capitalist societies.

In order to articulate the bio-political and ethical impact of female suffering in *Dans ma peau* upon the skins of spectators, I discuss how the affective dimensions of Esther's encounter with her body as other relate to a feminist spectatorship ethics of proximity. This affective proximity is suffused with immediate physical and emotional pain, as well as bio-political resonances relating to gender and sexual difference. Here I draw on the importance of proximity in the ethical thought of Nancy and Deleuze, incorporating concepts such as co-existence and becoming-woman. I also attend to the complex and at times problematic association of female desire with masochism, and the ways in which the film subverts established thought on the relationship between the two. Finally, I discuss the ways in which Esther's self-mutilations challenge patriarchal and sexist forms of socio-economic organization.

### *Encountering the "Masochistic" Female Body as Other*

Esther's alienation from and mutilation of her own flesh drive the narrative trajectory and aesthetic design of *Dans ma peau*. Spectators encounter the body of Esther as an other with whom they co-exist via disturbing cinematic affect. This relationship approximates the way in which Esther encounters her own skin as an other with whom she co-exists via self-destructive lacerations.

De Van drew inspiration for *Dans ma peau*'s narrative of self-objectification and mutilation from a childhood incident in which a car ran over her right leg. De Van remembers that after this accident she had no feeling in her injured limb, which felt like an alien object disconnected from her "real" body. De Van remembers that after the incident:

I felt no sense of panic, no pain, even though I should have passed out. I saw my leg as just another object, a deformed object...a scrap...Later, at school, my scars became a kind of game. My friends and I amused ourselves by sticking them with needles, because my skin had become numb there. I felt proud, but at the same time this insensitivity was frightening. (qtd. in Palmer 2011, 81-2)

In this regard, *Dans ma peau* constitutes an embodiment of real female suffering, especially as de Van herself performs the role of the female protagonist. De Van prepared to reenact her childhood trauma in the role of Esther by performing bodily exercises aimed at alienating herself from her own body. As Palmer describes it:

Such were the demands of Esther that de Van instilled herself forcibly with an impartiality about her own body, the film's raw material. For a year in advance she carried out actorly exercises designed to increase her objectivity and self-detachment: walking around in uncomfortable shoes, buying and wearing clothes that she disliked, growing her fingernails to awkward lengths, and so on. Closer to the shoot, she hired an acting coach...to dissect her mannerisms, and reinterpret for her the physical nuances of the script that she herself had written. (2011, 84)

In the film, Esther reacts to her leg injury in a similar manner as de Van experienced hers, in that the former begins to perceive her injured leg as a foreign object. Esther mutilates her skin in order to explore her fascination with something that forms a part of her, and yet from which she feels detached.

Spectators co-exist with Esther's suffering through the affective sharing of space with intimate and painful depictions of her mutilated, othered body. One of the first shots of Esther during the credit sequence features an extreme close-up of the skin of her legs, placing spectators in close physical proximity to her exposed flesh while simultaneously imposing a psychological distance that forecloses the likelihood of character identification. In the opening shots of *Dans ma peau* (as well as in subsequent scenes of self-mutilation), the closeness of the camera to Esther's body distances spectators from her psychic "interior" in favor of aligning them with her bodily sensations. The camera presents Esther's self-mutilations in a visceral, yet detached manner that approximates Esther's alienation from her own wounded body. *Dans ma peau* thus encourages spectators to adopt a compassionate (yet disturbed and separated) approximation of the point of view of the suffering female protagonist. That is, spectators are both proximate to and withdrawn from the body of the Esther, allowing co-existence without fusion. This aesthetic design expresses de Van's belief that, as she says, there "might be a distance between consciousness and the life of the body" (qtd. in Palmer 2011, 80).

After the opening sequence, *Dans ma peau* presents Esther's mutilations of her othered skin as potentially pleasurable for her, raising questions as to the masochistic dimensions of her actions. From a feminist standpoint, the longstanding association of female desire with masochism (or indeed, the conflation of the two) is highly problematic in political and ethical terms. Brinkema argues that the self-inflicted mutilations of Esther in *Dans ma peau* radically unravel the historical closeness of femininity with masochism by imaging a split in bodily sensation and identity that cannot be pathologized in a pleasure-pain, submissive-

dominant set of binaries tethered to gender expectations (namely, the man as dominant and sadistic and the woman as submissive and masochistic). The self-harming practiced by Esther reveals the concept of female masochism itself to be a “disruptive, open sore” (Brinkema 2009, 132) that cannot adequately account for the potentials of female pleasure divorced from male participation.

One disturbing and uncomfortable scene in particular illustrates the coding of Esther’s solitary mutilations as pleasurable (for her, if not for spectators). Esther is in her bathroom at home, cutting into her arm for an extended period of time. Esther hunches on the floor, biting and sucking at her left forearm in ghastly throes of ecstasy. She then begins to dig into her arm with a knife in order to draw out more blood. She pulls out what seems to be a bone with her bloody fingers, and begins to chew on it while continuing to caress and cut her skin with orgasmic abandon. Spectators then hear the sickening sound of sawing as she penetrates the bone in her arm. Esther cuts open her trousers and, lying back, pulls her mutilated right calf up to her face and begins sucking on the wound. Droplets of blood drip on her face and over her eyes, which she rubs into her skin. She then starts playing contentedly with the bones she has extracted from her body. Esther only breaks out of this erotic reverie when she takes note of her blood-soaked torso and limbs. Suddenly, she springs up and begins to wash herself in the bathtub, as if she had been caught in a clandestine affair with her own body.

*Dans ma peau* resists the conflation of female desire with masochism operative within a misogynistic and patriarchal gender economy by offering a more nuanced perspective on female sexuality, here expressed through an erotic relation to the self. This erotic relation comprises a Deleuzian ethics of becoming-other and bodily experimentation. In *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty & Venus in Furs* (1971), Deleuze describes masochism as a contractual alliance between two persons, rather than a relation of domination and subordination. In his writings with Guattari, Deleuze also challenges the understanding of masochism as a set of practices through which a body seeks pleasure through pain. Instead, Deleuze and Guattari write that a masochistic BwO is able to “untie the pseudobond between desire and pleasure as an extrinsic measure” by finding “a joy that is immanent to desire as though desire were filled by itself and its contemplations, a joy that...is not measured by pleasure since it is what distributes intensities of pleasure and prevents them from being suffused by anxiety, shame and guilt” (2004, 171-2). Deleuze and Guattari then relate this desire to an ethics of deterritorialization and becoming-other, noting that masochists “invent self-destructions that have nothing to do with the death drive. Dismantling the organism has never meant killing yourself, but rather opening up the body to connections that presuppose an entire assemblage, circuits, conjunctions, levels and thresholds” (2004, 177).

For spectators of *Dans ma peau*, an ethical process of becoming-other takes place through proximity to affective shocks that challenge stereotypes of female masochism. Esther’s mutilations “twists thought and drives it insane” (2008, 119), as Nancy writes of masochism, encouraging a thinking-otherwise outside of traditional understandings of masochism.

Patricia MacCormack defines spectatorial masochism in similar terms, as “submitting to

affects that indulge in the breaking down of logic and of the flesh itself” (2008, 37). She draws on Deleuze and Guattari’s ethics of becoming-other to argue that the wounds and transformations inflicted on spectatorial masochists open up the possibility of new understandings of desire, what she terms “the raw material for something beyond” (MacCormack 2008, 73). The links between becoming-other and a spectatorship ethics of proximity will be explored in greater detail later in the chapter. For now, I note that *Dans ma peau* disconnects female masochism from a phallogocentric economy of desire.

#### *Female Mutilation and Modern Capitalist Labor*

In addition to encouraging the becoming-other of spectators, the aesthetic design and narrative of *Dans ma peau* obliquely implicate the bio-political conditions in which Esther lives in her practices of self-mutilation. This intertwining of affective experience and political awareness exposes the gendered dimensions of cinematic aesthetics and spectatorial perception in relation to female suffering. I focus on two aspects of French society that the film discloses in relation to Esther’s self-harming: the increasing fragmentation of the French body politic, and the subordinate statuses of female bodies and desires within modern capitalist societies. In exploring these conditions, I describe Esther’s self-mutilation as a gendered symptom of her bio-political environment.

In his work on French New Extremism, Palmer reproduces statistical evidence of the increasing fragmentation of French society and the pervasive sense of isolation on the part of

its citizens. Specifically, Palmer cites an increase in the divorce rate (at 49 percent in 2011) and decrease in the marriage rate as evidence of this isolationism (2011, 43). Palmer describes the character of Esther in particular as “an iconic and representative *cinéma du corps* protagonist [who] is left socially isolated, personally traumatized and dangerously alone” (2006, 178), no longer able to function in the productive, efficient, normalized manner that society demands. Palmer argues that a traumatized and isolated New Extremist protagonist such as Esther arises out of a social system increasingly comprised of solitary individuals disconnected from families, corporations and government support networks (2006, 178). In *Dans ma peau*, the isolation of Esther “reflects contemporary France itself, which has become increasingly marked by social solitude. Recent census data confirms that 7.2 million French people now live by themselves, making up nearly one-third of the nation’s households” (Palmer 2006, 178).

Exemplary scenes of Esther’s isolation include the first in which she deliberately cuts into her skin. Soon after visiting the doctor and having her cuts dressed for the first time, Esther feels the uncontrollable urge to re-open her wounds at her office. Claiming that she “can’t breathe” at her computer, Esther sneaks into a darkened storeroom, takes off her trousers and tears the newly formed stitches out of the wounds in her leg. The camera cuts to an extreme close-up of her face as she looks away while ripping the staples out of her skin with a pained, yet satisfied and slightly dazed expression. She looks as if she recognizes the illicitness of her behavior but would rather not acknowledge what her hands are doing to her skin. She then uses a spare piece of metal lying nearby to carve deeper gashes into the calf and thigh of her right leg. The close proximity of the camera to Esther’s body isolates her from her

surroundings within the frame, mimicking the way in which Esther's self-mutilation cuts her off from her environment in increasingly drastic manners. The unsettling aesthetics of isolation and mutilation in *Dans ma peau* reflect anxious reactions to globalized capitalism in contemporary French culture. Namely, Esther's work within a profit driven corporation contributes to her bodily alienation and objectification. The mutilation scene described above is only the first of several in which Esther feels compelled to delve into her flesh as a means of escaping the utilitarian and stifling *mise-en-scène* of her office.

However, De Van's privileging of the mutable flesh of the female body contests the erasure of this body within capitalist modernity. Beugnet and Elizabeth Ezra define Esther's self-mutilations as politicized "'symptom-images', the asynchronous play of shock and affect, causes and effect" (2010, 13) that express the tensions between bureaucratic capitalist modernity and the "unclean," historically situated material body. Namely, *Dans ma peau* introduces the mutilated and "unhealthy" body as a material reality that has been effaced in France's drive towards modern progress:

what the dismembered bodies epitomize...is an interest in exploring and delving into the darker side of modernity...the body as corpse, dismembered and mutilated, decomposing yet impossible to dispose of, signals the limits of the power of the forces of instrumental reason...Bourgeois order, progress, and bureaucracy ultimately prove incapable of superseding the contingent and the material, or of expunging the unclean, the mortal, and the historical...next to the clean, dehumanized image offered by a cinema of 'restraint', images of the murky underbelly of modernity persist; the violent confrontation with the materiality of the corpse responds to the violence of abstract disembodiment. (Beugnet and Ezra 2010, 12-13, 24)

Esther's self-mutilation thus manifests a national crisis or shock to thought precipitated by

the advents of modernity and globalization. Her increasingly debilitating wounds serve as a gender specific metaphor for this national shock to thought, constituting a political and ethical challenge to capitalist productivity. Esther's bodily mutilation constitutes the ultimate capitalist sin, as it "render[s] dysfunctional a body that had been shaped to fit, represent and efficiently contribute to the perpetuation of a specific socioeconomic system" (Beugnet 2007, 161).

For example, Esther's isolating self-mutilations challenge capitalist productivity by endangering her privileged status with Daniel, her boss. Although Esther had previously cut herself at the office, he does not notice anything amiss until a business dinner during which her erratic conduct threatens to scare away executives of a jewelry firm whose account Esther manages. Esther appears nervous and disinterested from the outset, draining glass after glass of wine as Daniel and the clients casually discuss the virtues of cosmopolitan cities and minute details of various advertising and marketing strategies. When the food arrives, in "a surreal moment that calls attention to the spectacle of her body" (Angelo 2012, 222), Esther loses control of and literally becomes separated from her limbs. Her left hand lunges at her plate several times, seemingly of its own accord, while her right hand yanks it away. When she folds her hands on her lap underneath the table, she is shocked to discover that her left arm has been cut off at mid-forearm and is lying in plain sight on the table. As Daniel and the clients continue to chatter away, oblivious to Esther's predicament, she quickly snatches her left arm off the table and reattaches it to her body.

Esther then pokes the flesh of her arm with a knife underneath the table. She begins to draw blood as she digs into her flesh, caressing the bloody wounds with her fingertips before bringing them to her mouth. These actions are interspersed with extreme close-ups of other patrons as seen from Esther's point of view, engaging with their food in a primal and carnal manner. Esther stares fascinated as these diners cut into raw pieces of steak and rip apart succulent grapes, digging a hole in her pantyhose out of sheer frustration at having to simulate normal behavior in front of her colleagues. One of the clients asks Esther a direct question in order to engage her in the conversation, at which Esther abruptly leaves the table and makes her way to a secluded wine cellar at the back of the restaurant. She tears into her left arm with her teeth until a waitress walks in looking for a bottle and rushes out in terror after seeing the trail of blood Esther has left on the floor. Esther then grudgingly rejoins her colleagues and suffers through talk of expanding markets and advertising schemes.

Esther's alienation from and objectification of her body in this sequence indicate a biopolitical environment in which the female body functions as a commodity whose materiality is effaced in favor of its exchange value on the capitalist market. In *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1985), Irigaray discusses the constitution of female subjectivity and the treatment of female bodies within capitalist economies. Irigaray argues that an internalized mode of affective exchange within the female body remains foreign to its objectification and commodification under capitalism. She contends that female bodies are only objectified, exploited and consumed when performing within heteronormative institutions of marriage

and sex. The female body becomes a product *par excellence*, “merchandise, a commodity passing from one owner to another” (Irigaray 1985, 157-8) for the men who control and exchange them for sexual profit and pleasure.

Esther’s self-mutilations render her body non-sexually attractive as well as non-productive, resisting the objectification and beautification of the female flesh within the heteronormative, patriarchal and capitalist culture of which Irigaray writes. For instance, Esther’s mutilations directly challenge gendered and sexed norms governing the “correct” presentation of female skin. Elsaesser and Hagener identify these demands placed on gendered skin in the following terms:

Skin is...gender determined in culture: soft for women, taut for men, light for women, dark for men. Acne scars can be seen as masculine, because male skin is seen as a carapace or armor, while women’s skin must be yielding and smooth. Male skin is an envelope or container, while women’s skin is more of a surface that can be used as a movable aperture or window to be regarded: the site of display for jewelry and necklaces, female skin is the canvas on which endless dramas of hiding and revealing, of self-exposure and modesty, of presentation and shame, or veiled allure and absolute vulnerability are played out and staged. The depiction of the skinless woman is culturally taboo because, historically and artistically, the female is represented by her skin. By contrast, the skinless – or flayed – man has sometimes presented a positive image of (self-)liberation (2010, 112-13).

Esther’s self-mutilation wounds the idea that the sole function and value of female skin resides in its surface beauty and attractiveness for the opposite sex, echoing Beugnet’s argument that mutilation of the skin in New Extremist film subverts phallogentric modes of presenting and viewing the female body (2006, 27). In this regard, Esther’s self-mutilation takes on a feminist bent, illustrating the ways in which the mutilation of the female body exposes and undermines gendered bio-political praxis that determine and limit its potentialities.

Esther engages in self-mutilation in order to liberate herself from the disembodied effects of capitalist labor, the objectification of her female skin, as well gendered roles and responsibilities in her relationship with Vincent. Indeed, *Dans ma peau* makes explicit links between Esther's mutilations, her professional development and her personal life. Just as she and Vincent begin looking for an apartment to purchase together, Esther begins to ascend the management chain of command at work. Daniel promotes her from an analyst to a junior project leader, despite the fact that she has been working at the company for a shorter time than other qualified employees.

Faced with these rapid developments in her personal and professional life, Esther begins to engage in mutilations that express her fear of entrapment in her relationship with Vincent. At first she seems excited about buying an apartment with him; in fact, she suggests the move herself after both receive promotions at work. However, their relationship unravels in direct proportion to the slow spread of Esther's wounds across her flesh. Vincent becomes worried, suspicious and finally exasperated with Esther's despondent attitude and furtive self-harming. He "can't bear" to look at her mutilated right leg, and in a moment of exasperation screams "Do you like it?" when he suspects that she is preventing her wounds from healing on purpose. The two gradually drift apart as Esther distances herself from him in order to better enjoy the autoerotic pleasure she derives from her wounds. Vincent's concern over the beauty and integrity of Esther's skin illustrates the ways in which, as Carrie Tarr argues, "Esther's perverse treatment of her body is in part a reaction to his patriarchal desire to keep

her under control” (2006, 89). The film thus explicitly links Esther’s increasing distance from Vincent to the pleasure she takes from mutilating her own body.

Esther faces commodification both at work and at home; she mutilates her body in order to subvert her status as a productive object to be exchanged on the labor and marriage markets. Her mutilations render her body inefficient and inappropriate for the tasks she is expected to perform as a worker and partner. Her wounding touch of her self thus constitutes her rejection of the commodification thrust upon her in her heterosexual relationship with Vincent, seemingly destined to end in marriage and family, as well as the depersonalized, numbing corporate environment in which she works. When Esther’s doctor asks if her leg really belongs to her, he assumes a proprietary relationship with one’s own body that Esther rejects through mutilations that render her flesh unproductive and unprofitable for any means other than her own desires. Esther’s split and mutilated subjectivity reflects a non-appropriative form of internal exchange that resists commodification.

I note here that de Van has a history of critiquing the heterosexual family unit as a form of social organization detrimental to the personal and political needs of women. In *Bien sous tous rapports/Well In All Respects* (1996), her award-winning short film made while a student at the *École Nationale Supérieure des Métiers de l’image et du Son (La Fémis)*, de Van shocked audiences by presenting a narrative in which parents catch their teenage daughter masturbating and proceed to correct her technique. The next year, in *Regarde la mer/See the Sea* (1997), her first film with François Ozon, de Van portrays a female hitchhiker whose visit to an isolated beach house radically disrupts the lives of a new mother

and her infant daughter. As a variant on the “home invasion” horror film in which a vagabond outsider invades and destroys the sanctity of the bourgeois home, *Regarde la mer* confronts issues surrounding female anxiety and discontent with pregnancy and motherhood. Subsequent films *Sitcom* (François Ozon, 1998) (starring de Van as a nymphomaniac paraplegic living with her equally abnormal family) and *8 femmes/8 Women* (François Ozon, 2002) (which de Van co-wrote with Ozon) are black comedies depicting the moral bankruptcy of the bourgeois family. De Van’s second directorial effort *Ne te retourne pas* (2009), a psychodrama centering on the perceptual anomalies and bodily transformations of a female writer, also confronts female anxieties relating to marriage and motherhood (I discuss *Ne te retourne pas* at length in the final chapter). Her latest film *Dark Touch* (2013) depicts the physical and psychological trauma of a young girl who is sexually abused by her parents.

De Van’s cinematic corpus explores how female bodies are structured by and made to suffer within contemporary patriarchal and capitalist culture. In *Dans ma peau*, the bodily fragmentation enacted by Esther poses an abstract challenge to numbing systems of gendered bio-political regulation and conditioning that inhibit the ability of the female body to function in minor modes. The ethical function of *Dans ma peau* resides in its attempts to wound these established ways of seeing and understanding the female body, and open up alternative practices of perception and being in the world.

*An Ethics of Proximity to Female Suffering*

*Dans ma peau* enacts a cinematic topography of affective proximity to the suffering female body by employing aesthetic devices that encourage physical and emotional intimacy with the self-mutilating Esther. The disturbing and forceful affect involved in this proximity compels spectators to share space with the film and its suffering female protagonist, imparting a Nancean ethics of co-existence. Nancy closely links his ethical ontology of co-existence and the sharing of space to a proximity to others. In fact, Nancy identifies a distanced proximity as foundational to the very structure of being, which is “near to itself, beside itself, in touch with itself, its very self, in the paradox of that proximity where distance and strangeness are revealed” (2000, 35).

Esther’s withdrawal into her skin provides an example of what Nancy refers to as the failure of contact within co-existence – the separation from others (including the self-as-other) that prevents the fusion of bodies. In his book dedicated to the rethinking of touch and phenomenology in Nancy’s work, Jacques Derrida describes this interrupted proximity of bodies as “an irreducible *spacing*, that is, what spaces out touching itself, namely con-tact” (2005, 221). Esther’s self-touching occurs when she experiences her body as a stranger, a separate being whose distance from her sense of self allows for contact across the distance of her fractured subjectivity. This ability to touch the estranged self precedes the ability to touch and be touched by others – including the affective aesthetics of *Dans ma peau*. The experience of a haptic co-existence of spectators and screen is thus always a failure of touch; bodies approach each other only to affirm the irreducible space between them.

Deleuze and Guattari also link proximity to a corporeal ethics of becoming-other, as “[b]ecoming is to emit particles that take on certain relations of movement and rest because they enter *a particular zone of proximity*...an objective zone of indetermination or uncertainty...*something shared or indiscernable, a proximity*” (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 300-1 [italics mine]). The ethical dimension of becoming consists in a body’s ability and willingness, its *choice* to engage with others and with this world in a corporeal manner (Bogue 2007, 12). This ethics is achieved through bodily disarticulation and experimentation, both of which are processes undergone by Esther in *Dans ma peau*. Deleuze and Guattari argue that such disarticulation and experimentation respond to “social formations” that repress and regulate the potentialities of the body, each of which “has a BwO ready to gnaw, proliferate, cover, and invade the entire social field” (2004, 180).

For spectators of *Dans ma peau*, the fascinating and at times repulsive proximity to Esther’s gnawing at her own flesh encourages a transformative ethical, bio-political and psychosomatic process of becoming-other. According to Deleuze and Guattari, such an encounter with affect constitutes a form of becoming, in that affect deterritorializes the body, “throws the self into upheaval and makes it reel” (2004, 265). This “upheaval” of the self is comprised of a haptic mode of perception that transforms optical vision into a form of fractured touch. As in the Nancean ethos of co-existence, a transformative becoming-other privileges tactile proximity to others as the spatial configuration most conducive to an ethical mode of being in the world. The close proximity of spectators to the body of the female

protagonist in *Dans ma peau*, facilitated through the use of extreme close-ups and subjective camerawork, encourages an ethical transformation on the part of spectators – a becoming-other through physical intimacy and sympathetic engagement. De Van stresses this physical engagement in her comments on how she conceived of the relationship between audiences and Esther: “[t]he problem was also there from the start, in the incarnation of the character. Is it that people will cling to me? It was absolutely necessary that the spectator cling to me to be moved. This type of bet can succeed or fail” (qtd. in Le Vern, 2002).<sup>38</sup>

The aesthetics of *Dans ma peau* approximate Esther’s experience of a self split by wounds by cutting into the skins of the screen and spectators, enacting a co-existence between the two. We can take as an example the final sequence of the film, in which Esther isolates herself in a nondescript hotel room in order to cut off and preserve slices of her skin. De Van cuts the images with a split screen as Esther demarcates the sections of her skin to be removed with a black marker. From this point forward the screen frequently cuts to black, in between affording extreme close-up glimpses of Esther’s bloody and punctured flesh. The cutting aesthetic used to depict Esther’s self-mutilations affords a haptic experience to spectators and Esther alike, in that its intimate and brutal violence is “grounded in the refusal of suture, the rejection of stitches that bind” (Brinkema 2009, 142-3) and isolate the bodies of the screen and spectators from one another.

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<sup>38</sup> Translation mine. The original text reads: “Le problème était d'ailleurs là dès le départ, dans l'incarnation d'un personnage. Est-ce que les gens vont s'accrocher à moi? Il fallait absolument que le spectateur s'accroche à moi pour être ému. Ce genre de pari pouvait être réussi ou raté.”

In the final moments of the film, there is no triumphant or conclusive ending to suggest that Esther has overcome her alienation from her body. Her subjectivity remains split, embodying the approach and withdrawal of spectators from the screen and the failure of fusion that lies at the heart of ethical co-existence. The only thing that spectators share with the “other” of the film, and that Esther shares with her othered body, is an absolute alterity that constitutes subjectivity as both fundamentally shared with and separated from that of others. The ethical import of spectatorship lies in maintaining this distance, which precludes fusion into a common cine-spectatorial body. The body of the suffering other must remain just as the unsettling aesthetics of *Dans ma peau* constitute that of Esther, as a “disturbance, a trouble in the midst of intimacy” (Nancy 2008, 161) – a horizon of encounter where the spectatorial self approaches and withdraws from the film-other.

Esther’s attraction towards self-wounding, her refusal of the stitches that would secure and isolate her flesh, constitutes an appeal for proximity to spectators, a closeness that desires to be opened up to the other. In his posthumous work *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968 [1964]), Merleau-Ponty discusses what he calls the dehiscence of an embodied mode of being in the world. In medical terms, dehiscence is defined as the re-opening of a surgically sealed or sutured wound. In biology, it refers to the natural opening up of plants and flowers that signals maturity. Merleau-Ponty employs the term to describe the contact with otherness that “opens my body in two” (1968, 123) to the flesh of the world. Merleau-Ponty’s adoptive use of dehiscence aptly describes the ways in which the dehiscence of affect from

the screen has a direct effect on the skins of spectators, who co-exist with Esther's suffering: her self-inflicted lacerations impel an ethical mode of ontological transformation and a haptic exposure to the cinematic other from the bodies of spectators.

During the final hotel scene, the prolonged and inchoate temporality of Esther's self-mutilations throw the modern insistence on linear progress into crisis, thus constituting a Deleuzian time-image made flesh. Esther's stillness and direct address to the camera and audience, which compel spectators to focus their attention on her wounds and the materiality of her body, constitute a feminist shock to thought regarding the construction of the female body onscreen as an object of beauty and/or target for violence. In this sense the scene reflexively acknowledges the role of audiovisual mediation in structuring the spectatorial encounter with female suffering. For instance, the spiraling movement of the camera away from Esther's face recalls the legacy of female suffering and death in modern horror by referencing the movement of the camera out of the eye of Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) and down the shower drain in *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960). The fact that Esther stages her mutilations for a camera in this final scene further gestures towards the ethical and political implications of watching such violence, in that Esther's direct gaze expresses an awareness of spectators' surveillance of her mutilated body.

In the closing shots of *Dans ma peau*, De Van makes her body monstrous and strange in a manner connected explicitly to a feminist ethics of perception. Spectators' confrontation with the suffering body of Esther provides a shock to thought regarding codified modes of perceiving the female body. The intimate proximity of spectators to Esther's traumatized

flesh produces an alternative mode of seeing that resists the objectification of the female body, while also allowing it to retain its alterity. This intensive proximity opened up by Esther's wounds encourages an ethical becoming-woman on the part of spectators, "not imitating or assuming the female form, but emitting particles that enter the relation of movement and rest, or the zone of proximity, of a microfemininity, in other words, that produce in us a molecular woman" (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 304). In so far as the camera facilitates a deterritorializing proximity to Esther's body, it offers spectators an alternative to the objectification and fetishization of female suffering.

I clarify in closing that this ethics of intimate proximity to Esther's body constitutes a minor *feminist* (rather than essentially *feminine*) mode of filming and perceiving female suffering. Marks makes this distinction in her own work on haptic visuality and minority spectators (2000, 170). However, this haptic proximity may well pertain especially to the work of female filmmakers in France. Emma Wilson, for example, argues that the marginalized status of female filmmakers allows for (and necessitates) alternative modes of filming and viewing the female body, as "[e]xclusion may indeed have enabled difference and differentiation, witnessed in the creation of different trajectories and opportunities, different influences and different modes of attention" (2005, 219-20). (I will address the subject of female filmmaking in the French film industry more directly in the next chapter.)

The gendered construction of self-mutilation in *Dans ma peau* impacts upon spectators' biopolitical and ethical engagement with female suffering. In my discussion of *Black Swan*, I further explore the construction of feminist modes of spectatorship in relation to female suffering.

### **Melodramatic Affect and Hysterical Female Flesh in *Black Swan***

*Black Swan* charts the physical and psychological transformations of Nina Sayers (Natalie Portman), a ballerina in a famed New York City ballet company. Nina is an obsessive perfectionist who lives with her exceedingly overbearing mother (Barbara Hershey) in a cramped and claustrophobic apartment, and dreams of winning the leading roles in the company's new version of *Swan Lake*. Despite the misgivings of Thomas Leroy (Vincent Cassel), the company's sadistic and lecherous director, he gives her the roles of both the White and Black Swans on the condition that she delve into her "dark" side in order to better embody the spirit of the Black Swan.

At first, Nina fails utterly at unleashing her inner Black Swan – until she meets Lily (Mila Kunis), an adventurous and sexually uninhibited new dancer in the company. After the two form an uneasy friendship, Nina begins to party at nightclubs, flirt with men and disobey her mother. However, their friendship soon turns sour after Nina suspects Lily of sabotaging her in order to steal her roles in *Swan Lake*. These suspicions fuel Nina's accelerating physical and psychological transformations, which culminate in a deranged yet triumphant performance of *Swan Lake* in the finale of the film, during which Nina may or may not die herself by "becoming" the suicidal White Swan.

Those familiar with the aesthetic and narrative tropes of European New Extremist films will recognize these in Hollywood form in *Black Swan*: visceral mutilations of the body, explicit sexuality, violent and predatory relations between men and women and aesthetic techniques that approximate the psychological damage and hysteria of the characters. The graphic style in which the film renders Nina's mutilations thus owes a debt to the disturbing aesthetics of its New Extremist antecedents. (In addition, the casting of Cassel in the role of Leroy intimates a connection to New Extremism, as the actor often appears in New Extremist films as a morally suspect character.<sup>39</sup>)

Like *Dans ma peau*, *Black Swan* centers on a young woman's disturbing relationship with her objectified, alienated and mutilated body. *Dans ma peau* and *Black Swan* share a wounding aesthetic that allows spectators to encounter both films as others with whom they share an intimate and disturbing proximity. The physical suffering undergone by Esther performs a feminist function in sharing the pain of female bodily objectification and alienation with spectators through the skin of the film itself, while also gesturing towards the bio-political construction of gender that underlies this suffering. *Black Swan* also exposes and deconstructs painful processes of bio-political conditioning undergone by women through the affective resonances of its formal design, encouraging a sympathetic feminist solidarity between Nina and spectators.

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<sup>39</sup> Cassel has appeared in French horror and New Extremist films such as *Le pacte des loups*, *Irréversible* and *Sheitan*.

My discussions of the aesthetic design and narrative of *Black Swan* in relation to a feminist spectatorship ethics encompasses issues relating to the ideological function of the female double in film and the use of melodramatic affect to communicate female hysteria. I also address the ways in which the film situates itself within the gothic melodrama and fairytale traditions in order to deconstruct gender norms, offering shocks to thought targeted at female audiences specifically. Finally, I attend to the gendered bio-political dimensions of female bodily comportment in *Black Swan*, as well as the ways in which the form of the film fosters a cine-ethics of compassionate and sympathetic proximity to female suffering.

#### *The Female Double as Patriarchal Construct*

*Black Swan* presents various doubles of the female protagonist, including Nina's rival, Lily; Beth Macintyre (Winona Ryder), the prima ballerina whose shoes Nina aspires to fill; and Nina's seemingly jealous and over-protective mother. All four women are dancers and can be considered physical doppelgängers to a certain extent: all have brunette hair, are slim and small in stature, and are conventionally attractive. In addition, Nina herself is often presented as an internally doubled or fractured figure, surrounded by mirrors and reflective surfaces that fragment her body, causing it to proliferate within the screen.

The body of Nina constitutes a Deleuzian crystal-image whose virtual counterparts appear in the mirrors and reflective surfaces through which spectators often encounter her, as well as in the figures of her female doppelgängers. In his descriptions of the crystal-image in *Cinema 2*, Deleuze writes that the absence of linear temporality or narrative causality in cinematic time-images results in a splitting of time in which the past and present co-exist through a

doubling of the actual and the virtual. The “real object is reflected in a mirror-image as in the virtual object which, from its side and simultaneously, envelops or reflects the real: there is ‘coalescence’ between the two. There is a formation of an image with two sides, actual *and* virtual” (Deleuze 1989, 68). The crystal-image, then, is a bipolar structure in which the actual and virtual become entangled and impossible to differentiate from one another (Deleuze 1989, 82, 90). Deleuze identifies mirror reflections as crystal-images *par excellence*, in that they embody the entanglement of the actual and the virtual: “[t]he most familiar case is the mirror...the mirror-image is virtual in relation to the actual character that the mirror catches, but it is actual in the mirror which now leaves the character with only a virtuality and pushes him back out-of-field” (1989, 70).

Deleuze’s understanding of the crystal-image helpfully illustrates the ways in which cinema embodies the relations between the actual and virtual; however, it fails to account for the bio-political facets of the actual-virtual splitting of the female subject in film. Freud’s articulation of the concept of the crystal principle in relation to pathological behavior attends more specifically to the bio-political dimensions of the crystal-image. In *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* (1971 [1933]), Freud describes the split between normal and pathological behavior as a fracture along predetermined fault-lines:

we know that pathology, by enlarging psychological processes and, as it were, making them more severe, is capable of drawing to our attention the normal processes that would otherwise remain hidden. Where pathology shows us a fault-line, perhaps there is normally only an ordinary dividing-line. *If a crystal is thrown to the ground, it will break into pieces, not in a random way, but according to specific fault-lines which, although they are invisible, have been predetermined by the structure of the*

*crystal*. This broken structure is the structure of people with psychological illness. (1971, 80 [italics mine])

I alter Freud's understanding of the crystal principle in arguing that this broken structure describes the ways in which women and female hysterics "break" along bio-politically determined fault-lines; in *Black Swan*, the "good" virginal romantic (Nina) versus the "bad" sexual predator (Lily).

For evidence of this bipolar conceptual fantasy (as opposed to reality) of women, we can look to the fracturing of female subjectivity in Hollywood female double films in the horror and gothic melodrama genres, upon which *Black Swan* draws heavily. Fischer argues that the bifurcation of women into the categories of "good" and "bad" enjoys widespread popularity in patriarchal Western cultures, especially in art and entertainment targeted at female audiences. In her analysis of the figure of the female double in Hollywood melodramas from the 1940s, Fischer finds that the "significant differences between the dramatic configurations of female vs. male doppelganger narratives...reflect established patriarchal assumptions about women" (1983, 26). She argues that the bipolar presentation of female doubles in melodrama expresses contemporary cultural anxieties surrounding the entrance of women into the workforce during World War Two and related fears of the "defeminization" of women as they took on roles and responsibilities traditionally allocated to men (Fischer 1983, 38).

The proliferation of female double figures in modern and contemporary cinema, both within Hollywood and without, speaks to the continuing ideological purchase of bipolar

understandings of female psychology and sexuality.<sup>40</sup> As one of the most recent works of female doubling within the melodramatic and horror traditions, *Black Swan* reiterates the bipolar imagining of women by presenting Nina and Lily as a set of extreme opposites. Lily is Nina's physical doppelgänger and psychological antithesis. Nina is a painfully shy, virginal outsider with no social life or companions apart from her mother (a "frigid little girl," in the words of ex-prima ballerina Beth). In contrast, Lily is an outspoken, sexually voracious party girl who lives and dances with the passion that the reticent, coldly precise Nina lacks. The color scheme of Nina's costuming and the mise-en-scène of her personal spaces (such as her bedroom) reflect this antithesis by associating her with white and pastel pink shades that contrast with Lily's black ensembles. In bio-political terms, this simultaneous idealization and demonization of women betrays a lingering anxiety towards female solidarity, or what Fischer terms "the conventional psychological view of women's rivalry [which] bespeaks an unstated *fear* of female bonding – be it parent to child, sibling to sibling, or political 'sister' to 'sister'" (1983, 37).

Doubling or fracturing also occurs within the star persona of Natalie Portman, which in several ways is similar to Nina's personality. Broadly speaking, Portman's media image is that of a "good," properly feminine and uncontroversial actress, a persona stemming in large

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<sup>40</sup> Examples include *The Broken* (Sean Ellis, 2008); *Doppelgänger* (Avi Neshet, 1993); *I Know Who Killed Me* (Chris Silverton, 2007); *Obsession* (Brian De Palma, 1976); *Persona* (Ingmar Bergman, 1968); *Possession* (Andrzej Zulawski, 1981); *Sisters* (Brian De Palma, 1973); *Sisters* (Douglas Buck, 2007); and *Twin Sisters* (Tom Berry, 1992).

part from her childhood and teenage film roles.<sup>41</sup> The virtual “good girl gone bad” spectacle witnessed in *Black Swan* is enacted on an actual level through a deliberate disruption of her immaculate public record.<sup>42</sup> In this sense Portman encapsulates Deleuze’s comparison of the actual and virtual dimensions of the crystal-image to an actor and her or his public personas: “[t]he actor is bracketed with his [sic] public role: he makes the virtual image of the role actual, so that the role becomes visible and luminous” (1989, 71).

The construction of Portman’s “good girl” star persona through advertising materials before and during the release of *Black Swan* provides a compelling case in point. For example, Portman has served as the face of Miss Dior perfume since 2011, a collaboration that was announced in December 2010 during the campaign season for the upcoming Academy Awards (at which Portman won Best Actress for her performance in *Black Swan*). The fact that Portman was chosen to represent Miss Dior perfume is telling, as Miss Dior is composed mainly of citrus and floral notes that are often associated with a romantic young girl (as opposed to a seductive or dangerous *femme fatale*) (“Miss Dior” 2013). In her print and film advertisements for Dior, Portman is often dressed in pastel dresses and framed against floral

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<sup>41</sup> Portman gained fame in *Léon: The Professional* (Luc Besson, 1994), playing a precocious assassin. Portman also appeared in *Heat* (Michael Mann, 1995); *Beautiful Girls* (Ted Demme, 1996) and *Everyone Says I Love You* (Woody Allen, 1996) while still a teenager, in addition to starring as young Queen Amidala in *Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace* (George Lucas, 1999) and *Star Wars: Episode II – Attack of the Clones* (George Lucas, 2002). Portman put her film career on hold until she graduated from Harvard in 2003 with a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology. After graduating, Portman starred in the independent box-office success *Garden State* (Zach Braff, 2004), inaugurating a succession of “manic pixie dream girl” roles. Although Portman also appeared in riskier, more explicitly politicized and sexually explicit films such as *V for Vendetta* (James McTeigue, 2005) and *Closer* (Mike Nichols, 2004), in which she played a terrorist and exotic dancer respectively, her overall image was one of wholesomeness, intellectual and artistic gravity and classic beauty.

<sup>42</sup> In addition to her film roles, Portman has established herself as a politically and socially engaged woman: she is vocal about choosing to be vegan for ethical reasons; serves as an Ambassador of Hope for FINCA, an anti-poverty organization that provides funds to low-income entrepreneurs in the Third World; and is generally outspoken about being a role model for young women, turning down roles in films such as *Lolita* (Adrian Lyne, 1997) in fear that they might negatively influence young female viewers (Portman 2009).

backgrounds.<sup>43</sup> One commercial even features a white swan, included as a reference to Portman's role in *Black Swan* and as an homage to the work of former Dior advertising director Rene Gruau, in which white swans functioned as a motif representing the grace and beauty of the ideal Dior woman (*Miss Dior Chérie* 2013).

Portman's doubling within and without *Black Swan* exposes the bio-political significance of viewing femininity itself as a performative construct. The dichotomization of "good" and "bad" female traits reveals the patriarchal roots of such a bipolar schematization, rather than reflecting an essential facet of the female psyche. Fischer writes that the split between good and evil female twins in Hollywood melodrama "need not be viewed as a real break in the psyche of women. Instead, it is more aptly seen as a cleft in the male *view* of her" – a cleft that reveals "the dialectical fantasies of man" (1983, 33-4) rather than any "natural" foundations of femininity. However, in my consideration of *Black Swan* as a melodrama targeted at female audiences, I argue that the film is not a patriarchal fantasy in which the suffering female protagonist is fractured and mutilated to ease male anxiety and provide enjoyment. Rather, it exposes the misogynistic origins of bipolar constructions of women and expresses the gendered aspects of female suffering in a sympathetic manner.

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<sup>43</sup> A recent Miss Dior commercial directed by Sofia Coppola features Portman lounging against a bed of red and pink roses in pastel haute couture to the tune of "La vie en rose," sung by Grace Jones (*Miss Dior* 2013).

*Melodramatic Affect, Hysteria and Female Audiences*

I have so far discussed how the fracturing and doubling of the female protagonist in *Black Swan* exposes a patriarchal understanding of the female psyche and an anxiety towards female bonding and solidarity. As an example of contemporary cinematic melodrama, the modes of female suffering in the film also respond to the current socio-cultural and bio-political demands made upon the female body in U.S. (and more broadly Western) society.

*Black Swan* was released in 2010, which also happened to be the Year of the Woman in the U.S. However, this celebration of women's progress was curtailed by regressive political developments. We have, for example, what I have previously described as the "War on Women" dividing the political landscape over the past several years (O'Neill, 2011). Within this environment, feminists argue that women's right to bodily autonomy is policed by male-dominated political institutions and policies that, as I outlined in Chapter 2, circumscribe the reproductive rights of women, as well as advocate misogynistic understandings of rape and female biology (Moore 2012; Raju 2012). This embattled political environment also includes the continuing imperative for women to conform to unrealistic standards of beauty and physical perfection, as well as more positive developments such as the increased visibility of women in national politics (Hillary Clinton campaigned to become the presidential candidate for the Democratic party in 2008, and Nancy Pelosi became the first female Speaker of the House of Representatives in 2007).

It is not surprising, then, that cultural manifestations of anxiety towards the "out of control" female body such as that presented in *Black Swan* would be plentiful and have specific

connotations in this context. *Black Swan* allegorizes and deconstructs the bio-political disciplining of the female body through the use of melodramatic cinematic affect, which places spectators in a sympathetic relationship to female suffering and encourages an awareness of its patriarchal foundations. This politically conscious awareness experienced through the act of spectatorship constitutes a melodramatic shock to thought regarding gender inequality and female embodiment designed to appeal especially (though not exclusively) to female audiences.

The themes and affective resonances of melodramatic films are often targeted towards the presumed interests and experiences of female audiences. Examples include failed, cruel or abusive romantic relationships with men; hysteria, paranoia and psychosis; the loving and combative bonds between mothers and daughters; and female sexuality and desire.

Melodramatic tropes such as these express the gendered construction of cinematic affect and suggest traumatic *real* origins or counterparts. That is, the experiences of the female protagonists onscreen expose real female trauma on a mass level, erupting through the form and content of melodramatic affect. These traumatic eruptions encourage sympathetic or compassionate responses on the part of spectators, especially those who readily recognize that female suffering in melodramatic film performs the task of “rendering [female] anxiety coherent” (Cvetkovich 1992, 35).

The decade leading up to the year of *Black Swan*'s release saw a small revival of classical Hollywood melodrama in the U.S.<sup>44</sup> However, far more prevalent were female-centered fairytale and myth films and television series employing melodramatic, romantic and gothic affects to appeal to female audiences (2012 was even named the “year of the fairytale blockbuster” in the U.S., as Hollywood appeared to have a “preoccupation” with the genre [Bowden 2012; Rafferty, 2012]). *Black Swan* can be considered part of this revival of the fairytale film as a form of female-targeted melodrama by virtue of its narrative focus on the sexual coming-of-age of its young female protagonist. Indeed, many of the current fairytale and myth films center on young female protagonists, usually addressing issues of female sexual development and morality.<sup>45</sup>

These fairytale and myth films vacillate between depictions of active, independent heroines and iterations of female protagonists with more traditionally feminine traits (passivity, sexual obedience and “innocence”), and thus appear ambivalent towards the moral or ethical dimensions of female sexuality and desire. *Red Riding Hood* (Catherine Hardwicke, 2011) is

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<sup>44</sup> Examples include films and television series such as *Far From Heaven* (Todd Haynes 2002) and *Mildred Pierce* (HBO, Todd Haynes, 2011).

<sup>45</sup> Examples from the U.S. and France include *Alice in Wonderland* (Tim Burton, 2010); *Barbe Bleue/Bluebeard* (Catherine Breillat, 2009); *Beastly* (Daniel Barnz, 2011); *Beauty and the Beast* (Guillermo del Toro, no release date); *La belle & la bête/Beauty and the Beast* (Christophe Gans, 2014); *La belle endormie/The Sleeping Beauty* (Catherine Breillat, 2010); *Cinderella* (Kenneth Branagh, 2015); *Deeply* (Sheri Elwood, 2000); *Ella Enchanted* (Tommy O'Haver, 2004); *Enchanted* (Kevin Lima, 2007); *Enchanted 2* (Anne Fletcher, no release date); *Ever After: A Cinderella Story* (Andy Tennant, 1998); *Freeway* (Matthew Bright, 1996); *El laberinto del fauno/Pan's Labyrinth* (Guillermo del Toro, 2006); *Lady in the Water* (M. Night Shyamalan, 2006); *The Little Mermaid* (Sofia Coppola, no release date); *Maleficent* (Robert Stromberg, 2014); *Mirror Mirror* (Tarsem Singh, 2012); *Penelope* (Mark Palansky, 2006); *The Prince and Me* (Martha Coolidge, 2004); *The Princess Diaries* (Garry Marshall, 2001); *The Princess Diaries 2: Royal Engagement* (Garry Marshall, 2004); *Red Riding Hood* (Catherine Hardwicke, 2011); *Sleeping Beauty* (Julia Leigh, 2011); *Snow White and the Huntsman* (Rupert Sanders, 2012); *Snow White and the Huntsman 2* (David Koepp, 2015); *Twilight* (Catherine Hardwicke, 2008); *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn – Part 1* (Bill Condon, 2011); *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn – Part 2* (Bill Condon, 2012); *The Twilight Saga: Eclipse* (David Slade, 2010); and *The Twilight Saga: New Moon* (Chris Weitz, 2009). Fairytale and myth television series include *Beauty and the Beast* (CW, 2012-present); *Once Upon a Time* (ABC, 2011-present); and *True Blood* (HBO, 2008-present).

perhaps most similar to *Black Swan* in its emphasis on the sexual awakening of its adolescent “good girl” protagonist. Characters continually stress to Red Riding Hood (Amanda Seyfried) the importance of being a “good girl,” reminding one of the way in which Thomas refers to Nina (and Beth before her) in an infantilizing manner as “my little princess.”<sup>46</sup> Both films employ similar iconography of bleeding wounds to suggest female sexual development: in promotional material for *Red Riding Hood*, crimson flows from Red Riding Hood’s cape like blood, much as blood flows from Nina’s chest wound to contaminate the pristine white feathers of her White Swan costume in the final moments of *Black Swan*.

*Black Swan* is itself internally ambivalent in terms of its gender politics; as a contemporary melodrama, its presentation of the anxieties and pleasures of the female protagonist potentially reinforces and challenges gender stereotypes. Tania Modleski writes that melodramas “to some extent ‘inoculate’ against the major evils of sexist society,” noting that “Roland Barthes identifies inoculation as one of the principle figures of contemporary myth” (1982, 43). It is with this feminist potential in mind that I investigate the ways in which *Black Swan* employs melodramatic affect to convey the gendered bio-political dimensions of female embodiment and mutilation, as well as encourage a compassionate spectatorial co-existence with female suffering. I focus specifically on hysteria, both that of the female protagonist as well as its use as a method of communication between screen and spectators. I argue that *Black Swan* communicates in a melodramatic, hysterical mode that approximates

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<sup>46</sup> It is interesting to note here that Cassel performs the role of La Bête (The Beast) in *La belle & la bête/Beauty and the Beast* (Christophe Gans, 2014).

the hysterical suffering of Nina. The film employs this mode of communication to expose and critique the historical association of hysteria with women and femininity.

In *Melodrama: Genre, Style, Sensibility* (2004), John Mercer and Martin Shingler argue that cinematic melodrama is a sensibility or mode of filmmaking that “often deals with highly-charged emotional issues, characterised by an extravagantly dramatic register and frequently by an overtly emotional mode of address” (1). This melodramatic mode of cinema reaches beyond generic boundaries, functioning “as a style, mode, sensibility, aesthetic and rhetoric, crossing a range of genres, media, historical periods and cultures” (Mercer and Shingler 2004, 78). Melodrama produces feelings of sympathy or pathos in spectators, who are then encouraged to adopt a compassionate attitude toward suffering protagonists. Compassion is fostered by cinematic devices that approximate the subjective physical, emotional and psychological experiences of these protagonists, rather than striving for a “realistic” or “objective” representation of diegetic events (Mercer and Shingler 2004, 80, 85, 88).

*Black Swan* exhibits many of the aesthetic traits of melodrama as identified by Mercer and Shingler, as its stylistic features reflect melodramatic cinema’s “dependence upon an established system of non-verbal signs, gesture, *mise-en-scène*...and music” (2004, 7). For example, in terms of *mise-en-scène*, the apartment that Nina shares with her mother is overloaded with pastel linens, chintzy music boxes, stuffed animals and other gaudy ornaments. The drawings and paintings of Nina by her mother that cover the walls suggest the former’s sense of suffocation and entrapment. Artificial lighting designs employed throughout the film lend a fantastic and at times grotesque aura to Nina’s psychological and

physical transformations. This design accords with the common use of artificial lighting in melodramatic films to “represent the mood of a scene or a character rather than aiming for more naturalistic lighting” (Mercer and Shingler 2004, 56). For instance, in the scene that takes place in the club, blue and red filters and strobe effects closely approximate Nina’s personal disorientation and instability.

The ability of melodramatic formal devices to induce feelings of pathos and sympathy in audiences extends to spectatorial compassion for the hysterical suffering of Nina in *Black Swan*. Indeed, the melodramatic mode is particularly amenable to the imaging of hysteria, in that the “excessive” emotional and physical symptoms of the latter accord with the formal extravagance of the former. The form of *Black Swan* approximates the experience of Nina’s paranoiac hysteria by envisioning surreal events such as the doubling and transformation of her body. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith identifies events such as these as “the ‘hysterical’ moment[s] of the text” in which “undischarged emotion” exposes itself through melodramatic form (1977, 117).

As I outlined in Chapter 1 in relation to *Antichrist*, the understanding of hysteria as an illness or affliction was popularized by medical practitioners such as the neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot in France in the mid-nineteenth century. Hysteria was later adopted by Freud as a framework for analyzing “abnormal” female behavior rooted in unconscious or repressed memories of trauma. Freud even went to far as to equate the hysteric with the sexually

mature woman, in that both must constantly repress the masculine dimensions of their sexuality (Fischer 1983, 36). In her revisionist understanding of hysteria, Showalter follows Cixous in cautiously recuperating the concept of hysteria for feminist critiques of patriarchal culture, defining it as “a protolanguage rather than a disease” that functions as “a cultural symptom of anxiety and stress” (1997, 9, 13). In this respect Showalter’s thinking on hysteria also aligns with that of Foucault, who identifies female hysteria as the dominant biopolitical mode of producing and regulating female bodies in the nineteenth century (1990, 121, 146-7, 153). Showalter argues that, despite reports to the contrary, hysteria is alive and well in the contemporary paranoid political landscape of the U.S. (1997, 5, 26).

As a contemporary form of melodrama, *Black Swan* exposes and deconstructs the biopolitical production of female hysteria in a self-consciously hysterical mode. We can take, for example, the characterization of Nina’s anorexia and bulimia as hysterical responses to norms of femininity in the U.S. (and more specifically in the ballet industry). Spectators see that Nina survives off of very little food every day, usually those with a low caloric density such as grapefruit, eggs and salad. She expresses anxiety about eating a piece of cake bought by her mother in celebration of her winning the roles of the White and Black Swans. This anxiety is juxtaposed with repeated scenes of Nina flushing while locked in bathroom stalls, a common method of bulimic purging. Nina says that she engages in this obsessive behavior because “I just want to be perfect.” Nina’s weight drops as her hysterical hallucinations and transformations increase, culminating in the opening night of *Swan Lake* in which Nina finally “felt it...perfect. I was perfect.”

Feminists identify eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia as modern and contemporary forms of hysteria that have reached epidemic proportions in young women in the U.S.<sup>47</sup> Sandra Lee Bartky argues that eating disorders constitute a mode of gendered biopolitical disciplining in which the female body is alienated or “othered” by its own perceived imperfections, “under surveillance from without as well as from within” (2002, 21). Susan Bordo echoes this thinking in describing the anorexic’s view of her body as “animal, as appetite, as deceiver, as prison of the soul and confounder of its projects...Stupidly, unconsciously, dominated by appetite, he [the body] continually misrepresents my ‘spirit’s motive,’ my finer, clearer self...he casts a false image of me before the world, a swollen, stupid caricature of my ‘inner’ being” (1993, 3).

The alienation of Nina from her body through anorexia and bulimia serves as a precursor to the aesthetically hysterical moments of the film. For example, the constant use of following shots and close-ups grant spectators an intimate, tactile access to Nina’s paranoia and hysteria. Like *Dans ma peau*, *Black Swan* employs tightly framed, claustrophobic following shots of the female protagonist in order to draw spectators near to her physical and psychological neuroses, compelling them to share space with her nervous, twitchy presence. This spatial confinement to the materiality of the female body contests what Bordo defines as the postmodern “‘view from everywhere’ fantasy,” which “may itself be a male construction

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<sup>47</sup> Showalter notes that, in the U.S., “the rate of anorexia doubled between 1960 and 1976, and bulimia started its rise in the 1980s. By the late 1980s, these two disorders were thought to affect up to a million young women” (1997, 20).

on the possibilities for knowledge” (1993, 219-20). The restricted corporeal point of view in *Black Swan* exposes the patriarchal bio-political underpinnings of the female protagonist’s submissive and modest behavior. This location of spectatorial perception near the hysterical female flesh creates the space for a feminist ethics of bodily compassion, facilitated by haptic engagement with the physical and psychological torments of Nina. In this sense *Black Swan* adopts the recasting of hysteria as a feminist proto-language, or an embodied mode of expression that communicates women’s physical and psychic suffering under patriarchal gender norms.

When Nina begins to experience the possibly hallucinatory physical distortions that mark her transformation into the Black Swan, these are also conveyed to spectators in a hysterical manner. Mysterious scratches appear on Nina’s back and shoulders, causing her mother to accuse her of reverting to a previous habit of cutting herself. Nina then notices in panic that she is able to peel away her skin at the fingertips, revealing the bloody sub-epidermal gore below. Nina, along with viewers, also begins to experience a heightened sense of sound: the film sonically registers her unique ability to hear every minute vibration occurring around her, real or imaginary. To her utter amazement, she also finds small, barbed black feathers protruding from her skin. The camera dwells in uncomfortable extreme close-up as a traumatized Nina rips these feathers out of her skin, the individual goose pimples and her bloodshot eyes filling the screen like landscapes (reminiscent of the way Esther’s traumatized body fills the screen in *Dans ma peau*). The camera then approximates Nina’s point of view as her legs bend forward at an unnatural ninety-degree angle and she is knocked unconscious, mimicking what hysteria scholar Ruth Harris describes as “‘classic’ hysterical symptoms

such as retraction of the visual field [and] hemianesthesia (loss of sensibility on one half of the body)” (1988, 49).

Nina’s skin also begins to itch and turn into black, shiny scales as she descends deeper into hysterical paranoia and transforms physically into the Black Swan. The aural intensity of Nina’s scratching and the close proximity of the camera places spectators in a space contiguous to her skin; the severe discomfort and fear that Nina experiences through this pellicular itching becomes magnified for spectators through the sensual depiction of her skin as a surface of tingling sensations. The discomfiting aesthetics of itchiness becomes a palpable contagion that spreads to spectators and encourages a bodily engagement with Nina’s skin. Steven Connor describes itchiness as just such a bearer of contagion, which “is in continuity with other swarming sensations, in which the skin suddenly appears foreign to itself, and appears to have given up its singleness and entirety to pure multiplicity” (2004, 234). The bodies of Nina and spectators become similarly infected by the hysterical “swarmings” conveyed through the affective and infective aesthetics of Nina’s itch.

The use of hysterical affect to convey Nina’s suffering echoes the melodramatic construction of the hysterical female body in manners designed to garner sympathy from female audiences. For example, Linda Williams argues that melodramatic films require a “female reading competence” of the ways in which women are subordinated within patriarchal culture (1984, 7-8). Delving further into the history of melodramatic performance, Harris notes that

the public trials of female *criminelles passionnelles* in twentieth-century France constituted melodramatic spectacles that fostered sympathy between the women on trial (most often accused of murdering men) and those in the audience: “[s]ometimes the affecting nature of a case would literally reduce the public gallery to tears almost in the same way that a stage performance pulled the heart strings of an attentive audience....[this] aroused the sympathy of the largely feminine public in attendance” (1988, 45). Although this particular enactment of female sympathy and solidarity lends credence to patriarchal stereotypes of women as more prone to emotional instability (Harris 1988, 53-4), it also constitutes an alternative “feminine” mode of expression in which women were able to communicate with one another, obscurely articulating and contesting their common experiences of oppression and rage.

This attitude of compassionate sympathy towards the suffering female protagonist within melodrama constitutes a minor form of perceptive feeling, as Mercer and Shingler note that oftentimes “critics...decry the supposedly ‘banal’ or ‘sentimental’ nature of material aimed at women...regarding an uncritical, empathetic, response to these films as inferior” (2004, 57). As a mode of minor feminist cinema, the melodramatic *Black Swan* exposes the intolerable situation of young women such as Nina, caught between two impossible stereotypes of womanhood. A highly surreal and emotional melodramatic mode is key in exposing this intolerability, as it “implicitly recognises the limits...of conventional representation...In this way, the ‘beneath’ or ‘behind’ (*the unthinkable* or repressed) is evoked as metaphor” (Mercer and Shingler 2004, 79 [italics mine]).

For example, the minor use of melodramatic cliché in *Black Swan* expresses a feminist perspective on Nina's suffering. The film envisions restrictive gender roles and patriarchal control of female bodies in an exaggerated, clichéd manner in order to expose and undermine women's subordinate status. This deconstructive use of cliché constitutes *Black Swan* as a progressive melodramatic film in the tradition of Douglas Sirk's socially conscious brand of melodrama, which "frequently deploys clichéd imagery and scenarios to seemingly draw attention to their very artificiality" (Mercer and Shingler 2004, 56). Examples of gender clichés in *Black Swan* include Nina's emphatically "proper" femininity and childishness; her mother's overwrought protectiveness; Lily's amplified sexual artifice and careerist deviousness; and Leroy's misogyny and perfectionism. The blatant gender clichés in *Black Swan* produce a shock to thought that "is not the pleasurable recognition of a verisimilitude that generates naive belief" (Williams 1984, 22). Rather, this shock to thought involves exposing a patriarchal system that facilitates and objectifies female suffering in majoritarian cinema, as well as encouraging sympathetic compassion for this suffering.

In the final sections that follow, I further discuss how the relationship of the camera to Nina's bodily comportment encourages a sympathetic compassion for female suffering.

### *The Bodily Comportment of Female Suffering*

Nina's bodily comportment offers heightened access to the kinesthetic dimensions of female suffering, expressing certain gendered gestural traits that foster a sympathetic co-existence

between Nina and spectators. This kinesthetic engagement encourages a gendered form of sympathy between the suffering female ballerina and female audiences.

*Black Swan* draws on a history of female suffering, abuse and bio-political conditioning at the hands of men in ballet film, as well as its well-documented counterpart in the experiences of actual ballerinas. We can look, for example, at the melodramatic ballet film *The Red Shoes* (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1948), which similarly focuses on a man's control and abuse of his female protégé, and the latter's dedication to and sacrifice for her art. Cassel, who plays the role of the seductive and manipulative ballet director, stated that he based his character on the sadistic and controlling George Balanchine. Balanchine was choreographer and ballet master of the Ballets Russes, and later co-founder and ballet master of the New York City Ballet, whose abuse of prima ballerina and protégé Suzanne Farrell is well known. (Tellingly, Showalter refers to the exploitative hysteria expert Charcot as "a nineteenth-century psychiatric Balanchine" [1997, 106]. A Balanchine-Farrell dynamic is also evoked in the relationship between egomaniacal ballet director Boris Lermontov [Anton Walbrook] and prima ballerina Victoria Page [Moira Shearer] in *The Red Shoes*, which is set in Monte Carlo, home of the Ballets Russes in its later years.)

In addition to referencing a history of female suffering in ballet, *Black Swan* also appeals to the gendered knowledge and sympathy of female audiences through the ways in which it constructs Nina's movements in space. Specifically, the constriction of Nina's movements and gestures embody female subordination within patriarchal society, and in this way appeal to the sympathy of audiences in a gendered manner. In her description of the ways in which

women unconsciously adopt a body language of submission to male superiority, Bartky could indeed be describing the timid and diminutive Nina:

Women's typical restraint in posture and movement are understood to be a language of subordination when they are enacted by men in male status hierarchies...The current [female] ideal body type lacks flesh and substance; it takes up little space...This is also a body in whose very contours the image of immaturity has been inscribed. The requirement of a smooth and hairless skin underscores the theme of inexperience: an infantilized face must accompany this infantilized body, a face that never ages or furrows its brow in thought...this infantilized body mirrors what one might call...the effort at a continuing social infantilization of women. (2002, 21-2)

We can turn to the work of Young for a more detailed description of just what exactly this “feminine” body language of subordination entails. Young draws on the existential phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and Beauvoir to identify the ways in which female bodies are conditioned to behave as if they were weaker and less important than those of males. Young argues that the restricted “modalities of feminine bodily comportment, motility, and spatiality” originate “in neither anatomy nor physiology, and certainly not in a mysterious feminine essence. Rather, they have their source in the particular situation of women as conditioned by their sexist oppression in contemporary society” (2005, 42).

A key element of Young's argument with relevance to *Black Swan* is her description of female space as constricted, “*enclosed* or confining,” embodying “an existential enclosure between herself and the space surrounding her” (2005, 39-40). *Black Swan* aligns the camera (and, by extension, spectators) closely with Nina's body in order to melodramatically expose her constriction, encouraging an acutely uncomfortable awareness of its gendered

dimensions. The frequent close-up and extreme close-up following shots of Nina thus constitute a minor “feminized” mode of visioning space. This minor mode of perception entails a shift in perspective for spectators that is disorienting, but ultimately exposes the biopolitical dimensions of female bodily constriction and subordination.

In her analyses of contemporary ballet and dance films, Katharina Lindner similarly stresses the gendered aspects of female bodily experience in arguing that female dancers in film are objectified and alienated by voyeuristic modes of vision both within and without film.

Lindner’s descriptions of this alienating regime of perception speak to the ways in which *Black Swan* self-consciously embodies what she terms the “alienating implications of the self-surveying gaze” (2011):

the initial training/rehearsal numbers articulate the female characters’ bodily struggle for the ideal body and ideal movement. This struggle, and the associated alienation from the body, is further underlined through representations of the training/rehearsal contexts as places of voyeurism and surveillance. This includes the presence of overly critical trainers/coaches and perhaps most significantly, the presence of, and references to, mirrors through which the female characters turn their judging and scrutinising gaze onto each others’ and their own bodies. (2011)

The close proximity of the camera to Nina thus disrupts common forms of representing the female body in both ballet and film as consumable spectacle; that is, the camera is normally distanced to the extent that spectators experience the illusion of mastery over space and the bodies within it. This pertains especially to dance films and musicals, which often strive for this mastery by replicating the perspective of the audience in the theatre (Lindner 2011).

However, *Black Swan* exposes rather than obscures the gendered dimensions of such modes of perceiving the female body with its extreme constriction of the spaces of Nina’s movement and the field of spectatorial vision. The close proximity of the camera to Nina

during her daily routines and ballet performances, coupled with the extreme terror and hysteria she communicates through the nightmarish alienation and disobedience of her body, disrupts this objectifying regime of vision by constantly fostering an awareness of the biopolitical materiality of her body.

*Black Swan* also de-objectifies the female body as a pleasurable spectacle to be mastered by detailing the real physical hardships endured by ballerinas. After Nina accidentally stumbles during her audition for the role of the Black Swan, she goes home and practices all night until she is able to dance that particular coda perfectly. While she is pirouetting in front of a full-length mirror in her living room, framed in a medium shot, the camera cuts to an extreme close-up of her toe, the tip just balancing on the hard wood of the floor. Spectators then hear a distinct cracking noise as Nina breaks her toe in slow motion, the camera lingering on the ripped and bloody toenail as Nina nurses her foot. Throughout the film, the claustrophobic camera clinging to Nina's every move compels spectators to physically engage with her as she stretches her bodily endurance to the limit, spending each hour of the day and night straining and punishing her exhausted limbs in the pursuit of perfection.

*Black Swan* challenges established practices of perceiving the female body by exposing the objectification of women in majoritarian patriarchal media. In this sense the film enacts a feminist ethics of perception. However, I would note in closing that the hystericization of Nina's body also reflects the film's own circumstances of production, in that the female body

of Portman in the role of Nina was subject to the male scrutiny of director Aronofsky and director of photography Matthew Libatique, as well as constructed initially by the male writing team of Mark Heyman, Andres Heinz and John J. McLaughlin. While I would thus hesitate in defining *Black Swan* as an explicitly “feminist” film regarding the intentions of its creators, I do argue that it exposes female hysteria and suffering in a minor feminist mode.

*A Feminist Ethics of “Feeling-with”*

In the cases of both *Dans ma peau* and *Black Swan*, a feminist spectatorship ethics of sympathy comprises an intimate proximity to the body of the suffering female protagonist without complete fusion or mimicry, as well as an awareness of the gendered dimensions of such suffering. Irigaray characterizes such ethical vision as a compassionate and energizing shock to thought that encompasses both psychosomatic affection and reflective awareness of the experiences of others. In “Love Between Us,” she argues that one should aspire to a form of vision that is “not a distracted or predatory gaze, it is not the lapse of the speculative into the flesh, it is at once material and spiritual contemplation that provides an already sublimated energy to thought” (Irigaray 1991, 171). I thus define sympathetic and compassionate spectatorial vision as a response-ability towards women experiencing physical, emotional and psychological pain.

In terms of speaking to female pain specifically, my emphasis on a sympathetic relation between female protagonists and spectators contests the female isolation glimpsed in *Dans ma peau* and *Black Swan* through affording a close proximity to the suffering bodies of Esther and Nina. This proximity gestures towards the possibility of enacting female and

feminist networks of solidarity through affective experience in fragmented and isolating environments. Bartky suggests German phenomenological philosopher Max Scheler's concept of *mitgefühl*, or sympathetic "feeling-with," as a useful tool for feminist solidarity in this regard. *Mitgefühl* involves a sympathetic attitude resulting from a combination of affective alignment and knowledge of the context of the suffering of others (Bartky 2002, 71-3). A *feminist* *mitgefühl* would then require an affective alignment or proximity to the bodily suffering of women, as well as a recognition of inequalities between men and women and among women of different races, ethnicities, classes and sexual orientations (Bartky 2002, 141-3). Bartky describes feeling-with as a politically conscious form of affective infection (2002, 80), which dovetails with my feminist understanding of hysteria as a gendered form of contagion expressing female discontent and revolt.

A feminist feeling-with is accomplished in the cinema of exposure through sympathetic modes of affective transmission that extend beyond the realm of the visual; an example of this is the sympathetic transmission of tactile affects of female trauma in films such as *Dans ma peau* and *Black Swan*. *Dans ma peau* and *Black Swan* aesthetically embody female trauma and hysteria, with the result of encouraging a sympathetic compassion between female protagonists and spectators (especially those who sympathize with the "feminized" dimensions of the Esther's and Nina's experiences).

From the perspective of a feminist ethics of sympathy and solidarity, *Dans ma peau* and *Black Swan* diagnose bio-political problems surrounding female subjectivity in an indirect manner, without explicitly serving as a basis for organized solidarity or meditating on the ways in which change might be possible in the future. In this sense the potential of both films to inspire feminist action outside of the realm of spectatorship is, much like the women in the films, constricted by the lack of space for alternatives – what Deleuze and Guattari term the “cramped space” of minor literature (1986, 17). *Dans ma peau* and *Black Swan* operate in a feminist mode by exposing, deconstructing and critiquing the suffering undergone by contemporary women under patriarchal regimes of bio-political conditioning and control. However, I echo Bartky in insisting that in the future women and feminists both on and off the screen “need to organize, not to mourn and not merely to ‘bleed’” (2002, 148).

## **Conclusion**

The melodramatic expression of female trauma and hysteria in the cinema of exposure exposes the patriarchal and sexist bio-political disciplining of the female body, and thus fosters a feminist spectatorship ethics of compassion for female suffering. The close proximity of spectators to (their co-existence with) the suffering female protagonists of *Dans ma peau* and *Black Swan* challenges the split between masculine voyeurism and feminine objectification common in hysterical subjects by amplifying it to the point of exposure. This exposure fosters a feminist form of sympathy and solidarity with Esther and Nina on the part of spectators, who are both physically affected by and intellectually aware of the patriarchal foundations of female suffering.

## Chapter 4

### *Hors la loi:*

#### **Visioning-in-the-feminine and Minor Female Filmmaking**

Let yourself go! Let go of everything! Lose everything! Take to the air. Take to the open sea. Take to letters. Listen: nothing is found. Nothing is lost. Everything remains to be sought. Go, fly, swim, bound, descend, cross, love the unknown, love the uncertain, love what has not yet been seen, love no one, whom you are, whom you will be, leave yourself, shrug off the old lies, *dare what you don't dare*, it is there that you will take pleasure, never make your here anywhere but *there*, and rejoice, rejoice in the terror, follow it where you're afraid to go, go ahead, take the plunge, you're on the right trail! Listen: you owe nothing to the past, you owe nothing to the law. *Gain* your freedom...Search yourself, seek out the shattered, the multiple I, that you will be still further on, and emerge from one self, shed the old body, shake off the Law. Let it fall with all its weight, and you, take off, don't turn back: it's not worth it, there's nothing behind you, everything is yet to come.

Hélène Cixous 1991, 40

### **Introduction**

In this chapter I argue that *Ne te retourne pas/Don't Look Back* (Marina de Van, 2009) and *Baise-moi/Fuck Me* (Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi, 2000) serve as cinematic iterations of what I term visioning-in-the-feminine. Both films are works by female filmmakers that envision female experiences of suffering in shocking and disturbing registers, often evoking haptic vision on the part of spectators. This corporeal engagement necessarily comprises bio-political and ethical dimensions, as it responds to images of female suffering, sexuality and bodily subjectivity under patriarchal regimes of disciplining and exploitation. Such films gesture towards the feminist potential and future of the cinema of exposure, particularly regarding appreciation for the work of female filmmakers.

The pen and *caméra-stylo* are traditionally understood as metaphors for the penis, or tools through which men exercise the phallic privilege of expression through literature and film.<sup>48</sup> In contrast, *Ne te retourne pas* and *Baise-moi* illustrate the ways in which contemporary cinema can elicit alternative feminist imaginaries. I draw on Cixous's concept of *l'écriture féminine*, or "writing-in-the-feminine," to propose a mode of feminist vision (visioning-in-the-feminine) that resonates with spectators in a tactile register, allowing for a sensual and critical form of perception that visualizes female suffering as a product of patriarchal praxis. The visionings-in-the-feminine enacted through *Ne te retourne pas* and *Baise-moi* also portray female bodies (especially those in pain) in non-objectifying, sympathetic manners. This use of non-objectifying vision allows spectators to encounter cinematic images of female suffering in a self-reflexive manner, fostering a critical psychosomatic awareness of the ways in which film structures sexual difference and the pains and pleasures of the female body within the field of vision.

*Ne te retourne pas* and *Baise-moi* illustrate the recent resurgence of horror, thriller and psychodrama films centering on female friendship and conflict in France and the U.S. (an increasing number of which are written and directed by women).<sup>49</sup> Employing both films as

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<sup>48</sup> On the connection between authorship and the privileging of the penis/phallus, see Gilbert and Gubar 2000, 3-11.

<sup>49</sup> Examples include *À l'intérieur/Inside* (Alexandre Bustillo and Julien Maury, 2007); *À ma sœur!/Fat Girl* (Catherine Breillat, 2001); *Black Rock* (Kate Aselton, 2012); *Black Swan* (Darren Aronofsky, 2010); *Bye Bye Blondie* (Virginie Despentes, 2011); *Cracks* (Jordan Scott, 2009); *Crime d'amour/Love Crime* (Alain Corneau, 2010); *The Descent* (Neil Marshall, 2005); *Girls Against Boys* (Austin Chick, 2012); *Haute Tension/Switchblade Romance* (Alexandre Aja, 2003); *Les jolies choses/Beautiful Things* (Gilles Paquet-Brenner, 2001); *Kiss of the Damned* (Xan Cassavetes, 2013); *Martyrs* (Pascal Lagulier, 2008); *Mulholland Drive* (David Lynch, 2000); *Passion* (Brian De Palma, 2013); *Single White Female 2: The Psycho* (Keith Samples, 2005); *Violet & Daisy* (Geoffrey Fletcher, 2011); *Wolf Creek* (Greg Mclean, 2005); and *Je te manerais/You Will Be Mine* (Sophie Laloy, 2009).

case studies, I address the bio-political and ethical import of this resurgence as a mode of visioning-in-the-feminine, especially in terms of the minor position of feminist female filmmakers within the French film industry (Tarr and Rollet 2001, 5). *Ne te retourne pas* and *Baise-moi* present widely disparate visionings-in-the-feminine. However, the films are united by their feminist revisions of female experiences of suffering and sexual desire. These revisions elicit minor feminist modes of perceptual transformation in spectators that subvert misogynistic and (hetero)normative ways of viewing women's bodies. Minor aesthetic practices encourage spectators to adopt a relationship of sympathetic alignment with the female protagonists. This sympathetic alignment in turn fosters an ethical form of feminist solidarity with female experiences of pain and pleasure.

First I briefly summarize *écriture féminine* and visioning-in-the-feminine, which I defined in the introductory chapter. I then explore the inscription of feminist vision in *Ne te retourne pas* and *Baise-moi*. In *Ne te retourne pas*, the bodily suffering of the female protagonist involves mutations and transformations that alienate her from her sense of personal identity and gesture towards the lingering effects of childhood trauma. Visioning-in-the-feminine thus involves an aesthetic design that approximates the female protagonist's pain and confusion. This approximation embodies the destabilized, minor perceptive practices through which the female filmmaker, character and spectators "come to write" or vision-in-the-feminine.

*Baise-moi* is no doubt the more controversial of the two films. My analysis addresses the potential that the film holds for feminist modes of vision, as well as the political and ethical dilemmas posed by its violent female protagonists. I argue that *Baise-moi* writes or visions-in-the-feminine by radically altering the presentation of female suffering and pleasure as they are usually encountered in majoritarian patriarchal cinema. By refusing to stage erotic spectacles of female suffering, and focusing instead on the pleasures women experience in living outside the laws and dictates of patriarchal culture, *Baise-moi* visions an alternative to cinematic aesthetics and perceptive practices that objectify women and eroticize their pain. In this sense the film serves as an example of a minor feminist cinema in Deleuze's sense of the term: directors Despentès and Trinh Thi use cliché in a deconstructive manner to defamiliarize and make strange the misogynistic presentations of female suffering and pleasure in patriarchal cinema, the rape-revenge genre and pornography. *Baise-moi* visions female experience in a sympathetic aesthetic mode that encourages spectators to feel solidarity with the female protagonists. However, this solidarity is not bio-politically or ethically utopian; as I will discuss, the violence inflicted on others by the female protagonists, as well as their eventual death and capture, envisages the impossibility of sustained and meaningful feminist political action under patriarchy as it currently stands.

For the purpose of clarity, before discussing *Ne te retourne pas* and *Baise-moi* in-depth I will briefly summarize the elements of writing and visioning-in-the-feminine that are relevant to my arguments. As I explained in the introductory chapter, Cixous imagined *écriture féminine* as a mode of production in which anyone, regardless of sex or gender (but especially women), could challenge patriarchal and masculinist praxis by writing from a

minor position; usually, from the minor position of the female body (1976, 880). This corporeal foundation allows writing-in-the-feminine to intertwine the body with the mind, spirit and thought (Conley 1991, 94). Writing-in-the-feminine also makes female bodies and desires *visible* by disrupting patriarchal codes of communication and perception predicated on their erasure. In this regard Cixous's concept of *écriture féminine* aligns with the thinking of Irigaray, who in *Speculum of the Other Woman* argues that the castrated "lack" represented by the female body is a patriarchal fiction that must be challenged by making female embodiment visible (1985, 47-8).

My concept of visioning-in-the-feminine provides a cinematic correlate to *écriture féminine*. Visioning-in-the-feminine comprises a sensual psychosomatic awareness of the ways in which the cinema of exposure acknowledges certain patriarchal and misogynistic structures of female suffering. This alternative mode of vision exposes and critiques objectifying and eroticizing constructions of female suffering, constituting a feminist bio-politics and ethics of spectatorial perception.

With these features of *écriture féminine* and visioning-in-the-feminine in mind, I turn my attention to the feminist bio-political and ethical dimensions of writing and visioning-in-the-feminine in *Ne te retourne pas* and *Baise-moi*.

***La camera sognata: Visioning Female Crisis in Ne te retourne pas***

*Ne te retourne pas* portrays the psychosomatic transformations undergone by Jeanne (Sophie Marceau), a biographer, photographer and aspiring novelist who lives in Paris with her husband Teo (Andrea Di Stefano) and their two young children. After Jeanne's latest idea for a novel based on fragments of her forgotten childhood is rejected by her editor, she becomes increasingly agitated and confused as her perception of spaces and her own body begin to alter radically. Marceau slowly transforms into Monica Bellucci, who portrays Jeanne in the second half of the film. Bellucci, who does not recognize either her changed body or the new Teo (Thierry Neuvic) as her husband, goes in search of her missing mother in Italy and eventually discovers the disturbing childhood trauma that she had repressed.

*Ne te retourne pas* premiered at the 2009 Cannes Film Festival, screening out of competition. It also screened at the Oldenburg and Sevilla film festivals, played at Febiofest in Prague and was nominated for Best Film at the Sitges-Catalonian Film Festival. Reviews indicate that the film did not perform particularly well in the European and North American markets; it was certainly not as well received as de Van's feature-length directorial debut *Dans ma peau* (2002). *Ne te retourne pas* received a limited theatrical release in France, and was released direct-to-video in the U.S.

Due to its limited and short-lived release and distribution schedule, *Ne te retourne pas* was not reviewed in most major newspapers, magazines or journals. With few exceptions, the reviews that do exist are overwhelmingly negative, and express disappointment that de Van did not live up to the artistic and directorial promise she showed in *Dans ma peau* and in her

earlier collaborations with François Ozon.<sup>50</sup> The general dismissal of *Ne te retourne pas* in the critical press render serious discussions of its presentation of gendered subjectivity and suffering all the more crucial, in order to more fully appreciate the political and ethical dimensions of its visioning-in-the-feminine.

The bodily and spatial transformations undergone by the female protagonist, as well as the formal devices of the film that approximate these transformations, expose the traumatic origins of female crisis and suffering. It is with the traumatic origins of these transformations in mind that I devote ample space to exploring the ways in which *Ne te retourne pas* aesthetically renders the mutation of bodies and spaces, and determine the relevance of these aesthetics to a feminist spectatorship praxis of becoming-other and co-existence. I argue that the film employs psychosomatically disturbing affects and emotions such as fear, confusion and alienation to convey the female protagonist's experiences of physical disorientation and subjective instability. The estranging destabilizations within this oneiric cinematic atmosphere are closely linked to issues surrounding female subjectivity and sexual difference. Namely, the disruptive use of cinematic affect exposes spectators to a feminist visioning-in-the-feminine that embodies female desire and creative voice. These sensory-motor disruptions also present a feminist re-visioning of female suffering that embodies the

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<sup>50</sup> See Chareyron 2010; Crespo 2009; D'Angelo 2009; Elley 2009; "Films du Festival Cannes 2009" 2009; Gilli 2009; Lee 2009; Lopes 2009; Orndorf 2010; "Review: *Don't Look Back*" 2009; "Review: *Ne te retourne pas*" 2009; "Review: *Ne te retourne pas* (2009) de Marina de Van" 2009; and "Three Thrillers from IFC Midnight" 2009.

ways in which female bodies are conditioned by and subvert objectification in majoritarian and minor cinemas respectively.

*Ne te retourne pas* visions-in-the-feminine through several specific means. I first discuss how the film traumatically defamiliarizes the female protagonist from her body and spatial surroundings through the use of indexical media and digital technologies, enacting a feminist becoming-other and co-existence with alterity that also embodies Freud's notion of the uncanny. I then detail how *Ne te retourne pas* consciously presents itself as a film-text concerned with the gendered specificity of female experience by reflectively approximating the position of de Van as a female writer and filmmaker in a male-dominated industry. Finally, I explore how the film encourages a sympathetic and compassionate mode of perceiving female crisis and suffering. This sympathetic mode of perception constitutes *Ne te retourne pas* as a form of minor feminist cinema.

#### *The Becoming-other of Jeanne*

*Ne te retourne pas* destabilizes female experience and identity through its use of indexical media and digital special effects, both of which transform the body of Jeanne and the spaces she inhabits. These manipulations vision-in-the-feminine by encouraging spectators to approximate and sympathize with Jeanne's pain and confusion.

By approximating the ontological crisis of the female protagonist, the film employs indexical media (photography and video) to defamiliarize spectators and characters from the bodies and spaces onscreen. This media transforms space, making it strange, erratic and fantastic, as

opposed to indexing a familiar and static reality. The autobiographical novel that Jeanne dreams of writing, *La camera sognata (The Dream Room)*, similarly hints at the key roles played by fantasy and the imagination in shaping spaces and bodies. The coincidence of indexical “reality” with fantasy, both in the film and in Jeanne’s novel, constitutes an architecture of vision that includes female imagination and sensual experience. This hybrid visioning-in-the-feminine renders visible the “otherness” of Jeanne’s transformative embodiment. Jeanne’s experience of internal doubling and otherness, combined with the co-existence of fantasy and reality onscreen, encourages spectators to reflect critically on the ideological foundations of vision, particularly in terms of gendered and sexually differentiated bodies and their relationships to space.

In digitally composed psychodramas such as *Ne te retourne pas*, photographs and other forms of indexical media often take on the function of, as Garrett Stewart explains, “anchor[ing]...the ontological gothic... the photographic index of an inhabited body is often a touchstone of the crisis” (2007, 90). Indeed, the photographs and videos that Jeanne discovers of her family and herself as a little girl signal the beginning of the (digitally rendered) transformations of her body and environment. Jeanne initially expresses an unexplained aversion to photography and video bordering on fear and disgust. She gets angry with her husband, who is a cinema owner and film enthusiast, whenever he tries to record her or their children on his digital video camera. She warns him that “you’ll be slaves

to this thing,” and appears extremely uncomfortable and annoyed whenever she encounters this video footage.

Jeanne then notices that the camera transforms the spatial layout of their home and the bodily gestures of her husband and children: in the videos, the kitchen table appears in the wrong place, her daughter whispers unintelligibly to the camera and Teo and both children begin to motion strangely with their hands for brief periods. The camera aligns spectatorial vision with that of Jeanne in imaging these changes, which remain invisible to her family. Jeanne’s spatial stability degenerates further when she wanders through her house to see its transformation with her own eyes: the color tones and decorations of various rooms alter each time she passes through, until she finally turns on the camera to check for evidence. She fast-forwards the tape until, to her amazement, she transforms into Monica Bellucci, and her husband into an entirely unknown man (credited as “Teo 2”).

Later on, Jeanne (now played by Bellucci) comes across a photograph of herself as a young child. This photograph motivates her hunt for her forgotten past, acting as the initial source of her corporeal and ontological crisis. The camera lingers on the photograph of the young Jeanne as the older version contemplates it with confusion, reminding spectators of the camera slowly tracking in on the photograph of the young Carol (Catherine Deneuve) in *Repulsion* (Roman Polanski, 1965), a film that also employs photography to hint at the eruption of a woman’s repressed childhood trauma. In fact, de Van replicates specific shots used by Polanski in *Repulsion*, including an extreme close-up of the face of the female protagonist as distorted in a teapot. This reflection warps Jeanne’s features, rendering them

strange and disconcerting to audiences, while also embodying Jeanne's perception of herself as a traumatized and destabilized body undergoing a process of becoming-other. *Ne te retourne pas* thus draws on recognizable iconography of female trauma and perceptive instability in visioning those of its female protagonist(s).

De Van's use of video and photography as agents of spatial and bodily destabilization and transformation suggest that these devices, rather than confirming a stable and static reality, present a female bodily existence that lacks foundation, in indexical media or elsewhere. It is a mutable, transforming and transformative mode of being that renders the body of Jeanne strange to herself and to the world. This transformation dovetails with feminist re-imaginings of the body as changeable and unstable, lacking any foundation in dominant biopolitical norms and ideologies. In *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Irigaray writes that the "body is not the same today as yesterday...Never settled. Let's leave definiteness to the undecided; we don't need it. Our body, right here, right now, gives us a very different certainty. Truth is necessary for those who are so distanced from their body that they have forgotten it" (1985, 214). Consider, for example, the opening scene of *Ne te retourne pas*. The camera shows an unidentified naked woman from the neck down who contemplates herself before a mirror covered with photographs of Jeanne as a child. This body could belong to either Marceau or Bellucci, presenting an indeterminacy that prefigures the corporeal confusion and transformations that will intensify throughout the film.

In a later scene, after Marceau discovers Bellucci in the video tape and begins to forget an increasing amount of her personal information, she is made to feel even more alien in her own body. While Jeanne/Marceau is in her bedroom getting dressed, the camera tilts and sways vertiginously, as she appears disorientated and confused by her surroundings. Suddenly, her body feels and looks strange: her shirt no longer fits over her chest, rings suddenly appear on her fingers, orange blotches materialize on her legs and her previously unvarnished toenails are now painted. Jeanne (still played by Marceau) then looks in the mirror in horror as her face slowly begins to resemble that of Bellucci. At this point Teo 2 takes Jeanne (now played by Bellucci) to the doctor, who suggests that she is seeing “otherwise” because “perception is shaped by what we believe or know. It’s like a drawing that has a second one hidden within it.” Throughout the consultation, Jeanne transforms seamlessly from Bellucci to Marceau, and back to Bellucci.

Jeanne/Bellucci then goes to Italy in search of the woman whom she believes to be her mother. In the coffee shop where this woman (played by Brigitte Catillon, who also played Jeanne/Marceau’s mother in Paris) works, Jeanne notices that her arm has strange bumps under the skin. In a later sex scene with barista Gianni (also played by Andrea Di Stefano, whom viewers later discovers is actually her brother), extensive scars that were not present during the Jeanne/Marceau scenes are visible on her left leg. Jeanne/Bellucci doesn’t recognize anyone at this point: her mother, Gianni, Teo 2 and herself are all strange to her. “I don’t recognize anything,” she cries to Gianni, “not even my own face.”

The most radical spatial and bodily transformations occur in the penultimate scene of the film, in which Jeanne/Bellucci attends a party at her Italian mother's house. When Jeanne enters the dining room, she suddenly shrinks to the height of a young child as the walls begin to shift in size and close in on her. As Jeanne tries to work her way around the furniture, Bellucci progressively transforms into the young Jeanne (Vittoria Meneganti). After revealing to her Italian mother that "I don't know where this face is from. I don't know who I am," her mother confesses the truth in Italian, obviously dubbed over in French: the young Jeanne was in a car crash with family friends, including a similarly aged daughter named Jeanne. After the original Jeanne died, they renamed the family friend and raised her as their own. The mother pleads with the adult Jeanne to understand and forgive, telling her that Jeanne had wanted it that way: "You told me to call you Jeanne, like her. After the crash, you didn't recognize your parents. You clung to me, and you became my daughter."

De Van's destabilization of Jeanne's bodily identity and environments accords with Nancy's understanding of the body (what he terms the "corpus") as fundamentally ungrounded in its existence. In an essay collection entitled *Corpus* (2008), Nancy introduces the corpus as a mutable, hybrid body constituted in its being-exposed to the world, "a juxtaposition without articulation, a variety, a mix that won't explode or implode, vague in its ordering, always extendable" (2008, 53) to the exterior world. Unlike the subject of Western metaphysics grounded in an autonomous and static being, the corpus is (un)grounded in its constant transformations and exposures to alterity: "[t]he corpus is neither chaos nor organism: it

doesn't fall between the two, but lies somewhere else...its foundation slips away from its place...in an essential, all-embracing and exclusive way, ontology is *modal* – or modifiable, or modifying” (Nancy 2008, 53).

A destabilizing process of becoming-other is the originary status of the corpus. Rather than signaling an essentialist return to the notion that “truth” is somehow embedded solely within the mind and soul of the human subject, the “truth” of the body-as-corpus exists only in its infinite exposure to external forces and technologies – in a groundless becoming-other that perpetually renews itself with every encounter and exposure to the world. The transforming body of Jeanne thus constitutes a female corpus ungrounded in its altered physicality and shifting point of origin.

The mutations of bodies and spaces within *Ne te retourne pas* reveal an otherness that also coincides with Deleuze's concept of the crystal-image, a form of time-image in which the actual and virtual dimensions of existence become indiscernible from one another (1989, 7, 69, 78, 82, 90). The crystal-images presented in *Ne te retourne pas* envision a temporality that reflects Jeanne's experience of a past co-existent with the present. For example, the baroque spatial transformations of Jeanne's apartment indicate its closeness to her internal processes of non-linear, amorphous subjective memory. Spaces such as these “cannot be explained in a simply spatial way...These are direct presentations of time...we have a chronic non-chronological time which produces movements necessarily ‘abnormal’, essentially ‘false’” (Deleuze 1989, 129). Later in the film, the transformations of the spatiality of the house of Jeanne's Italian mother and Jeanne's own body within it extend

“beyond the purely empirical succession of time – past-present-future. It is... a coexistence of distinct durations, or of levels of duration” (Deleuze 1989, xii). Spectators directly perceive Jeanne’s subjective experience of disturbed temporality in images such as these in which “[t]ime consists of this split” (Deleuze 1989, 81) between the past and the present. That is, Jeanne’s disturbed memory, what Deleuze terms “disturbances of memory and... failures of recognition” (1989, 55), allows for the emergence of time-images that convey her becoming-other to spectators.

In its embodiment of simultaneously real and imaginary, actual and virtual qualities, this crystalline construction exposes the bio-political facets of space and vision, including those that structure and are structured by gender and sexual difference. Namely, the doubled body of the female protagonist establishes the screen as a self-reflexive and reflective surface upon which the female body and feminine vision are inscribed and rendered visible. Reflexive vision renders female bodies (specifically, those of Jeanne) newly visible both to the character herself and to spectators who adopt her othered vision of her body and her strange, fantastic environment.

*Ne te retourne pas* exposes the gendered ideological underpinnings of objectified vision through its presentation of bodies and spaces as self-reflexive crystals in which fantasy and reality become indiscernible. The film presents a crystal-image in which the female body and female vision are made visible through the employment of a defamiliarized, non-

objectified vision alive to the possibilities of bodily and spatial alterity and transformation. This fantastic and strange vision echoes Verena Andermatt Conley's understanding of Cixous's feminine "scene" as "one of inner sight, dream eyes, of the body seen and felt with eyes closed. A sight that does not distance, appropriate, take pleasure in seeing the debt one feels...Oneiric temporality with all its shortcuts, distortions, and jumps replaces linear time linked to a false concept of consciousness and unity" (1991, 43).

Cixous's elaboration of a non-objectifying and non-mastering mode of visioning-in-the-feminine thus has clear links to the crystalline time-image, as both disrupt the causality of linear time and the rational organization of spaces. The transformations of space in particular take on a feminist bent in disrupting the thoroughly organized space of the patriarchal family, as well as woman's traditionally subordinate position within it. As Cixous writes, writers-in-the-feminine (in the case of *Ne te retourne pas*, De Van and Jeanne) "take pleasure in jumbling the order of space, in disorienting it, in changing around the furniture, dislocating things and values, breaking them all up, emptying structures, and turning propriety upside down" (1976, 887).

The body (or bodies) of Jeanne is a crystalline screen (and the cinematic screen is a body) insofar as it serves as a threshold between the familiar and the strange, between the "self" and its other, between spectators and film. The technical body of film is that point of contact that exposes spectators to alterity while also opening up distances that deny the total immanence of fusion. Spectators do not merge with the screen. Rather, each is exposed as a being-extended in their encounters with film, like Jeanne "an intruder in the world as well as

in himself [sic]" (Nancy 2008, 170). The defamiliarizing doubling of Jeanne's body constitutes it as a site or threshold between the self and its interior strangeness and alterity. This Nancean conception of being as a technical coming-to-presence challenges understandings of bodily ontology as necessarily involving self-contained subjects shielded from the world by the material boundaries of the body (the body as limit rather than threshold). Being-exposed (un)grounds a disembodied and stable masculinist ontology in its insistence of being through (and only through) extension and exscription.

This surreal ungrounding of the doubled female body has an uncanny effect, reinforcing my understanding of *Ne te retourne pas* as a creative hybrid of fiction and reality. Freud writes that "an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality" (1955, 244). Freud also characterizes the uncanny as a loss of sight (understood in turn as a metaphorical form of castration), which is important regarding our understanding of sexual difference and spectatorial vision in relation to the crystalline structure of *Ne te retourne pas*. Freud argues that an anxiety surrounding the loss of one's eyes is often carried from childhood to adulthood, and that "no physical injury is so much dreaded...as an injury to the eye" (1955, 231). Jeanne's experiences of spaces and her body as uncanny, or *unheimlich*, is indeed precipitated by what her doctor believes to be a defect of eyesight termed "ocular pressure." This ocular abnormality defamiliarizes Jeanne from her once familiar body and environments, rendering them *unheimlich*, or "that class of

the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (Freud 1955, 220). Things about which Jeanne assumed she had intimate knowledge, such as her body and home, are no longer recognizable due to the eruption of repressed childhood trauma.

As it involves the loss of sight and repression, the uncanny can also be thought productively in terms of the visibility and invisibility of the female body. Freud points out that the terms *heimlich* and *unheimlich* have ambiguous visible and invisible features that sometimes coincide with one another. *Heimlich* designates both “what is familiar and agreeable, and...what is concealed and kept out of sight” (Freud 1955, 224-5). *Unheimlich* describes those elements previously hidden or invisible that have suddenly become apparent:

“*everything that ought to have remained...secret and hidden but has come to light*” (Schelling qtd. in Freud 1955, 244). According to Freud, men regard the female body (specifically, the female genitals) as an *unheimlich* dwelling, due to the fact that men feel both connected to (as their place of origin) and removed from it (by not possessing it themselves). Freud argues: “neurotic men declare that they feel there is something uncanny about the female genital organs. This *unheimlich* place, however, is the entrance to the former *Heim* [home] of all human beings, to the place where each one of us lived once upon a time and in the beginning” (1955, 245).

Post-structuralist theorists such as Nancy have rethought this masculinist understanding of the female body as an *unheimlich* space by conceiving of the body as more open to co-existing with alterity (Perpich 2003, 83). Such an acceptance of alterity is imaged in the peaceful being-with or co-existence of the two Jeanne at the end of *Ne te retourne pas*.

Writing and visioning-in-the-feminine are “on the side of *with*” (Conley 1991, 136) – the co-existence of the body and the others whom it encounters. Bracha L. Ettinger, for one, insists on the characterization of subjectivity and artistic production as encounters with alterity. Ettinger productively accounts for the importance of sexual difference in structuring these encounters, identifying it as a common blind spot in theories of subjectivity based on co-existence and encounter.<sup>51</sup> Her notion of the feminine or matrixial borderspace as a space outside of patriarchal paradigms of castration and lack conceives of sexual difference itself as a form of co-existential subjectivity (Ettinger 2004, 74-6). Ettinger’s theorization of a feminine, matrixial borderspace contests the Freudian notion of the female body and genital organs as invisible or *unheimlich* spaces by privileging alterity and co-existence, which, like the multiple bodies of Jeanne, exists within “a structure of shared borderspace...[that] implies a figure of severality, an I and a non-I” (Pollock 2004, 34).

The defamiliarizations and transformations of Jeanne’s body in *Ne te retourne pas* thus appropriate the concept of the uncanny for feminist discourses on the reception of art, as the fantastical and strange film-text itself has the uncanny effect of making the female body strange to itself and to spectators. The film approximates Jeanne’s destabilized self-estrangement in order to foster a sympathetic and compassionate alignment with her trauma

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<sup>51</sup> Male post-structural philosophers such as Nancy and Levinas have been criticized for failing to take sexual difference and female bodily comportment and experience into account when proposing subjectivity as co-existence or encounter, or doing so in an essentializing manner. See Braidotti 1993; Cooper 2007; Ettinger 2004; Irigaray 1986; and Perpich 2005.

on the part of spectators, as well as a critical awareness of the location of this trauma within the female body specifically.

*Visioning-in-the-feminine as an Ethical Seeing-Otherwise*

The origin of Jeanne's ontological and corporeal crisis lies in her repressed experience of childhood trauma, which *Ne te retourne pas* makes visible through strange and transformative modes of perception. In this regard, the style in which these transformations are rendered is of great importance. Specifically, the self-reflexive and baroque aesthetics of the film draw attention to learned and habitual modes of experiencing traumatized female bodies and the spaces they inhabit, and suggest ways of seeing these bodies and spaces otherwise. As I argued previously, vision that is ethical in a feminist sense self-reflexively acknowledges the gendered dimensions of female suffering, and is dedicated to ungrounding and rewriting normative patriarchal and misogynistic codes of representing and perceiving this suffering.

Regarding ethical forms of self-reflexivity, the digital technology used to morph Marceau into Bellucci introduces an awareness of the film's foundations in creative and fantastical fiction. The affective resonances of unstable bodies and bizarre spatial elicit the physical, emotional and intellectual engagement of spectators. Stewart explicitly connects awareness to affective engagement during the viewing of digital time-image films, as self-reflexive devices encourage a form of spectatorial awareness that "typically gets suppressed by the viewer's ocular attachment to the projected movement-image" (2007, 31). In *Ne te retourne pas*, this self-reflexive awareness is engendered by baroque aesthetics and digital special

effects. Baroque elements of the film include the complex and confusing arrangements of bodies and spaces that alter without warning or reason, and the heightened emotional and physical tension that accompany Jeanne's ontological crisis. These baroque elements lend an oneiric or surreal feel to the film that would be lacking in a more realistic presentation of a linear narrative.

Spectators' apprehensive awareness of the artificiality of the baroque digital image allows for a critical visioning-in-the-feminine that is both corporeally situated and open to transformations of thought in its engagement with altering bodies and spaces. The surreal aesthetics of *Ne te retourne pas* encourage spectators to vision-in-the-feminine by blending fantasy, memory and reality in a way that denies any notions of stable or static ontological "truths." The crystalline real-fictional hybridity of the female bodies onscreen realizes a non-normative and non-objectifying mode of ethical vision alive to internal multiplicity and alterity. This baroque instability constitutes a feminist time-image, in that the absence of an established sensory-motor schema encourages spectators to critically interrogate Jeanne's trauma and transformations.

In addition to its surreal and crystalline structure, *Ne te retourne pas* and its context of production provide an interesting case of a cinematic visioning-in-the-feminine regarding the history of de Van as the primary creator of her films. De Van is an accomplished writer, with extensive film writing credits. She developed the original ideas and wrote the scenarios and

dialogue for all of her own feature length films, including *Ne te retourne pas*, *Dans ma peau*, *Le petit poucet/Hop-o'-My-Thumb* (2011) and her most recent horror film *Dark Touch*. De Van wrote all of her short films, made while a student at *La Fémis* in Paris and after her graduation in 1996.<sup>52</sup> She has also written films for other directors, including Pascal Bonitzer (*Je pense à vous/Made in Paris* [2006]) and frequent collaborator François Ozon: *Regarde la mer/See the Sea* (1997) (dialogue, uncredited); *Sous le sable/Under the Sand* (2000); and *8 femmes/8 Women* (2002).

Much like her creator de Van, Jeanne too is a (aspiring) fiction writer. She wants to transition from journalism and biographical writing to fiction by authoring a fictionalized account of her repressed childhood. However, her (male) editor discourages her from her attempts at fiction, criticizing her writing for its lack of emotional depth and excessive use of description. However, Jeanne is determined to proceed, as she believes writing fiction can help her regain the childhood memories that she has lost.

Cixous and Irigaray similarly insist that a writing-in-the-feminine combines fictionalized and factual elements in the creation of female biographical memory and feminist futures. The female, feminine or minoritarian subjects who refuse to be subjugated to the reality of a phallogocentric social order do so by making their voices heard through their writing, “seizing the occasion to speak, hence her shattering entry into history, which has always been based on her suppression” (Cixous 1976, 880). Minor authors thus insert their lives into their

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<sup>52</sup> De Van’s short films include *Bien sous tous rapports* (1996); *La poseuse* (1997); *Rétention* (1997); *Alias* (1999); *Psy Show* (1999); *L’épicurie* (2003); *L’hôpital* (2003); *L’hôtel* (2003); and *La promenade* (2007).

hybridized factual-fictional writings and artistic endeavors. Jeanne makes her repressed childhood memories the topic of her fictional writing, just as de Van commonly includes biographical details from her own life into her fictional films, especially those relating to childhood trauma.

For example, de Van's leg was run over by a car when she was a young child, an incident whose resonances inspired her directorial debut *Dans ma peau* and can also be glimpsed in the transformations and implied (but never directly addressed or explained) mutilations of Jeanne's skin in *Ne te retourne pas*. De Van's most recent horror film *Dark Touch* further explores the themes of bodily harm and childhood trauma touched upon in her previous films. *Dark Touch* tells the harrowing story of a young girl named Niamh (Missy Keating) who develops deadly telekinetic powers after being physically and sexually abused by her parents. De Van's consistent focus on the oftentimes painful and confusing bodily experiences of women and girls situates her as a filmmaker who writes and visions-in-the-feminine. The feminist dimensions of her work are further underscored by the emphasis on female friendship and solidarity in the conclusion of *Ne te retourne pas*, in which the doubled Jeannes create *La camera sognata* together.

In this respect, de Van draws on a legacy of European films that celebrate female friendship, authorship and creative empowerment. *Ne te retourne pas* is clearly indebted to *Céline et Julie vont en bateau/Celine and Julie Go Boating* (Jacques Rivette, 1974), which similarly

focuses on the close bond between two women who “write” in a manner that confuses reality and fiction, and who free a child from the patriarchal symbolic order much in the same way as the two Jeannes free their child self from trauma. *La double vie de Véronique/The Double Life of Veronique* (Krzysztof Kieslowski, 1991) also presents a “doubled” female protagonist who co-exists with her “other” in a relationship of friendship. In *Ne te retourne pas*, spectators encounter a similar presentation of female friendship and solidarity that expresses a sympathetic and compassionate attitude toward female crisis and suffering. I will discuss the importance of female solidarity and friendship in films that vision-in-the-feminine further in the context of *Baise-moi*; here, I note briefly that de Van positions *Ne te retourne pas* as a current iteration of female friendship film and minor feminist cinema.

#### *Ne te retourne pas as Minor Feminist Cinema*

Visioning-in-the-feminine links bodily sensation and thought in a politicized mode that renders the female body and creative voice present and visible, and in this way opposes itself to the “man who in his fiction reduces woman to absence” (Conley 1991, 114). In this regard *Ne te retourne pas*’s visioning-in-the-feminine is a bio-politically minoritarian act. The film envisions a personal destabilization of the female body that deterritorializes a static and unified majoritarian ontology. This meeting of public ideology and private trauma visualizes the “cramped space” of female bodies within patriarchal constructions of ontology, which “forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics” (1986, 17). Jeanne’s bodily transformation, her becoming-other, therefore constitutes a political challenge to hegemonic understandings of bodily subjectivity.

The estranging and defamiliarizing aesthetics of *Ne te retourne pas* comprise its feminist biopolitical and ethical project, which is to challenge codified ways of perceiving female bodies and the spaces they inhabit. By virtue of de Van's willingness to explore subjects and aesthetic practices excluded in majoritarian filmmaking traditions, hers is a minor cinema that encourages spectators to employ an alternative feminist vision. De Van's mutations and transformations of female bodies and spaces allow her, as Deleuze and Guattari write, "to become a nomad and an immigrant and a gypsy in relation to one's own language" (1986, 19). Her minor feminist mode of artistic production subverts hegemonic majoritarian language by enacting continual transformations and becomings-other associated with writing-in-the-feminine, in which "[t]he imagination must be freed through invention of other 'I's.' ...Against literary production that sustains the status quo... a writing from the imaginary, with its infinite multiplicity of identifications precluding a stable subject" (Conley 1991, 26).

Jeanne embarks upon a surreal discovery of origins through this hybrid feminist imaginary, which displays oneiric qualities that mimic the minor literature that she produces. Her novel *La camera sognata* functions "like a dream; the dream is a writing, and the scene of writing mimes the scene of the dream... The third body, born on the other side of the intersection of the writer's written body and her other... also undoes repression and functions like an interminable analysis, a *passage* out of a closure" (Conley 1991, 28). This third body, the "other" created by minoritarian writing and artistic creativity, engenders a transformation of

the body of Jeanne that she experiences as a co-existence with alterity. Jeanne's co-existence with her other through fiction echoes Braidotti's endorsement of creative license in works of feminist philosophy, as this creativity "is attached to the collective project of feminism. This implies the acknowledgment and recognition of the voices of other women...Letting the voices of others sound through my text is therefore a way of actualizing the non-centrality of the 'I' to the project of thinking" (1993, 4-5).

Spectators witness this feminist rejection of the solitary and unitary "I" in the final shot of *Ne te retourne pas*, in which Marceau and Bellucci sit side by side, creating the manuscript of *La camera sognata* in unison. Minoritarian writing (writing-in-the-feminine or becoming-woman through writing) always involves this double or multiple articulation of voices and histories, as it is a writing "of scenes, always double, where sameness is traversed by otherness...Writing does not represent a "real" but phantasmatically stages and poetically shatters concepts and meaning" (Conley 1991, 31). Jeanne's invention of her past through literature is a specifically female and feminist discovery of the self, which differs from "the nostalgia that makes man a being who tends to come back to the point of departure to appropriate it for himself and to die there. A girl's journey is farther – to the unknown, to invent" (Cixous 1986, 93).

*Ne te retourne pas* also establishes itself as a minor feminist film by disrupting codified ways of filming and seeing the bodies of Marceau and Bellucci. Both actresses have been designated as "sex objects" to varying degrees throughout their careers. Marceau, for instance, gained fame in the U.S. as a hyper-sexualized "Bond Girl" in *The World Is Not*

*Enough* (Michael Apted, 1999). She has also appeared in many other roles primarily focused on her beauty and sexual appeal.<sup>53</sup> Bellucci, meanwhile, has long been famed for her sexual appeal. The actress ranks highly in “Sexiest Women Alive” polls in publications such as *Maxim* and *FHM*, and her frequent casting as an object of sexual desire throughout her career reflect this heteronormative assessment.<sup>54</sup>

*Ne te retourne pas* visions the bodies of Marceau and Bellucci in a minor manner by refusing to participate in a scopic economy of sexual objectification common in patriarchal majoritarian cinema. To draw again on the first moments of the film in which a nude woman whom spectators assume to be Jeanne stands before a mirror: the indeterminate quality of the female body envisions both the estrangement of women from their own bodies within patriarchal and misogynistic regimes of perception, as well as the ability to undermine and transform these regimes through the feminist indeterminacy of becoming-other. Jeanne discovers her origins by “writing her self,” as Cixous says, “return[ing] to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display” (1976, 880). To mutate and transform the bodies of actresses widely associated with

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<sup>53</sup> Films include *Braveheart* (Mel Gibson, 1995); *La fille de d'Artagnan/The Daughter of d'Artagnan* (Bertrand Tavernier and Riccardo Freda, 1994); *Joyeuses Pâques* (Georges Lautner, 1984); *Mes nuits sont plus belles que vos jours/My Nights Are More Beautiful Than Your Days* (Andrzej Zulawski, 1989); *La note bleue* (Andrzej Zulawski, 1991); and *Police* (Maurice Pialat, 1985).

<sup>54</sup> Films include *The Brothers Grimm* (Terry Gilliam, 2005); *Combien tu m'aimes?/How Much Do You Love Me?* (Bertrand Blier, 2005); *Dracula* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1992); *Irréversible* (Gaspar Noé, 2002); *Malèna* (Giuseppe Tornatore, 2000); *Le pacte des loups* (Christophe Gans, 2001); *La ruffa* (Francesco Laudadio, 1991); and *Shoot 'Em Up* (Michael Davis, 2007).

the sexual appeal of their well-known physiques thus serves as a means of reclaiming female bodies – that of Jeanne, but also those of Marceau and Bellucci.

*Ne te retourne pas* self-consciously asserts itself as a minor feminist cinema by visioning female experiences of crisis and suffering in a non-objectifying and sympathetic mode. As such, the film presents one possible mode of visioning-in-the-feminine, according to which de Van as a female filmmaker envisions female trauma in a compassionate manner. Another, more violent mode of visioning-in-the-feminine fraught with bio-political and ethical complexities can be glimpsed in *Baise-moi*, a film made by female filmmakers exploring female suffering and pleasure.

### **Visioning Female Solidarity in *Baise-moi***

*Baise-moi* follows the violent sex and murder spree of Manu (Raffaëla Anderson) and Nadine (Karen Lancaume), two economically disenfranchised *beur*<sup>55</sup> women from the margins of society in the Parisian *banlieues*. Manu is a porn actress who is raped while out with a friend and, after killing her brother in a subsequent argument, decides she has to get out of town quickly. Nadine is a prostitute who kills her roommate during a fight that gets out of control. The two women meet for the first time at a Métro station and embark on a road trip through France, seducing and killing a large number of people along the way. Their journey ends after Manu is shot and killed in a gas station, and Nadine is arrested by police officers as she is laying Manu to rest in a nearby lake.

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<sup>55</sup> *Beur* is a colloquial term referring to French citizens whose parents were born in Northern Africa.

*Baise-moi* is based on a 1993 novel of the same name by co-director Virginie Despentes that, much like the film version, caused a scandal upon its release. Despentes and Trinh Thi shot the film on digital video, with available light and real porn stars in order to stay within their £250,000 budget (approximately \$379,000 in 2000). *Baise-moi* eventually made a small profit, earning around \$420,000 in box office sales worldwide (“Box Office/Business for Rape Me”; “Baise-Moi: Summary”). The film premiered in France in June 2000. In what was to become a trend at the premieres of New Extremist films, mass walkouts were reported at the Cannes screening in May 2000 (Sharkey 2002).

*Baise-moi* gained infamy at the time of its release in what was called “L’affaire *Baise-moi*,” which involved a battle over censorship and the right to freedom of speech. Scott MacKenzie describes this affair in detail:

Opening in Paris in June 2000, the film was limited to those of sixteen years and older, with the following warning posted in theatres: ‘This film contains prolonged sex scenes of an extremely explicit nature and scenes of graphic violence, which some viewers may find shocking and disturbing’. This warning was not enough for rightist moral and political watchdog groups in France. Three days after the film opened, under pressure from the far-right, pro-family values group Promouvoir, the French government, having previously approved the certification of the film as ‘16+’, pulled *Baise-moi* and reclassified it as ‘18+’, in essence an X-Rating. Following Promouvoir, the government then proclaimed that *Baise-moi* ‘constitutes a pornographic message and an incitement to violence.’ Invoking the 1975 law that established the X-Rating in France, the film was essentially removed from distribution, as X-Rated theatres in France disappeared with the advent of home video pornography. (2002, 219)

Filmmakers such as Catherine Breillat, Claire Denis, Jean-Luc Godard and Tonie Marshall signed a petition to release *Baise-moi* from its X-rating so that it could be shown in a larger

number of cinemas. The film faced similar censorship battles in Canada, New Zealand and the U.K., where the film was given an 18 rating by the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) after receiving one cut to the rape sequence. (MacKenzie 2002, 319-20). Although the BBFC cut “a penetration shot from the rape scene,” the rest of the film was left intact, as “the BBFC applauds the film for its ‘serious cultural purpose’” (L.R. Williams, 2001).

Critical response to *Baise-moi* in the U.S., U.K. and France was overwhelmingly negative. The film critic (and, apparently, medical expert) Roger Ebert of the *Chicago Sun-Times* gave the film one star out of four, noting in his review that “Manu and Nadine are man haters and clinically insane, and not every man is to blame for their unhappiness – no, not even if he sleeps with them” (2001). Critics for the *New York Times* and the *Guardian* also gave the film brief and scathing reviews (A.O. Scott 2001; Peter Bradshaw 2002). The “French daily *Le Monde* branded it a ‘sick film’; while upmarket weekly *Le Nouvel Observateur* said it ‘throws sex in your face to sell blood and gore’” (Sharkey 2002). The only slightly positive review came from J. Hoberman in the *Village Voice*, who described *Baise-moi* as “a more existential *Thelma & Louise* made as cruddy-looking hardcore” that was “scarcely the worst film in Toronto” in 2000 (2000). Initial scholarly reactions to *Baise-moi* largely reflected those in the popular press: the film faced accusations of misandry from Linda Williams (2001, 21), while others such as Ginette Vincendeau cautiously praised its “raw energy” (2002).

One can detect traces of judgmental sexism in the dismissive critical assessments on the part of (male) reviewers in the major press outlets in Europe and the U.S. In addition to the

diagnosis of insanity pronounced by Ebert, we have A.O. Scott's inexplicable claim that the rape of Manu at the beginning of the film has nothing to do with the events that follow, clearly overlooking the film's critique of a masculinist rape culture. In fact, Scott expresses much more outrage over the women's lack of respect for sexual safety, suggesting that the most criminal act in the film is Manu's and Nadine's refusal to use condoms (2001). (MacKenzie astutely observes the ways in which *Baise-moi* foresees and violently refuses these types of criticisms in a scene late in the film in which "a bourgeois intellectual male is eliminated because of his fatuous rhetoric" [2002, 319]. This scene "summarizes the filmmakers' quite self-conscious response to the paternalistic male offering his 'authoritative', privileged interpretation of Manu and Nadine's actions and their meaning – indeed, the man could be a film critic or, for that matter, a film censor" [MacKenzie 2002, 319].)

I depart from these critical perspectives on *Baise-moi* in arguing that the film visions-in-the-feminine by violently disrupting majoritarian patriarchal codes of female suffering and sexual desire in the cinema. The aesthetic devices through which *Baise-moi* subverts these codes engender minor feminist viewing practices on the part of spectators. In this regard I position the film in relation to the personal histories and feminist politics of directors Despentes and Trinh Thi. As female creators of a film-text sympathetic to female experiences of suffering, pleasure and solidarity, Despentes and Trinh Thi articulate a minor feminist bio-political and ethical consciousness of the injurious social treatment of women.

*Baise-moi* employs a tale of violent female solidarity to shock audiences into an awareness of the intolerable conditions under which women live and are depicted in Western film and media.

#### *Baise-moi as Minor Feminist Cinema*

*Baise-moi* consciously draws on the conventions of majoritarian patriarchal cinema in order to expose their misogynistic underpinnings, and imagine alternative ways of envisioning female suffering and pleasure. The film visions-in-the-feminine by encouraging spectators to perceive female suffering and sexual desire in a non-objectifying and compassionate manner. Specifically, *Baise-moi* employs gender clichés in a deconstructive manner to defamiliarize and make strange the misogynistic characteristics of majoritarian patriarchal cinema, the rape-revenge genre and pornography. This deconstruction is achieved via two major strategies: the refusal to stage female suffering and pain as erotic spectacles, and the portrayal of female sexual desires in a non-objectifying and sympathetic mode. I will discuss each strategy in turn.

*Baise-moi* refuses to stage female suffering as a pleasurable spectacle most clearly in the rape of Manu at the outset of the film. Manu and her friend (Lisa Marshall) are sitting in a park when they are kidnapped by a group of men and taken by van to an indoor parking lot. The men drag Manu and her friend out of the van and throw them onto the concrete, and the camera maintains a detached and rather clinical gaze through medium shots as the two women are raped. In addition to the spatial remove of the camera, the bright fluorescent lighting is alienating in its harsh illumination of the rape. The scene is relatively short

(approximately three minutes), but no less upsetting and horrifying in its stark portrayal of sexual violence.

The distanced camera refrains from eroticizing or exploitatively dramatizing the pain of Manu and her friend by approximating what spectators understand to be Manu's emotional perspective. In contrast to her friend, who kicks, screams and sobs loudly as the rapists assault her, Manu appears disengaged from what is happening to her. She silently follows the men's orders and does not struggle physically with them (she does, however, ridicule them verbally towards the end for their sexual incompetence). The men notice Manu's lack of pained expressions or gestures, and this destroys the pleasure they take in the act of rape: "Shit, it's like fucking a zombie! Move your ass a bit...Forget it, bitch." After the men jump into their van and drive off, leaving Manu and her weeping friend on the concrete floor, the latter admonishes Manu: "How could you? How could you let them do it?" To which Manu replies: "It could've been worse. We're still alive, right?...I don't give a shit about their scummy dicks...Fuck them all, I say. If you park in the projects, you empty your car 'cause someone's gonna break in. I leave nothing precious in my cunt for those jerks. It's just a bit of cock. We're just girls. It'll be okay now."

*Baise-moi* by no means dismisses the traumatic impact that rape can have on women's sense of bodily security and self-determination. Rather, Manu refuses to think of herself as a victim, and refuses to invest the experience of being raped with the power to destroy her

sense of self. This position accords with certain revisionist feminist understandings of rape as not only damaging to women through the act of sexual assault, but also harmful through discourses that maintain that women are necessarily “ruined” or fundamentally compromised as subjects because they have been subject to assault (Perpich 2005, 88).<sup>56</sup> By refusing to express (and perhaps feel) psychological pain and ontological destruction, Manu’s despondency denies the male pleasure that relies on such pain and destruction. This aesthetic distancing aligns spectators with Manu’s emotional state. Such a structure of alignment engenders a form of spectatorial compassion in which spectators are proximate to Manu’s disengagement from her sexual assault. As I argued in relation to spectatorial compassion for Alex during her rape in *Irréversible*, spectators “have a subjective sympathy for the unbearable, an empathy which permeates what [they] see” (Deleuze 1989, 18) when encountering the rape of Manu and her friend.

In this regard the short, emotionally sparse and singular rape scene in *Baise-moi* distinguishes the film from the vast majority of rape-revenge films, which commonly rely on the repeated staging of female pain and violation. Rape-revenge films initially gained popularity and notoriety in the 1970s, and have been succeeded by a wave of remakes since 2000 of which *Baise-moi* is part. The most infamous of these films is arguably *I Spit on Your Grave/Day of the Woman* (Meir Zarchi, 1978), which details the repeated raping and eventual revenge of Jennifer Hills (Camille Keaton), a young woman who travels to the countryside to write a novel and is attacked by local men. *I Spit on Your Grave* foregrounds female agony and, in

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<sup>56</sup> Female filmmaker Catherine Breillat expresses a similar perspective on rape in *Romance* (1999), in which the female protagonist is raped after consenting to oral sex. The protagonist tells her rapist “I’m not ashamed, asshole!” and makes no mention of the rape in the rest of the film.

an almost caricatural manner, male pleasure in three separate and prolonged scenes of sexual assault. The rape scenes are largely shot in a shot/reverse shot pattern, and as such explicitly juxtapose Jennifer's suffering and humiliation with the pleasure and dominance of her rapists. The remake *I Spit on Your Grave* (Steven R. Munroe, 2010) and its sequel *I Spit on Your Grave 2* (Steven R. Munroe, 2014) repeat this formula of multiple sexual assaults of long duration that emphasize the reliance of male pleasure on female pain.<sup>57</sup>

Although the lack of visible physical struggle or emotional ruination on the part of Manu in the aftermath of her rape is not a sufficient political challenge to cultural institutions and practices of rape, it does disrupt the association of rape with male pleasure and female psychosis that spectators commonly encounter in majoritarian patriarchal media.

Furthermore, I am not arguing that a detached style is the only politically responsible or ethical way of depicting rape in film. As I argued in my previous analysis of the rape scene in *Irréversible*, formal design choices of a more intimate and affective tenor can also portray

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<sup>57</sup> Other rape-revenge films include *Act of Vengeance/Rape Squad* (Bob Kelljan, 1974); *Bad Reputation* (Jim Hemphill, 2005); *Death Wish* (Michael Winner, 1974); *Deliverance* (John Boorman, 1972); *Descent* (Talia Lugacy, 2007); *L'été meurtrier/One Deadly Summer* (Jean Becker, 1983); *Eye for an Eye* (Joel Schlesinger, 1996); *Extremities* (Robert M. Young, 1986); *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (David Fincher, 2011); *Girls Against Boys* (Austin Chick, 2010); *A Gun for Jennifer* (Todd Morris, 1997); *Hannie Caulder* (Burt Kennedy, 1971); *Hard Candy* (David Slade, 2005); *I Drink Your Blood* (David E. Durston, 1970); *Irréversible* (Gaspar Noé, 2002); *Jungle Warriors/The Czar of Brazil* (Ernst R. Von Theumer, 1984); *The Ladies Club* (Janet Creek, 1986); *The Last House on the Left* (Dennis Iliadis, 2009); *The Last House on the Left* (Wes Craven, 1972); *Lipstick* (Lamont Johnson, 1976); *Män som hatar kvinnor/The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (Niels Arden Oplev, 2009); *Ms. 45* (Abel Ferrara, 1981); *Rise: Blood Hunter* (Sebastian Gutierrez, 2007); *Run! Bitch Run!* (Joseph Guzman, 2009); *Savage Streets* (Danny Steinmann, 1984); *Shurayukihime/Lady Snowblood* (Toshiya Fujita, 1973); *6 Guns* (Shane Van Dyke, 2010); *Straw Dogs* (Rod Lurie, 2011); *Straw Dogs* (Sam Peckinpah, 1971); *Sudden Impact* (Clint Eastwood, 1983); *Thriller – en grym film/Thriller: A Cruel Picture/They Call Her One Eye/Hooker's Revenge* (Bo Arne Vibenius, 1973); *Ticked-Off Trannies with Knives* (Israel Luna, 2010); *L'Ultimo Treno Della Notte/Night Train Murders* (Aldo Lado, 1975); *Los Violadores/Mad Foxes* (Paul Grau, 1981); and *Vulgar* (Bryan Johnson, 2000).

female suffering and trauma in a politically conscious and ethically responsible manner. Both *Baise-moi* and *Irréversible* are examples of cinema of exposure because they make female suffering unpleasurable for spectators, and connect this suffering immediately to contemporaneous gender bio-politics.

In their de-eroticized iteration of rape-revenge cinema, Despentès and Trinh Thi embody the situation faced by minor filmmakers as described by Deleuze: “[t]he cinema author finds himself [sic] before a people which, from the point of view of culture, is doubly colonized: colonized by stories that have come from elsewhere, but also by their own myths become impersonal entities at the service of the colonizer” (Deleuze 1989, 222). In order to subvert this colonization, Despentès and Trinh Thi depict the rape of Manu and her friend as an intolerable, banal feature of female experience within rape culture, rather than a horrific spectacle from which spectators are encouraged to take pleasure. (In the novel version of *Baise-moi*, Despentès gestures towards a culture of male bonding through rape when she writes that Manu’s rapists “like being together...working together against a common enemy [women]. How far are they planning to go to show their solidarity...” [2003, 49]). The horrific banality of the rape scene in *Baise-moi*, when considered in contrast with the spectacle of rape common in the rape-revenge genre, allows the former “suddenly to free itself from the laws of this schema and reveal itself in a visual and sound nakedness, crudeness and brutality which make it unbearable” (Deleuze 1989, 3).

*Baise-moi* is also a revisionist rape-revenge film in that Manu and Nadine do not subsequently hunt down, torture and kill Manu’s rapists. They attack men and women who

cross their paths, choosing their victims in both calculated and random manners. There is no sense of restoring “justice” or “order” to society by killing rapists or men who sexually harass and objectify women. In this regard *Baise-moi* is akin to *Thelma & Louise* (Ridley Scott, 1990), a film in which the potential male rapist is killed at the beginning of the film and the two female friends are forced to go on the run from the (patriarchal) law. In a similar manner, the outlaws Manu and Nadine view *all* men as implicated in rape culture, not just individual rapists. Both films thus gesture more towards underlying societal problematics that subordinate women to men, rather than celebrate the personal satisfaction gained by raped women in isolated cases of revenge. Although the ending of *Baise-moi* is rather nihilistic (Manu is shot and Nadine is arrested), like *Thelma & Louise* it highlights the impossible position of women within bio-political regimes that enforce and intensify systemic inequality between the sexes. This dystopian worldview envisions sexual assault as the most extreme manifestation of a pervasive culture of rape, rather than perpetrating the myth that feminist liberation and justice arise from individual acts of retribution.

The opening of *Baise-moi*, for example, highlights a wider culture of masculine domination and abuse by featuring a man verbally abusing his girlfriend in a bar. The scene in which Manu and her friend are raped follows soon after, as does a subsequent violent altercation between Manu and her brother (Hacène Beddrouh). After being raped, Manu returns to the bar where her brother works and is slapped for “wasting your fucking life...Work. You heard

of that?” Then Manu’s brother confronts her about her sexual assault in a scene that parodies the machismo of male revenge fantasies:

Manu: “You’re a fucking asshole!”

Brother: “What are the bruises? Who did that?”

Manu: “Bastards like you always have to hit someone to feel alive!”

Brother (smirks): “You got done again. You’re always high on something.

Always high. Were you raped? Were you?”

(Brother leaves the room to retrieve a gun.)

Brother: “Who did it?... Who was it? Who did that to you? Who?”

Manu: “Fuck you! You don’t even bother to ask how I feel, shithead! You make me wanna puke, asshole!”

Brother: “You don’t seem too upset. Fuck, you make me sick. Bitch.”

Manu then picks up the gun from the bed and shoots her brother in the head. He slides down the wall in a close-up shot, after which Manu kisses him on the cheek and leaves with his cash. This critique of male assumption of ownership over violated female bodies is rather blunt, yet successfully illustrates the gender dynamics at play in a culture that endorses female victimization and submission to men.

In addition to refusing to stage erotic spectacles of female suffering, *Baise-moi* constitutes a minor feminist cinema by envisioning female sexual desire in a non-objectifying and sympathetic manner. For an example of this, we can look to the scene in which Manu and Nadine pick up two men in a bar and have sex in their motel room.

Much discussion has centered on the fact that the sex scenes in the film are unsimulated, and otherwise depart radically from the ways in which heterosexual sex is usually simulated in mainstream film. Linda Williams notes that sex in New Extremist films such as *Baise-moi* “defy the soft-focus erotic prettiness, the contained lyrical musical interlude, that has marked the ‘sex scene’ of mainstream Hollywood” (2001, 20). The aesthetic qualities of the sex scene in *Baise-moi* bear out the validity of this observation. The scene begins with a rapid cut from the bar to Manu and Nadine’s hotel room, and employs extreme close-ups of separate couples undressing and caressing one another’s skin. The scene then moves into wider shots of each couple having sex, and spectators realize that both are in the same room, each on a separate queen-sized bed. The handheld digital video camera alternates between grainy close-ups of each couple and wider shots of both. The mise-en-scène furthers the impression of a low-budget pornographic film: red-tinted lighting luridly illuminates the crimson paisley wallpaper and heavy curtains of what is obviously a “cheap” motel. The soundtrack complements the camerawork and mise-en-scène by featuring loud gasps alternating with rhythmic electronic beats, followed by high-pitched female moans as the scene progresses.

During this scene, the camera privileges Manu and Nadine’s pleasurable gazes at one another, rather than their interactions with the men. Lisa Downing writes that this structure of female gazing resists the objectification of women prevalent in masculinist regimes of perception, as Nadine’s “enjoyment of watching Manu’s body does not lead her to a

depersonalizing objectification of the other, but to respect and friendship...An ethics that admits of the desiring gaze is hinted at in however fragile and skeletal a form in the filmed interaction between the two women” (2006, 62). In later works such as *Mutantes (Féminisme Porno Punk)/Mutantes: Punk, Porn, Feminism* (Virginie Despentes, 2009), Despentes emphatically celebrates the sexual agency and pleasure of women working in the pornography and prostitution industries; the filmmaker’s explicitly feminist stance towards the marginalized sexual experiences of women can be glimpsed in the looks of Manu and Nadine at one other in *Baise-moi*.

Despite the mutual desire suggested by Manu’s and Nadine’s gazes, the film de-objectifies female bodies and sexual desires by refusing to stage a lesbian sex scene between the two women. Such scenes have become clichés of patriarchal cinema and pornography that are geared more towards satisfying male desire, rather than depicting female pleasure for female, queer and non-heterosexual audiences. The structure of female gazing hints at the attraction between Manu and Nadine in a knowing manner, but disallows a pornographic spectacle of lesbian sex in so far as it commonly functions as a source of masculinist appropriation of non-heterosexual female desire in majoritarian film.

Spectators witness this refusal in the sex scene discussed previously. After both couples finish, the man who was with Nadine tells the women: “Know what’d be good now? To see you two go down on each other.” Manu smirks before abruptly ordering him to “get out.” After Manu and Nadine leave the hotel room, they see the man walking on the street and hit

him with their car, laughing as they drive away: “That calmed that fucker down. Asshole in a suit. Hi! Bang!”

The film does not shy away from the possibility of lesbianism by refusing to characterize Manu and Nadine’s relationship in sexual terms. Rather, “the film is constantly aware of the voyeuristic fascination offered by scenes of girls together for heterosexual men, not only the character who is promptly dispatched...but the ‘imagined’ male viewer too” (Downing 2006, 57). In the novel version of *Baise-moi*, Desportes makes it clear that Manu and Nadine do not have sex. Their bond is rather one of sympathetic solidarity. A character notes that Manu and Nadine do not even touch, as “[n]ot doing that is the best way they’ve found to convince themselves that they’re sisters” (Desportes 2003, 185).

This self-reflexive focus on female desire, pleasure and friendship establishes *Baise-moi* as a form of minor feminist cinema in which, as MacKenzie writes, “Desportes and Trinh Thi [impart] an ideological point of view that destabilizes both art-house audiences and the consumers of more typical pornographic product, producing an interstitial form of cinema” (2002, 316). As an example of the cinema of exposure, *Baise-moi* crosses the divide between mainstream and art cinema in its minor feminist exposure and revisioning of majoritarian cliché.

*Despentes and Trinh Thi's Visioning-in-the-feminine*

*Baise-moi* is also a minor feminist film in that Despentes and Trinh Thi can be considered its feminist creators: in addition to co-directing, the two also wrote the screenplay together. In the course of promoting the film upon its release, they characterized their relationship as one of solidarity and friendship that mirrors that forged between Manu and Nadine (Sharkey 2002). *Baise-moi* is one of the few rape-revenge films to be written and directed by women (the only other exceptions from the films footnoted being *The Ladies Club* [Janet Creek, 1986] and *Descent* [Talia Lugacy, 2007]). The fact that *Baise-moi* refuses to adopt the normative conventions of a genre centered on envisioning female experiences of suffering and humiliation may indeed be due in large part to its female genesis. Various other women involved in the making of *Baise-moi* have spoken of the ways in which their own experiences of gender inequality and violence informed the way in which they shot and performed the film.<sup>58</sup>

In her teen years, Despentes was a punk, rapper and prostitute working in massage parlors and peepshows in Lyon before coming to writing in the early 1990s. *Baise-moi* is based on a novel written by Despentes that caused a sensation when it was published in 1993. Fifty thousand copies were pre-sold and translated into ten languages before the book was even released, an excitement generated by Despentes's popular image as "the underground voice of les marginalisés" (Sharkey 2002). Despentes has written other novels and short stories

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<sup>58</sup> Despentes has publicly discussed her experience of being raped as a teenager. Anderson (Manu) details her experiences of being raped on three separate occasions in *La petite morte* (Emmanuelle Garcia, 2003). When attempting to report these crimes to the authorities, Anderson relates that her case was dismissed on the grounds that "[y]ou're an actress in pornographic films, so you can't complain."

since then, winning various awards, such as the 1998 Prix de Flore; the 1999 Prix Saint-Valentin for *Les jolies choses/Beautiful Things*, published in 1998 and later made into a film starring Marion Cotillard (Gilles Paquet-Brenner, 2001); and the prestigious Renaudot prize for literature in 2010 for her novel *Apocalypse Bébé* (Dugdale 2010). She has published non-fiction work on feminist cultural theory such as *King Kong Théorie/King Kong Theory*, released in 2007 and translated into English in 2010. Desportes is also politically engaged in issues relating to minorities and women, weighing in most recently on the Dominique Strauss-Kahn sexual assault case in the *Guardian* (2011).

Desportes is recognized as an explicitly feminist writer and filmmaker, similar to Breillat in her use of shocking imagery to express an unromantic view of female sexuality and gender politics that often disturbs audiences and censors alike. As Alix Sharkey describes Desportes, “she is regarded as the pioneer of a new genre of feminist literature which has seized the sexual act as its own territory,” whose work “is characterised by violence and an aggressive political agenda – it aims to tear down the pretence of gender equality and rekindle the national debate on male violence” (2002). Desportes’s literature and film work reflect this feminist political stance by focusing exclusively on female relationships: doubling, sisterhood, friendship and lesbian love.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> *Les jolies choses* is about twin sisters, and *Bye Bye Blondie* (Virginie Desportes, 2011) is about a sexual relationship between two middle-aged women.

Less information is publicly available on Coralie Trinh Thi. She is an ex-pornographic film star who began working in the industry at the age of 18, appearing in over 70 films by the time she made *Baise-moi* with Despentès (she was only 23 at the time). In her pornographic films, “Trinh Thi is noted for her aggressive on-screen persona” (Sharkey 2002). Her most mainstream work has been in New Extremist film *Sombre* (Philippe Grandrieux, 1998), as well as *Sodomites*, a hardcore safe sex promotional video directed by Gaspar Noé for French television in the 1990s (Macnab 2002).

Despentès and Trinh Thi’s public self-identification as feminists is rare in a cultural context and time period in which, as Carrie Tarr and Brigid Rollet write in their history of female filmmakers in France, female directors work “in a male-dominated industry” in which “French women have felt obliged to disclaim their gender, and in a society where issues relating to gender inequalities and sexual difference have been persistently obscured by discourses on Republican universalism inherited from the French revolution” (2001, 5). In contrast to this tendency, Despentès and Trinh Thi align their film with a genre of feminist female friendship films. As I previously argued, *Baise-moi* consciously asserts itself as a female “buddy movie” along the lines of *Thelma & Louise* and other female revenge films of the 1990s which, as Karen Hollinger writes, shifted to more violent modes of expression (1998, 114).

*Thelma & Louise* in particular set in motion a cycle of politically minor female road films that eschewed the common focus of the genre on “alienated and inassimilable masculinities” (Tarr and Rollet 2001, 228). Instead, films by female filmmakers such as *Personne ne*

*m'aime/Nobody Loves Me* (Marion Vernoux, 1994) privileged female self-discovery and solidarity. In addition, several female-directed road movies about female criminals appeared in France prior to the release of *Thelma & Louise* in 1991, including *Signé Charlotte/Sincerely Charlotte* (Caroline Huppert, 1985) and *Sac de noeuds/All Mixed Up* (Josiane Balasko, 1985) (Tarr and Rollet 2001, 230-4, 243). Like *Manu and Nadine* in *Baise-moi*, the “nomadic road movie heroines” in the films of these female directors “transgress notions of what is socially and sexually acceptable for women, their occupation of the road constituting a symbolic rebellion against conventional conceptions of women’s space and women’s supposed ‘passivity’” (Tarr and Rollet 2001, 248).

Although *Baise-moi* is most often characterized as a rape-revenge film, we can note from this history of its creators and cultural context that the film is just as much a female friendship film in which *Manu and Nadine* “provide images of alternative lifestyles for women based on meaningful social relationships with other women. In doing so, they avoid advocating the submissive behavior that so often characterizes filmic portrayals of women’s relationships with men” (Hollinger 1998, 4). *Baise-moi* revisions the codes governing the depiction of female friendship in normative patriarchal cinema, presenting instead a violent and explicitly sexualized account of feminist “awakening” designed to shock and disturb audiences into an awareness of the gendered aspects of female suffering and pleasure in film.

The feminist shocks to thought regarding the intolerability of rape culture in *Baise-moi* align with the aims of *écriture féminine* “to break up, to destroy” the patriarchal clichés in which female suffering and pleasure are traditionally portrayed in the cinema, and “to foresee the unforeseeable, to project” (Cixous 1976, 875) and invent a different (if not utopian) future. Although *Baise-moi* does not directly envision an idealized feminist future for women such as Manu and Nadine, as a minor feminist imaging of the intolerable it provides the conditions out of which such a future might arise. Despentès and Trinh Thi’s feminist visioning-in-the-feminine gestures towards “the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures” (Cixous 1976, 879).

#### *The Political and Ethical Potential of Baise-moi*

I locate the political and ethical relevance of *Baise-moi* for feminist praxis in its ability to generate shocks to thought regarding female suffering and gendered violence. Specifically, the film viscerally envisions the rebellion of economically disenfranchised minority women existing at the margins of French society in a manner that foregrounds the importance of female solidarity within a violent patriarchal culture.

Despentès and Trinh Thi were thus specific in their casting of minority women (who also happen to be actresses in the marginalized and disreputable porn industry) for the roles of Manu and Nadine. Anderson (Manu) is French citizen of Algerian descent, and Lancaume (Nadine) was a French citizen of Moroccan descent. Despentès credits much of the negative

critical reaction and censorship of the film to its depiction of anarchic minority female outlaws, rather than any inherently “offensive” presentation of violence or sexuality:

We really took the brunt of a lot of prejudice and paranoia...We didn't realise just how much fear and hatred it would arouse, but it definitely stoked up a lot of nasty stuff. Not least because it's about poor, non-white women. In France, there's real conflict between the white majority and the Arabic population. Our two lead actresses both have African roots - one is half-Moroccan, the other half-Algerian – and in France, don't harbour any illusions, it's visceral, this problem. A lot of people really don't want to see two North African women who have been raped taking up arms and shooting European men. That's a little too close to historical reality. (qtd. in Sharkey 2002)

This emphasis on the political need for minority female solidarity is even more pronounced in the novel version of *Baise-moi*, in which Manu refuses to kill Arabs, and she and Nadine form a close friendship with a young Arab woman named Fatima (Despentes 2003, 162).

In their focus on female *beurs* originating from the outskirts of Paris, Despentes and Trinh Thi consciously revision the ways in which sexual and ethnic difference are imaged in the French genre of *banlieue* films. These films (with *La Haine* [Mathieu Kassovitz, 1995] being a paradigmatic example) are mainly concerned with problems faced by men, and “have rarely been addressed to issues relating to young ethnic minority women, who have generally been constructed in stereotypical roles (as victims of the Arabo-Berber-Islamic sex-gender system or as liberated sex objects)” (Tarr and Rollet 2001, 67). The fact that Manu, Nadine and Fatima form an intimate bond on the basis of shared oppression gestures towards the gendered and ethnic dimensions of social inequality.

The celebration of female *hors la loi* who attempt to escape from and destroy an intolerable patriarchal culture is attenuated by the finale of the film, in which Manu is shot and Nadine is captured by the police. This ending, much like that of *Thelma & Louise*, suggests the impossibility of sustaining a feminist exile from patriarchy. Genuine female freedom is envisioned as impossible in the contemporary cultural climate due to the prevailing dominance of patriarchal and masculinist institutions. *Baise-moi* thus highlights the intolerable elements of life for Manu and Nadine in the Deleuzian sense of the term by envisioning a level of oppression at which life becomes unbearable and violent rebellion a viable option. The pessimistic and cynical ending of the film is by no means politically unproductive or regressive from a feminist or Deleuzian standpoint, however. The imaging of the current condition of female subjects as intolerable in the finale performs an ethical function in fostering a belief in *this* world, not as it might be in a utopian future, but as it actually exists. This ethical function is further developed by the positions of Manu and Nadine as Deleuzian seers who, along with spectators, bear witness to their own suffering without denying or erasing it (Deleuze 1989, 41). In this sense *Baise-moi* differs from *Ne te retourne pas* in not ending on a utopian note in terms of female solidarity. However, both films envisage the possibility of genuine female friendship and solidarity, without stigmatizing or demonizing these relationships as unnatural or inferior to heterosexual romance.

The same cannot be said for more current mainstream adaptations of the female outlaw narrative. A comparison and contrast between *Baise-moi* and Hollywood film *Girls Against Boys* (Austin Chick, 2010) illustrates how the minor feminist potential of *Baise-moi* is

genuinely radical in comparison to mainstream film, as well as how this potential is often co-opted and turned against women and the possibility of female solidarity. In many respects *Girls Against Boys* is an anti-female friendship remake of *Baise-moi*, revealing the extent to which female relationships of genuine solidarity and affection such as that of Manu and Nadine are unacceptable in mainstream film.

*Girls Against Boys* centers on the development of an unlikely friendship between Shae (Danielle Panabaker) and Lulu (Nicole LaLiberte). Shae is a shy, deferential college student and part-time bartender involved in an unsatisfactory affair with an older married man. Lulu is a fellow bartender with a much more confident and overtly sexualized persona; she is self-possessed and assured when dealing with men, whereas Shae is not. Lulu invites Shae to a party, after which the latter is raped by a man who walks her home. Lulu then accompanies Shae to the police station, where the officer is uninterested in her charges of sexual assault. Lulu seduces and kills the policeman in retaliation, and the two women embark on a road trip in which they kill Shae's rapist, among other men.

Several plot devices employed in *Girls Against Boys* are reminiscent of those in *Baise-moi*. For example, Shae's married boyfriend responds unsympathetically to her traumatized state after she is raped, and tries to sexually assault her himself in a scene that reminds one of the disdainful machismo of Manu's brother after she had been raped. *Girls Against Boys* also portrays male authority figures as legitimized agents of rape culture: the police refuse to

believe that Shae was raped because she had been drinking and was kissing her rapist before he assaulted her.

Although similar to *Baise-moi* in its recognition of how systemic gender and sexual inequality create a culture permissive of rape, the feminist potential of *Girls Against Boys* is nullified by its demonization of female friendship and solidarity as façades concealing unhealthy homosexual obsession. This demonization is achieved mainly through the characterization of Lulu as a nymphomaniac who is infatuated with Shae. Lulu abruptly shifts from a fiercely independent and self-sufficient woman (albeit, one who kills men) to a mentally and emotionally unstable lesbian who sadistically tries to thwart Shae's flirtation with a shy, sensitive male classmate. The film uncritically employs the clichéd dichotomy of the "good" straight girl versus the "bad" lesbian operative in many anti-female friendship films (such as *Single White Female* [Barbet Schroeder, 1992]) in order to deny the possibility of female and feminist solidarity in the face of gendered and sexualized violence against women.

The distinction between *Baise-moi* and its Hollywood iteration is most obvious in the political uses each film makes of affect. *Baise-moi*'s indictment of rape culture is based largely on its graphic and upsetting depiction of rape, whereas *Girls Against Boys* avoids any actual depiction of rape onscreen. In contrast, the most viscerally disturbing moment of *Girls Against Boys* occurs when Shae finally defeats Lulu by *stabbing her in the vagina*, a clearly misogynistic act that dramatically contradicts the female solidarity of Manu and Nadine by

identifying the female sexual organs as the origin of excessive desire and dangerous independence.

As a form of patriarchal Hollywood cinema, *Girls Against Boys* exploits relationships of female friendship and solidarity in films from the political margins such as *Baise-moi* by divesting them of any feminist bio-political subversiveness. Although the epilogue of *Girls Against Boys* suggests that Shae will replicate Lulu's role by liberating another young woman from an abusive heterosexual relationship, we can see from this comparison that *Baise-moi* asserts itself as a feminist film with radical and untimely critiques of gender inequality and masculinist rape culture. As a feminist form of visioning-in-the-feminine, *Baise-moi* provides an uncomfortable and disturbing cinematic expression of female suffering and rage.

## **Conclusion**

Cinematic visioning-in-the-feminine in *Ne te retourne pas* and *Baise-moi* subverts patriarchal discourses governing spectatorial perception of female suffering. This visioning-in-the-feminine involves sensual engagement with and critical psychosomatic reflection on instances of non-objectified female suffering and sexual pleasure. Such vision makes spectators aware of the habitual exclusion of compassionate and sympathetic depictions of female pain and pleasure from the field of vision, and fosters a recognition that these exclusions are dictated by dominant bio-political ideologies rather than being natural or

inevitable. The minor position of feminist female filmmakers within the French film industry facilitates this mode of visioning-in-the-feminine on the part of filmmakers such as de Van, Desportes and Trinh Thi (Tarr and Rollet 2001, 5).

Unconscious and habitual modes of vision objectify female bodily experience by repeating and supporting hegemonic ways of seeing without reflecting on their material or ideological points of origin. This unconsciously enacted and codified mode of vision must be unlearned, and replaced with a critical, self-aware method of seeing that dovetails with what feminists regard as writing-in-the-feminine: “[t]he poet must rethink her writing activities in such a way as to *désoublier* (to unforget), *détaire* (to unsilence), *déterrer* (to unbury), *se désaveugler* (to unblind), *se dessourdir* (to undeafen), in an endeavor to displace all that has been repressed” (Conley 1991, 107).

I argue that this unblinding that works to “change our dulled senses” (Conley 1991, 46) operates on the screen as well as in written texts. In *Ne te retourne pas* and *Baise-moi*, cinematic affect and cliché shock spectators into a sensory-motor awareness of their habitual modes of seeing. In this regard Deleuze’s description of cinematic clichés that disrupt normalized modes of spectatorial perception accords with Al-Saji’s critical-ethical practice of perceptive hesitation; Deleuze writes that “[w]e...normally perceive only clichés. But, if our sensory-motor schemata jam or break, then a different type of image can appear...the new image has to stand up against the cliché on its own ground...add to it and parody it, as a better way of getting over the problem” (1989, 20-1). Deleuze terms this sensory-motor

awareness a shock to thought that, as Braidotti explains, consists of “a force capable of freeing philosophy from its hegemonic habits” (1993, 6).

The break from codified, hegemonic modes of perception rendered possible by visioning-in-the-feminine exposes spectators to certain bio-political facets of female experience to which they may have previously been blind, including an awareness of the role played by ideologies surrounding gender and sexual difference in structuring female suffering in the field of the visible. Such processes of exposure and estrangement constitute one of the paramount goals of visioning-in-the-feminine in the cinema of exposure: to effect the becoming-other of spectators, and in doing so make visible “a brand-new subject, alive, with defamiliarization” (Cixous 1976, 890).

## **Conclusion**

### **Future Directions of the Cinema of Exposure**

This thesis has explored the phenomenological, bio-political and ethical dimensions of spectators' encounters with female suffering in the cinema of exposure. The aesthetic features of the cinema of exposure resonate with spectators on corporeal and intellectual levels, giving rise to politicized shocks to thought. This invitation to affective reflection on the part of the cinema of exposure encourages spectators to reflect critically on the gendered and sexually differentiated dimensions of female suffering, as well as their ethical relationship to this suffering.

In each chapter, I situate specific films within the cinema of exposure in relation to contemporary socio-political problematics in Western culture, especially as they relate to feminism and the bio-political regulation of women's bodies. I have therefore attended to the bio-political dimensions of mediated female suffering and spectatorial perception on two levels: that of spectatorship experiences, and that of the wider socio-political contexts in which they are embedded.

In elaborating the bio-political and ethical relationship of spectators to female suffering in the cinema of exposure, I draw on the work of Deleuze, Nancy and Cixous. I employ the Deleuzian concepts of becoming-woman, the time-image, the shock to thought, minor cinema and an ethics of belief in the world in order to clearly articulate how certain formal devices in the cinema of exposure transform spectators as political and ethical subjects.

Disturbing instances of female suffering in the cinema of exposure disrupt patriarchal and misogynistic cinematic codes in order to provide minor feminist shocks to thought and encourage the ethical becoming-other of spectators.

Nancy's ethical ontology of co-existence further informs my understanding of the biopolitical and ethical dimensions of spectators' intimate proximity to female suffering the cinema of exposure. I argue that spectators engage in a co-existence with female protagonists that comprises both an intimate proximity to their suffering, as well as an irreducible distance from it that precludes fusion or immersion. Spectators do not conflate themselves with the suffering female protagonist when experiencing a relationship of co-existence. Rather, they share emotions, feelings and physical experience in a sympathetic and compassionate manner. This co-existence is often produced by unsettling imagery that encourages a haptic vision on the part of spectators, in which the eyes approach (but do not realize) a tactile and immediate relationship with female suffering onscreen.

Finally, I adapt Cixous' concept of *écriture féminine* to analyses of cinematic affect and feminist spectatorship praxis in relation to the cinema of exposure. I develop a theory of visioning-in-the-feminine in which spectators and filmmakers engage in sympathetic and compassionate modes of perceiving and imaging female suffering. This visioning-in-the-feminine responds to female suffering in a sensual manner, and is also critically aware of the gendered and sexualized inequalities at the root of such suffering.

I outlined these theoretical concepts and their relevance to my understandings of female suffering in the cinema of exposure in the introductory chapter, in which I analyzed *Martyrs* as an example of a minor feminist mode of visioning female pain. Chapter 1 further developed spectators' ethical relationship to the bio-political dimensions of female suffering by comparing *Antichrist* to *Wait Until Dark*, two films in which female protagonists are exposed to the physical and emotional abuse of their husbands. Each film stages a war of the sexes that lays bare the gendered dimensions of female suffering, thus constituting a minor feminist cinema of exposure. In Chapter 2, I focused on spectators' ethical co-existence with suffering pregnant women in contemporary French New Extremist and body horror films. I considered the brutal eviscerations of pregnant female bodies in *Irréversible* and *À l'intérieur* as embodiments of post-colonial conflict within the French body politic. Chapter 3 addressed the ways in which spectators experience shocks to thought and becomings-woman when encountering female self-mutilation in *Dans ma peau* and *Black Swan*. The gruesome and unsettling instances of female pain in each film create ethical spaces of co-existence that encourage spectators to experience and reflect on the bio-political status of female embodiment in contemporary Western society. Finally, in Chapter 4 I argued that films by female filmmakers such as *Ne te retourne pas* and *Baise-moi* serve as cinematic iterations of visioning-in-the-feminine. Both films envision female experiences of suffering in shocking and disturbing registers that invite spectators to engage with this suffering in a sensual and critical manner. Visioning-in-the-feminine constitutes a minor feminist mode of vision that encompasses the tactile sensuality of the cinema of exposure, while also making the bio-political dimensions of female suffering visible.

My explorations of female suffering in these chapters evidence the widespread prevalence of violent images of female suffering in Western cinema. Exploring the impact that this violence has on spectators as ethical subjects thus remains an urgent political task, which this thesis takes up. Specifically, my thesis contributes productively to the developing area of spectatorship ethics within the field of Film Studies. It makes an original and innovative contribution to this area of study by linking ethical modes of spectatorship to politicized depictions of female suffering and trauma in contemporary film.

The feminist ethics of compassionate solidarity with female suffering that I articulate in each chapter also contributes to wider socio-political and philosophical discourses engaging with the ethical impact of media violence on spectators and consumers. Namely, this thesis has established the relevance of embodied perception to current feminist praxes of solidarity that insist on the continued importance of collaborative political action, while also attending to the multiplicity of experiences and perspectives that arise from differences among women and feminist subjects. I have examined the ways in which images of violence against women in the cinema of exposure pose ethical questions to each spectator regarding her or his bodily relationship to gendered and sexualized power dynamics and inequalities. In doing so, my study of the cinema of exposure promotes a more public discussion of the ethics of viewing and responding to female suffering in the media.

Although I did not have the space to address this issue in an in-depth manner, in the future the focus of this project could be expanded beyond the cinemas of Western Europe and the U.S. For example, one could explore the ethical and bio-political relationships of spectators to female suffering in cinemas from other cultural, socio-political and national contexts. A comparative study would further illuminate the various modes in which spectators respond to different aesthetic presentations of female suffering. One would also need to expand the philosophical scope of such a project beyond the philosophies of Western thinkers, whose conceptualizations of ethical existence and the bio-political construction of (gendered and sexually differentiated) subjectivity cannot be applied on a universal basis.

I broached the topic of race and ethnicity briefly in my discussions of minority women in *Martyrs* and *Baise-moi*; however, a deeper consideration of factors of difference such as race, ethnicity, socio-economic status and sexual orientation could further elucidate the political and ethical relationship of spectators to female suffering in the cinema of exposure and beyond (especially in so far as such factors intersect).

For example, the brutal beating of a female slave in *12 Years a Slave* (Steve McQueen, 2013) envisions the intersection of gendered female suffering and racial politics. Severe plantation owner Edwin Epps (Michael Fassbender) punishes his female slave Patsey (Lupita Nyong'o) for leaving the plantation without permission. Epps, who has expressed a sexual obsession with Patsey throughout the film, stripes her of her clothing and ties her to a tree trunk. Epps first forces her fellow slave Solomon Northup (Chiwetel Ejiofor) to whip Patsey, before doing so himself.

The camera initially focuses on Solomon and Epps in a medium shot as the former whips Patsey without much force, clearly trying to minimize her suffering. The handheld camera travels around the tree trunk to a close-up of Patsey's face as she cries in pain. Epps then holds a gun to Solomon's neck and shrieks at him to "Strike her!...You will strike her until her flesh is rent, and meat and blood flow." With a pained expression, Solomon begins to whip Patsey much harder. The camera returns to a close-up on a sobbing, choking Patsey as the lashes tear apart her skin. Epps, who seems unsatisfied with even this amount of force, wrestles the whip from Solomon and begins to whip Patsey himself with a brutal strength that far exceeds that of Solomon. The camera then alternates between a close-up of Epps's enraged face and a medium shot of Patsey's lacerated back. Even when the camera does not directly image Patsey, the sound of the whip cracking and the lashes blowing down on her exposed flesh horrifically envisage her pain.

Immediately after the whipping sequence, the camera cuts to an extreme close-up of Patsey's mutilated black skin. Her wounds open wide with dark blood as fellow slaves gingerly dab them clean. The shot only lasts several seconds, but its impact is shocking and disturbing, viscerally bearing witness to the physical pain Patsey has undergone. Patsey then looks up and gazes directly at Solomon, who is standing before her, and continues to sob. The camera cuts to a close-up of Solomon's face as a tear falls down his cheek. *12 Years a Slave* exposes the painful convergence of racial and gender inequality by inscribing it upon Patsey's skin in a disturbing manner.

Epps's savage whipping of Patsey blatantly exposes the confluence of patriarchal sexual desire, racist violence and the white man's ability to subordinate the black female body. Here, the suffering body of Patsey is doubly objectified by her race and gender; in the words of Epps, "Man does what he pleases with his property." The objectification and torture of Patsey in *12 Years a Slave* is aesthetically and thematically similar to the protracted rape of Alex in *Irréversible*. The long duration (approximately four minutes) of Patsey's whipping in *12 Years a Slave* furthers the impression of an intolerable environment of slavery and female suffering, in this regard echoing the prolonged temporality and bio-political import of Alex's rape by La Tenia.

Furthermore, the direct involvement of Solomon in enacting Patsey's suffering confers upon him particular ethical responsibilities as a participant and as a witness. Here, as in the figure of the shadowy witness to Alex's rape in *Irréversible*, *12 Years a Slave* confronts spectators with the ethical failure or powerlessness of the male protagonist. The difference in the latter film is that Solomon recognizes and regrets his inability to prevent such acts of brutality. He becomes a seer in the Deleuzian sense of the term, exposed to the intolerability of racial prejudice and patriarchal prerogative. In bearing witness to and participating in female suffering, as well as clearly expressing an abhorrence of it, Solomon "has gained in an ability to see what he has lost in action or reaction: he SEES so that the viewer's problem becomes 'What is there to see in the image?'" (Deleuze 1989, 272).

The intersection of racial politics and female suffering in the cinema of exposure and elsewhere constitutes an area of exploration beyond the purview of the thesis. However, I

note in closing that the cinema of exposure invites spectators to perceive and become- otherwise when encountering female pain onscreen: to reject the assumption that female suffering serves as a misogynistic and patriarchal spectacle, and to respond to it in a compassionate and critically aware manner.

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