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The New French Extremity: Bruno Dumont and Gaspar Noé, France's Contemporary Zeitgeist

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THE NEW FRENCH EXTREMITY: BRUNO DUMONT AND GASPAR NOÉ, FRANCE'S CONTEMPORARY *ZEITGEIST*

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by

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Abstract

This thesis represents an attempt to more clearly delineate current conceptions of a recent collection of transgressive films from France, here entitled the New French Extremity. Using the first three feature films from directors Bruno Dumont and Gaspar Noé as my central case studies, this research attempts to bring forth analyses of the Extremity's transgressive nature as both mirroring the nation's own transgressive cultural shifts, and as constituting the films' central theme. One of the purposes of the thesis is also to decide on its status as a 'movement'. This is completed by comparing its formation and development to past French movements and cycles, examining the Extremity in the greater context of the country's socio-politics, as its previous movements were. Overall, the thesis seeks to explore present theories of affect, spectatorship, and transgressive cinema through a close examination of the New French Extremity's formations, current developments, and future potentialities.

Keywords: Abject; abject cinema; Affect theory; arthouse; Bruno Dumont; cinema of sensation; cinema of the body; cognitive film theory; cognitivism; contemporary; extremism; film movement; formalism; France; French cinema; French politics; Gaspar Noé; haptic cinema; haptics; Julia Kristeva; Laura Marks; neoformalism; neuroscience; New French Extremity; ordeal cinema; psychology; psychophysics; spectatorship; sublime; transgression; transgressive cinema.

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Prologue

This thesis represents an attempt to more clearly delineate both a historical and theoretical context for the New French Extremity, a label designating a collection[1] of transgressive films from France from roughly the late 1990s to the present. Its status is only recently being examined within critical and academic circles, and the difficulty in identifying its position as a 'movement' has thus necessitated this effort to expand upon the current definitions and conceptions of the New French Extremity.

Current treatments of the New French Extremity lead to similar points of examination: its films focus on several forms of corporeality, including explicit sex, violence, and sexual violence; reveal overtones of fatalism and nihilism in exploring aspects of contemporary morality; display an aesthetic style that heavily uses elements of arthouse and experimental cinema; and express a concern with the treatment of race, gender, and sexuality in contemporary French society. There are a number of filmmakers generally associated with the New French Extremity, including, but not limited to, Catherine Breillat, Marina de Van, Bruno Dumont, Philippe Grandrieux, Gaspar Noé, and François Ozon. However, many writings (which will be touched upon in the following chapter) on the New French Extremity tend to provide only a general overview of these elements, withholding close analysis of the films for brevity, and perhaps most significantly, their historical contexts as constituting a body of films with political messages.[2]

The current research takes as its predominant locus of examination the role of the New French Extremity as constituting a recent tradition of *transgressive cinema* (which, again, will be expanded upon at great length in the proceeding chapter). My reason for singling out the Extremity's nature of transgression is due to my perception that it is one of the sole identifiable traits common to all of the films involved. A primary example of

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[1] Due to its "categorical evasiveness", as commented upon by Tim Palmer (2012: 9), I use the term "collection" as a broad descriptor for an area that has also been called a "diverse body of films" (Horeck & Kendall 2011: 1), a "trend" or "tendency" (Quandt 18), and a "phenomenon" (Beugnet 2011: 29).

[2] As Martine Beugnet comments: "In a number of recent studies, a degree of acknowledged personal input, reflecting the subjective element inherent in the exploration of a work based on its sensory apprehension, has been put forward in denial of conventional methods based on categorising (national, generic, popular-versus-auteur cinemas and so on)..." (2007: 11)

this lies within this thesis, itself: though Noé and Dumont vary widely in their aesthetic tendencies (Noé informed by a 'hyperactive' style of editing and cinematography, Dumont starkly contrasting through his ultra-naturalistic, sedate method of filmmaking), the reason for their inclusion, here, as comparable filmmakers is precisely because of the transgressive commonality between their films. As Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall suggest:

> *The work of film directors associated with the new extremism does not amount to a collective 'style', and the films…evoke and often deconstruct a range of generic tropes rather than constituting one collectively. Nor do we wish to downplay the differences in style, approach and intent that separate the filmmakers…Hence…the new extremism brings together a range of aesthetic approaches, themes and concerns, but that does not preclude other ways of categorising or approaching these films.* (2011: 5)

These comments are not just limited to Noé and Dumont, but similarly inform other filmmakers (Ozon and Breillat being prominent examples in portraying such divergences in style and content) of the New French Extremity. Therefore, I presently deem it futile to attempt an examination of the New French Extremity based on common themes, tropes, aesthetics, or narratives; but, rather, the wildly varied nature of these elements are intrinsically brought together through their single, common goal: to represent the transgressive nature of contemporary France through their own transgressive properties. Though the means are different, the ends remain alike.

      The first chapter seeks to establish a historical context in an attempt to inspect the socio-political conditions that have given way to the formations of the New French Extremity, using the development of the French New Wave as a parallel phenomenon through which to gauge the Extremity's status as a 'movement'. Though various writers have raised concerns in labeling it a 'movement'[3], I believe such an approach is often

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[3] Beugnet remarks that "the sample of filmmakers cited in this book does not correspond to a 'movement' (indeed, some of the directors would voice, I suspect, a strong dislike for each others' work)" (2007: 15), and refers to the films as being "unclassifiable" (Ibid). Similar comments are made by Horeck and Kendall

avoided due to the difficulty in identifying potential catalytic factors in a collection of films which reflect few evident commonalities among one another, as well as the lack of a formal dictum put forth by its directors.

The second chapter will position the works of Gaspar Noé as a form of transgressive filmmaking that aims to disrupt social and moral boundaries through the concept of a '*haptic cinema*', modulating the spectator's physiological properties through experimental techniques in sound and image. This section is in line with some of the research that has been conducted on the New French Extremity thus far, the focus placed both on the films' depiction of bodies and on their affective qualities towards the spectators' bodies, themselves.[4] This chapter combines numerous fields of research I feel are largely 'alien' to the field of film studies, including those of psychology, neuroscience, and psychoacoustics. As such, the central methodology for this chapter is that of cognitive film theory, utilized in an attempt to better understand how Noé pushes transgressive properties to the fore in his films, and thus, how they inform the larger aims of the New French Extremity.

Finally, the third chapter examines the first three films by Bruno Dumont, also locating them on a transgressive level, this time through the portrayal of the *abject* in a specific juxtaposition of the corporeal and landscape. He shares an affinity with Noé in his focus upon the treatment of bodies, though I do not see him as being a part of the "cinema of sensation" (Beugnet 2007: 16), which I would align Noé with. Because of this, this chapter moves away from the cognitive film theory approach I apply to Chapter II. Instead, I examine Dumont's transgressive nature through Julia Kristeva's original conception of the abject, in tandem with its juxtaposition to the *sublime* as evidenced throughout all three of his films.

An *auteurist* methodology has been appropriated for this research for two central reasons: the first is to allow for a more clear demarcation of similarities and differences

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who "do not see the 'new extremism' as the collective label for a new 'genre' or 'movement'" (2011: 5), instead applying Quandt's terminology of a "trend or tendency" (Ibid) to the films.

[4] I here point to Beugnet's *Cinema and Sensation: French Film and the Art of Transgression* (SIU Press, 2007), Horeck and Kendall's *The New Extremism in Cinema* (Edinburgh University Press, 2011), and Tim Palmer's *Brutal Intimacy: Analyzing Contemporary French Cinema* (Wesleyan University Press, 2011) as key texts in the analysis of such.

in the construction of a transgressive cinema both within the filmmakers' individual corpora of works and between the two at large; and, secondly, to endeavour the idea of the New French Extremity as constituting a movement through the related sensibilities of its filmmakers, similar to how the French New Wave is often examined. I have chosen Noé and Dumont largely due to a notable lack of critical writing on their works, as well as a personal belief that their films exemplify many of the New French Extremity's fundamental tenets of transgression. It should also be noted that I use the film titles most common to English-written discourse. For example, though I refer to Noé's 1998 *Seul contre tous* as *I Stand Alone*, I call Dumont's 1999 *L'humanité* by its original French title, as opposed to *Humanity*. This is simply due to my own observations of what titles are most often used within discussions of the films.

My endeavour in this thesis is twofold: centrally, I attempt to expand the current definitions and conceptions of the New French Extremity, specifically interrogating the idea of transgression (in both art and society) as the model upon which the Extremity has developed. Unlike the majority of other writers on the Extremity, however, I feel it is necessary to attempt an understanding of the films as constituting a 'movement', specifically examining the nation's recent socio-political tensions as its formative catalysts. And, secondly, the research simultaneously seeks to expand the boundaries of film studies into a model which seeks to hybridize art and science, theory and empiricism. These areas of art and science should be framed not as being mutually exclusive but, instead, those which intertwine with one another to better further our understanding of *how* the images and sounds of cinema can affect a spectator's physiological and psychological states.

Chapter I
The New French Extremity: Formative Contexts

Before conducting a rigorous analysis on whom I believe to be two of the most significant *auteurs* of the New French Extremity, it is first necessary to briefly examine various contexts in which their films have arisen. Coming out of both cinematic and national history, the New French Extremity's current formations can be traced through historical, social, political, and cultural contexts, while simultaneously reflecting the nation's cinematic trajectory. While this examination will not attempt to be exhaustive, it is intended to act as an original piece of research which will explicitly link the development of the New French Extremity to the larger milieu of France's own social and cinematic evolution.

It is important that the New French Extremity be examined concurrently with the national political climate during this time, as it is during which a burst of transgressive, morally-objectionable films have emerged. A further parallel can be made between the Extremity and New Wave's formations in an attempt to define the Extremity on the grounds of its status as a movement, given the latter's similar developmental context. Such a review has, to my current knowledge, not yet been attempted, writings instead concentrating on fragments of the nation's social/political/cultural situation in relation to specific filmmakers and notions of the New French Extremity; or, more noticeably, not examining the national context at all.[5]

Some notable examples of such works include: Martine Beugnet's 2007 book *Cinema and Sensation: French Film and the Art of Transgression*, which examines films of the New French Extremity largely through their audio-visual qualities as mediating a "cinema of sensation" (14) as a specific act of transgression; Tim Palmer's 2011 book *Brutal Intimacy: Analyzing Contemporary French Cinema*, which, in the analysis of recent shifts in the "ecosystem" of French cinema, brings up works typically associated with the Extremity, although discussing them mostly in the context of the *cinéma du corps* ('cinema of the body'—referring to French films which make explicit their focus

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[5] This brief review summarizes English-language works only. Due to limited space herein, and ease of availability, foreign-language works are to be left absent for the course of this examination.

on all forms of corporeality, largely through sex, violence, and sexual violence); Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall's collection of essays in 2011's *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe*, which includes material written on the various representations of sexuality and violence, as well as the political dimensions and theories of spectatorship, informing contemporary transgressive cinema of Europe which extends the notion beyond France; and a Fall 2012 issue of the journal *Cinephile* which similarly presents a collection of essays related to this movement of "contemporary extremism", although extending the examination even further, geographically, to include cinemas of Asia and North America. While this "list" is not exhaustive, it is meant to reflect the limited corpus of research conducted on the New French Extremity thus far, further emphasized by the time in which all have been released: only within the past one or two years. Furthermore, an insufficient amount of research conducted in these works aim to examine *why* such a movement is occurring. Instead, much of the focus has been placed on the films' aesthetics or content, but without a parallel discussion of contemporary French society.

1.1 Defining a Film Movement

At this point, it is valuable to briefly diverge from the discussion of the New French Extremity to reflect upon the concept of a *movement*, in order to establish a theoretical context by which to define the Extremity. David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson define collective trends in cinema by examining the concept of a film movement, suggesting that, in a movement,

> *filmmakers typically operate within a common production structure and*
> *share certain assumptions about filmmaking. Above all, they favor a*
> *common approach to film form, style, and theme…Sometimes the*
> *filmmakers in a movement know one another well and respond to one*
> *another's projects…Other movements are more diffuse, with unconnected*
> *filmmakers gravitating toward a common approach to form and*
> *style…[Factors] such as the state of the industry, artistic theories held by*
> *the filmmakers themselves, technological features, and cultural and*

economic forces…help explain how a particular trend began and developed." (2013: 461-2)

The two researchers further posit that a film movement reflects filmmaking trends in different *times* and *places*. Expanding upon this, they suggest that a movement consists of two elements: films that are produced within a particular period and/or nation and that share significant traits of style and form; and filmmakers who operate within a common production structure and who share certain assumptions about filmmaking (2010: 454).

As such, then, an attempt to define the New French Extremity as a film movement must necessarily follow, by positing it in relation to the criteria Bordwell and Thompson list, as well as in comparison to other traditions that have been agreed upon as film movements. It is worth briefly noting two recent film movements to use as a launch pad, in order to later frame the New French Extremity in either a contrasting or comparable light. The New German Cinema movement of the 1960s-80s, for instance, found its initial development in young German filmmakers' frustration with the nation's funding system and state subsidies for production. In addressing such issues, Thomas Elsaesser discusses the most "striking feature" of the cinema as "the proliferation of militant platforms onto which its directors were to climb and the often intense meta-discourse and media debate which accompanied the various stages of its ascendancy, consolidation and eventual dissipation" (273).

Similarly, the Dogme 95 movement—also 'initiated' through a manifesto by Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg in 1995—finds its origins through certain individuals' frustrations (most notably, von Trier and the Dogme film collective, consisting of other Danish filmmakers) towards the structures of film production in Denmark. The movement is seen as an attempt for "the democratisation of the cinematic medium, [which] resonates with the Dogme manifesto's critical reflections on globalisation…[reflecting] von Trier's enduring commitment to a conception of film as formal innovation and compelling expression rather than standardised product" (Hjort & MacKenzie 2). Most significantly is the duo's 'Vow of Chastity', a list of ten rules that a director was to follow in order to create a true 'Dogme' film—that is, countering the "film of illusion" (von Trier & Vinterberg, qtd. in Utterson 88). With such rules as

location-shooting only, the restriction of non-diegetic sound, and the usage of handheld cameras, the movement sought to reimagine 'art cinema' in a "collectivist register" (Hjort & MacKenzie 2), "[appealing] to film-makers who are still in the process of breaking into film-making" (8).

1.2 Modern Catalysts for the New French Extremity's Formation

  While the aforementioned movements were initiated through the more "official" avenue of a manifesto, if we adhere to Bordwell and Thompson's definition of a film movement, the usage of such a declaration is not a necessity for one's formation. In locating its status as a movement, then, I hold the belief that the New French Extremity does follow the criteria of being a movement, and this will thus be the first major attempt at defining it as such. I also contend that the Extremity has been subliminally influenced by such older, established movements in a number of ways. Thus, as a starting point, I find it integral to establish a parallel between the New French Extremity and the French New Wave movement. The central motive for this is due to a variety of similarities shared between the two movements; the similarities, however, are not evidenced through direct likenesses of form and content, but rather, the *contexts* in which a group of filmmakers utilized *radical* techniques in form and content.[6] Only a brief discussion of French films outside of these two "periods" may be enacted, as the French New Wave most closely shares the aforementioned similarities with the New French Extremity, thus causing this link to be the central point of reference. Furthermore, I believe that, since the French New Wave period (roughly approximated as beginning in the late 1950s/early 1960s (Greene 1), and ending around 1968 with the mass protests in France (108)), the New French Extremity reflects what is the first major shift in French cinema. Films of other French "cycles", then, may be brought up, but chiefly either as a contrast to the New Wave and Extremity movements (such as *le cinéma de papa*[7] of the 1940s and early

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[6] Though it has not yet been established if the New French Extremity justly fits the descriptor of *movement*, I will utilize its application here in order to more easily establish a connection between the two.

[7] Attacking the French cinema of the time "which they considered sclerotic [and] ossified", Truffaut and the rest of the *Cahiers du cinéma* film critics (led by André Bazin) accused such films of being "script-led,

1950s which Francois Truffaut pejoratively referred to (225), or as a reflection of the New Wave's influence upon contemporary French filmmaking, and by extension, the Extremity (such as the *cinéma du look*, *cinémas de banlieue* and *beur,* and *le jeune cinéma* of the 1980s to the early 2000s).

At this point, it is worth describing these examples of French cycles/genres which can be seen as being influenced by the French New Wave, and, by extension, which inform certain tendencies of the New French Extremity. The *cinéma du look* is described by Phil Powrie and Keith Reader as being a counterpoint to the mid-1980s emergence of what they term *heritage cinema*, in which films are "imbued with nostalgia for the golden age of the cinema, as well as the golden age of a rural France untainted by rapid post-war industrialisation and the alienation of increasing urbanisation in the 1980s and 1990s" (39). The *cinéma du look*, inaugurated at the start of the 1980s, has as its main recurring element "a preoccupation with style at the expense of narrative", particularly, colour and décor (41); other central tenets include the focus on contemporary youth (more specifically, "young lovers in urban or alienating surroundings" (Austin 119)) and a tendency to cite from other films (Ibid). Powrie and Reader note that these films are usually associated with directors Jean-Jacques Beineix, Luc Besson, and Leos Carax, poining to three central films: Beineix's *Betty Blue* (1986), Besson's *Le Grand Bleu* (*The Big Blue*, 1988), and Carax's *Mauvais Sang* (*The Night is Young*, 1986), all of which "have alienated central characters, who in one way or another reject society" (41). Perhaps most significantly, however, is the relationship between the subject matter of the films and the socio-political context in which they were developed. As Powrie and Reader note, the genre is seen as "representing the marginalised youth class of the 1980s…[with] alienated central characters, who in one way or another reject society" (Ibid). Such a focus on marginalization and alienation, they suggest, had given way to the genre's overall ethos of hopelessness, itself a direct result of "a gradual shift in political terms from Socialist hopes at the beginning of the decade to the gradual loss of those hopes as [French President François] Mitterrand's governments moved to the right" (Ibid).

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redolent with safe psychology, lacking in social realism and of being produced by the same old scriptwriters and film-makers whose time was up" (Hayward 2006: 33).

Like the *cinéma du look*, the *cinéma de beur* and *le jeune cinéma*—both of which emerged more or less at the same time as the *cinéma du look*, during the 1980s-90s (Powrie and Reader 45-6)—reflect further narrative attributes of youth, marginalization, and social disillusionment. The term *beur* is believed to have been derived from Parisian backslang for *arabe* (Arab) (Tarr 27), and designates those who are French-born to North African immigrants ("Beur" n. pag.). *Beur* films reflect "France's greatest social and political problem during the 1980s and 1990s: immigration" (Powrie and Reader 44). A *beur* film is defined as "one which was made by a young person of North African origin who was born or who spent his or her youth in France, and which features *beur* characters" (Bosséno 49). Commenting on the hybrid nature of the term, Carrie Tarr notes its reflection of "the conflict of identity experienced by the newly visible 'second generation'" (27). The films are a symptom of "the difficulty in coping with the tensions between multiculturalism on the US model, and the more favoured French approach of assimilation of second- and third-generation immigrants, particularly those from the Maghrebi communities" (Powrie and Reader 44-5). Their content matter deal with "the difficulties faced by young *beurs*, with racism and unemployment amongst the more obvious" (Ibid). Powrie and Reader point to Mehdi Charef's *Le Thé au harem d'Archimède* (*Tea in the Harem*, 1985) as being exemplary of *beur* films' status as a distinct trend in French cinema during the 1980s (45), while Tarr designates Malik Chibane's *Hexagone* (*Hexagon*, 1994) as being "the first film to be made by the *beurs* for the *beurs*" (27). Other films associated with the cycle include Karim Dridi's *Bye-Bye* (1995), Thomas Gilou's *Raï* (1995), and Rachid Bouchareb's *Bâton Rouge* (1985), considered one of the two first specifically *beur* feature films alongside *Tea in the Harem* (Tarr 31).

Le jeune cinéma further represents an advent of such socially-oriented issues. Establishing the framework for these films, Powrie and Reader suggest that "the key development during the 1990s was the renewed interest in marginalised social groups" (45). The films of this cycle place an emphasis on "contemporary social problems, with a tendency to focus on the young, on women and on rural communities as much as on the city" (46). One filmmaker most frequently, and notably, associated with this movement is Bruno Dumont: his 1997 debut feature *La Vie de Jésus* (*The Life of Jesus*), set in the

northern French countryside, focuses on "the empty lives of out-of-work youngsters who ride…frantically round the countryside in a vain attempt to escape boredom" (Powrie and Reader 46). *L'humanité*, taking place in the same area, depicts a detective's investigation into the rape and murder of a schoolgirl, his attempt to find tranquility in the countryside in vain as his mind continually questions the futility of attempting to do good in the world today. Both films focus upon the rural area of northern France, interrogating its contemporary social issues such as racism, sexism, and the malaise that stems from unemployment. Other directors referred to include Bertrand Tavernier, his film *Ça commence aujourd'hui* (*It All Starts Today*, 1999), to select one example, which explores the intricate connections between poverty, bureaucratic and political sanctions, education, and the effects of a fragmented, economically-depressed society upon the youth; Robert Guédiguian, whose films can be framed as being social realist; and, I would argue, the Dardenne brothers (Jean-Pierre and Luc), whose films, though technically focusing on contemporary social issues within Belgium, depict the effects of poverty and general aimlessness of youth, with their geographical proximity to France allowing for the films to simultaneously be a commentary on similar issues there, too.

One specific 'genre' within *le jeune cinéma* is that of the *cinéma de banlieue*, referring to films focusing on self-governed, urbanized communities located on the outskirts of a town center ("Banlieues" n. pag.). Arguably the most significant of these films is Mathieu Kassovitz's *La Haine* (*Hate*, 1995), notable for its blistering interrogation of race relations within contemporary France. Kassovitz simultaneously explores the conflict between the economically-disadvantaged *banlieue* "ghettoes" and state police, while magnifying the surfacing of youth frustration. Yet, what the *cinémas de beur* and *banlieue*, as well as *le jeune cinéma* all share in their focus on issues of marginalization, alienation, and cynicism is their development relative to the *mouvement des sans-papiers* from 1996-7: a series of protests against the threatened deportation of approximately 300 Malian "illegal immigrants", which were simultaneously opposed to legislation requiring French citizens to notify the police of non-EU citizens staying with them (48). The significance of this event, Powrie and Reader note, is its status as the first time that filmmakers, as a group, "had stood together over a political issue…part of a

more general politicisation of the industry…in the interest of a new generation of film-makers in social conditions" (Ibid).

1.3 French New Wave: Tracing its Trajectory to the New French Extremity

What should be made clearer as this chapter proceeds, is the historical trajectory connecting the French New Wave, to the *cinéma du look* and other cycles of the 1980s and '90s, to today's New French Extremity. These three periods reflect an intrinsic evolution in French cinema since the 1950s, where each influences the next to come. While the *cinéma du look*, for instance, arguably does not possess the radical aesthetic tendencies of the New Wave, it can be argued that its proclivity for drawing attention to its own formal construction borrows from the New Wave.[8] Similarly, the New French Extremity's films, though aesthetically different from filmmaker to filmmaker, reflect its own newfound radicalism in contemporary French cinema. These films possess transgressive qualities which, as I posit, function to establish a new style of aesthetics (detailed later in this chapter as a comparison to the New Wave, and in Chapter II's examination of the role of 'haptic cinema' in the Extremity). Aesthetically, then, all three film groups are related in their highlighting of aesthetic tendencies, ranging from radical self-reflexivity of the New Wave, to the focus on colour and setting in the *cinéma du look*, and coming back around to a radical approach of 'affective cinema'.

Perhaps more clear-cut, however, are the related socio-political/-economic contexts in which these three periods of cinema were developed. Explained more basically, the three periods reflect shared *thematic* tendencies, although to delve into all of them specifically would, again, require much more room in this thesis. However, I would like to put forth an idea that, like style, film narrative has its own trajectory from the 1950s to now, particularly in the way social malaise is represented: alienation, marginalization, and critiques toward the political and economic statuses of France have all been deployed in some form among these cinematic groups. While the French New Wave is, on the whole, unabashedly much more Marxist in its views, its various social critiques and focus on youth and such issues as race, gender, and sexuality cause it to fall

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[8] I will not delve into the specifics of whether or not style "consumes" narrative in any of these three groups, due to the space such a claim would require, but its heightened significance is central to this discussion.

in line with both the genres/cycles of the 1980s and 1990s, and the New French Extremity. While the politics may have continually shifted in the nation from the 1950s to today, the ethos of frustration and discontent has always remained, represented through all three periods in their own ways. Furthermore, all three periods have found themselves emerging in the face of national protests within France (to be detailed in a later section): be it the wildcat strikes and student protests of May 1968, the *sans-papiers* protests of 1996-7, or the *banlieue* riots of 2005 and the student protests of 2006, each movement/cycle is connected through the national contexts in which they developed.

Such influence of the French New Wave is further suggested by a number of writers: Jill Forbes writes that French filmmakers in the 1970s and '80s felt the "constant necessity" to locate themselves "positively or negatively in relation to the *nouvelle vague* (3) (although I certainly suggest that filmmakers today continue to do the same, though not necessarily wholly consciously). Ginette Vincendeau suggests that the French New Wave establishes a "critical standard against which French cinema has been judged ever since" (111). Susan Hayward similarly acknowledges its influence within the French cinematic ecosystem, concentrating on "one of the most fortuitous and long-lasting effects of the New Wave: [forcing] a reconsideration of production practices" (2005: 233). She proposes the significance it possessed in suggesting a "democratisation" of the camera, such as "accessibility to the camera...[allowing] formerly marginalised voices and people into film-making", listing "Blacks, Beurs, and Women" (Ibid) among them. The second important effect she locates is in the "renewed politicisation of French cinema" as a result of the movement being an "auteur-led" cinema (234).

Referring to both the more general atmosphere of the French New Wave's significance upon cinematic culture, and pointing to what Hayward sees as two specific effects of the movement, it is now valuable to examine the establishment of its social/cultural/political contexts in relation to those of the New French Extremity. For instance, it will be possible to better understand how the contemporary movement's own concerns of marginalization and "democratisation" are reflected in the image through narrative. Likewise, the Extremity's "auteur-led" filmmaking (which, indeed, forms the methodological basis for the following two chapters) is a direct result of the New Wave's influence, which has also very much led to a recent "renewed politicisation" of French

cinema. Through such specific parallels between the two movements—as well as those more generally regarding form and content, and the socio-political/-economic contexts in which both movements took shape—it will be easier to understand both the potential cultural significance the New French Extremity could possess, as well as establishing a new point of reference in France's extended, and complex, cinematic history. This is thus an attempt to contextualize the New French Extremity, using what is arguably France's most significant film movement as a yardstick against which to measure: for it is through examining and learning from history that we can better track a contemporary movement's formations, as well as predict its potential shifts, in both form and content, and its impact upon French society.

1.4 Parallels in Socio-Political/-Economic Context: 1950s—70s

To examine the ideological underpinnings of the New French Extremity, it is of much importance to conduct an analysis of the nation's socio-political/-economic context. Just as the French New Wave's development occurred in tandem with various shifts in French society and politics, it can be evidenced that the New French Extremity experiences a similar pattern of development. It is worth noting, however, that social and political changes were not the sole catalyst for the New Wave's dramatic cinematic transformation, as much of the change stemmed from disenchantment filmmakers felt towards the status of film form in France at the time. Consequently, it is important to examine the social and political backdrop in France which may have led to such (post)modernist sentiments. Likewise, the examination of such a backdrop is very relevant to the French Extremity's origins; and in so paralleling the two movements' social/political/economic contexts, it may be possible to understand *why* the Extremity is developing the way it is.

Naomi Greene outlines several of the major changes occurring in French society and culture during the 1950s-60s, through which the French New Wave emerged. She first interrogates the nation on a political level, claiming that the period was

> *shadowed by the bitter and divisive struggle to retain a colonial foothold*
> *in Algeria ([which gained] its independence in 1962)…In the course of*

this traumatic period, postwar hopes for social change were fading –
leaving a kind of moral, if not nihilistic, vacuum in their wake. (10)

She continues to assess the nation on an economic level, discussing the period as one of
"enormous change", in which

the 1950s and early 1960s marked the midpoint of les trentes glorieuses –
the 'thirty glorious years' of the postwar economic boom. Along with
growing prosperity, this period was marked by dramatic demographic,
institutional and social transformations. A wave of consumerism and
newfound affluence advanced hand-in-hand with a weakening of
traditional mores and longstanding social structures. Rural areas and
villages declined; huge anonymous housing projects on the outskirts of
cities replaced familiar neighbourhoods; television decisively entered
French homes even as mass culture…gave an allure to everything that
seemed 'new'. (10-11)

What was critical amidst the occurrence of these political, cultural, and social
changes was the coming of age of a new generation: the Young Turks[9], a group of
directors (including Jean-Luc Godard, François Truffaut, Jacques Rivette, Claude
Chabrol, and Eric Rohmer) who had initially worked together as critics on the significant
film journal *Les cahiers du cinéma* (3). At the center of the Young Turks' philosophy,
Greene remarks, is "an overarching need to draw close…to reality itself" (9); specifically,
the search for "truth" involved exploring the realities of daily French life, focusing on
"the nature of relationships, the desires and aspirations of French youth, [and] the pace of
life in Paris" (10). The relationship between youth and the New Wave is also a prominent

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[9] The term 'Young Turks' can be traced back to the Young Turk Revolution of 1908, which saw the alliance
of several reform groups overthrow the authoritarian regime of Ottoman sultan Abdülhamid II, resulting
in the formation of a constitutional government and newfound sense of Turkish nationalism (Brittanica n.
pag.). Its current usage normally designates one who advocates radical change within an established
order (Merriam-Webster n. pag.), and thus its application to the group of New Wave filmmakers can be
summed up by de Baecque: "To shock the sensibilities of self-righteous leftists, to scandalize—this was
what [they] were going for." (2012: 104)

factor in the movement's formation, as Antoine de Baecque points out in discussing the convergence of the generation of young people growing up and those directors who were beginning their careers at this time: "something unique happened…a generation of French people…was almost contemporaneous with a cinematic idea and praxis that was called "New Wave"…[transforming] a particular moment in the history of cinema into a mythology of modern times" (1998: 17). Greene similarly asserts that, emerging alongside this new generation at the end of the 1950s, the Young Turks "caught the bewildering alienation, the search for money and love, experienced by young people as they confronted a world in which traditional moral codes and political aspirations no longer held sway" (11).

Originally designating not the young filmmakers of the late 1950s but, instead, the youth portrayed in those films (Greene 11), the term 'New Wave' "sprang from a growing fascination with the attitudes and beliefs of the nation's youth", pointing to the media "[probing] into the lives of the [new] generation…[investigating and debating] its cultural tastes, sexual life, religious beliefs and social behaviour" (Ibid). As Jean-Michel Frodon suggests, its original usage demarcated films that "revealed new mores, depicted with…a refreshing frankness" (21), before Pierre Billard, in an issue of *Cinéma*, applied it to the emerging generation of young French filmmakers (Greene 12).

Directors of the French New Wave were also heavily invested in the wildcat strikes and student protests of May 1968, affecting their approach to filmmaking and the content contained within their films, both reflecting a radically overt political tone (the most evident of which are Godard's militant, politically modernist films of the 1970s, embodying the most radical of narrative forms of the French New Wave). Though there is currently no pretense to exhaustively review the history of the events of May 1968, it is worth momentarily locating its initiation, before connecting it to shifting cinematic traditions within France.

Citing the French student movement as traditionally possessing a "higher level of political awareness than many others" (92), Tom Nairn examines the underlying causes of the widespread protests, locating its origins in the '*Mouvement du 22 mars*' ('Movement of March 22'), a "student vanguard" functioning as the "'small motor' of revolution" (91) in 1968. (Jean-François Lyotard briefly defines the March 22 movement

as commemorating "the student occupation of the administration building in protest at the arrest of six members of the National Vietnam Committee" (1).) He outlines a central cause for student protest, suggesting: "The normal sufferings of carefree youth engendered by this diseased philosophy ("the enduring bourgeois prejudice…that education is a 'privilege' of some kind, to be paid for" (94)) were also clearly aggravated in France by the exceptionally rigid and authoritarian pattern of higher education" (Ibid). Mattei Dogan recalls three phases the May 1968 "crisis" (247) went through: beginning on May 3 with a demonstration organized mainly by the Communist party and the Communist-controlled union (C.G.T.), rallying between 500,000 and 700,000 individuals (Ibid); followed by a period "characterized by violence…by the rapid transformation of the student movement into a socio-drama…and, simultaneously, by an increasing unrest among the workers" (Ibid); and ending, for seven days until May 20, with strikes that "spread with startling rapidity" (Ibid), the country "paralyzed,…with more than 10 million people on strike" (Ibid).

Writing extensively on the formal and thematic ripples the events of May 1968 left upon the group's corpus, Alison Smith summarizes its significance for the French New Wave and, by extension, its relevance to cinematic traditions:

> *…The upsurge in the desire for change seemed to mark a new direction in the consciousness of France. May '68 was a date on which change was…shown to be possible...[The events] brought a genuine discovery, or rediscovery, of a collective identity, where individuals could add their voice to the general shout that all was not well…[The class struggle] appealed to those concerned in cultural production…Writers, artists, students – and above all those concerned with cinema…– were attributed importance and influence by a rigorous theoretical structure, which placed them at the centre…of Marxist cultural change…* (1-5)

Elaborating on the above, the French New Wave, then, reflects an attempt by its filmmakers to represent the contemporary issues of France as experienced by its youth. While not all of the films and filmmakers aimed to take an overtly political stance, they

almost all relate to one another in depicting the ethos of France at the time; or, perhaps more fittingly, in depicting the nation's *zeitgeist*. This representation can be evinced most clearly by comparing the Young Turks (briefly described earlier) to the Left Bank group of filmmakers. Delineating the two separate groups, Greene describes the Left Bank (or *rive gauche*) as an older group of filmmakers who "not only lived on the Left Bank of Paris but were also on the left politically" (3-4), also referring to them as the "so-called 'first generation'" (41) of the New Wave. Films from the Left Bank, to which directors Chris Marker, Alain Resnais, and Agnès Varda are commonly attributed, are seen as a "resurgence of documentary that marked the postwar period" (42). The documentary renaissance is suggested to be a result of "the climate of the times, [including] the recent trauma of the War and Occupation" (Ibid), in the Left Bank's "relentless pursuit of 'truth'…[leading]…to new perceptions of reality itself" (41).

Greene defines two avenues through which the Left Bank differed from the Young Turks in their ideology (which further establishes a clearer view of the significance the nation's political/social/economic/cultural climate had on the movement's formation and development): a historical awareness and a "deep political consciousness" (43). To the former, Greene locates a generation who, "deeply marked by the traumas of the recent past,…went on to make films that bore witness to the terrible weight of history" (43). Such twentieth century events confronted include the bombing of Guernica in 1937, the horrors of Nazi concentration camps during the Holocaust, and the repercussions of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima in 1945. Claire Cluzot points out that, while the Young Turks were "autobiographical and neo-romantic", the Left Bank "sought inspiration in the repercussions of the…war…,the atomic threat, and in the absurdity of the world" (56). This dichotomy of global/local between the two filmmaking "schools" is representative of the fact that, though the issues they sought to depict varied in content, they were still connected by way of their heightened social awareness, though the Young Turks focused arguably more on that of France.

In terms of the Left Bank's "political consciousness", Greene points to such attributes as Varda's films which "bear witness to a concern with those on the bottom rung of the social ladder", and Marker's focus on "the nature of revolutionary struggle and the possibility of a better, more just, society" (44). The issue most heavily

concentrated on by the Left Bank was the Algerian War (in which Algeria had fought for its decolonization by France from 1954-62), referred to in "one film after another" (Ibid). Staunchly denounced by filmmakers of the Left Bank (but never overtly explored by those of the Young Turks), the films depicted such issues as the ramifications of French colonialism and racism, the French military usage of torture, and anti-war protests in Paris (Ibid).

It is perhaps now more evident how both the subject matter and the production of the films of the French New Wave largely reflect these vital social, cultural, and political changes and issues within the nation. Though the Left Bank and the Young Turks had their own separate socio-political concerns addressed within their films, they are fundamentally allied together through their desire to depict contemporary concerns that affected the nation's predominant ethos. Whether the issues targeted were on a global (the Holocaust, the Spanish Civil War) or local (the Algerian War, the strikes and protests of May 1968) scale; or whether the approach was more abstract (examining contemporary malaise through such concepts as the relationship between memory and the past, the actions of people "caught in the meshes of desire and obsession" (Greene 45)) or concrete (such as Truffaut's French *Bildungsroman* [*The 400 Blows* (1959)], or Godard's frequent depictions of New Left political activism [*La Chinoise* (1967), *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* (1967), *Tout va bien* (1972)], both groups represented a defining attribute of the French New Wave: a concern with humanist values. As Noël Simsolo suggests, the directors of the Left Bank and the Young Turks shared "a certain idea of cinema" (qtd. in Greene 45), for both groups

> *viewed cinema as an intensely personal calling…Impelled by a desire to*
> *seize the real – be it in the inner life of individuals or the realities of*
> *history – they too challenged existing conventions even as they*
> *experimented with new forms…[posing] the phenomenological and*
> *existential questions – What is the nature of the image? What is its*
> *relationship to reality? How best can film uncover the 'truth' of reality? –*
> *at the philosophical heart of the New Wave.* (Greene 45)

Similarly, the New French Extremity also considers the truth of events and the truth of reality, albeit in a different way, and using other aesthetic means than the French New Wave.

1.5 Parallels in Socio-Political/-Economic Context: 1990s—Present

It is now essential to draw parallels between that period of time and the present state of French society, as well as to examine the status of what Tim Palmer designates the "contemporary French film ecosystem"[10] (2011: 1). This section will focus on approximately the last decade of French socio-politics, and should be undertaken to evaluate any potential underlying factors which could situate the New French Extremity as one of the nation's most impactful movements since the New Wave. It should be noted that, because there has been few outside research explicitly connecting the politics of France to the nation's current cinematic shifts, this requires my own preliminary findings and conclusions to be calculated. Such research may also overlap with what I had previously examined in regards to Powrie and Reader's focus on French "contemporary social problem" films of the 1980s and '90s, such as those of the *cinéma de banlieue* and *le jeune cinéma*. However, my intention will be to shift focus away from the specificities of these certain cinematic tendencies—as they have already been thoroughly covered herein—and concentrate more on the actual socio-political/-economic events that have transpired since the beginning of the 2000s (or slightly earlier). The ordering of these issues are not governed by any form of hierarchical importance, but rather represent what I deem to be the most important as a result of the most manifest effects upon its society.

This section will begin by examining the recent politics of *race* and *ethnicity* within France. As previously alluded to, issues of xenophobia and racism have visibly affected the social stability within the nation since at least the events of the Algerian War. The concerns of race and ethnicity have been longstanding, continuing into contemporary France, reflecting the disconcerting notion that, instead of visibly progressive shifts in

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[10] Palmer defines his usage of the term 'ecosystem': "…To understand contemporary French cinema we should explore its diversity…To pursue this, we must depart from traditional critical methods, which usually tend towards…privileging either certain auteurs or else isolated genres or movements…[and instead, treat] contemporary French cinema as an interconnected continuum, a series of concentric circles, a range of craft techniques from all walks of filmmaking life. What then emerges is a fascinating kind of cinematic ecosystem…" (2011: 2)

racial and ethnic viewpoints, the issues and their impact upon the nation's cohesion remain largely unaltered.

One of the most significant, and ongoing, issues pertaining to race and ethnicity is that of tensions between Arab and African immigrants and naturalized French citizens (evidence of the Algerian War's current reverberations). A dramatic point of reference for this matter is the series of riots occurring through October and November in 2005: after two teenagers (of North African descent), from Clichy-sous-Bois (an economically marginalized zone), were electrocuted after entering an electrical power station to avoid a police check, clashes between the youth and the police erupted in the locality (Canet et al. 1). Nicolas Sarkozy, then Minister of the Interior, acquitted police authority from all responsibility, which, following his previous controversial comments about wanting to "rid the town of hooligans" or to "clean the *racaille* (scum) of the suburbs with *Kärcher* (a high-powered water hose brand)" (Ibid), additionally fueled an already highly confrontational relationship between the young and the police. The northern Paris *banlieue*, populated mostly by first- and second-generation immigrants from Northern Africa (Snow et al. 386), sparked a series of riots for the next three weeks, beginning in the original town of the incident, then spreading to departments surrounding the Paris region, before finally registering on all French territory (Canet et al. 2). During this period, 10,000 cars were burnt, 233 public buildings were damaged, 4,770 people were arrested, and 217 police were injured (Fassin 1-2). As Canet et al. point out, the average age of the rioters was 16 years old (2); the contemporary issues of France often stem from the malaise felt by its youth, thus correlating to a similar socio-political context during 'New Wave'-era France.

It is thus important to now examine the factors behind such conflict, and it is worth noting the historical lineage these series of riots follow: Canet et al. observe that such riots have been a "typical occurrence" in the *banlieues* since the eighties (3). Similarly, Dilip Subramanian notes that "xenophobic sentiments have returned to haunt almost all sections of French society ever since the National Front emerged as a durable presence on the political landscape in the early 1980s" (5157). He further summarizes what he perceives to be the central root causes of the riots, which lie "in the worsening economic and social situation of youth from the immigrant communities. Rising rates of

long-term unemployment and underemployment, abysmal housing conditions, unabated racial discrimination, the failure of the education system to promote social mobility for the lower classes, oppressive policing, and the absence of political representation reinforce the sentiment of a future virtually devoid of perspective" (5156). Subramanian advances the issue of racial discrimination, noting that police tend to "instinctively suspect all male Arab and African adolescents living in the suburbs of either being potential delinquents or…potential terrorists...[thus making] identity controls and body searches…routine occurrences" (5157). Fassin echoes such sentiments, observing the "long-denied policies of economic inequality, residential segregation and racial discrimination", in which he singles out "police pressure on youth (almost exclusively Arab and Black)" and "groundless identity checks and body searches" which have given way to "a growing sense of injustice among the youth" (2). The statistics of poverty have also been noted by both: Fassin locates Clichy-sous-Bois as being part of the '*quartiers*' – a designation "used to cover all 'difficult neighbourhoods', the historical product of economic segregation of mostly immigrant families" (1). Subramanian points out that in the "disadvantaged" areas, "one out of four active adults was jobless in 1999, or almost double the national average" (5157). Perhaps more disconcerting, however, is the rate of unemployment among French youth in general, of which, "among the generation aged 15-24 years climbed from an already high 28.5 per cent in 1990 to 39.5 per cent a decade later" (Ibid). This statistic demarcates a larger anxiety concerning the future of France and its inhabitants, whether on an economic scale or pertaining to fears of what it means to possess a "French identity". As Canet et al. suggest, the 2005 riots should be "interpreted as the manifest evidence that most of the frustrated young men feel entirely French and that they simply want to be accepted by the Nation" (3).

I believe that these riots are symptomatic of the current French socio-political landscape on two levels: on an immediate one, they represent the outright racial, economic, and even generational inequalities forming between those living in the suburbs of France and the state within its center. More significantly, however, and of the utmost pertinence to this current research, is the notion that the riots are indicative of the shortcomings and prejudice of right-wing France. For instance, in March 2012, Sarkozy—then President of France—had claimed that there were too many foreigners in

France, desiring to almost halve the number of new arrivals, as well as introduce tighter controls on access to welfare benefits upon his possible re-election (which did not occur) ('Too many foreigners' n. pag).

Significantly, there have been other riots and protests since those of the *banlieues* in 2005. Perhaps the most evident parallel to societal discontent of the New Wave era is that of the 2006 youth protests, correlating strongly with the ideals behind the protests of 1968. Occurring from February to April, students throughout France launched a series of protests against the *Contrat Premiere Embauche* (First Employment Contract), a youth jobs law introduced by Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin. The new work contract would have affected youth under the age of 26, allowing a two-year trial period for employers to end a contract without explanation ('Keep up protests' n. pag.). The series of protests were noted by a union official at the time as being one of the biggest since France's fifth republic was founded in 1958, with buses, commuter trains, and metro services disrupted as workers' unions had ordered walkouts in unity with the students ('Rally against labour law' n. pag.). In continuing the nation's longstanding socio-economic issues of class and labour, a series of ongoing general strikes occurred from September to October 2010. Henry Samuel referred to the riots as possessing "distant echoes of May 1968" (n. pag.). The influence is described further in his suggesting that "French leaders have been notoriously wary of student protests ever since they sparked a two-week general strike in May 1968 that crippled the country and the government of President Charles de Gaulle" (Ibid).

While issues of race, ethnicity, and immigration have been central to the nation's recent socio-political climate, there are still other vital factors which can be seen as influencing the New French Extremity's development. Economic concerns regarding income and unemployment have been present in the nation's general populace. Salil Sarkar cites figures given by the Observatory of Inequalities which claim that, as of 2007, 12 percent of the French population were considered poor (1821).

Two other concerns in contemporary France—albeit requiring more intensive analysis than evidenced here—regard general behaviour towards women and homosexuals. The most significant recent event to propel concerns related to the treatment of women in the workplace was the arrest of former Managing Director of the

International Monetary Fund (IMF), Dominique Strauss-Kahn, for allegations of sexual assault upon a hotel maid, Nafissatou Diallo, in New York in 2011. In an article written for the *Los Angeles Times*, Devorah Lautel speaks to several figures about the case's impact upon the issue of women in the French workplace. Commenting that "women have begun speaking, often hesitantly, of a pervasive atmosphere of sexism" (n. pag.). Lautel examines the gender inequality prevalent in France and its coming to light due to more women speaking out as a result of the Strauss-Kahn case. In 2008, statistics published by the Ministry for Solidarity and Social Cohesion showed that women made up approximately 30% of business manager positions, and only 17.1% of chief executive jobs in the private industry (Lautel n. pag.). More staggering statistics are found within the World Economic Forum's 2012 Global Gender Gap Report: in 2012, France ranks 57th, showing continuous decline since 2008 (sliding from 15th to 57th in the span of only four years) (Hausmann et al. 8). According to the report, "France loses nine places relative to last year's ranking, primarily due to a decrease in the percentage of women in ministerial positions…[It also] ranks last overall on the perceived wage equality survey indicator" (23).

More troubling, however, isn't merely the fact that women do not earn as much money or possess as many jobs as men do; it is the ongoing prevalence of sexual harassment within the workplace, and its acknowledgment which is deemed taboo. One concern Lautel comments upon is that the crime of sexual harassment in France is too loosely defined, and thus, "protections can be difficult to enforce" (n. pag.). As Nathalie Tournyol du Clos, head of administration and finances for the Economic, Social and Environmental Council, discusses, "There is no strict rule as in the U.K., or as in the U.S. [You] have to know how to defend yourself" (n. pag.).

Yet still more distressing is the atmosphere within French society deeming such contentions taboo. A former company manager claims that women "can't talk about the seductive pressure that men put on women, because it is a taboo in France" (Lautel n. pag.). Along similar lines, Genevieve Fraisse, a women's study philosopher working for the government-funded National Center for Scientific Research, says that women "don't want to be part of this category that says there's a problem… In France you have to be on the side of the seducer…The good side…because power is masculine" (Ibid). The

ascribing of gender roles within France can be evidenced through Simone de Beauvoir's term, "*le deuxième sexe*" ("the second sex"), referring, in 1949, to the female's consigned status in French society. Yet, though conceived nearly 60 years ago, Rainbow Murray suggests, while writing on the role of French women in politics in 2010, that "women are still *le deuxième sexe* in French politics…Women are treated differently by the media, with sexist assumptions about women's passive and subordinate role…[Parity] will only be able to address the symptoms of women's exclusion rather than the cause" (411-14).

While gender relations are a significant factor when we discuss the development of contemporary France's inner tensions, it is worth examining a final important issue: that of sexuality, specifically, national attitudes towards homosexuality. John Lichfield highlights the issue in a 2004 piece, commenting:

> *Outside Paris and other large cities, tolerance for homosexuality in*
> *France is low. The marriage of two men in the town of Bègles, near*
> *Bordeaux, in June by Noel Mamère, the local mayor and prominent Green*
> [now Europe Ecology – The Greens after merging with Europe Écologie in
> 2010 (TN)] *politician, produced such an avalanche of hate mail that it*
> *was assembled into a book.* (n. pag.)

Such intolerance is made clear when examining the most recent spate of anti-gay marriage protests in France. On March 24, 2013, "[hundreds] of thousands[11] of people…converged on the capital…in a last-ditch bid to stop [a draft law allowing same-sex couples to marry and adopt children]" (Euler and Cetinic n. pag.). Drafted by president François Hollande, and approved by the lower house of France's parliament (dominated by Hollande's Socialist Party along with its allies) in February, the "marriage for everyone" bill has received increasingly dwindling support from the majority of the French population, according to recent polls (Ibid). Florence Tamagne's inspection of homosexuality in Europe from 1919-39 may shed light on its current problematic treatment in France:

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[11] While an official with the Paris police headquarters estimated a number of 300,000, organizers claimed the number was around 1.4 million (Euler and Cetinic n. pag.).

…While France did have an organized homosexual subculture, there was no militancy, and French homosexuals remained determinedly individualistic. That is certainly due to the more favorable social climate than in the neighboring countries, but it also had to do with a certain political immaturity. Discussions on homosexuality remained confined to the literary sphere… (103)

These current French debates over race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality thus necessarily require an interrogation into a larger, and recent, political climate in the French nation. Through my findings, I suggest they are the result of significant shifts within positions of government; more specifically, such a climate could be seen as the result of the nation's overwhelmingly right-wing climate (more precisely, and appropriately, the successive presidencies of Jacques Chirac and Sarkozy from 1995 to 2012). Only in 2012 did François Hollande's election victory mark the second left-wing President of the Fifth Republic (1959-present).

While issues of racism, poverty, unemployment, sexism, and homophobia could certainly be found, with varying degrees of prevalence, in other cultures as well, what is important is how they are integrated into the specific history of French public consciousness, connoting French ideals and beliefs. Just as important, however, is the fact that the aforementioned analysis has focused primarily on specific sections of French society; notably, Arab immigrants and the youth. Hence, what must now be undertaken is a sociological examination of the nation's communal beliefs and actions. These notions will become particularly significant when contextualizing them in cinematic terms, in an attempt to associate general public frustrations, and their subsequent actions, with those of French filmmakers'. Analyzing the "collective action" of contemporary France, John P. Murphy deduces several important ideas about the manner in which citizens have responded to these problems, and what this may tell us about the nation's historical evolution in pressuring political changes:

...[Moments] of collective contestation (like May 1968)...are generally perceived as legendary events that have fundamentally positively *shaped the contours of modern French society on multiple planes (government structuring and purview, social equality, gender roles, etc.). Taking to the streets in collective opposition to an aggressive, unjust, or wrong-headed regime in power can thus be readily managed as an action completely within the mainstream of the oldest and most quintessentially French traditions.* (984)

A key suggestion by Murphy is that, though such "moments of collective contestation" may begin within the frustrations of specific social groups, they're "apt to be portrayed as shared by society more generally" (985). Using the events of May 1968 as one example, he suggests that "the dominant theme was the need for a complete reorganization of modern society in order to break down hierarchical structures and provide greater opportunities for participation" (Ibid). Similarly in November and December of 1995, as well as in fall 2010, he suggests that "the issue at stake was…the perception that the current government was whittling away at the principle of providing a wide array of social benefits to all French citizens or residents" (Ibid). What has resulted is what Murphy, in observing Chirac's reaction to the 1995 riots, describes as "the mark of a 'deep malaise'" (990)

Numerous other commentators have analyzed these ongoing trends of present-day France, outlining the implications they have developed for the current state of the nation, as well as reflecting upon their collective integration into society. Rob Long portends the breakdown of social mores and cultural values through his experiences living in France, describing France as being in a "*crise d'identité* [identity crisis]" (32). Other writers further parallel the nation's recent outward acts of discontent with those of May 1968: Janice Valls-Russell comments that, "What lingers from May 1968 in the country at large is a tendency to air one's discontent in the streets, and a parallel mistrust of institutional democracy that the [former president François] Miterrand years failed to erode" (8); likewise, a *Tikkun* piece, entitled "The Youth Are Getting Restless", remarks that "there is more than just a passing resemblance between this student revolt [2006] and its 1968

predecessor" (Anonymous 6). Finally, Ian Zack aims to capture the entirety of the nation's recent tumultuous times in the title of his piece, "What's the Matter With France?", posing the question: "Why do France's young people feel so alienated, threatened, and angry?" (18)

A central factor in what I deem to be the national public's feelings of malady, frustration, and a resulting course of "fighting back" (through riots, protests, filmmaking) is the repressive nature of the French republican government which has affected France for the better part of the past 50 years. Focusing on the issue of race relations, Fassin writes, in response to the 2005 riots, that France's "Republican model was not working…its integration paradigm had become a cover for the denial of its institutional racism" (2). Along similar lines, Subramanian suggests that "the riots have uncovered the need for France to recast its republican model of integration…where no racial, linguistic or religious differences are recognised" (5158). Alfred Stepan and Ezra Suleiman make analogous remarks, writing that the French republican model "asserts that all French citizens have the same cultural identity" (n. pag.). They further comment upon its modern repercussions, claiming that, "so long as second- and third-generation minority citizens are taught that the only acceptable cultural identity is French, but are not in fact accepted as French…the Republican model will fuel alienation rather than democratic integration" (Ibid).

Though writing on the issue of ethnicity, the writers all share with one another the concern of France's attempts to assimilate 'outsiders' into a 'pure' French tradition, relating many of the nation's current issues to the question of what it means to be 'French'. It can be suggested, then, that it is the policies of the French right which, having taken control of the Fifth Republic all but twice over the last five decades, have created turbulence with the vocal left during the 1990s and into the Noughties. Jean-Yves Camus identifies the recent origins of the right's influence in modern France:

> *A strong extreme right has been a permanent feature of French political*
> *life since the election of the first local councillor for the* Front National
> *(FN)…in September 1983…The FN's ideas have reached a very wide*
> *segment of the French electorate and have had an influence on the*

political agenda of the right on issues such as immigration, law and order,

multiculturalism and the definition of national identity. (83)

Camus describes the policies of various extreme right-wing parties, putting into focus the severity of France's internal fissures: the *Union pour un Mouvement Populaire* (UMP) (the party Sarkozy formerly led) has "adopted a restrictive immigration policy", as well as attempting to ban the full Islamic veil in public places (86), while the *Mouvement pour la France* (MPF) opposes Islam, multiculturalism, and the European Union (87). The *Front National* represents perhaps the most extreme of France's right-wing parties, which "not only wants an end to immigration, [but] wants the state to order compulsory repatriation of immigrants to their 'countries of origin' and…wants Islam to be banned", as well as demanding the return of the death penalty (86). Among their basic principles include populism, xenophobia "with a social agenda of 'priority for the French'", opposition to the European Union, and "the demand for better social services for French 'natives' only" (88). Following this last value is the trait appearing to be shared among the extreme right-wing as a whole, their "belief in the superiority of the 'white race' as the core value of European identity" (87). This core idea for the nation's extreme right-wing is perhaps the key indicator of France's recent tensions regarding the status of a French "identity", as the rising vocalization in those marginalized (i.e., Arabs, Africans, homosexuals) is being matched by a similar vocal output by a population still influenced by right-wing ideology.

To conclude, it is worth noting examples of how there may be links between the films of the Extremity and the repercussions of right-wing France. Jon Towlson, an author focusing on recent horror trends, suggests that the New French Extremity can

be seen most significantly as a response to the rise of right-wing

extremism in France during the last ten years (as personified by the figure

of La Penn [sic]*), a response that film-makers are in the process of*

working through. (n. pag.)

Jonathan Romney similarly speaks on Gaspar Noé's *I Stand Alone* (1998), remarking that the film "brilliantly pinpointed a very real French cultural mood, with the butcher's rancorous worldview pushing the mindset of the Le Pen constituency to its intolerable extreme…[the film is a] venomously precise diagnosis of the alienated extreme right" (n. pag.). Finally, director Xavier Gens explains the motive for his 2007 film *Frontierè(s)* (*Frontier(s))*, in which a group of characters attempt to escape Paris after an extreme right-wing candidate wins the French presidential election, sparking a series of citywide protests:

> *[The story] came from the events in 2002, when we had the presidential*
> *elections [in France]. There was an extreme right party in the second*
> *round. That was the most horrible day of my life.* (Amner n. pag.)

Though there is no present attempt to definitively say that the films of the New French Extremity are the result of *only* the French extreme right-wing's popularity and policies, it is thus such a connection which I believe to be a central catalyst in developing the movement. While more in-depth research on this connection can, and should, be undertaken in the future, the current findings are meant to be a starting point for several different approaches to be further pursued.

1.6 Conclusion: A Newly Transgressive Cinema for a Newly Transgressive Society
While not wholly comprehensive, what I have attempted to conduct is a detailed examination of recent French society on its various social, political, and economic levels My assessment has been conducted in tandem with similar analysis of French society during the period of the French New Wave, attempting to locate the nation's own past malaise as a prefiguration to what is arguably its most influential film movement today. It is hoped that, by examining the relationship between France's collective social shifts and its development of the New Wave, a similar result can be reached in locating the New French Extremity's development and status as a movement, through parallel examination of the nation's collective social shifts of today.

Concluding this section necessitates a brief discourse on what I now suggest as being the "unifying" factor common to all filmmakers and films of the New French Extremity; namely, a "new" form of artistic transgression. It is my contention that the New French Extremity's central characteristic is the act of cinematic transgression, one which has never before been witnessed in such a condensed period of time, in such a specific geographical space. I feel that the filmmakers of the Extremity consciously seek to defy moral and ethical boundaries of the French consciousness, through both the content of the films themselves, and, particularly for Noé, their aesthetics which aim to create a heightened dynamic between spectator and screen. Because the filmmakers of the Extremity have their own individual thematic and aesthetic interests—similarly to those of the New Wave—it must be suggested that the Extremity does not possess a single group of distinguishing features, but instead portrays a malleability through its single identifying characteristic: the transgressive interest in pushing boundaries. I thus suggest that filmmakers of the Extremity seek to depict their own repressed frustrations and social discontent through their films, of which the collective malaise of France can be evidenced as being the catalyst for the movement's development.

It needs to be clarified, however, that part of the Extremity's transgressive nature reflects *specific* social mores of contemporary France. While the common elements of explicitly depicted sex, violence (and sexual violence), nihilism, and fatalism are evident, numerous films frame their narratives with specific concerns around gender and sexuality norms: this is most often evidenced in the depiction of women through sex and/or violence (Philippe Grandrieux's *Sombre* (1998) and Noé's *I Stand Alone*), Pascal Laugier's *Martyrs* (2008)) or outward forms of homosexual victimization or similar acts of homosexual "menace" (Noé's *Irréversible* (*Irreversible*, 2002), Dumont's *Twentynine Palms* (2003)). Some films, however, have attempted to reverse normative gender roles, such as Claire Denis's *Trouble Every Day* (2001), which portrays a cannibalistic female character, and Patrice Chéreau's *Intimacy* (2001), wherein a woman carries on an open relationship with a male stranger, defying her traditional role as both wife and mother.

The nature of transgression within contemporary French cinema can be prefaced with Murphy's suggestion on the nature of transgression within contemporary France itself. In examining "the ways the French distinguish between acceptable and

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unacceptable collective displays of disruptive behaviour" (979), he at first defines the word *transgression* as "conventionally [implying] a violation, the breach of some collectively understood limit or boundary" (Ibid). Utilizing this term, he then suggests that the fall 1995 riots were considered transgressive

> *because they somehow overstepped the boundaries of what the French*
> *deem acceptable acts of contestation…In the end, tracing out what gets*
> *classified as transgressive (or not) and why, as well as how people draw*
> *that line, should help to illuminate how they organize their social world.*
> *This can, in turn, throw light on shared as well as conflicting values within*
> *French society…and demonstrate the value of using comparison to*
> *interpret acts of dissent defined as transgressive in any setting…This in*
> *turn exposes fundamental French values and beliefs relating to how*
> *society ought to be and its members ought to behave…* (979-80)

The transgression of the New French Extremity, then, should be thought of as a result of the nation's own recent shift towards a fracturing of "acceptable" social norms. In order to properly gauge the transgressive nature of the movement, though, it is necessary to briefly explore the idea of "transgression" and, by extension, what denotes a "transgressive act". Anthony Julius notes that "transgression" became used in the English language in the 16th century, at first "freighted with…negative scriptural [theological] meanings", but then expanded to "include the violating of any rule or principle", and then to eventually "embrace any departure from correct behaviour" (17-8). By the end of the 17th century, Julius remarks, "transgression" came to include digressions, "deviations from the rule of one's discourse…thus [reaching] up to the most serious of misdeeds…[and] is the name of the worst offences and of any offence" (18).

Where Julius also locates an act of transgression is in its status as a "kind of assault…a provocation…[violating] the person…[thus acquiring] this meaning: an act of aggression that causes injury" (Ibid). This very image of a transgressive act "assaulting" the person confronting it is how the nature of the New French Extremity should thus be conceived: by going beyond a mere breaking of French social norms and taboos, the

films instead seek to personally affront the spectator. It is in this relationship between film and spectator where the Extremity arguably defines itself in relation to the French New Wave; filmmakers were similarly constructing new relationships between spectator and screen, largely through heightened forms of self-reflexive filmmaking. Martine Beugnet posits the New French Extremity in a similar fashion:

> *A specific sense of momentum emanates from the work of a number of contemporary French filmmakers, evidenced by the release, in close succession, of a batch of films which betray a characteristic sensibility to and awareness of cinema's sensuous impact and transgressive nature…with its emphasis on the corporeality of film…*

> *In the majority of feature films, even critical approaches operate primarily as mirrors of reality's appearance, captured from an 'objective', detached stand-point. The films concerned here offer an alternative vision, an affecting and thought-provoking way of* questioning our status as observers and 'consumers' of the pro-filmic reality. (2007: 14-6, emphasis added)

Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall offer a point of view analogous to Beugnet's, examining a "diverse body of films that have attracted attention for their graphic and confrontational images of sex and violence":

> *Reports of fainting, vomiting and mass walkouts have consistently characterised the reception of this group of art-house films, whose brutal and visceral images appear designed deliberately to shock or provoke the spectator…[The] films of the new extremism and the controversies they engender are indispensable to the critical task of* rethinking the terms of contemporary spectatorship. (2011: 1, emphasis added)

And, finally, Tim Palmer has categorized many films (including those of Noé and Dumont, both of whom will be the focus of this research) of the New French Extremity

as constituting a *cinéma du corps*, "whose basic agenda is an on-screen interrogation of physicality in brutally intimate terms" (2011: 57) which "seeks a more confrontational experience" (2006: 22):

> *…Forcible and* transgressive*, this is a cinema of brutal intimacy…Few have recognized its collective ambitions for the medium itself, as the means to generate profound, often challenging* sensory experiences*…[It is] a test case for film's continued potential to inspire…*raw, unmediated reaction.

> *…These narratives of the flesh…are rendered via a* radical, innovative use of film style*, an ingeniously crafted barrage of visual and aural techniques…[that] engage forcefully at both an intellectual and* visceral *level.* (2006: 22-3, emphasis added)

As such, this examination of contemporary French society, its recent acts of public discontent, and its relation to parallel formations of the French New Wave, though not intended to be comprehensive, is an attempt to more properly gauge the New French Extremity's status as a film movement. Many factors remain: the variety of genres at play, the interplay between arthouse and "mainstream" status, and the fact that the Extremity is still ongoing and, consequently, is still in flux all coalesce to signify that such an overview requires much more investigation. As it stands, however, the New French Extremity can, and should, be thought of as a result of the nation's recent social, cultural, and political shifts, its filmmakers sharing an inherent desire to provoke the spectator by dismantling traditional morals as a response to the repressive nature of France's enduring republican governments. If the spirit of the times is indeed changing for France, and is thus represented through its cinema, then it is perhaps the *Zeitgeist* of Transgression that is making its mark.

Chapter II
Haptic Punishment: Gaspar Noé and the Visceral

2.1 Image as Sign to Image as Event: Defining the Haptic

      The concept of a haptic cinema is one which I feel requires greater attention within film studies. To start, I will take up Laura Marks's concept of a 'haptic cinema', a formalist approach which stresses the image *as* event, a theory I deem radical compared to the popularity of more traditional aesthetic approaches. While certainly not applicable to every film, Marks's idea is to examine the filmic image as the one which evokes the sensation of touch within the viewer (162); no longer something which codifies a set of ideas or feelings, the image *becomes* the feeling, the viewer ceasing to establish a connection between aesthetics and content, instead receiving the image on a purely visceral level. While ideas of the haptic have long been discussed throughout various avenues, as will soon be made clear, its usage here is largely indebted to the notions originally put forth by Austrian art historian Alois Reigl. As Marks notes, Reigl "observed tactile modes of representation in traditions generally deemed subordinate to the procession of Western art history: Egyptian and Islamic painting, late Roman metalwork, textile art, and ornament…[as well as] the "low" traditions of weaving, embroidery, decoration, and other domestic and women's arts as a presence of tactile imagery...All these traditions involve intimate, detailed images that invite a small, caressing gaze." (169)

      I do not believe that current traditions of formal film analysis are stagnant; I do feel, however, that we must now engage with a film's aesthetics through a different conceptual framework, moving beyond mere discussions on how a film's form may, for instance, evoke certain feelings or ideas within its narrative. Herbert Zettl, writing on "applied media aesthetics" as a way to formally examine media texts, serves as an example of what I wish to move away from:

> *Applied media aesthetics is…a process in which we examine a number of*
> *media elements, such as lighting and picture composition, how they*
> *interact, and our perceptual reactions to them…Exactly how*

media…shape or must shape the message for a specific viewer response is
the subject of applied media aesthetics…The basic purpose of applied
media aesthetics is to clarify, intensify, and interpret events for a large
audience. (4-14)

Zettl's conception of 'media aesthetics' working to "clarify, intensify, and interpret" events for spectators is similar to aesthetic theories posed by other writers, those of from whom I also wish to depart. Similarly, Flo Leibowitz examines different "theories of expressiveness" (329) in film, attempting to engage with conceptions of how spectator emotions can be adjusted based on the deployment of "characteristic expressive devices" such as camera movement, slow motion, colour scheme, and *mise en scène* (329-30). In analyzing the airplane daydream sequence from William Wyler's *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), Leibowitz focuses on the 'expressiveness' of camera movement, stating:

…The camera's movement makes it appear to be taking off, as if it were an
aeroplane. It…expresses the excitement of flying…[Thus], the image
arouses excitement on the basis of expressing *it…Recognizing the*
excitement in the movie may lead in turn to a mirroring emotional
response. (330-1, emphasis added)

Leibowitz, like Zettl, appears to be focusing on how a film's aesthetic techniques can *express* a certain emotion through *recognition* of its place within the narrative. In this example, a spectator may feel 'excited' not because the camera movements physiologically modify his/her physical state of being, but rather, because the act of excitement is experienced by Fred Darry (Dana Andrews) during the sequence. As Leibowitz clarifies, "This shot is an example of the dependence of expressive techniques on the narrative line for appropriateness. In expressing excitement, the shot reminds us of the meaning that flying held for Derry…" (331).

Such an idea of film form's 'expressive' properties can be traced back to Platonic accounts of aesthetics and representation, which many contemporary formalist (or

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perhaps, more accurately, neoformalist) theories[12] are influenced by—and which I wish to stray from. Alan H. Goldman points to *The Republic* and *The Sophist* as making clear that, "in Plato's terms, artists imitate…we may conclude that he takes such representation to consist in the imitation of visual experience, of the ways things appear to sight" (193). He further defines such an interpretation through the medium of painting, though it is just as applicable to film:

> *Since artists cannot exactly reproduce their visual experiences, we may take imitation to be the creation of an object, a two-dimensional surface, which in turn creates visual experience that resembles that of the objects it represents.* Resemblance, not duplication, is crucial…*The imitation that is representation…is the intentional creation of resemblances in visual experiences…* (193, emphasis added)

In such a Platonic account of aesthetics and representation, Goldman makes explicit that the nature of the artistic representation of reality must necessarily be a product of *resemblance* and *imitation*, in that it is impossible to replicate a specific emotion/event for a viewer. All three of these accounts fall along similar lines of how aesthetics are widely approached in cinema studies[13]: the image acts as a 'mirror' of reality through its likeness to objects we can perceive in real life, utilizing filmic techniques to create emotions or feelings through the act of narrative *interpretation*. The point here is that the interpretation can only pan out one way, because of the positioning within the narrative of a particular aesthetic device. Yet, it is this very act of

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[12] Some names representative of such theories include Noel Bürch, David Bordwell, Clement Greenberg, Paul Schrader, and Kristin Thompson.

[13] The link between Platonic theories of aesthetics and neoformalism is implicitly laid out by Thompson: "…All those qualities that are of interest to the analyst—its unity; its repetitions and variations; its representation of action, space, and time; its meanings—result from the interaction between the work's formal structures and the mental operations we perform in response to them" (25-6). Katherine Thomson-Jones refers to this as a "constructivist account of the activity of film viewing, or how viewers, both from a psychological and from a social perspective, comprehend and interpret films" (137). She further notes the approach as being principally developed by Bordwell in relation to narrative fiction film, where the viewer "constructs the literal meaning of a film through the activity of comprehension, and the more abstract meaning of a film through the activity of interpretation…The viewer must construct the events and characters that he or she takes the two-dimensional images to represent" (Ibid).

interpretation which I deem central to shift away from in a reworking of aesthetic theories.

Certainly, there is nothing wrong with such formalist approaches, and they should be used in the process of decoding a film's image. Identifying its embedded codes to isolate purveyed ideas or concepts is useful for establishing the importance of the way particular narratives interact with particular formal devices, and by extension, form to ideology—the connection between art and life, in essence (Edman 12). But this is where the barrier still remains: traditional formalist approaches have only gone so far as to stress the relationship *between* art and life, image and narrative; such approaches, as aforementioned by Zettl, "clarify, intensify, and interpret events" for the viewer. I intend to push beyond such a conception of "applied media aesthetics", dissipating the relationship between form and content. This methodology follows from what Marks would call a haptic 'sensibility' through which Noé forms his unique approach to transgressive filmmaking, further informing the Extremity's approach as a whole.

Before illustrating Marks's own definition of a haptic cinema, it is worth briefly tracing the genealogy of the concept of the haptic. 'Haptics', derived from the Greek verb "haptesthai" meaning "to touch", refers to a new media that deals with the sense of "touch", shifting away from traditional media such as audio, video, text, and image (Furht 279). Haptic *perception*, as usually defined by psychologists, is the combination of "tactile, kinesthetic, and proprioceptive functions, the way we experience touch both on the surface of and inside our bodies" (Ibid). The concept of haptics finds its serious psychological underpinnings within contemporary cinema at least over a hundred years prior; in an essay written for the *American Journal of Psychology* in 1894, F.B. Dresslar discusses his findings on the "psychology of touch":

> *…The skin is situated and conditioned unlike any other of the sense*
> *organs, in that it is turned in all directions…Its range is not only larger*
> [than the body's other sense organs]*, but it takes cognizance of the more*
> *fundamental properties of the material world. Our eyes are useless in the*
> *dark, our ears are without value when there are no vibrations in matter,*
> *but the conditions of touch remain so long as there is objective existence*

at all. The skin is the mother sense and out of it, all the other senses have
been derived…We are constantly speaking of the qualities of things seen,
in terms of qualities only felt, such as a warm color, a cold shade, etc.,
that the sense of sight was developed out of the sense of temperature. (314-5)

This fascinating account of our sense of touch mediating all of the other senses already alludes to cinema's disposition as inherently being somewhat haptic in nature. While we most often refer to what we *see* or what we *hear* while watching a film, the idea of our body converting such sensorial responses into one of *touch* is one which is often overlooked; perhaps the artistic medium which most accurately enacts the sense of touch is that of painting, due to the close proximity an observer can have with the artist's original physical manipulaion. However, I feel that Dresslar's explication of the "qualities of things seen" being explained "in terms of qualities only felt" aligns the role of the visual (and aural) with that of the kinesthetic: what is seen and heard are, by extension, *felt* by the body. Touch is no longer simply defined in terms of the skin coming into physical contact with an object; touch should now also be seen as any transference of physical feeling through any combination of the bodily senses. (And the measure of an artwork's success, here, is the feeling that it 'touches us'.) This is a movement beyond that of emotional affect, the 'feeling' that cinema is seen to most convey, instead now *physically* affecting the viewer's *body*, appealing to shifts in bodily processes that cannot be controlled.

However, I feel it necessary to briefly examine other ways in which the idea of the haptic has been described by a variety of writers, as my feeling is that Marks does not cover all bases, thus making it possible to now add extra nuances to the ones present in Marks's. While I will use Marks's conception of a haptic cinema as the basis for my research, it is important to reflect upon the spectrum of research that has been conducted upon the role the haptic plays in contemporary art and society. Through this, greater insight can be uncovered into the haptic's significance for modern cinema, (specifically, its importance in studying theories of spectatorship and affect), and central to my research, the significance it has within the framework of the New French Extremity.

Abbie Garrington writes that the "haptic sense combines touch [of the human skin]…with kinaesthesis, or the body's appreciation of its own movement" (810). She also discusses the haptic as a measure of *proprioception*, a bodily sense of position within space, and together these elements construct the haptic into what she believes is largely a *modernist* phenomenon; it is this period, she notes, in which "human bodies were becoming accustomed to startling new experiences…most importantly the cinema and mechanised transport…that *transformed the human sense of movement and of tactile interactions between body and world*" (Ibid, emphasis added).

David Trotter discusses the haptic in relation to *stereoscopy*, a process by which paired images made with a twin lens camera produce an illusion of three-dimensionality when viewed through a binocular stereoscope; the mind "converts the flatness of the images set side by side on a piece of cardboard into depth" (38). Trotter then relates this to his own phenomenological questions within film which focus upon the "embodiedness of the spectator" (39), or what has been termed by David Clarke as cinema's 'sensorial immediacy'" (8). His desire is to further examine a question posed by Maurice Blanchot: "What happens when what you see, even though from a distance, seems to touch you with a grasping contact, when the manner of seeing is a sort of touch, when seeing is a *contact* at a distance?" (75)

Dave Boothroyd, demarcating the haptic as the sense of touch upon the skin, locates it in a way which could describe cinema's ability to be a haptic medium. As opposed to thinking of the haptic only in terms of a physical touch, "'all' of the senses are in a sense haptic in that they are dependent on the transmission of movement, and all movement is ultimately registered on the surfaces of 'skins'. The eye…the ear…the nose and mouth are all sites and surfaces of affective intensity…[thus] all of the senses are perhaps just one" (337). Similarly, Jacques Derrida remarks that the investigation of touch needs to proceed by way of an exploration of the interconnection between "all of the senses" (8), as "the very concept touches upon how sense and sentience, or sensuality and thought are related to each other" (Boothroyd 337).

Finally, a number of theorists focus on the haptic in the context of Indian aesthetics, most specifically, that of *rasa* theory. Encyclopaedia Britannica defines *rasa* as "the concept of aesthetic flavour, or an essential element of any work of art that can

only be suggested, not described…a kind of contemplative abstraction in which the inwardness of human feelings suffused the surrounding world of embodied forms" (n. pag.). Gupteshwar Prasad writes that the term *rasa* initially denoted 'essence', 'juice', 'semen', 'potion', as well as 'happiness', 'pleasure', 'beauty', 'supreme reality', and a general sense of 'flow' (2-5). But now, he notes, the term has been extended to signify "highest taste" or "divine experience accompanied by a sense of supreme delight" (5). Its application to drama (and thus potentially to cinema) is significant to my conception of the haptic, for *rasa* "may mean the aesthetic pleasure which the connoisseur enjoys when he loses himself completely in the characters, situations, the incidents and poetry and music of the play as represented by highly gifted and accomplished actors" (Ibid). Pravas Jiwan Chaudhary declares that *rasa* is achieved when an emotion is found to be "experienced in an impersonal contemplative mood" (78). Finally, Rajinder Dudrah and Amit Rai make a direct connection between the concept of *rasa* and Marks's conceptualization of the *haptic*, writing on the "contagion of the skin of the film…[where] the experience of Bollywood both on the screen and in the space of viewing has been marked by contagions—bodily, cultural, and ideological, sensual" (149). Thus, the defining thread that travels through discussion of both *rasa* and the *haptic* is the sense of 'directness' in the relationship between viewer and image: the emotion experienced is the highest and most pure, generating a form of introspection within the viewer, and the viewing space becomes directly shaped by the space within the film—beyond the screen.

2.2 Haptic Cinema & the New French Extremity

Having established the concept of the haptic as both a psychological and physiological process, I shall now position it in the context of the New French Extremity; specifically, I will examine how Noé's three feature films—*I Stand Alone, Irreversible,* and *Enter the Void* (2009)—function within the context of a haptic cinema in order to more clearly delineate the filmmaker's own 'hyper'-transgression. I use the prefix "hyper" to describe the combination of a variety of visual and aural techniques, borrowing from both the traditions of the avant-garde and 'mainstream' narrative cinema, with which Noé uses to construct a visceral 'attack' upon the viewer. This demarcates not

just his own unique aesthetic sensibilities, but, most significantly, advances the New French Extremity's transgressive properties through an approach which necessitates a rethinking of theories of *spectatorship* and *affect* in an attempt to revise them in general. Noé's transgressive approach can also be examined in light of how he depicts contemporary French life, specifically with the themes of social malaise and individual alienation in *I Stand Alone*.

I will be conducting my analysis on both the concepts of *haptic visuality* and *haptic sound*. While sound is a central haptic element to the films of Noé, it is the visual image which Marks concentrates upon in her book. Configuring the concept of haptic visuality in cinema, she defines it as follows:

> *Haptic cinema does not invite identification with a figure—a sensory-motor reaction—so much as it encourages a bodily relationship between the viewer and the image. Consequently, as in the mimetic relationship, it is not proper to speak of the* object *of a haptic look as to speak of a dynamic subjectivity between looker and image…Haptic visuality tends less to isolate and focus upon objects than simply to be co-present with them…This relationship* [between the perceiver and a sensuous object (TN)] *does not require an initial separation between perceiver and object that is mediated by representation.* (164)

Again, what is central is the idea of the haptic doing away with the *representation* of an object; instead, a direct relationship is established between the viewer and the image, semiotics abolished in favour of a "bodily relationship between the viewer and image". Marks further establishes the manner in which haptic visuality configures a relationship between viewer and object, defining it in relation to the *optical image*:

> *In haptic* visuality*, the eyes themselves function like organs of touch…While optical perception privileges the representational power of the image, haptic perception privileges the material presence of the image. Drawing from other forms of sense experience, primarily touch and*

kinesthetics, haptic visuality involves the body more than is the case with optical visuality. Touch is a sense located on the surface of the body…The haptic image forces the viewer to contemplate the image itself instead of being pulled into narrative…[and] *can also be understood as a particular kind of affection-image…*[which] *usually extends itself into action, may also force a visceral and emotional contemplation in those any-spaces-whatever divorced from action. Thus the haptic image connects directly to sense perception, while bypassing the sensory-motor schema…The affection-image, then, can bring us to the direct experience of time* through *the body*. (162-3)

Before embarking on rigorous formal analysis of Noé's films in relation to haptic media—and a variety of related concepts in the fields of aesthetics, psychophysics, and neuroscience—I find it important to briefly define two terms I have created for the purposes of the current research, both of which will be used throughout. *Direct affect* designates the effect of haptic cinematic devices upon the spectator: emotional and intellectual contemplation of the filmic narrative are replaced by a purely visceral response, in which the spectator's body is modulated through a purely physiological response as a result of audiovisual stimuli. It is *through* haptic cinema that direct affect is generated. *In-the-body-ness* (an etymological homage to Laura Mulvey's idea of a female character's "to-be-looked-at-ness") is a reflection of a certain spectatorial tendency I have noticed while studying Noé's three feature films: each constructs a degree of subjectivity in regards to the spectator "experiencing" the filmic world, with a marked increase in the degree of subjectivity of the experience with each successive film. *I Stand Alone*, through a variety of cinematographic and aural devices, attempts (and mostly succeeds) to emulate its central pro-/antagonist's state of mind, and mostly succeeds in so doing; *Irreversible* sees an increase in such subjective "emulation" by attempting to physiologically 'attack' the spectator largely through, again, specific usages of cinematography and sound; and finally, *Enter the Void* represents the apotheosis of Noé's construction of spectatorial subjectivity, in which, through a wide variety of audiovisual techniques, the spectator is no longer subjected to forms of experiential emulation, but is

instead placed *literally* inside the character's body and mind. Both terms will be used throughout the current work in relation to a variety of haptic, aesthetic, and psychological concepts, their creation reflecting an effort to expand theories of affect and spectatorship in cinema.

2.3 *I Stand Alone*

This "affection-image" finds itself manifest in *I Stand Alone*. The film details the life of a jobless butcher, referred to only as The Butcher (Phillipe Nahon), and his sordid thoughts on contemporary French society. The majority of the film's dialogue is constructed through internal monologue (a point which will be expanded upon much more in due course, herein), the viewer confronted with the very worst of his imaginings: violent and hateful rants are aimed at the rich, women, Arabs, blacks, homosexuals (where derogatory slurs such as "faggot", "fairy", and "queer" are espoused by him quite often), and French society as a whole. Noé himself has admitted that the film is "an anti-French movie", and that he simply wanted to dishonour France with its production (Spencer n. pag.), purposely opposing French cinema as a whole: "the French film industry is very conservative, like the 19th century salons, a private club where six people decide which movies should and shouldn't be made" (Smith 1998: 154).

The volatile thoughts of The Butcher, along with Noé's own militancy against contemporary French cinema, are aesthetically realized through the concept of both haptic visuality and haptic sound. In this way, the film bypasses mere representation of a modern social malaise; instead, it constructs the malcontent *as* sound and image itself. One of Noé's key methods of affecting the viewer's body is through 'shock cuts': the camera abruptly tracks in on a specific subject/object through a fast track-in, sharply punctuated with a gunshot sound. Noé has stated his desired effect of these 'shock cuts' as "like being electrified, like an epileptic seizure" (Smith 1998: 6). Noé's wording prefigures the idea of an aesthetic style which targets the viewer's body on a primal level, the parallel between electric shock and epileptic seizure making evident Noé's goal: to make the viewer *feel* the film without the ability for thought or contemplation. A seizure proposes the notion of losing control, and so Noé is able to commit to such through a discomfiting 'attack' on the viewer on both a visual and aural level.

The capriciousness of the shock cuts is further emphasized by the content of the images themselves, often following the trajectory of violence the film designates: at one point, The Butcher decides to brutally beat his mistress after being accused of adultery. As the camera makes its dizzying track inward on The Butcher's face, accompanied, again, by the sound of a gunshot, his numerous punches to her stomach take on a doubly nauseating nature, as the mistress is, in fact, pregnant with his baby. Three bodies, then, are being attacked: that of the viewer, treated to aesthetic principles meant to psychologically disorient and physically repulse; the mistress, lying helpless under the heavy fists of The Butcher; and, most disturbingly (and pertinent), that of the foetus, a living being that is now being punished without due course, never born, now never-to-be-born. Upon this trifecta of bodily assault, Noé raises the question: is this France really one in which someone wants, and deserves to, live? This can, in fact, be seen as a (twisted, repugnant) form of mercy killing: perhaps it is better for the unborn child to never experience the collapse of contemporary French society, a 'death-before-living' being something to be desired in a time of mass unemployment and, according to The Butcher, a society run by those whose genes grow "soft and degenerate", who are "France Fruitcake" instead of France Horsemeat.

This treatment of shock cuts evincing violent images is similarly exemplified in the film's final sequence, during the 'false ending' which precedes the real one: a 30-second countdown occurs on the screen warning viewers to leave the theatre, during which the background alternates between red and black with the text flickering at the same time (this represents a further element of the haptic, here structured around the tradition of the flicker film). The sequence continues with The Butcher shooting his mute (and perhaps mentally-deficient) daughter in the back of the neck, then the head, before finally shooting himself through the temple. The shock cut aesthetic is utilized in the same manner: the camera zooms in, unsteadily, on both The Butcher and his daughter on a number of separate occasions, accompanied by the same gunshot sound effect. And like the previous scene analyzed, the theme of contemporary French society's impact on future generations is again examined through the contemplation of a murder-suicide: just as his daughter has suffered through her mental and social incapacities, she should not

have to suffer further in a society deemed unlivable; a society unlivable, too, for The Butcher, who also finally decides to end his own existential plight.

However, this ending remains as that just mentioned: something that is only imagined. Upon The Butcher's suicide, the screen fades out, only to return to the moment of his reflection before shooting his daughter, whereupon he forgoes the murder-suicide, deciding instead to live out his life with her. Fondling her as she stands at a window, his interior monologue proclaims that the purity of their love will always be condemned by the world—and, most germane, condemned by French society, just as he has perceived the rest of his life as being unfairly judged by those around him. It is an ending, then, that begins with violent content made equally violent in its presentation for the viewer, questioning the purpose of life in modern France, only to end with an inversion of the classical romantic ending: the romance is now that of incestual perversion, the integration into society now turned into its very repulsion, underlain ironically by the strings of Pachelbel's 'Canon in D'. Again, an assault has been perpetrated both within and outside of the film (upon the daughter, The Butcher, and the viewer) through turbulent aesthetic means, presenting similarly turbulent content, only to end in an ironically serene manner.

Other moments of haptic assault make their way to the surface in *I Stand Alone* in ways that are perhaps more slightly nuanced, but no less effective in modulating the viewer's physiological status. One of the film's central motifs is that of meat, which enters in a number of ways. Evidently, there is the eponymous Butcher, his entire life centered around the workings of abattoirs. But on a specifically visual level, there are, in the film, two distinct cuts (both of which establish the setting of a new sequence, the significance of this to be noted soon), to a shot of some form of meat being cut or handled, becoming a visual extension of the body in which the haptic is invested. One of these shots consists of a close-up of the hands of The Butcher's mistress's mother cutting some sort of sausage at the dinner table the three of them are seated around. While the sound of the knife slicing through the meat is not overwhelming, its grotesque 'squishiness' locates the image as continuing the film's 'directness' of representing the body, as well as enhancing, within the 'body' of the film itself, the presence of the motif of assault upon the body. Further emphasizing this directness is the shape of the sausage itself, instantly evoking the image of male genitalia being violently cut at the front end,

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conjuring the disturbing notion of castration.[14] Certainly, given The Butcher's discontent in his living status with the two women, it can be seen as little surprise that Noé chooses to employ this 'meat cut' device as a symbol of The Butcher's own self-perceived loss of control and freedom within the household (against which, as I have previously discussed, he finally reacts by physically beating his mistress, permanently leaving the complex so as to not become any more emasculated; rather, he retains his manhood, especially highlighted by the gun he forcibly takes from his mistress's mother, leaving before any further emasculation occurs).

This 'meat cut' as representation of the body is carried, again, in the film's other similarly constructed shot. In this one, we see a close-up of The Butcher's hands sifting through folds of raw horse meat. This shot harbours a similar duality as the last shot, whereby the undertone is very much sexual (the layers, arguably, calling to mind female genitals, especially disconcerting when one of the film's final shots is that of The Butcher's hand moving down towards his daughter's crotch area in a similarly-constructed close-up), while simultaneously evoking a horrific state of decay, a body now reduced to its bare form through violent slaughter. Not merely a glimpse of The Butcher's occupation, the shot similarly acts as a comment on his own inner thoughts, as he constructs everyone and everything around him as slabs of meat to be manipulated for his own use or goals (call to mind his mistress, valuable only so long as she will finance his butcher's shop, or his old friends in Paris whom he calls only for financial support). Stephen Holden echoes this idea, arguing that "…[the] close-ups of human hands slicing and manipulating large chunks of red horse meat…underscore this view of human life as essentially bestial" (1998: n. pag.). Fred Thom similarly espouses these sentiments, stating:

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[14] I suggest that the act of 'castration' is solicited by the text through a variety of aesthetic properties: the close-up through which the sausage is being sliced, the cut from the sausage to The Butcher's facial expression, and the roles of the characters in the narrative at this moment: in backing out of her promise to open a butcher's shop, his mistress has consequently held power over his own decisions in life. Now he, a butcher himself, must witness his own technical skills being overshadowed by his mistress and her mother, here visually represented through the shot, its meaning derived from the place it holds in the larger narrative context.

His job as a butcher refers to his relationship with the world. Not only can the word "butcher" be associated to blood, killing and a lack of delicacy, but meat—and flesh—are omnipresent in the movie. Everything around him, except for his daughter, is in his eyes assimilated to meat whose only purpose is nutritive. Beyond the obvious steaks from his shop, his girlfriend is a piece of financial meat, sex is only flesh, and the other humans are only pieces of meat that he can kill like vulgar animals. (n. pag.)

These shots function narratively, then, to not only extend the film's constant focus on the body, but also become redolent of The Butcher's own situation and behaviour within the film. Furthermore, however, while these shots evidently juxtapose human and animal on physical terms, the essence of haptic images roots itself inside the viewer's *primal* sensations: haptic visuality and haptic sound do not necessitate psychological ponderings, but rather, function on a level of unconscious sensation. In this sense, then, these images can be said to take on a primal function, a notion not lost on Holden, who defines the film's imagery as being "animalistic" (1998: n. pag.). While the shots do not 'shock' the viewer, they nevertheless constitute a rather abrupt entrance into a new setting of the film, inverting cinema's typical usage of establishing shots, which, as Giannetti and Leach suggest, frame a location through a long (or extreme long) shot at the beginning of the scene, granting the viewer the context of the ensuing closer shots (424). Rather, these particular establishing shots are already zoomed in on a specific object (meat and hands), without narrative context, setting, or characters established. Whereas the typical establishing shot serves as a spatial frame of reference for the closer shots (69), Noé decides to construct the spatial frame of reference only *after* having begun a new sequence with a close-up. In this way, then, is the viewer's sense of orientation disrupted, the central purpose instead being to evoke a primal reaction within the body rather than construct a proper narrative context through such an abrupt 'establishing' cut.

The final aesthetic technique which can be examined through the scope of the haptic, though perhaps not affecting the viewer's body to quite the same degree as the

others analyzed throughout my research, is that of Noé's usage of intertitles, delivered with the same abruptness with which the 'shock cuts' and the 'meat cuts' are also delivered. While they can be seen as a spoof of Godard's own intertitles from such films as *Pierrot le fou* (*Peter the Crazy*, 1965), *Masculin féminin* (*Masculine Feminine*, 1966), and *La Chinoise* (*The Chinese*, 1967), they arguably function more to unnerve the viewer instinctually, each intertitle delivered with a loud 'door slam' sound which recalls the gunshot marking the camera movement of each 'shock cut'.

The relation between the usage of intertitles and its effects on the viewer's body becomes most self-aware in the film's final sequence, when an intertitle appears, stating, "You have 30 Seconds to Leave the Cinema", before an on-screen countdown begins. That this occurs right before the previously-discussed 'false ending' (The Butcher committing a murder-suicide with his daughter), calls to attention the film's own status as attacking the viewer's body through the multiplicity of techniques discussed herein. While it could be taken literally as a chance to leave the vicinity (though, one would wonder why someone should leave at this point after having watched everything else occurring during the past 85 minutes), it functions more to both call attention to the film's own gratuitousness and sensorial modulations, and as an extension of the latter purpose, to build up a final instance of haptic assault. As one critic opines, "[the countdown] doesn't take you out of the film, as most extra-textual devices do, but instead deepens the suspense and leaves you wondering, what could possibly live up to this title" (Meaney n. pag.). Noé causes the viewer to experience the image on a primal level, the countdown demarcating a sense of unease even though there has not even been a proper narrative context to cause such anxiety to arise through which such anxiety is expected (*Why* should the viewer leave? *What* is going to happen? Is this intertitle being used in a self-parodic manner, or is the 'caution' genuine? Such uncertainty inherently arouses suspicion and discomfort). And as this unease heightens within the viewer's body, it similarly heightens the sensorial experience of the scene that is underway, before the film finally ends with an (ironically) peaceful series of images.

I have attempted to evaluate the psychological and physiological properties of sensation and touch, in order to apply the findings to a study of the construction of Noé's *I Stand Alone*. It seems that the film is constructed to purposely modulate the viewer's

bodily processes through haptic visuality and, to a lesser extent, haptic sound (which will be much more significant and clearly-defined in the coming analysis of Noé's second feature film, *Irreversible*). While the variety of aesthetic techniques, from the 'shock cuts' to the 'meat cuts' to the usage of intertitles, work in unison with images of excessive violence and sexual perversion to 'assault' the viewer's senses (thus making one feel physically 'shocked' and without sensorimotor control), this sensorial 'attack' further works to make clear Noé's own view of contemporary French society. As we listen to The Butcher's musings via interior monologue, the film's representation of the nation's socioeconomic malaise is accentuated through the visual and aural 'attacks' on the viewer: the brusqueness and volatility of the nation's lower-class citizens are 'physically transferred' to the viewer, the film's themes doubly inscribed through narrative context and aesthetic manipulation. This film is thus representative of the New French Extremity's focus on the body (relating back to Tim Palmer's conception of the *cinéma du corps*), and its model of not just representing violent images on screen, but establishing a direct, *bodily* relationship between image and viewer.

2.4 *Irreversible*

If *I Stand Alone* establishes a connection between the viewer's body and the depiction of the bodies on the screen through editing of sound and image, then it is Noé's next film, *Irreversible*, which creates a much more direct connection through sound and cinematography. In contrast to *I Stand Alone*, which emphasizes the affection-image largely through the usage of *metaphor*—the food as human flesh, the 'shock cuts' as The Butcher's fidgety state of mind—*Irreversible* aims to build upon what I had previously termed as Noé's 'in-the-body-ness' through what I term *direct affect*. As opposed to the earlier film's *indirect representation* of the body (obviously, the images of violence and sex are a direct representation of bodily gratuitousness, but I am here largely examining *formal technique* in Noé's films), *Irreversible* is constructed to purposely affect the viewer's body in as uncomfortable a manner as possible. The first technique I will examine is that of sound manipulation, which is evident most clearly in the film's opening half-hour. Though much less developed than her notion of haptic visuality,

Marks does outline that of *haptic sound* to such an extent that I feel confident in applying it to Noé's aesthetic. She writes:

> *We* listen *for specific things, while we* hear *ambient sound as an undifferentiated whole. One might call "haptic hearing" that usually brief moment when all sounds present themselves to us undifferentiated, before we make the choice of which sounds are most important to attend to. In some environments the experience of haptic hearing can be sustained for longer, before specific sounds focus our attention: quiet environments like walking in the woods…,or overwhelmingly loud ones like a nightclub dance floor…In these settings the aural boundaries between body and world may feel indistinct:…the booming music may inhabit my chest cavity and move my body from the inside."* (183)

Her description serves to designate the S&M nightclub sequence as exemplifying 'haptic sound', in a double manner. The first point, in that sounds are presented as "undifferentiated", is evocative of the nightclub as a cacophony of sounds, the music, dialogue, and the various sound effects fighting amongst one another to grab hold of the viewer's attention most prominently. Fitting into Marks's own example of an "overwhelmingly loud [area] like a nightclub", the Rectum forces the viewer to attempt to focus on individual sounds: the characters' speech to one another, the screams and moans from the sadomasochistic acts being performed in the background, the jeers of the 'crowd' witnessing Pierre (Albert Dupontel)'s assault on the wrongly-accused man, among other ambient sound effects. These are largely drowned out by Thomas Bangalter's electronic soundtrack, which is less of a musical rhythm and more of a sustained attack on the viewers' ears, a rough, siren-like tone rising and falling in volume for several minutes; furthermore, because it is diegetic, its physical effects on the viewer (to soon be examined) are emphasized more strongly as they 'transfer' from the characters to ourselves (i.e., the soundtrack and cinematography work to visibly disorient Pierre and Marcus (Vincent Cassel), thus causing the viewer to experience a similar feeling). The second point is that, through such a loud, erratic, and pounding soundtrack,

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the image is so overwhelmed that the "aural boundaries between body and world" do become indistinct, and the noise of the nightclub works to physically unsettle the viewer through volume and sporadic shifts in pitch. As Pierre and Marcus are disoriented by the club's pulsating soundtrack and swath of ambient noise, working in tandem with the Rectum's shadowy, red dungeon-like interior, the viewer, too, is physically disturbed: the 'music' rapidly spikes in attack (how quickly a sound is initiated and reaches its sustain level) and subsequently decays as quickly (the time in which it takes a sound to diminish to silence) (Mott n. pag.). The erratic shift between loud and quiet thus forms an unsettling, unpredictable accompaniment to the series of events occurring.

The unnerving effect created by the electronic soundtrack and ambient noise can be scientifically supported by work done in the field of *psychoacoustics*, the study of the relationship between the objectively characterizable sound incident upon a human ear and the corresponding perception of the sound (Gunther 328). Whereas many films' soundtracks will rely on several mechanics of music to elicit an emotional response in tandem with the image, I intend to examine the usage of the soundtrack not as an emotional parallel for the image, but as its own mechanic to elicit a physiological response in the viewer. I would first like to briefly define 'sound' in order to make clear the properties of its ontology within the film. Specifically, I do not wish to define the scientific properties of sound—the vibration of air—but to do so in a more phenomenological[15] sense. In discussing the ontology of sounds, O'Callaghan and Nudds note that their nature has commonly been tied to our experience of them, "the predominant view…that sounds are secondary or sensory qualities…subjective and private" (5). Sounds defined in these terms are often grouped with what they label as *perceptible qualities* or *properties*, such as colours, smells, and tastes (Ibid). However, in the case of Noé's film, I frame my particular study of sound as being *individuals* or *particulars*: instead of being a property attributed to a certain thing or event, I use

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[15] I here refer to "phenomenological" in order to describe one's *subjective experience* of sound, as opposed to a purely scientific definition. Specifically, I adopt Vivian Sobchack's notion that phenomenology "is the foundational study and description…of phenomena in the "life-world" as they seem given and are taken up as conscious experience" (435). She defines it in conjunction with cinema as "a mode of inquiry that might describe the perceptual, sensuous, affective, and aesthetic dimensions of signification and meaning in the film experience" (Ibid). As such, I here define 'sound' in a similar manner, as a phenomenon "taken up as conscious experience", investigating its significance in Noé's film in possessing the very "dimensions" Sobchack describes.

O'Callaghan and Nudds' model of sounds being "individuals that bear sensible features such as pitch, timbre, and loudness" (Ibid). There are two specific instances of sound in *Irreversible* I wish to examine, both affecting the viewer physiologically *on their own terms*; they could viably be separated from the image, and still induce a sensation of nausea, unease, and doom in the viewer.

The first instance of this takes place during the Rectum nightclub sequence, where we can examine how Bangalter's 'music' functions to become a source of unpleasant sensation for the viewer. As mentioned previously, the soundtrack consists of a rapid wavering tone, and in so doing, seemingly takes on the sonic quality of something like a civil defense siren, itself a mechanism which is used to provide warning of an impending danger. In discussing Noé's "oppressive use of sound…to disturb…[in] what becomes an assault on our senses" (2011: 73), Palmer notes Bangalter's uses of such effects as beats, drones, riffs, and pitch slides. He then goes on to explicate more fully the notion of the erratic soundtrack, suggesting that as the "density, mix, and volume of the soundtrack abruptly shift…a subterranean barrage of off-screen and nondiegetic sound peaks and ebbs in waves, an arresting but dislocated clamor that interrogates the events we see" (Ibid). Robin Wood argues that the music cannot even be classified as such, instead referring to it as "soundtrack noise", and labels it as "ominous, ugly, [and] threatening" (2003: 5). The overall effect, then, is what Palmer suggests a "queasy range of pulsing textures that intensifies our malaise at events on the imagetrack…[causing] sensory overload, sheer aural chaos" (2011: 73-4). The physiological effects of irritability, nausea, and anxiety upon the viewer during this sequence can be explained by a brief description of how noise itself can make a person feel sick. Dr. Andrew Weil, famous for his work in the field of integrative medicine, remarks that loud acute noises can damage hearing, interfere with one's sleep, raise blood pressure and stress levels, and cause headaches (n. pag.).

Yet, it is perhaps the less noticeable element of the sequence's sound design which contributes most strongly and interestingly to the viewer's unpleasant sensation. Continuing in his analysis of the film's sound design, Palmer brings up the concept of low-frequency sound, or what may also be referred to as *infrasound*. He establishes that, for sixty minutes of its running time, *Irreversible* uses a "barely perceptible but

aggravating bass rumble that was recorded for Noé's purposes at twenty-seven hertz, the frequency used by riot police to quell mobs by inducing unease and, after prolonged exposure, physical nausea" (2011: 73). On the usage of low-frequency infrasound, Steve Goodman remarks that it can be "especially effective in the arousal of fear or anxiety and "bad vibes"…its sonic dimension [magnifying] the nauseous tone" (66). The existence of this physiological phenomenon is supported by a variety of sources: Weil notes the variety of physical symptoms associated with low-frequency noise, claiming it can make people more prone to higher levels of the stress hormone cortisol, in turn leading to high blood pressure, high cholesterol levels, heart disease, and reduced immunity; acute, low-frequency noise can also cause nausea and heart palpitations (n. pag.). Environmental Protection UK further supports the existence of this range of symptoms related to infrasound exposure, recording such physiological and psychological effects as irritation and unease, fatigue, headache, nausea, and disturbed sleep (n. pag.).

The importance of these findings is clear, then: the sound in *Irreversible* ceases to act as a mediator between viewer and image/event, evoking a certain emotion or representing a certain idea in the sense of it acting as its signifier (in Saussurean terms). Instead, the sound *becomes* the event in and of itself, utilized for the sole purpose of eliciting such negative psychological and physiological reactions within the viewer. Noé readily admits this, stating that "[in] a good theater with a subwoofer, you may be more scared by the sound than by what's happening on screen. A lot of people can take the images but not the sound. Those reactions are *physical*" (qtd. in Goodman 66, emphasis added). So while the image certainly does emphasize the soundtrack's construction as being 'antagonistic' towards the viewer (as well as relevant to the scene's setting in a nightclub) through aesthetic elements such as low-key lighting and a claustrophobic setting, the significance lies in the fact that the sound could play without an image, and a viewer would *still* be experiencing such negative symptoms. Yet, my goal is not merely to examine how the film's soundtrack psychologically and physiologically stimulates the viewer, but to use such findings as support for my original idea of Noé subjecting his audience to a unique 'in-the-body-ness' in regards to the characters. To conclude on the concept of sound within the film, this 'in-the-body-ness' can be most fully realized when one examines the narrative framework for the soundtrack: it lies not outside the filmic

world (*non-diegetic sound*), as an external sign establishing emotion or mood for the viewer (to the exclusion of the characters); but rather, finds its place *within* the filmic world (*diegetic sound*), heard both by the characters and the viewer. The significance of this is clear: by emulating for the viewer Pierre and Marcus's own disorientation and erratic behaviour in the Rectum nightclub through the function of a 'noisy' soundtrack which finds its source inside the club, Noé enables the haptic more fully, establishing a direct connection between character and viewer (evoking what I had earlier termed *direct affect*). This connects back to my initial hypothesis that Noé does not rely on a semiotic relationship between viewer and screen, wherein an aesthetic element such as sound *interprets* the event for the viewer; instead, the sound *becomes* the event, doubly embedded through the sonic properties of the sound itself *and* through the fact that its effects on the characters parallel those on the viewer.

While haptic sound does play an extensive role in constructing this 'in-the-body-ness', and thus becomes an important method in viscerally 'attacking' the viewer, it is very much worth examining other functions of the haptic in *Irreversible*; notably, *cinematography* too plays a central function in eliciting physiological and psychological reactions within the viewer, working in tandem with sound to prompt feelings of nausea, anxiety, and disorientation. At this point, it should be evident that the entire sequence creates such unease within the viewer through a combination of sound and image (cinematography, more specifically); however, my objective herein has been to dissect *how* and *why* these aesthetic components affect the viewer physically.

This visceral 'assault' is first experienced during the Rectum nightclub sequence, filmed (like every other sequence) in one take. While I find that other films may often utilize a tracking shot in order to help the viewer better understand the camera's surroundings, thus acting as a point of navigation (i.e., the 'Copacabana' shot in Martin Scorsese's *Goodfellas* (1990), or the many tracking shots around the high school in Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* (2003), both of which allow an unmediated view of the characters' surroundings), *Irreversible* celebrates its usage to the complete opposite effect as we follow Pierre and Marcus through the dungeon-like corridors: it deliberately disorients, nauseates, and confuses the viewer, aiming to subvert the very function of 'classical' cinematography itself. It does not simply follow a track, pacing itself through the world,

granting the frame a degree of stability that entails from the viewer's complete knowledge and understanding of the world through the screen. Rather, the camera spins and twirls through the claustrophobic interior; Palmer describes the camerawork as a result of Noé's decision to use an extremely small, lightweight Minima camera in order to film a 360-degree area of space around the characters of Pierre and Marcus (2011: 76). He discusses the cinematography with descriptors such as "violently" and "jarring", reinforcing Noé's tendency of ultimately 'punishing' the viewer.[16]

The result is a complete loss of control—not only for the camera, nor for Pierre and Marcus, but most significantly, for the viewer. The classical ideals of cinematography are dismantled to mirror the alienation and stupefaction Pierre and Marcus experience inside a space which is completely alien to them. (On the other hand, it is worth noting that in other, less emotionally-loaded or -alien situations, such as the party Pierre, Marcus, and Alex (Monica Bellucci) attend, the camerawork retains a more structured form, further emphasized by brighter and more diffuse lighting.) As one critic notes, the camerawork establishes that "nothing makes sense, nothing is in focus, reality is scraps of information that refuse to assemble into a pattern" (Hunter n. pag.). Furthermore, these adverse feelings are transmitted to the viewer in order to establish that 'in-the-body-ness' with the male pair, the viewer, too, lost in the world of the nightclub, and subsequently experiencing similar feelings of dislocation and isolation. The experience of de-familiarization comes around full circle upon the sequence's final shot: after having beaten the man whom Pierre and Marcus had thought to be Alex's rapist, Le Tenia (Jo Prestia), we soon find out that the man they had killed, in fact, was not the rapist at all; Le Tenia merely watches the murder incredulously, with a sadistic sense of satisfaction. The man who raped Alex is able not only to get away with it, but one who is innocent dies in the process. Only with the benefit of omnipresence can the viewer

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[16] It should be noted that Noé's camerawork here accords with typical frequent usage in one particular genre: that of the horror film. Writing extensively on horror film aesthetics, Thomas M. Sipos comments upon the function of camera angle, an element which largely evokes the feelings of claustrophobia or unease during this sequence: "…Level frames depict a stable world as seen by "level-headed" people, and canted frames suggest either a character's *subjective* fear, madness, desperation, or hysteria, or an *objective* collapse of normalcy, society, or reality." (71) One may also point to Linda Williams's suggestion that, in the horror film, "the body of the spectator is caught up in an almost involuntary mimicry of the emotion or sensation of the body on the screen" (605). The common spectatorial response of aversion to *Irreversible* can thus position the film as a form of horror cinema, an area which necessitates further readings.

understand the tragic error, something Pierre and Marcus may be doomed to never see. As the camera movement disorients the viewer, then, that feeling is paralleled in the two men who are similarly lost in an unfamiliar world, only to experience fatal consequences.

While it is important to note the effects spectators may feel while viewing the events unfold, I wish to continue supporting my initial hypothesis that Noé's film exploits spectator affect through the sensation of touch with concurrent research into the area of *human sensation* and *perception*. While there has yet to be a consensus among researchers on the factors leading to motion sickness, the *sensory conflict theory* has been central to an understanding of Visually Induced Motion Sickness (VIMS) for over two decades. Detailed by Brand and Reason in 1975, they suggest that "the essential nature of the provocative stimulus is that it always involves a mismatch between presently communicated spatial information and stored traces of previous information" (103); situations, then, which elicit motion sickness "are *all* characterized by a condition in which the motion signals transmitted by the eyes, the vestibular system [the sensory system which most heavily contributes to balance and spatial orientation (TN)] and the nonvestibular proprioceptors [sensory receptors which detect the motion and orientation of one's own body in space (TN)] are at variance with one another, and hence…with what is expected on the basis of previous transactions with the environment" (264).

One of the key factors of VIMS, as suggested by Bardy et al., is that of *vection*, defined as the subjective experience of self-motion relative to the inertial environment as produced by optical simulations of self-motion (2). They further explain this notion with the idea of *body sway*—defined as "the slight postural movements made by an individual in order to maintain a balanced position" (Abbott et al., 2225)—, suggesting that, through laboratory tests, "optical simulations that mimic the amplitude and frequency of body sway give rise to a *subjective* experience of self-motion" (Bardy et al. 2, emphasis added).

It can be established, then, that a spectator who views a film which itself produces the illusion of subjective movement can experience motion sickness by way of a clash between one's expected degree of movement and the simulation of movement that is forced upon them. This very well may explain why, in Matt Reeves's science fiction film *Cloverfield* (2008), many spectators had reported experiencing bouts of nausea and

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vomiting during the film. One doctor explains how motion sickness would be elicited, suggesting that, while watching *Cloverfield*, "viewers were sitting still in their seats, so their inner ear was telling their body they were motionless. But the bumpy camera movements—and their eyes—misled them into thinking they were moving around erratically" (Smith 2008: n. pag.). These conflicting messages, then, bring about symptoms of motion sickness, such as nausea and headache. And in both cases, the degree of *subjectivity* is central: a film which posits the spectator as an objective witness removed from the content on-screen will likely not result in motion sickness, as embodied most fully in the classical Hollywood cinema norms of cinematography—such as logical uses of long, medium, and close shots to establish the world and its inhabitants clearly. Contrastingly, a film which attempts to 'place' the spectator within the film must often do so through either a subjective point of view (as evidenced in *Cloverfield*'s filmed-through-a-character's-camera verisimilitude) or, as in the case of *Irreversible*, a form of '*indirect-subjectivity*': not witnessing the action through a character's direct point-of-view, but allowing us to become close enough to the action that we are able to experience the characters' emotions as if we were right there with them (Boggs 132). In our example here, then, the camera does not literally become the point-of-view of Pierre or Marcus, or perhaps any Rectum inhabitant, but successfully emulates their states of mind through camerawork which blatantly violates traditional classical norms. And in so doing, the camera lens transforms into a human eye, emulating the spontaneity and uncertainty with which we view the world, no different from the uncertainty Marcus and Pierre feel in this hostile, claustrophobic, and entirely alien environment.

It can therefore be suggested that the importance of Noé's utilization of the haptic is found through the cinematography as exemplified by the Rectum sequence, as it can affect the spectator on a physiological level, here exploited through Visually Induced Motion Sickness.[17] Going back to Marks's initial conception of the haptic, we can see how Noé erases the representational power of the image, privileging its material presence, instead. The image is not constructed for contemplation and interpretation by the spectator, but instead reveals reality, the notion of 'construction' dismantled for pure

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[17] It should be noted that this remains a hypothesis, and one in need of further empirical research. It is also worth considering viewers who did not experience nausea or uncomfortable feelings of any sort during the viewing.

feeling on a physiological level—the "bodily relationship" between image and spectator Marks delineates (164). If we are to locate the importance of this cinematic technique within Palmer's framework of the *cinéma du corps*, it is evident that Noé focuses on the human body not just on a narrative scale (the vicious beating, the men in the nightclub in general), but integrates the focus on the *filmic* body into the *spectatorial* body. For Noé, the body is both subject and object: it is ultimately a catalyst for the narrative's propulsion (*subject*—Alex's rape and beating), yet is what is treated most inanimately (*object*—the body is treated as a vessel for violence, drugs, and sex). In a way, so, too, can the spectator's body be envisaged as such, as we simultaneously are subject by way of 'direct affect' with the film's various bodies, yet remain object as we are held to witness the acts of cruelty in the film.

If it is the objective of the *cinéma du corps* to pose the human body as its thematic centerpiece, then this can, at least for Noé, only come to fruition when the *spectator* must necessarily be physiologically affected by the image, as well. It is not enough to simply convey the feelings of disorientation and violence as experienced by the characters, but the spectator must also experience such effects, establishing a direct link between character and spectator for the fullest extent of verisimilitude. While my examination of the cinematography has revolved around *perspective*, this direct connection can be further examined with a final look at Marks's suggestion that the affection-image can "bring us to the direct experience of time *through* the body" (163). Marks here invokes Deleuze's notion of the movement-image, in specific, examining how the haptic image can "be understood as a particular kind of affection-image", as the affection-image "may also force a visceral and emotional contemplation in those any-spaces-whatever divorced from action…Thus the haptic image connects directly to sense perception…" (Ibid.) Noé makes evident his concern with the concept of time in a number of ways within *Irreversible*: *I Stand Alone*'s Butcher murmurs, in the opening shot, that time destroys all things ("Le temps détruit tout", also seen on a title card at the film's conclusion); the title itself evokes the irreversibility of time, which itself is mimicked as a framing device for the film, the narrative's sequence of events shown in reverse chronological order; each sequence is filmed in one take, and all are subsequently edited together to give the illusion of a seamless transition from one to the next; and finally, the experience of time

is linked to Noé's presentation of the body, with two specific moments demarcating his aesthetic as not only constituting a cinema of *tactility*, but one of *human phenomenology* (the film particularly playing on the spectator's subjective experience of time).

In the Rectum sequence just examined, I focused on the movement of the camera, and furthermore, on its inability to cease movement; it twists, turns, and lurches, never slowing down. That is, until the sequence's most graphic burst of violence occurs, beginning initially with Marcus having his arm snapped by the man he and Pierre believe to be Le Tenia: Pierre appears behind the man, who is preparing to sodomize a semi-conscious Marcus, and begins to pummel him in the face with a fire extinguisher, long after the man has ceased to consciously respond to the attacks. It is the first time in the film when the camera becomes largely stationary (only tilting up and down slightly to follow the trajectory of the extinguisher, and spinning only once in the middle of the attack), settling on the ground beside the man, the upward angle allowing us not only to witness, but to 'receive' Pierre's attacks, the extinguisher's bludgeons landing on the man's face beside the camera. This, again, is an engagement of a form of indirect-subjectivity with the spectator, but importantly here, it makes clear the importance of temporality and its connection with bodily experience. It is a moment when the viewer is not just physically disturbed by the act of violence itself, but through the fact that he is forced to endure it for its entire duration, without ellipses, cutaways, or movement to aestheticize the violence. It is a violent method with which Noé establishes the 'in-the-body-ness' between viewer and character (in this case, the man being beaten), the concept of duration forcing the viewer to acknowledge his/her own cognizance: the duration of the murder correlates to the duration the spectator must necessarily endure. Once the murder is complete, the camera also foregrounds temporality by lingering on the deceased man's caved-in skull; as Stephen Hunter points out, "the camera doesn't look away from the last few seconds of the atrocity, and the biology of death by crushed skull is laid out in detail" (n. pag.). Hunter's own description, too, inherently carries with it the concept of the body and its direct focus, discussing its "biology".

The final instance of the relation between the body (for both character and spectator) and temporality is the central event which catalyzes the aforementioned attack in the Rectum nightclub: Alex's rape by Le Tenia. It lasts a total of nine minutes, and

takes the stasis of the camera one step further: it simply lies on the ground of an underpass, framing Le Tenia and Alex in a medium-long shot, and remains completely motionless for the duration of the vicious rape. In the relationship between spectator and screen there lies a voyeuristic gaze, the normally private element of sex now dismantled through the spectator's own act of intrusion; this is emphasized when we catch a glimpse of a passerby wandering into the tunnel from the opposite end, only to stop short upon the viewing of the act, and back out without offering any form of support for Alex. In this sense of the voyeuristic, then, the Rectum sequence shares with the rape sequence an indirect-subjectivity which contributes to the film's 'in-the-body-ness': just as we follow Pierre and Marcus into the depths of a nightclub with an anxiety and confusion equal to theirs, largely elicited through aesthetic tendencies of cinematography, we also follow Alex down into the underpass, the medium shot behind her head emphasizing our own identification with her. (This shot is reminiscent of that which is seen extensively in Noé's *Enter the Void*, which he discusses in the context of "his analysis of his own perception…[in that] he sees himself in silhouette in his memories and dreams" (qtd. in B 18)). It can similarly be argued, then, that this very subjective notion of his "perception" can be placed within the context of *Irreversible*, for as we necessarily identify with Oscar (Nathaniel Brown) in *Void* through this angle, we are then drawn to identify with Alex.) As in the fire extinguisher scene, the spectator is forced to 'identify' with the victim not through mere representation, but direct affect.[18] In a research project conducted on audience response to watching sexual violence on screen, Martin Barker lists a number of aspects he believes make up the "dangers" of filmic rape, one of which would appear to support this notion: "There is a belief that to show, for instance, a rape on screen is…almost to enact the rape for real. The line between the represented and the real is seen to be particularly fragile in this case" (107). Such an erasure of the boundary between reality and representation is enhanced considerably through a number of elements: just as

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[18] One might raise the question of identification lying with the attacker rather than the victim, a position that is not my current focus, but that warrants further research. In his review of *Irreversible*, David Edelstein comments that the camera "leers" at Bellucci, Noé "on the verge of implying that such quivering ripeness can't be left unmolested in a world like this, that by natural law it ought to be defiled" (n. pag.). Roger Ebert suggests that, upon the release of *I Spit in Your Grave* (Meir Zarchi, 1981), "the new horror films encouraged audience identification not with the victim but with the killer" (Smith 2010: n. pag.). While this possibility should certainly be recognized with regard to *Irreversible*, such a position does not seem to reflect the experience of most commentators.

Alex is trapped on the ground, so are we; just as she is also trapped within the confines of a small tunnel, so, too, are we to feel the claustrophobic confines; and most importantly, just as Alex must endure the violence for nine unbroken minutes, the spectator must also withstand the event for the entire duration.

The camera becomes "cruelly *static*" and commits to an "*excruciating*…single-shot" (Palmer 2011: 77, emphasis added), Palmer's adjectives emphasizing the 'punishing' nature that temporality enacts in the sequence. Other critics have noted the antipathetic nature elicited from the unbroken gaze: the audience must "sit in *anguish* through a *solitary* shot", one describes (Sells n. pag., emphasis added); another argues that it's "difficult to know what to do during those nine minutes in which Bellucci lies prone, moaning and weeping…You can leave—although Noé would probably consider that a victory" (Edelstein n. pag.); the duration of the shot is brought to the fore in which one critic describes the "10-minute-long take" wherein Alex "endures a vicious anal rape" (Baumgarten n. pag.); and finally, J. Hoberman notes that the "nastiness lasts eight minutes but feels *far longer*. Having found its meat at last, Noé's camera stops turning cartwheels and settles down to *masticate* upon the unsavory spectacle" (n. pag., emphasis added).

There are yet many more reviews and articles referring to the rape sequence in much the same way: often, descriptors are used to point to the inescapability of the sequence (relating Alex's rape to that of the spectator, both helpless), and in so doing, inherently discuss the duration of the sequence, often noting its significance as a static long take. As a critic for *USA Today* suggests, Noé "[experiments] both with time frame and audience tolerance" (Clark n. pag.), the two inevitably informing one another; the 'standard' Hollywood procedures of editing are broken, the temporality of the image now akin to that of avant-garde cinema, whereby the experimenting with duration can be traced back to the structural film tradition of the early 1960s, as in Andy Warhol's early usage of the static long take to "[trigger] ontological awareness" (Sitney 352). The essence of the long take, however, finds its theoretical underpinnings in the early writings of André Bazin, himself formulating (and subsequently favouring) 'realist' film theory. Bazin argued for the depiction of 'objective reality', as seen in documentaries and by the Italian neorealists, and in the techniques used to achieve such, included the long take as

preferable to montage editing. Noé is therefore similar in his treatment of these two sequences which focus on the human body, and in his goal to affect the viewer on a physiological level, commits to the fullest extent of realist filmmaking.[19] Gregory Currie comments on the long take and realism, suggesting that the former "enhances our ability to detect spatial and temporal properties of the fiction by using the capacity we have to detect those properties of things in the real world" (107). By its nature, the long take emphasizes "the sense of passionate contemplation…[of] reality…an unmediated openness to the world" (Le Fanu n. pag.). As such, it could be argued that other, non-violent sequences from the film work to the effect of 'attacking' the viewer similarly, such as the explicit sexual discussion between Pierre, Marcus, and Alex on the subway, whose voyeuristic nature may instinctively cause discomfort within the spectator. Yet, while this uneasiness is due to the nature of the discourse, and the aforementioned sequences are due to the nature of the image, they both share the long take's property of forcing the viewer to 'endure' the action within the frame.

So it is, then, that the (static) long take, in establishing for the spectator a direct connection between the temporal properties of the image and those experienced in reality, acts as a central factor in constructing the film's 'in-the-body-ness'. We are forced to witness two separate attacks on the human body, and through indirect-subjectivity, are transposed into the 'shoes' of each victim. The indirect-subjectivity dissipates representation and symbolism for pure physiological and psychological response, achieved through the manipulation of cinematography: the dizzying camerawork mimics the confusion and anxiety Pierre and Marcus experience in unfamiliar territory, while the

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[19] It must be noted that the term 'realism' carries a fair amount of complexity, the concept being a wide umbrella under which many traditions are housed. As Dr. Paul Coates points out, while Noé may be indebted to this idea of Bazinian realism in one respect, there are still clear differences in conceptions of realism, Bazin himself prepared to advocate a 'cinema of cruelty' (in reference to Buñuel) otherwise foreign to the humanist realism he was most often a proponent of. Coates further suggests Noé as perhaps being located within the 'naturalist' tradition of French writer Émile Zola who, in the late 19th century, explicitly advocated theatrical naturalism in his 1880 essay, *Naturalism on the Stage*. The placement of Noé's realism requires much more analysis to be conducted in the future, as the current discourses are too few, and the area too unwieldy at the present time to carry forth extensive investigation.

static long takes force us to become one with Pierre's victim and Alex[20], the stasis and unbroken duration eliciting within the viewer a state of 'ontological awareness', to quote Sitney's earlier comment (i.e., the long take may turn a spectator's focus away from the narrative event being presented, and towards their own heightened perception of the shot's temporality itself). Ergo, Noé constructs the image in the face of reality, and in turn pushes ideas of the haptic to the fore.

2.5 *Enter the Void*

The concept of an 'in-the-body-ness' reaches its plateau in Noé's third and most recent feature film, *Enter the Void*. As I had noted earlier, this concept of spectator affect appears to increase in 'intensity' with each subsequent film: *I Stand Alone* found the connection between spectator body and character body largely through a series of editing techniques which conveyed The Butcher's state of mind, emphasized through his consistent voiceover narration, allowing the viewer to more literally 'get inside his head'; *Irreversible* furthered this haptic sensibility with a manipulation of sound and cinematography to affect the viewer on a physiological and psychological level, Noé's aim being to provoke adverse effects through infrasound and Visually Induced Motion Sickness, which ultimately established a connection between the characters' states of mind of anxiety and uncertainty, and those experienced by the spectator; and finally, *Enter the Void* establishes the 'in-the-body-ness' to a literal level, taking direct affect to its most extreme: the spectator is now *inside* a body, that of Oscar, both in human form (Life) and spiritual form (Death). I will begin by examining the basic formal techniques of cinematography and sound that Noé employs in order to establish a direct connection between Oscar's character and the spectator, before moving into its various implications for theories of spectatorship and affect.

The concept of subjectivity found its greatest significance up to this point during my discussion of cinematography in *Irreversible*, where 'indirect subjectivity' was the means through which a connection between spectator and character was established.

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[20] It should be noted that viewer identification might not be so uniform if one were to take gender into account. As Dr. Paul Coates has suggested to me, it is significant to note that, while the rape of a female is shown in full, earlier the sodomizing of a male is interrupted, thus making it look as if Noé's gaze is male and the suffering more female.

Enter the Void, however, completes the trajectory of subjectivity, the camera now invoking 'direct subjectivity'; while many writers may err on the side of simply labeling it a 'subjective point-of-view', for the purposes of establishing a 'gradation' in subjectivity, I will prefix it with the term 'direct' in order to wholly make clear Noé's aims of increasing spectator affect through character perception. Regardless, this 'direct subjectivity', in which the camera "shows us various details as the character sees or experiences them so that we share the character's emotions" (Boggs 127, 131-2), is established from the film's opening sequence, in which the eyes of Oscar follow the flight path of a plane in the sky, before moving down to greet his sister, Linda (Paz de la Huerta), as they stand on the balcony of their Tokyo studio apartment. This degree of subjectivity is made clear through the swift, unbroken motion of the camera tilting upward from the neon 'ENTER' sign behind the apartment, towards the airplane, and back down to Linda for her direct address to the camera. While first-person shots in film are nothing new—around since even the earliest days of cinema, they have been used in shot/reverse-shot cuts where there is an initial shot of a character looking at something off-screen, which is then followed by an eyeline match of the very thing the character was looking at—their usage in *Enter the Void* represents an extreme form of editing subversion. This is not only in the duration of the first-person viewpoint being used (which is, in fact, that of the entire film, although the film's remaining two-thirds represent a shift from subjectivity of the body to subjectivity of the spirit), but also through the ingenious technique of the 'blink'. For the time we spend in Alex's body, Noé applies a 'blink' effect to the screen, fractional moments of black covering the image, which vary in their duration and pacing to mimic the actual function of human blinking. This extreme degree of subjectivity leads one critic to label the film as being "*subjective* filmmaking at its purest" (McClanahan n. pag., emphasis added); another comments that he found his rate of blinking "coming into synch with Oscar's" (Bradshaw n. pag.), an unbroken connection between the body of the spectator and that of the character here evidenced, both notions evoking my own supposition that the film itself enables Noé's 'in-the-body-ness' to its fullest potential. Roger Ebert similarly opines that Noé "films with his video camera and then *becomes* the camera as the remainder of the film is seen from his POV" (577).

It is not merely through the visual, but equally through the aural that this connection between spectator and character is established, human perception being further mimicked by way of sound design. This is not made fully clear until we hear Oscar's opening dialogue to Linda, his disembodied voice emitted with equal volume from both speakers, while also being slightly muffled in contrast to Linda's clear, multi-directional voice, which one writer feels "adds to the weird sense of being *inside* the character" (Archer n. pag., emphasis added); the disembodied voice also works to convey Alex's inner thoughts, the spectator granted access to literal whisperings within his mind. Again, it is my initial concept of this 'in-the-body-ness' that is supported by references to the spectatorial sensation of actually *feeling* the character's body from within. This is doubtlessly carried throughout the duration of the film, from Alex's psychedelic DMT trip (which includes an ambient soundscape and overly saturated colours to represent the state of being stoned), to his murder in the Void bar bathroom stall (where the image becomes blurred, the sound marked by a high-pitched ringing in response to Alex/'the spectator' being shot, and expanded to his out-of-body experience of the afterlife). What I have done at the present time is simply to demarcate the boundaries which Noé establishes for the film's 'in-the-body-ness': the camera literally becomes the eyes of Alex, the speakers his ears; in turn, the camera also functions as the spectator's eyes, the speakers, too, becoming his ears. But it is not enough merely to examine how direct subjectivity is established through sound and image: I now find it pertinent to continue my inquiry into the psychological and physiological effects Noé elicits within the spectator. I will again examine certain formal tendencies (such as flicker effect and retinal persistence) with a scientific eye, and inspect the resulting phenomenological properties of human experience and subjectivity which correspond to Noé's overall focus on the body, of which the importance of his corpus within the New French Extremity will be made clear: its aesthetics aim largely to construct itself as a 'cinema of the touch', harkening back to Marks's original theory of a haptic cinema, and thus, become a new model for transgressive cinema.

The spectatorial physiological modulation which Noé aims for can be evidenced directly in the film's opening (and only) credits sequence. It is not only significant for the amalgam of formal properties it possesses (light, colour, rhythm, music), but for the ways

in which they come together to viscerally affect the viewer from the outset, announcing the film's intention to construct an 'in-the-body-ness' to further reinforce its status as being among the burgeoning *cinéma du corps*. The sequence, occurring over the span of approximately two minutes, utilizes a variety of visual effects (flicker, rapidly rhythmic procession, a unique typeface for each cast and crew member constructed in a variety of sizes and colours) not merely to show both the opening and closing credits (as Noé had done in *Irreversible*), but to overwhelm the viewer sensorially. One critic argues, Noé "[affects] the audience on a submolecular level, starting with the opening credits, which whiz by in a blurt of colors and fonts…You've got a contact high and the movie hasn't even started", and subsequently defines the film as being a "primal experience" (Burr n. pag.). Again, we can see an example of a spectator defining the film in terms of *bodily* or *sensory* terminology, evoked merely through the film's title sequence. In an interview with *Art of the Title*, typography designer Tom Kan explains the process by which he designed the typography of the opening credit sequence, as well as its significance in relation to the pulsating techno soundtrack by English electronic group LFO. He states that, in modifying the designs according to Noé's treatment of the typefaces' succession to the music's rhythm, he wanted to explore "retinal persistence and the limits of readability" (n. pag.). Retinal persistence is also known as the theory of 'persistence of vision', which attempts to explain the illusion of motion as seen, for instance, on a film screen; the theory attempts to argue that when the human eye is presented with a rapid succession of slightly varied images, there is a short period during which each image, after its disappearance, remains imprinted upon the retina, allowing that image to blend smoothly with the next image to thus create the illusion of motion (Anderson and Anderson 4). While this theory has long since been debunked as a myth in the midst of more palpable theories of the sensation of movement, such as *phi phenomenon* and *beta movement*, the specifics of how the human eye perceives motion are not pertinent for this thesis; rather, it is interesting to me to examine Kan's aims in the context of visual perception, the dynamics of motion related directly to the physiology of the spectator, contemplative thought stripped for direct affect.

The absence of contemplation within the title sequence is expanded upon by Kan in his discussion of the total effect Noé aims for, in which the visual and aural come

together to induce the spectator into a state of what could only be a form of hypnosis. He explains:

> [The title sequence] *functions as a real gateway. Like a prelude or a prologue, we can explain or complete a part of the story. In our case, the title sequence needed to reflect a colourful and varied universe full of rhythm to prepare the audience for Gaspar's film. Its crescendo rhythm leads you to a euphoric ascension. You feel the visual and auditory onslaught. You don't need to read, you just experience the typefaces, the names and the music. I find it to be a successful contrast to the really calm first scene.* (n. pag.)

Kan thus makes explicit his (and Noé's) goal of viscerally affecting the viewer on a level upon which intellectual contemplation is dismantled for a purely emotional response. He uses terms such as "euphoric ascension" and "onslaught" to demarcate the film's location within haptic cinema, the viewer subjected to a construction of aesthetic techniques which cause one to "experience" rather than "read" the typefaces. Here, then, is a subversion of a typical credit sequence in which the 'standard' procedure (reading for information) is replaced by an atypical procedure of passivity and sensory overload, which, in Kan's own view, sets the tone for the rest of the film: an experience hinged largely around the audio-visual experience of euphoria, a state in which one experiences pure ecstasy without thought, in order to establish a direct connection between Oscar's transcendence of time and space and that of the viewer.

One specific aesthetic phenomenon central to Noé's aim of establishing a state of 'euphoria' via direct affect is that of the film's *flicker/strobe* effect. Noé's usage of flicker can be traced back to the avant-garde tradition P. Adams Sitney designates as the *structural film* (347), a trend in the early 1960s which "insists on its shape, and what content it has is minimal and subsidiary to the outline" (348); one of its key characteristics, he notes, is "the flicker effect" (Ibid). In delineating the structural film's function upon the spectator, Sitney suggests that "apperceptive strategies come to the fore" (Ibid); the concept of *apperception* has been defined through a variety of

psychological and philosophical avenues. For the purposes of the current research, I will integrate an epistemological definition which states that apperception is

> *introspection, conscious thought, or the consciousness of internal states. It*
> *is at the same time consciousness of, or reflection on the "I" or the self,*
> *that is the subject of these states. In apperception the self is aware of itself*
> *as being a unity and as possessing the power to act.* (Blackwell n. pag.)

Transplanting this idea onto Noé's usage of the flicker effect in *Enter the Void*, it can thus be suggested that his aim is to actively engage in a spectatorial 'self-awareness', during which the flicker of the image consciously disengages with the filmic narrative in order to call the spectator's attention to his/her own state of mind/body. Noé, himself, describes this process in an interview with Sam Adams, who suggests that the audiovisual effects of *Enter the Void* "have a lot in common with experimental filmmakers like Tony Conrad and Stan Brakhage" (n. pag.):

> *Sometimes you can tell* [there is colour in the flicker] *and sometimes you*
> *cannot. Still, it plays with your brain. Maybe it uses alpha waves or beta*
> *waves, I don't know. Even myself, when I get into it, when I get in front of*
> *it, I feel I'm stoned because of the flicker.* (Ibid)

Noé's sentiments of feeling "stoned" from the flicker can be read as an attempt to emulate the state of higher consciousness one may feel when under the influence of drugs, which can then potentially lead to a heightened awareness of one's own state of mind and body—the very apperception Sitney refers to. This is further emphasized when questioned about the film's focus on the "process of perception", something Adams correlates with a "lot of experimental film" (Ibid):

> *The game for me, the goal in the movie, was to induce an altered state of*
> *consciousness as much as possible inside the viewer's brain…I was*
> *thinking…"What movie could play with my perception?" There are not*

many movies [that do this]…The Flicker *by Tony Conrad gets you stoned.*
(Ibid)

Noé therefore makes clear his intended effect upon the audience: to induce, through the function of direct affect, an ontological awareness within the spectator, distanced from both the narrative and any form of emotional and intellectual contemplation. His goal to evoke a state of apperception is conducted most evidently through the flicker technique, and is reminiscent of what Kan attempts to achieve in the credit sequence, also indebted to the flicker tradition. Noé's reference to Conrad's *The Flicker* (1965) further makes evident the significance of the film's flicker effect as an attempt to modulate the spectator's "perception" through a purely physiological response, by linking his aims to those of the structural filmmakers in the 1960s.

It is now worth investigating *how* the flicker effect can induce a variety of unconscious physical reactions, further pointing to both Noé's 'hyper'-transgressive approach, and its implications for the evolution of a haptic cinema. The usage of strobing/flickering light/colour in visual media may often be discussed in tandem with the concept of *photosensitive epilepsy*, defined by Marjorie Steinkruger as "a seizure phenomenon caused by exposure to bright and/or flickering light" (355). While certainly important in evaluating the incidence of seizures from certain visual triggers, such content is too specifically attuned to epileptic patients; for the purposes of the current research, it is more fruitful to examine phenomena which may cause more 'universal' adverse effects upon a spectator. More specifically, it is desired to examine phenomena which are more likely to affect spectators "without a history of epilepsy" (Philipkoski n. pag.).

One such physiological occurrence worth investigating is that of *flicker vertigo* (FV), described by Kevin High and Amy Moore as "an imbalance in brain cell activity created by light sources that emit flickering rather than steady light", and is characterized by "nausea, vertigo, and, in rare cases, seizure activity" (129). While intended as a study on the risks involved for air medical crewmembers who may experience such effects of FV—caused by light, from any source, passing through a helicopter's rotor blades or propellers, thus creating a "strobing effect" (Ibid)—, I suggest it worthwhile to displace

the findings onto a reading of its function within haptic cinema. Of note is High and Moore's suggestion that FV is part of a "larger spectrum" of symptoms known collectively as *flicker illness*; its manifestations can range from mild symptoms such as headache, vertigo, drowsiness, nausea, and vomiting, to those more severe such as altered mental status and seizure activity (130).

While it is significant to locate the instances and aims of Noé's haptic tendencies in the film, and to also investigate their physiological effects upon a viewer, such research conditional on theories of spectatorship must necessarily be corroborated with personal experiences of the spectator. While this is only a small proportion of overall viewer response, a handful of instances can be examined to better support the argument that *Enter the Void* is, indeed, representative of a new form of transgressive cinema which *physically* affects the spectator's body. (While Noé discusses his desire to make viewers feel 'stoned', aberrant readings can be found, pointing to the question of whether or not Noé, himself, can even fully control the effects some of his formal devices use.) Interviewing Noé, Hunter Stephenson describes the opening credit sequence as "[accelerating] into a pulsing concert of epileptic typography", while finding himself "staring at the floor at one point, overstimulated" (n. pag.). Sean Axmaker, in his review of the film, comments on both the opening credits and the flicker effect: he calls the former a "strobing, neon-blasted barrage…that don't announce so much as hit and run, flashing by with such momentum that you barely have time to register names let alone make sense of it all"; meanwhile, the latter "actually had a physical effect on [him] and more than once [he] had to avert [his] eyes to stop the nausea", stating that Noé "assaults the senses and sensibilities of his audiences" (n. pag.). Another critic terms the opening credits "an assaultive display" (Noller n. pag.), while other critics refer to the film's visuals as "visual intoxication" (Howell n. pag.), or proclaiming that it is "a movie to be felt, not told" (Rodriguez n. pag.).

2.6 Conclusion: A 'Hyper'-Transgression

What is significant to all of the viewer responses for *Enter the Void* is not simply their references to the film's 'striking' or 'hallucinogenic' visuals, but, more importantly, that these visuals modulated their *physiological* states. Further interesting are the

descriptors that frame the visuals as being 'violent' towards the spectator, whether labeled a "barrage" or an "assault" as earlier quoted. Significantly, these very terms have been applied, as evidenced herein, to all of Noé's three feature films in a variety of manners, thus successfully locating Noé's sensibilities as being 'hyper'-transgressive, parallel to the same nature of the Extremity as a whole.

This chapter is representative of several primary intentions to my current research: to deploy the concept of 'haptic cinema' (with 'haptic visuality' and 'haptic sound' as the primary reference points) as a viable method through which to re-contextualize theories of spectatorship, affect, and aesthetics; to postulate the concepts of 'direct affect' and 'in-the-body-ness' as both a product of and a principle towards the production of 'kinesthetic' cinema, respectively, for their specificity to the analysis of haptic cinema's techniques and effects; to exemplify the belief that science and art need not be mutually exclusive, but, rather, how they should be further intertwined in order to allow for newly-realized ideas of how cinema functions upon the spectator through the scientific inquiry of such fields as psychology, neuroscience, and psychophysics; and, finally, to perform a close reading of Gaspar Noé's filmography that both allows for a rereading of transgressive cinema in its 'hyper-' nature, and makes clearer the role of transgressive cinema in the New French Extremity as an 'aggressive' act towards spectators, the 'movement' a product of contemporary France's social, political, and economic frissons.

This final objective points to the central inquiry of the entire thesis: the act of locating contemporary French filmmaking as a newly transgressive form of cinema, paralleling itself with the nation's recently-transgressive social conditions. As such, it is necessary to embark upon one more case study of the New French Extremity's transgressive nature, further attempting to line it up with that very nature of modern France: here, a selection of Bruno Dumont's films. Aesthetic and conceptual tendencies will thus be significant for this aim.

Chapter III
The Abject Cinema of Bruno Dumont

While the concept of haptic cinema is central to understanding Noé's goals and techniques, and, by extension, those of the New French Extremity, it will not be used in the current study on Bruno Dumont's additions to the movement. The previous chapter reconfigured the role of transgressive cinema and theories of spectatorship as applied to the New French Extremity largely on the level of formalist and aesthetic readings; this chapter aims to continue investigating such conceptual avenues within the New French Extremity, albeit through a different approach, namely that of the concept of the *abject*.

Dumont, born in Bailleul, France—which is also the setting of his first two films—, has won the Grand Prix at the Cannes Film Festival for two of his films (*L'humanité* and *Flandres* (*Flanders*, 2006)), placing him on the border of mainstream recognition and arthouse discourse. Furthermore, he is, along with those noted in the Introduction to this monograph (Breillat, Grandrieux, Noé), often incorporated into the discussion of the New French Extremity (Horeck & Kendall 2011: 1). Certainly, a central reason for this is his interest in the depiction of corporeality—occurrences such as sexual intercourse, rape, violence, and murder are commonplace in his films, and are treated with an equal level of gratuitousness to these directors—although his aesthetic tendencies are a marked contrast to those of Noé. As opposed to Noé's hyperactive camerawork and editing, oversaturation of colour, and ambient music—whether aggressive or serene—, Dumont utilizes a style in which long takes are favoured, the usage of music is minimal, and, often, the camera records the banalities of its characters' lives. Darren Hughes discusses Dumont's "trademark cinematographic blend of lush widescreen landscapes, glossy-eyed close-ups, and clinically objective (and graphic) stagings of sex" (2002: n. pag.) in presenting "the mundane details of human experience" (2004: n. pag.). Likewise, Tim Palmer comments on Dumont's eschewing of "figures and figure movement", instead focusing on "modern minutiae" (2011: 75). James Quandt similarly remarks upon the "somnolent" (22) and "naturalistic detachment" (23) of Dumont's films, while also commenting upon his status as a "true heir to [Robert] Bresson" (18), a comparison also made by Peter Verstraten, writing:

...Dumont can be considered as the main heir to Robert Bresson's legacy...Like Dumont, Bresson hated theatricality in acting...[and worked] with non-actors as well...Like Dumont, he preferred mediocre and flat images over overly aestheticized shots... (36)

Therefore, whereas Noé reformulates the central elements of transgressive cinema through a *haptic* approach, Dumont chooses to connect the transgressive qualities of contemporary France with those of the *abject*. Opposed to Noé's experimental approach in storytelling and aesthetics, Dumont opts for a naturalistic construction in order to properly accentuate the role of the *abject* within the setting of the *sublime*, further drawing focus to his treatment of the *body*, and its role in signifying the malaise of contemporary France (and society at-large).

It is vital to introduce the current section with such commentary in order to more properly maintain an examination of the New French Extremity as representing a new form of *transgressive art*, while continuing to engage in theories of spectatorship and affect. It is also hoped that such research will lead to a better understanding of how the New French Extremity can be viewed as a product of contemporary French society. I plan to closely analyze three of Dumont's films as case studies: *The Life of Jesus*, *L'humanité*, and *Twentynine Palms*. While the study of aesthetics will no doubt be important, it will be maintained by a study of more central concepts related to Dumont's work (and, for future studies, the New French Extremity itself).

One distinction must be made in relation to the films chosen for current analysis. Even though *The Life of Jesus* and *L'humanité* are set within the specific region of northern France, and thus appear to contain overt commentary on the social framework there, *Twentynine Palms* diverts geographically, instead taking place in the Californian desert. Given the multiculturalism of the two main characters—one American, the other Russian, and both attempting to speak French to one another at times—, Dumont may be suggesting that the social conditions of contemporary France can be recognized in other parts of the world. As Neil Archer suggests,

The main…achievement of Twentynine Palms*, then, may be the way it reorients an understanding of cinematic extremism away from divisive and potentially problematic questions of cultural binaries, and towards a more transnational dialogue with space and the violence of human presence.* (63)

Rather than comment only upon shifting models of transgressive behaviour in France, Dumont attempts to do so in North America, too, by juxtaposing the two cultural identities. Because of this geographical discrepancy, any socio-political readings of his first two films should not be specifically applied to *Twentynine Palms*; rather, it is worth investigating how the content of those former films informs that of the latter. As such, *Twentynine Palms* appears to extend Dumont's evaluation of contemporary French society to that of civilization, more generally, although its function in appraising the transgressive qualities of the New French Extremity and French society is no less important.

Generically, Dumont represents a unique approach to the depiction of contemporary French society's malaise by combining the neorealistic properties of social realism with those of body horror. My analysis of his films point to two central manners in which this is accomplished: firstly, Dumont establishes a world in which the banal, the everyday, and the 'normalcy' of contemporary life is ruptured by acts of brutal violence, murder, and sexual violence; and, secondly, is the photographic juxtaposition of tranquil, barren countrysides with bloodied, battered, abused, and maimed human bodies. These two properties configure Dumont's unique generic hybridity within the New French Extremity.

However, it is too general (and, ultimately, too unwieldy and broad in the current monograph) to merely examine the interplay of social realist and body horror properties within Dumont's films. Central to this chapter's research will be an investigation of the interplay between Julia Kristeva's original conception of the *abject* and Dumont's films. An examination of the *abject* will better allow for a framework in which to examine the transgressive nature of Dumont and, by extension, the New French Extremity. Ultimately, my intention is to connect the conceptual properties of the *abject* to its

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contemporary applications in the films of Dumont in order to more properly engage with the New French Extremity's status as being both a newly-realized form of transgressive cinema and a representation of some of contemporary France's social/political/economic issues. Like the previous chapter, the idea most central to an understanding of Dumont, the New French Extremity, and their place within the nation is that of *transgression*, and how past concepts of transgression remain relevant today, informing the works of Dumont, those of the Extremity, and segments of modern French society itself.

3.1 The Abject: Definitions

Before embarking upon a discourse of the *abject* and its correlation with Dumont's work, it is valuable to first define 'the abject' on basic terms, and then as originally posed by Julia Kristeva in 1980. The Oxford Dictionary defines 'abject' as an adjective being "(of something bad) experienced or present to the maximum degree", "(of a situation or condition) extremely unpleasant and degrading", and "(of a person or their behaviour) completely without pride or dignity; self-abasing" (n. pag.). Of particular interest is its origin, which, in late Middle English, was used in the sense 'rejected': from the Latin *abjectus*, past participle of *abicere* ('reject'), from *ab-* ('away') + *jacere* ('to throw') (Ibid). While the specifics of its etymology are not pertinent, it is worth noting due to its centrality in Kristeva's definition of 'abject'. Due to her rather opaque and verbose writing, it is difficult to summarize Kristeva's precise 'definition' of the *abject*; yet, in attempting to do so, it can perhaps best be encapsulated by her discussion of the corpse as a form of abjection:

The corpse…upsets even more violently the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious chance…Refuse and corpses show me *what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being…Such wastes drop so that I might live…If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is*

no longer I who expel, "I" is expelled. The corpse…is the utmost of
abjection. It is death infecting life…[and is] something rejected from
which one does not part. (3-4)

Kristeva thus attempts to formulate the *abject* in terms of something one wishes to reject for the betterment of personal living which, upon its re-entrance into our world (by witnessing its very state of being through such senses as sight or touch), causes us to experience physically adverse reactions or else any form of antagonistic emotion. As Barbara Creed suggests, the abject "must be radically excluded from the place of the living subject,…deposited on the other side of an imaginary border which separates the self from that which threatens the self" (65).

Giving an "archaic" and "elementary" example of "food loathing" (2), Kristeva contextualizes the *abject* in terms of eyes seeing or lips touching "that skin on the surface of milk" (Ibid). This then induces "a gagging sensation and…spasms in the stomach…[provoking] tears and bile…" (2-3), the "spasms and vomiting that protect [her]" (2). However, central to her appropriation of the *abject* is that it is "thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order" (4). Samantha Pentony clarifies this idea, listing several avenues through which abjection is expressed on a larger, societal level:

Religious abhorrence, incest, women's bodies, human sacrifice, bodily
waste, death, cannibalism, murder, decay, and perversion are aspects of
humanity that society considers abject. (n. pag.)

3.2 Dumont and the Abject: *The Life of Jesus*

The *abject* in its various manifestations can consequently be evidenced in the films of the New French Extremity and, more specifically, those of Bruno Dumont. Susan Hayward describes films of the New French Extremity not just as a "cinema of transgression", but also a "cinema of the abject" (2005: 326); Martine Beugnet similarly labels the films a "cinema of abjection" (2004: 295), describing their nature in the following way:

Transgression is the main principle, the thematic and aesthetic crossing of the frontier of the acceptable into the sphere of the abject…Abjection, the violent repulsion against and expulsion of bodies felt as alien or threatening, also works as a metaphor for the processes of exclusion through which a social 'body' seeks to 'purify' itself…The cinema of abjection focuses precisely on those 'aberrant' elements: criminals, psychopaths, monstrous beings or those perceived as such, creations of the very system that must eradicate them. (2004: 295-6)

Such a description is highly pertinent when examining Dumont's appropriation of the *abject*, as can be evidenced in his first three feature films. A common thread to be found in them is the surfacing of the *abject* in ways which resist their characters' attempts to repress them. The *abject* manifests itself in a variety of manners: as literal forms of corporeality (explicit instances of murder, violence, and sex, replete with close-ups of bloodied bodies and genitals, and unsimulated acts of penetration); as forms of cultural discords (touching upon such relevant issues as Arabs-in-France and French-American personal relationships—the former a concern for France's large assemblage of right-wingers, the latter a projection of globalization's potentially-negative effects); and as forms of symbolic 'rupture', which simultaneously act as social constructs to be ignored or discarded (murderers, rapists, child molesters). All of these instances of the *abject* must be examined more closely within each separate film, in order to more properly assess the aims of Dumont, and their significance in reflecting upon the state of contemporary French society.

The Life of Jesus does not present the *abject* in overly corporeal terms as delineated by Kristeva's original conception; rather, it finds its presence within Beugnet's aforementioned description of an "expulsion of bodies felt as alien or threatening", while metaphorically acting as a "social 'body'" seeking to "'purify' itself". The narrative focuses on five young men in the small Northern French town of Bailleul, who, all seemingly unemployed, spend their time tuning up cars or riding through the countryside on their electric scooters. The central point of conflict within the narrative stems from the

racial animosity the five show towards a young Arab man, Kader (Kader Chaatouf), which escalates upon the discovery that he has been hanging around Marie (Marjorie Cottreel), a supermarket cashier and girlfriend of Freddy (David Douche), the principal character of the young male pack.

The *abject* thus centrally manifests itself as a fear of the Other, the very same exhibition of French xenophobia discussed in the first chapter. Kader's introduction to the narrative finds himself and his family greeted, in a pub, with insults ("Go and fuck your mother, you dirty Arab," taunts one of the young men) and crude imitations of the Arabic language (another of the young men vocalizes a very guttural interpretation of the language). After insulting the young French men ("Sons of fucking French bitches!" he yells, while gesturing the middle finger), and by attempting to 'steal' Marie away from Freddy (following her home after work), the young men discuss the manner in which they will 'catch' the "dirty Arab". Eventually, they capture and beat him to death (the latter only known afterward when a police inspector interrogates Freddy), dumping his body off somewhere untold.

Hal Foster writes that "the abject is what I must get rid of in order to be an I at all", and that "the abject touches on the fragility of our boundaries" (114). Its correlative is represented through the young men's attempts to 'rid' the town of Kader, and, it is implied, the village may experience similar feelings, evinced by the crowd's laughter upon a man's mocking them as they depart the pub. While Freddy later desires revenge upon Kader for what he sees as hidden sexual relations between he and Marie, there is initially no impetus for his joining in the table's taunting of the Arab family, asides from their ethnicity. From the outset, Kader is thus seen as a threatening, alien, and foreign body by the village's inhabitants, who must be expelled in order to preserve the region's cultural stability. In accordance with Kristeva's conceptualization of the *abject*, Kader represents an entity whose similarity to the villagers (being human) heightens the fear of encroachment by way of the central dissimilarity (ethnicity) between them. He is simultaneously "them", yet is not "them", thus marking the need to exorcize what could potentially disrupt the community's unity.

Yet, while the group's attempts to 'expel' Kader from the town is the most predominant form of the *abject*, its implications for modern French society are

emphasized by more 'secondary' forms of the *abject*: Freddy turns his initial mistrust of Marie into a breakup, feeling as if her own 'expulsion' from his life will grant him a form of 'purity' from her presence around Kader; and the young men verbally and sexually harass a young girl, pulling down her pants and groping her, later following up with disparaging remarks about her weight and looks. Perhaps most significantly, however, is one of the young men's brother succumbing to AIDS, the *abject* embodied on a variety of levels. While it is physically presented through unsettling close-ups of the brother's diseased face, it is further exhibited as a form of naïve commentary from one man who, upon hearing of the brother's illness, can only respond by asking if he is gay, followed immediately by a comment saying, "Like all those guys on TV", referring to television images of Africans affected by the AIDS epidemic. All of these instances of the *abject* can hence suggest varying sectors of French anxieties: racism towards Arabs, misogyny towards women, and homophobia, all of which have been examined in relation to contemporary France in the first chapter. These examples of the *abject*—whether embodying corporeal, racial, gendered, or sexual properties—thus can be suggested to reflect the condition of contemporary France, simultaneously representing its anxieties and its attempts to repress what is seen to threaten French 'purity', so championed by many recent French politicians on the right, and subsequently embodied by the country's citizens.

This final, and most significant, point—the question of *what* the *abject* comes to symbolize in the film—can perhaps best be pursued by examining the film in relation to its eminence as constituting a "social renewal of French cinema" (Garbarz 74-5), or a "new realism" which focuses on political issues (Powrie 10-8) in the 1990s. Delphine Benézet conducts an extensive analysis on the "poetics and politics of the rural"[21] (164) of such films focusing on the region of northern France, in particular offering an interesting (and one of the few to be written) examination of Dumont's film, focusing on two "inextricably linked" (168) features: the function of the natural setting (landscapes, specifically), and the treatment of the characters. By examining his "political, realistic"

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[21] This topic requires extensive analysis to be carried out in the future, as the current text represents only preliminary findings.

(167) treatment of film 'poetics', Benézet's suggestions can offer great insight into the overall function of the *abject* in *The Life of Jesus*.

Central to her interrogation of Dumont's film is the idea that it enacts a "pseudo-ethnographic" style (167); as she explains,

> *Freddy…cannot avoid his condition. He is powerless; he is a prisoner to*
> *his disease and to his socio-economic situation…[Reflecting] on a recently*
> *deceased friend, [he says]: 'He must be happy up there', suggesting* a
> contrario *his hopelessness. In many of the films shot in northern France in*
> *the 1990s, a similar impression of* latent despair, of hopelessness and
> inadequacy permeates the narrative. (168, emphasis added in last sentence)

This notion correlates with Beugnet's aforementioned suggestion of the *abject*'s treatment in these films, which follow "creations of the very system that must eradicate them". By way of his unemployment, laziness, and inability to connect with anybody emotionally (which Benézet succinctly points out by suggesting that Freddy is unable to "join" with others (172)), Freddy thus comes to represent an outsider group which finds itself, literally, on the margins of France. It is an image at variance with that of France's romanticized, inclusive one, wherein those from around the world converge at one of the world's most recognized cosmopolitan cities. Significantly, it echoes various illustrations of marginalization and exclusion evidenced in the first chapter of this thesis, the strongest parallel being that of France's *banlieues* of the 1990s, itself brought to global attention in Mathieu Kassovitz's *La Haine*. Freddy and his friends, then, are *abject* in and of themselves: without any sort of meaningful 'direction' in life, and oscillating between ennui and violence—the only visible modes of expression they portray—, they are "alien" and "threatening" (to use Beugnet's earlier language) to the common spectator. Verstraten suggests this point, saying that

> *we are encouraged to identify with the main protagonist,…who turns out*
> *to be an unpleasant character, plagued by (racial) prejudices. The price*

paid for the viewer's willingness to identify with Freddy is a relentless
sense of discomfort. (34)

Freddy thus embodies the dual role of being excluded by society-at-large, and further imposing that exclusion through his own unwillingness to integrate himself into any form of community, be it his romantic relationship with Marie, or his familial one with his mother. The varying representations of the *abject* previously mentioned find their personification within the film's characters themselves, representing "aspects of humanity that society considers abject", to borrow Pentony's earlier phrasing.

In her analysis of the film's real-world connotations, subsequently finding their expression through the *abject*, Benézet makes several interesting claims in regards to the film's (and, throughout his corpus, Dumont's) focus on nature and the landscape, an element which I also deem important in its representation of the *abject*. Writing that "scenes where the landscape is filmed are hardly ever silent" (169) (referring, mostly, to the overwhelmingly loud scooter engines), Benézet suggests that the landscape "reflects their rage and rebellion" (Ibid), with the "vibrant red" of the region's architecture "[evoking] the latent rage of the protagonist" (Ibid).

The interplay of *body* and *landscape* emerges within the film to make clearer the function of the *abject*. Marie most explicitly calls attention to this when she remarks that the landscape is "so beautiful" during her and Freddy's gondola ride over the countryside; contrasting such a remark are the numerous scenes of sexual intercourse between the two, most often filmed "in extreme close-up, with no particular attention to the bodies or the faces of the characters…[instead focusing] on the genitals" (Benézet 172). This stark divergence seems to emphasize the 'emptiness' of the characters' lives, the predominant "sense of despair" and feeling that there "seems to be absolutely no hope" (171). What may thus be represented, here, is the dual nature of the landscape: its aesthetic beauty initially seems to conceal those aberrant elements forming the *abject*, but may, it is suggested, function to amplify and create those very threats. Benézet indicates as much, saying, "the realistic treatment of landscape emphasizes its contemporariness…, and the rural and economically depressed environment is used as a means to augment Freddy's malaise" (170).

Thus, the landscape not only portrays a modern-day France through its naturalistic aesthetics (long shots, static takes, natural lighting), but also comes to represent the boredom and aimlessness of the characters themselves, "where inaction leads to depression, and ultimately to violence" (171). The potential for violent actions is always bubbling just beneath the surface, at first taken out through more sedate manners (Freddy kicking inanimate objects out of frustration, as well as his voluntary flinging himself off his scooter), until it becomes violence towards others (the "fat" majorette, Kader). It is an ethos frighteningly prescient in the wake of the 2005 *banlieue* riots, a violence bursting forth in an otherwise peaceful region.

The *abject* in Dumont's *The Life of Jesus* can thus be seen to represent the varying modes of 'exclusion' experienced in contemporary French society, both symbolically (Freddy's epilepsy, the AIDS-infected brother) and literally (unemployed youth, French Arabs, Africans being viewed as an Other which subjects them to naïve remarks regarding AIDS and homosexuality). These forms of the *abject* consequently signify the perceived 'threats' to the well-being of the French population, which are viewed as being antagonistic, and so must be removed from society. Martin O'Shaughnessy supports this reading with an acute observation:

> *The racism associated with the killing of the young* Beur *is connected with a sense of imploding national community. The unemployed young men do not seem meaningfully attached to anything beyond their own little circle and their own locality. Thus, their attitude when parading with their band behind the national flag seems one of mocking detachment rather than enthusiasm. They only engage more meaningfully with Frenchness when, in Freddy's mother's bar, they begin to ridicule the family of the* Beur*, underlining how the national now only retains meaning as a neo-tribalism that produces belonging* through the exclusion of others *rather than through any more positive integration of its citizens…Extreme nationalism seems the only form of collective belonging offered to the otherwise excluded…*[Kader's death] *points to the power of racism to connect to immediate, bodily experience…* (119, emphasis added)

By referring to the film's processes of exclusion as a function of French nationalism,
O'Shaughnessy is pointing to a key function of the *abject* within the film: to signal the
state of contemporary French society as being affected both by unemployment and a shift
to right-wing ideology, both contributing to the recent atmosphere of social instability.
This instability, as has been evidenced by examining recent French socio-politics,
fundamentally leads to violence, and finally to murder, the definitive form of 'exclusion'.

Finally, just as homosexuality and Arabs are aberrant to the livelihood of Freddy
and his friends, they, in turn, are similarly viewed as such by the common spectator. As
Benézet puts forth in describing the role of the viewer, the film can be seen as "a look
from outside onto the 'Other'…typical of unemployed youth in Northern France" (172).
She explains:

> *[In making] reference to the difficulties experienced by people in this*
> *region…[the film] is characterized by a raw and pseudo-ethnographic*
> *realism, which is cleverly articulated to bring into the forefront issues*
> *(such as racism and sexuality) that have become classical themes in*
> *contemporary French and European cinema.* (173)

This examination of the *abject* in Dumont's film has thus attempted to establish a theory
through which to examine the New French Extremity, although it must necessarily be
supported by further readings of Dumont's following two feature films: *L'humanité* and
Twentynine Palms.

3.3 *L'humanité* and *Twentynine Palms*: The Abject/The Sublime

In *L'humanité*, Pharaon (Emmanuel Schotte), a French police inspector, must deal
with the crime of a raped and murdered eleven-year-old girl, whose body is found in an
isolated rural field (set in the same region as *The Life of Jesus*), next to a series of railway
tracks. Orbiting this central narrative marker are the attempts he makes to connect with
what seem to be his only friends: Domino (Séverine Caneele), whom he has a crush on;
and Joseph (Philippe Tullier), Domino's boyfriend. Pharaon shows to be a man conflicted

between his duty (finding the rapist/murderer, who ends up being Joseph) and his personal well-being (questioning and disavowing the inhumane nature of such acts of violence). As a result of this dissonance, Pharaon repeatedly attempts to distract himself from the emotional impact of the crime, through such mundane tasks as bicycling and gardening. Yet, what results is his continually returning to the scene of the crime, both literally and emotionally, the latter through outbursts of frustration (yelling at the railway tracks) or an overall comportment of melancholy (his sprinting through the field, only to fall face-first into the soil, wide-eyed, stoic and motionless).

Twentynine Palms, like Dumont's previous two films, substitutes a prototypical narrative for a clinical character study. The film follows David (David Wissak), an American photographer, and his unemployed Russian girlfriend, Katja (Yekaterina Golubeva), through the California desert, in search of a scenic backdrop to conduct a photography project. Chronicling the couple's bouts of sexual intercourse and fighting, the film's final act involves three men ambushing them in a rather secluded area, sodomizing and beating David to near-death while forcing Katia to witness it. David, through madness and trauma, stabs Katja to death in their motel room, eventually dying, alone, in the desert, shortly before a police officer arrives to inspect the scene.

Dumont's focus on the natural world juxtaposed with images of corporeal gratuitousness finds itself a natural extension of its function in *The Life of Jesus*: at first appearing to conceal the *abject* through aesthetic splendour, before revealing its nature as preserving—and becoming—the *abject* itself. Referring to one of the opening shots of *L'humanité*—an extreme close-up of the young girl's bloodied vagina—Andrew Tracy suggests that it is "almost part of the landscape, sharing its contemplative beauty. Welcoming a monstrous act into the fold of its serenity, *the earth which offers comfort one moment casually accepts horror the next*" (n. pag., emphasis added). For Dumont, the dichotomy of the *abject* and the *sublime*—the *body* and the *landscape*, respectively— is central to an investigation of the *abject*'s role in contemporary society. Furthermore, it acts as a method through which Dumont posits his works within the transgressiveness of the New French Extremity, while also allowing him to reflect upon that very transgressive nature he witnesses in modern western culture. Dumont, himself, remarks upon the relation between the two:

The landscape is fundamental. My characters speak very little because the landscape is preponderant within the comprehension of the emotions. I try to work like an artist, which means to photograph landscapes which are ways of expressing the emotions of my characters. And that when one says that a landscape is beautiful, it's within ourselves that something is occurring, rather than outside. (Peranson and Picard 70)

The function of landscape in Dumont's films not only heightens the portrayal of the *abject* through aesthetic contrasts, then, but, most significantly, naturalizes it, as O'Shaughnessy suggests (115). The *abject* is thus integrated into the natural world to suggest that such processes of exclusion towards the 'foreign' or the 'threatening' are imbedded in the fabrics of contemporary French society, a product of the nation's recently popular right-wing nationalist sentiments. The *abject* has, in Kristeva's sense, crossed boundaries, while confrontations with the *abject* are now a type of normalcy. Important to note, furthermore, is how the landscape, in its naturalization of the *abject*, becomes an extension of the characters themselves. Responding to a query that the landscape in his films is "more than just 'setting'…[but] is a character with its own identity" (Conterio n. pag.), Dumont comments that the landscape is

the inside of the character…I try to represent what's inside with the outside. Landscape is not just a character, it's THE character. In "Twentynine Palms," the desert is in the characters, and the landscape partakes in saying what's inside of them, what they feel. (Conterio n. pag.)

However various landscapes may represent the characters' motives, actions, thoughts, and feelings, it is integral to observe their function as necessarily *overwhelming* those characters. Not just embracing the *abject*, or becoming a mere extension of the characters' personalities, the landscape works to *become* a space which is, in itself, threatening or alien, a site of identity-disturbance where boundaries have, perhaps, always been absent. The *abject* therefore oscillates between that of the *corporeal*, and

that of *nature*, yet wholly consuming the characters all the same. Writing that Dumont's "bodies and landscapes blend and interrelate" (177), Lisa Coulthard comments upon these very ideas as evidenced in *L'humanité* and *Twentynine Palms*:

> *…The beautiful landscape of* Twentynine Palms *transforms in the course of the film into a menacing, ugly setting of ultimate violence—into a landscape that has a correlation with, rather than opposition to, violence…*

> *…*Twentynine Palms *asserts an overt correspondence of landscapes with bodies—most notably in its visual paralleling of sand with skin…where manifestations of the outer, natural world operate as indicators of psychological, existential, and brutally physical states…This is equally evident in the mud that opens Dumont's* Humanité *and that quickly becomes associated with violent death and the traumatic presence of the violated corpse.* (176-7)

James Quandt implies as much, describing *L'humanité* as a "film about the body in the landscape and the landscape of the body" (23), referring to its "imprisoning horizon" (Ibid); similarly, he defines the landscape in *Twentynine Palms* as a "postlapsarian Eden" (Ibid), recalling the Biblical account of the Fall of Man, the California desert transformed into a threatening site of expulsion. Martine Beugnet similarly adheres to this contention, writing that, in *L'humanité*, it is "the landscape that breathes" (2007: 105), and that, in *Twentynine Palms*, the desert is turned "into the vision of a monstrous entity on whose skin the characters seem to wander" (Ibid). Finally, Nikolaj Lübecker offers an animated description of the landscape's function within *Twentynine Palms*:

> *The impressive Mojave Desert appears as an overwhelming organism, the most powerful 'character' in the film…The rock formations in the desert assume an anthropomorphic form and the Joshua trees resemble*

otherworldly creatures. In short, the impressive landscape breathes, cracks and appears to live, and accordingly, there is little difference between the animate and the inanimate, between subject and object. (237-8)

The observations made on the indistinctiveness between body and landscape—subject and object, to borrow Lübecker's terms—appear to manifest themselves, ultimately, in the indistinctiveness between the *abject* and the *sublime*. Through its various definitions and manifestations, I will here refer to a conceptualization of the *sublime* as originally formulated by Edmund Burke in his seminal 1757 treatise, *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*:

> *The passion caused by the great and sublime in* nature*, when those causes operate most powerfully, is astonishment: and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it.* (95-6)

Central to Burke's interpretation is the notion that the *sublime*, within nature, causes an individual to feel a sense of wonder while also experiencing a form of horror as a by-product. Robert Miles comments on this idea of a "dreadful pleasure" (14), saying that

> *in all cases a sense of terror underlay our experience of the sublime…A sight of nature's vastness from the top of a mountain would be sublime; the same view from the perspective of someone falling down it would be simple terror.* (Ibid)

I thus propose a shift away from Hanjo Berressem's distinction of the *abject* and the *sublime*, wherein he suggests that

> *sublimity can only arise in the subject when it is not too near to the*
> *material object that triggers the idea (it must be at a safe distance) but*
> *also not too far away from it (it must be near enough to be affected by it).*
> *Abjects, in contrast, are experienced, much like traumatic events…* (20)

Berressem describes the *sublime* as the *abject*'s "other" (Ibid); however, rather than being mutually exclusive, I believe the two inherently contain properties of each other. This certainly seems to be the case in the two films of Dumont presently being examined, in which, as commentators earlier mentioned, the landscape is simultaneously captivating yet threatening. The aim of Dumont, then, can perhaps best be described as uncovering the beauty in the natural world to expose its nihilistic, violent, and threatening underpinnings, consequences of its' populations' actions. While the *abject* represents an attempt to expel menacing bodies, its delineations become problematized when paired up with the *sublime*: what results is an inability to distinguish between the two, the *sublime* acting not only as a space for those invading bodies, but becoming one, itself.

Such an idea finds several recent counterparts in reality: the images of the September 11 attacks are often prefaced with the towers overlooking the Hudson Bay on that clear, sunny morning, the idea that such a beautiful scene would be juxtaposed with images of horror a short time later almost inconceivable. Any number of riots similarly possesses such an effect, whether the rapidly progressing instigations of violence in Los Angeles circa 1992, or the instantaneous outburst of destruction during the 2010 G-20 summit in Toronto. Most relevant, however, would be the bouts of violence and protest evidenced in contemporary France, whether that found in the *banlieues* or further into the city. Yet, most significant to this French counterpart is its subversion of the country's prototypical associations with the *sublime*: the various riots and protests go against the country's romanticized associations, such as the Eiffel Tower or the Champs-Élysées[22], instead revealing the 'threatening' forces that lie amongst the beautiful sights. As such, the *abject* not only resides within the *sublime*, but the *sublime* has thus become threatening, itself, the streets of Paris now often associated with angry riots, the downtrodden *banlieues* a

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[22] It is often referred to as *la plus belle avenue du monde*—"the most beautiful avenue in the world" ('Paris Architecture' n. pag.).

site of exclusion for the police. These functions of the *abject* and the *sublime*, I contend, are intended to be made clear by Dumont in his treatment of the landscape and his characters' bodies, his spaces turned into sites without borders, boundaries, order, or identity. In portraying such instances of transgression, Dumont's films—like many within the New French Extremity—can perhaps best be seen as being generically *horror* in nature; as such, it is worth concluding this section with Robin Wood's suggestion that "the true subject of the horror genre is the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses or oppresses:…its re-emergence dramatized…as an object of horror" (2004: 113). In general, *L'humanité* and *Twentynine Palms* can thus be seen as reflections upon contemporary society's attempts to repress that which is viewed as being threatening—and the futility in doing such.

3.4 The Abject as Sex + Violence

A central avenue of investigation is Dumont's treatment of the *abject* in relation to sex and violence. Like *The Life of Jesus*, both films include several images of "clinically objective" (Hughes 2002: n. pag.) and "animal-like" (Peary n. pag.) sex. One of *L'humanité*'s opening shots exemplifies this idea: an extreme close-up on the young girl's bloodied vagina, the image most clearly highlighting Kristeva's conception of the corpse being one of the paramount forms of *abjection*. Yet, what is significant, here, is the conflation of the sexual and the lifeless into a composite image: the girl's vagina comes to represent both the intercourse incurred and its secondary function as becoming *and* enacting pure violence. The shot is followed by similarly framed shots of the corpse's ant-ridden thigh, and then her legs splotched with dirt, each image fragmenting the girl's body in a manner similar to pornography; as Graham Fraser remarks, "Fragmentation of the body is…a key code of both visual and narrative pornography" (521). Annette Kuhn makes similar commentary, suggesting:

> *In pornography, photographs are often composed in such a way that a*
> *particular bodily part is greatly emphasised. Or it may even fill the whole*
> *of the picture, in which case the body is fragmented, cut up, by the*
> *frame…Porn's attention to bits of bodies is never random. Pornography is*

preoccupied with what it regards as the signifiers of sexual difference and sexuality: genitals, breasts, buttocks… (36-7)

It is interesting to thus examine the film's opening series of shots as being concurrently pornographic yet violent in nature: the bloodied vagina ambiguously signals both an act of assault and of the girl's deflowering. Examined in conjunction with Dumont's treatment of sexual intercourse elsewhere throughout the film, which is portrayed as being impassionate and inherently violent[23], these images introduce the spectator to the notion that sex and violence can perhaps be considered two sides of the same coin in respect to the *abject*, and thus signalling their dual nature in portraying forms of *transgression*. As Berressem comments, a work of *abject art* "links the abject directly to the corporeal realm" (20), listing semen and blood among the "corporeal matter" (Ibid) which form the *abject*. O'Shaughnessy makes a significant observation on this matter, writing that the shot of the young girl's vagina is

echoed later in the film by a shot of Domino's sexually aroused vagina which makes a clear reference to Courbet's famously scandalous painting The Origin of Life. *The film would seem to suggest that if it is through the vagina that all human life issues, life is brutal and rooted in the physical.* (120)

Twentynine Palms appears to espouse similar notions, the film concentrating upon the *body* and its various acts of sex and violence to a greater degree than Dumont's previous two films. Whereas they contained, at the core of their narratives, a central plot point around which the films' content revolved (the 'threat' of Kader, a murder mystery), *Twentynine Palms* eschews this for Dumont's "most minimal [film] in terms of plot and character…[as they] drive around, explore the desert, go for ice cream and squabble" (Holden 2004: n. pag.). Yet, this narrative 'transparency' allows for a heightened examination of the relation between sex, violence, and the *abject* to occur within the film,

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[23] Benézet refers to the "pornographic perspective which emphasizes male sexuality and violence" (172) within Dumont's films.

and its subsequent position within a discourse of transgression in contemporary society in general, as well as within French cinema.

Like *The Life of Jesus* and *L'humanité*, *Twentynine Palms* treats its scenes of copulation with an impassionate, cold examination, the sexual and the violent, again, conflated. During the couple's moments of sexual intercourse, David yells out during orgasm in a manner that suggests pain rather than pleasure. Several commentators echo this notion: Dennis Lim describes David as "unleashing a *piercing slaughterhouse howl* at the moment of climax" (C84, emphasis added), while Ed Gonzalez uses similar terminology in describing the act of climax, referring to the manner in which David "unleashes a *primordial wail*" (n. pag., emphasis added). Tim Palmer comments more extensively on this conception, in reference to David and Katia's "violent, frantic sex" (2011: 77):

> *The physical brutality is jarringly underscored by exclamations from the actors' vocal cords, which we hear pushed to grotesque breaking point: in ragged gasps, harsh sobs, and broken shrieks of pain. Human copulation, aggrandized and made primal,…reaches a brutish and guttural crescendo, as much a shattering release or explosion of energy as a sexual climax. The act of sex itself…becomes devoid of pleasure…* (Ibid)

If David's orgasms signal a conflict between the sexual and the violent, that conflict is made whole by the film's conclusion, as David is severely raped and beaten by a group of three unknown men in one of the desert's many isolated sections. This act of sexual violence becomes an extension of the couple's earlier bouts of 'animalistic' or 'primitive' intercourse, the relations between sex and violence now made clearer through a conflation of the two. After the final occurrence of violence David incurs upon Katia, and then himself, the *abject* thus becomes embodied through at least three different contexts: as purely sexual libido; as a hybrid of sexual violence, which offers pleasure (to the assaulters) at the expense of pain (to David and Katia); and finally, as purely violent instinct.

However, while these instances of the *abject* are evidenced on a base level of the corporeal—harkening back to the ideas of blood and semen as forming the corporeal "matter" of which the *abject* may consist of—, they simultaneously denote the equally-significant notion of the *abject* as a 'threatening' body which encroaches upon boundaries and order. All three aforementioned contexts function as such. David and Katia, though engaging in a private, and normally affectionate affair for a couple, become 'foreign' towards one another merely through the act of sex. (Their disconnectedness is further amplified by the lack of understanding they have for one another due to language barriers: David's native language is English, with limited knowledge in French, while Katia's primary language is Russian, while also proficient in French and English.) Similarly, David's murder of Katia represents the couple's most extreme form of being alien to one another, identity and space both dismantled through a blind rage.

Nevertheless, it is the three men's assault on David which best signifies the role the *abject* possesses in disturbing identity; here, specifically, male identity, as the *abject* can perhaps best be thought of as representing a 'crisis of masculinity' for David. Though not technically a 'character', David's Hummer becomes a central figure in examining the function of masculinity, its role amplified as the couple spends much of the film wandering the desert in it. Shane Gunster, writing on the "transformative power of Hummer" (92), suggests that

> *the truck is celebrated for helping normally mild-mannered men slough off the repressive conventions of civilization in favor of a primordial masculine identity. The rhetoric is that of emancipation, authenticity, and joyful regression: the aggressive behavior and atavistic fantasies inspired by the Hummer are applauded as expressive of the true needs and desires that stand at the core of what it means to be a "real" man. The rhetoric of biological essentialism…is pressed into service in the surreptitious naturalization of what is actually a deeply ideological and technologically mediated account of gender.* (92-3)

Gunster recounts a number of testimonials from automotive critics and journalists, as well as citing the marketing direction of General Motors, all echoing a similar sentiment: that the Hummer heightens the 'feeling' of masculinity within he—and, occasionally, she—who drives it, functioning more on impulse than reason or logic (i.e., there may be no need for non-military citizens to own such a vehicle, but its role as enacting primal and visceral sensations takes precedence). Richard A. Rogers similarly proposes that Hummers are "identified with the US military and other figures of hegemonic masculinity" (290), and that its image conveys the message that "if your masculinity is threatened, a Hummer will restore it" (292). In essence, the Hummer triggers, for many men, latent feelings of hyper-masculinity, which is, in turn, utilized by advertisers as their primary marketing image, in order to continue the cycle of 'masculinization' by the vehicle.

Its role in marking David's 'masculinity' is shown most clearly in two scenes. In one, Katia and David sit in a café, noticing a marine sitting at a nearby table. David asks Katia whether he should shave his head in the style of the marine's, to which Katia responds that it is "beautiful", yet laughing and recommending that David *not* attempt to do so. David is offended by her mocking tone, which is followed shortly thereafter by an argument between the two. Recall the Hummer's original status as a military-oriented vehicle, which still holds today: David's offence becomes clear in this context, as his previous effort to 'gain' an image of masculinity through his Hummer is quickly deflated by the suggestion that he cannot pull off a military-style appearance, which subsequently suggests that he cannot pull off driving a military-style vehicle. This offence is further emphasized by the fact that his girlfriend makes the remarks, a figure, whom, presumably, David has worked hard to impress and be 'macho' for.

This point becomes even clearer in the context of the second scene highlighting the connection between David's Hummer and his attempt to become hyper-masculinized. At one point during their travels through the desert, David allows Katia the opportunity to take control of the vehicle. What ensues is Katia's inability to properly commandeer the Hummer, resulting in her scraping the paint off one side upon driving through brush. In response to David's anger, Katia, again, laughs, thus emasculating him once more. A following scene shows David intently waxing his car where the paint scraped off, a

moment that Hughes suggests is "an attempt to reconstruct his masculine authority" (2004: n. pag.).

If the Hummer acts as a nexus through which David attempts, and repeatedly fails, to assert a form of masculine hegemony, it is all but shattered in the attack on him and Katia. What is first significant is that the Hummer is driven off the road by a normal-looking, but significantly larger, pickup truck—even though the Hummer offers, for one critic, a "feeling of invincibility" (Dimon K10). From this initial intrusion upon, and destabilization of David's masculine authority, comes the most extreme, and final act of David's emasculation: being anally raped by one of the attackers, as Katia is forced to watch it unfold (of note is the lack of her own rape, inverting the 'typical' image of what such a context may entail). Significantly, too, is the rapist's own shaved head, thus asserting his own masculinity over David's: he with his long, shaggy, and ideologically 'feminine' hair style is forced to submit himself to the physical domination of a man who, by contrast, assumes the appearance of a marine, a figure whom Katia finds "handsome". David's 'crisis of masculinity' thus finds itself at its apex in this moment, his anxieties over his own masculinized appearance initially triggered by Katia's infantilizing behaviour towards him, and now fully manifest through the literal submission to a more 'dominant' male figure. Aside from the physical and emotional pain of being beaten and sexually assaulted, David must also contend with the embarrassment and shame that comes with Katia's viewing of the act; such an occurrence may typically find itself hidden from a man's female partner, but in this case, David will forever think of himself as 'weak' or 'impotent' in front of Katia. As Coulthard suggests, "male-on-male rape becomes a shameful collective secret…suffering rape is classified as a feminized victimization…put simply, men are frequently seen to be feminized, made to play the woman by rape" (175). She further describes the repercussions of having Katia witness David's rape, by offering the notion that "male-on-male rape witnessed by the woman undermines and negates the association of woman as paradigmatic victim of rape, as essential rapable object, and transfers this traumatic potentiality to the male body" (183-4).

This total loss of David's masculine authority precipitates his actions in the final minutes of the film: confining himself to the motel bathroom, Katia receives no response

when she beckons him for supper, shortly before David bursts through the door in a manic craze, repeatedly stabbing Katia to death. Significantly, at this point, David reveals to us his shaved head, in what can only be assumed as a last-ditch (albeit delirious) attempt to reclaim any semblance of his masculine identity. The murder of Katia further serves an inverse function to his rape: now he, once more, is able to establish his own form of masculine hegemony, in a final effort to assuage his 'crisis of masculinity'. As Coulthard proposes, his murder of Katia is "a reclamation of phallic masculinity" (183), and that he must "kill Katia not because of her feminine otherness but because she represents the easy slippage of gender roles" (Ibid). Hughes suggests as much, commenting that the scene represents "the dissolution of the fictional unity of David's masculine subjectivity (and his failed attempt to reconstruct it through violence and the shaving of his head)" (2004: n. pag.)[24]. Two important points come from Hughes's reading: first, is the idea that David uses violence as a means to "reconstruct" his masculine identity. Recall the scenes of David and Katia having sex, in which David emits primal yells during orgasm, the aggressive intercourse hinting at an undercurrent of violence; Hughes proposes that David's

> *thin frame, shag haircut, and fashionably-dishevelled wardrobe put him in*
> *stark contrast to the "proud, fighting men of the US Marines" who*
> *surround the periphery…Alone with Katia, however, he*
> *(over)compensates for any apparent lack.* (2004: n. pag.)

Barry Keith Grant makes a similar suggestion in identifying the significance of the Hummer and final sequence in understanding David's 'crisis of masculinity':

> *…David transforms sex and intimacy into assertions of masculine*
> *power…If the Hummer is an extension of David's masculinity, it is rear-*
> *ended, just as he is by his attackers…[The film highlights] the internal*

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[24] The final sequence echoes that of *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976), as Robert DeNiro's Travis Bickle shaves his head into a Mohawk and, attempting to construct his own masculinity, murders the inhabitants of a brothel in a rampage.

tensions of masculine identity. David's response to his rape is to murder

Katia because his masculine subjectivity has been destroyed. (13)

And so in his final instance of being alone with Katia, David's aggressive sexual tendencies turn into pure violence in order to rectify his 'emasculation'. The second significant point, however, is Hughes's observation that David's identity reconstruction is a "failed attempt", most clearly delineated in the film's final shot: lying naked in the desert, a high-angle shot configures David as a defeated, shrunken figure, lying in close proximity to his Hummer. An irony presents itself in highlighting his failed attempts to assert his masculinity, the juxtaposition of David and the very object that was to have granted him his 'masculine authority' revealing the futility of his efforts and, subsequently, that of relying on a commodity to assert one's normative gender role.

In the end, however, David's omnipresent concern with his own masculine identity finds itself radically altered by elements of the *abject*, most significantly through functions of sex and violence. If a central function of the *abject* is to 'disturb' identity, it is here done so through the constellation of its tenets, which comprise of foreign bodies (the marine in the café, the three attackers), sex, and violence—yet, most significantly, sexual violence, as enacted upon by the three men, which also signals a complete rupture in David's 'crisis of masculinity'. Dumont thus utilizes the *abject* in *Twentynine Palms* to specifically comment on the various functions of sex, violence, and masculinity in contemporary culture, concurrently using it to signal transgressive shifts in how we think about such issues in today's society.

The relationship between sex and violence, and their inherent similarities, throughout the two films is remarked upon by Dumont, himself, stating: "When one makes love, there is pleasure in this sexual release, but one makes the same face as when one is in pain. Someone who enjoys this release is also someone who suffers" (qtd. in Tracy, n. pag.). Numerous commentators support this contention: Lim describes *Twentynine Palms* as "linking sex, violence, and man's animalistic nature" (C84), while Gonzalez suggests that it "questions the link between sex and violence" (n. pag.); Tracy makes a similar claim in reference to *L'humanité*:

It is no coincidence that Pharaon witnesses Domino and Joseph having
sex soon after discovering the girl's body. In the inescapable reflexivity of
L'humanité*, the act of love is analogous with the act of violation; the*
physicality which allows for a moment of transport is the very thing which
weighs inexorably down. (n. pag.)

The *abject*, here, thus becomes what Kristeva terms the "in-between, the
ambiguous, the composite…[disturbing] identity, system, order" (4), and "not
[respecting] borders, positions, rules" (Ibid). For in all of these images, Dumont confuses
the sexual and the violent to suggest that sex, by nature, is violent, and violent is
inherently sexual. Such perversions are thus ultimately portrayed through the *body* in his
films, for, as he remarks in response to a question regarding the "corporeal" (Peranson
and Picard 70) nature of his films: "Rawness…allows us to think anew. What I want is
for the viewer to rethink liberally the reality which he faces" (Ibid). And, as such, this
"rethinking" better allows for the connection between Dumont, the *abject*, and
transgression to be evidenced in the films: through the focus on the *corporeal*, Dumont
treats his human subjects as being *abject*, depicting them as threatening (Joseph, the three
men), grotesque (a close-up of Pharoan's superior's sweat-drenched neck, David
masturbating to an episode of *The Jerry Springer Show*), or unwelcome (the young girl's
vagina, Katia through the eyes of a mad David). And, just as the *abject* disturbs "system"
and "order", and does not "respect borders" or "rules", so, too, does *transgressive* cinema
act in the same way: to break boundaries and traditional norms, often through corporeal
manners in order to physiologically provoke the spectator. Bruno Dumont thus acts as an
exemplary instance of the New French Extremity's transgressive nature.

3.5 The Abject as Body Politic

In concluding this chapter on the role of the *abject* within the films of Bruno
Dumont, it is worth raising the idea of the *abject* as constituting a form of 'body politic'
within all three of his films examined herein. This inquiry stems from a suggestion by
Hughes that *L'humanité* offers "stunning and often shocking images of the body—here, *a*
conflation of the body of flesh with the body politic—and by forcing us to respond

truthfully and viscerally to them" (2002: n. pag., emphasis added). Regrettably, Hughes does not qualify his usage of the term "body politic", resulting in a rather vague context through which he raises his point, and giving credence to what Erin O'Connor describes as having been "blunted into a buzzword for a contemporary critical topic, the specific meaning of the term 'body politic' [having] been lost in its expansive academic circulation" (n. pag.). Regardless, I interpret Hughes's approach as demarcating an important relationship between the body and its role within, and as shaped by, the society it inhabits.

One could, for instance, look back to Beugnet's earlier description of the 'cinema of abjection' as including "criminals", "psychopaths", or "monstrous beings…creations of the very system that must eradicate them". This suggestion bears significant weight throughout the trio of films, as all acts of murder appear to call attention less to the superficial attributes of their perpetrators—that they are 'evil', 'villainous', or 'psychopathic'—but more to the society in which such actions have been shaped and enacted within. Delphine Benézét, remarking that *The Life of Jesus* raises "political and social issues", proposes the central issue as inquiring: "can hope survive in a community abandoned by the political process?" (167) (This very issue even informs many of France's own recent tribulations.) Dumont himself has stated that *L'humanité* is intended "to be an occasion to meditate around evilness, awfulness—the evil's origin" (Conterio n. pag.). And, finally, Ed Gonzalez suggests that "sex and violence in *Twentynine Palms* [is used] as a pretext—not only to address the "nature" of American violence but to dissect the way audiences intellectually and emotionally respond to it" (n. pag.); similarly, Hughes refers to its "timely" and "urgent" nature through the interrogation of "America's defining tropes [which] have made of such violence a point of pride and national unity" (2004: n. pag.).

All of these ideas intrinsically link back to the way in which the body is treated in the films, both within the diegesis and through Dumont's cinematographic approach: the corporeal—the *abject*—becomes a vehicle through which to question the sources of transgressive behaviour in contemporary society, simultaneously attuned to a specific culture (French, American) and a universal nature. This impulse might also help provide insight into the view that such transgression may be a product of, or a catalyst for, the

breakdown of communication, itself corroborated by the actions of the films' characters. Lübecker suggests that, in *Twentynine Palms*,

> *two of the most obvious means of communication—language and the look—are eliminated, and the relationship between the characters instead becomes a body-to-body one…[T]he film functions via regression…it strips away discourse, intellect, psychology and civilization to leave us with bodies that interact by fighting, screwing, crying, shouting and being consumed by their passion.* (237)

Hughes offers similar insight into the film, commenting that David and Katia appear "barely cognisant of the other's presence…miscommunicating, still struggling to capture a glimpse of some impossible communion" (2004: n. pag.). Dumont's previous two films would also appear to support this line of discourse: Freddy exchanges few words with his girlfriend, mother, and even his friends, a majority of the 'communication' confined to acts of physicality, such as the incessant scooter-driving, his playing in a marching band or tending to his pet finch, sex, and violence. Freddy's mother is more preoccupied with the television images of the AIDS epidemic than with her son's evident melancholy, and, as Hughes rightly points out in the chair lift scene, he and Marie "appear more at ease in their embrace than in conversation. When they talk, they sit as far removed from one another as their chair will allow" (2002: n. pag.). Likewise, Pharaon tends to lack any form of comprehensive speech with others, instead committed to individual, physical activities such as gardening, riding his bicycle, or playing his keyboard. When he does interact with others, it is often either through benign passivity—staring at Joseph and Domino having sex, or unwilling to make Joseph cease his reckless driving—or basic thought, such as his simple analysis of a museum painting, reduced to nothing more than pointing out how pretty the blue colour looks.

3.6 Conclusion: An Aesthetic of the Fragment

In all three of these films, human communication is broken, unclear, and frequently consumed by purely physical acts, which are often without clear reason or

provenance. Its disintegration has either led to the *abject*'s role in dictating human relations, or vice versa: the modern embodiment of the *abject* is a by-product of a society becoming increasingly transgressive in nature. While Dumont does not seem to suggest one as a catalyst for the other, I propose that his focus on the corporeal as *abject*, his focus on disconnected relationships and isolated bodies within *sublime* settings, and his focus on physical actions over human speech link back to an ultimate aim of his: to reflect upon the nature of transgression as it stands, today, and to attempt to locate its source(s). In closing, I advocate these works as part of what Martin O'Shaughnessy designates an 'aesthetic of the fragment'[25], which he defines as "the absolute non-reconciliation of individual and society, so that what one might call a social cinema in fact shows the deconstruction of the social" (25). He expands upon this:

> *If the cinema of the fragment is characterized by the absence of an explicit politics and social connectivity and the presence of unmediated, corporeal collisions and raw struggles, the emergent fragment is one where an explicit politics is falling silent or becoming disembodied, where individuals and groups are becoming detached and where struggles are becoming raw and corporeal.* (99-100)

If Dumont's films can be characterized by this 'aesthetic of the fragment', so, too, should much of contemporary society, and, for the purposes of this research, French society in particular: increasing struggles are being met with swelling fragmentation among people, relations and communication disjointed and repressed, and an air of malaise having turned into one of transgression, artistically and socio-politically. And so it is, then, that the body and landscape become the key representations of this transgression, the *abject* functioning as a site of resistance for social change, and Dumont's films firmly rooted in the New French Extremity's context of socio-political and artistic transgression.

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[25] O'Shaughnessy expands upon this concept as delineated by Patricia Osganian; unfortunately, her original writing in which this theoretical approach was configured is unable to be readily located.

Epilogue

In writing this thesis, my goals have been largely twofold: I have attempted to locate the New French Extremity's formative status within the history of cinematic traditions, in order to more properly ascertain its status as a 'film movement'; and, simultaneously, I have also sought to expand upon theories of affect, spectatorship, and transgressive cinema. The latter represents a key idea in informing the aims, aesthetics, content, function, and reception of the films discussed, for the element of transgression is what I deem to be central to understanding *why* these films have been made. The transgressive nature of the films—seeking to rupture social norms through the gratuitous depictions of sex, violence, and sexual violence, as well as treating the filmic narratives as largely fatalistic, nihilistic, and, at times, amoral—should also be seen as a symptom of France's own socially- and culturally-transgressive acts over approximately the last decade. Returning to the notion of a transgressive act being one of 'assault' or 'provocation', my intention has been to connect such a definition to the recent events in France (i.e., the various riots, protests, and acts of anti-authoritarianism).

Furthermore, I have endeavored to introduce methods of research relatively novel to the field of film studies. Integrating areas such as psychology, neuroscience, and psychophysics with more 'typical' approaches to film analysis (i.e., philosophy, formalism, *auteur* studies) represents my desire to expand the current boundaries of film studies, re-imagining the methodologies often employed in the field. Specifically, I have aimed to hybridize forms of scientific inquiry with film theory.

While I have concentrated on Noé and Dumont, it must be noted that a key area of interest in examining the New French Extremity was all but absent from this thesis: the role of female filmmakers. While outnumbered by the production of films from male directors, woman filmmakers commonly associated with the Extremity (Catherine Breillat, Marina de Van, Claire Denis) have acquired prominence within the collection of films. Their films often position female protagonists as the central characters, denoting a

marked contrast to the somewhat male-dominated films made by their peers.[26] However, due to its breadth, it is an area I have decided to avoid entirely.

However, the acts of researching a recent cinematic phenomenon and assimilating areas of research largely unfamiliar to studies of cinema raise many questions and introduce numerous concepts and ideas too numerous to expound upon in the space allotted. As such, I will briefly list a variety of areas and ideas that I suggest require more research to be conducted upon in the future:

1. The socio-political context of France appears to be changing, which thus requires an updated examination of the New French Extremity's development and trends. François Hollande's 2012 victory as president marks a shift from seventeen consecutive years of centre-right leanings to leftist ones. His inauguration marks only the second time (since François Mitterrand, presiding from 1981-1995) a Socialist candidate has become president of the country. As such, the acts of public resistance examined in Chapter I can perhaps best be seen not as reflecting the mindset of only a minority of the population, but instead signaling a wider alteration in socio-political tendencies. Consequently, research on the New French Extremity should take these changes into consideration, attempting to locate any parallel shifts in the films' aesthetics/themes/content themselves.

2. The concept of haptic cinema should be examined at greater length in regards to shifting cinematic technologies, such as three-dimensional cinema and technologies of augmented reality. Itself a fairly recent area of study in film, ideas of the haptic must be continually updated to reflect the shifting avenues through

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[26] This can be seen throughout all six films I have closely analyzed in the thesis: they either focus on a male protagonist (every film except for *Twentynine Palms*) or, more significantly, position the females as 'victims' to the actions of the male characters, or are elsewise 'helpless' in some manner. (Noé: the misogynistic Butcher in *I Stand Alone*, the focus on male-on-female rape in *Irreversible*, the characterization of Linda as a stripper who must conform to the demands of her abusive boss in *Enter the Void*; Dumont: various instances of males as threatening figures towards female characters in *The Life of Jesus*, the rape of a young girl and Joseph's domineering behavior towards Domino in *L'humanité*, David's slaughter of Katia at the end of *Twentynine Palms*.) Contrastingly, films such as Breillat's *À ma sœur!* (*Fat Girl*, 2001) and Denis's *Trouble Every Day* position females as the main characters, the former film examining sister-relations, the latter portraying its female protagonist as subjugating men under her power through acts of cannibalism.

which we receive and interpret sounds and images. Accordingly, theories of affect, spectatorship, and transgression should further be studied in tandem with those of haptic cinema, here specifically in conjunction with the studies of the New French Extremity.

3. Film studies should further strive to integrate areas of research previously thought of as being 'alien' to the field, in order to open up a wider variety of avenues through which to study film, and thus to give way to more original methodologies. The areas of science and art should cease to be thought of as being mutually exclusive, instead hybridized in a manner which allows one to inform the other.

4. Much can be discussed in regards to the Extremity's generic properties, something which I have only briefly touched upon throughout this thesis. It may prove useful to examine the variety of genres witnessed among the films, in order to more properly assess the goals of the filmmakers, and the ways in which spectators interpret them. Of particular interest is the Extremity's indebtedness to the genres of horror (body horror, significantly) and social realism, the two often informing one another within an individual film. It is a juxtaposition which seemingly brings two disparate genres together, and may point to interesting notions of what, exactly, makes these films so notable in their function.

5. The growing interest in films of and concepts related to the New French Extremity[27] must be taken into account to reflect potential changing traditions in the reception of the films. Specifically, it is important to realize that the Extremity's integration into mainstream avenues of inquiry may very well reflect

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[27] A recent instance of this can be found in the latest edition of the *Oxford Dictionary of Film*, which includes an entry on "extreme cinema (ordeal cinema)", which is defined as "a group of films that challenge codes of censorship and social mores, especially through explicit depiction of sex and violence, including rape and torture" (Kuhn and Westwell 152). The provenance of "ordeal cinema" is directly ascribed to the role of the spectator, "who commits to watching a film that will take them through a horrendous experience in what seems like real time" (Ibid).

the wider public's changing attitudes towards on-screen depictions of sex, violence, and sexual violence as being more accepting of them. Such an observation would be useful in questioning the status of the New French Extremity as a form of transgressive cinema: if transgression becomes more readily consumed by a general film-viewing populace, can it thus be considered 'transgressive' any more? Furthermore, its growing popularity might also point to questions of arthouse cinema's greater acceptance among spectators: its integration into a more 'mainstream' sphere[28] might raise questions about the distinction between arthouse and mainstream cinema, if such films are to blur that differentiation.

6. Finally, one of the most significant changes to the New French Extremity is that its corporeal, transgressive nature is being portrayed in other national cinemas. Horeck and Kendall predicted this expansion in the title of their 2011 book, *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe*, and, the following year, note that "the new extremism tendency…has been a growing cinematic force across a number of national contexts, including films from South Korea, Japan, the United States, Mexico, and the Philippines" (2012: 5). They further suggest that "the notion of an extreme art cinema can feasibly be thought of not just as a transnational trend, but also as a highly lucrative global commodity, marketed to consumers in a range of different national contexts" (Ibid). A number of key questions are thus raised: If the "new extremism" was originally the product of French filmmakers who were responding to both the nation's socio-politics and its 'stagnant' film ecosystem, what happens to this cultural specificity when other nations adopt its aesthetic and narrative tendencies? Are notions of it being a movement thus questioned, if a movement must necessarily be informed by a set of 'goals' sought to be achieved by its filmmakers? Does this global expansion reflect other nations' desires to simply 'mirror' the French Extremity in an attempt to duplicate its success (or, perhaps, notoriety)? Or does it perhaps point

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[28] I point to the inclusion of *Irreversible* on the American version of the popular film and television streaming service, Netflix, as an example of such.

to similar feelings of malaise in other parts of the world, only now brought to the surface in cinema? As Horeck and Kendall similarly pose, "What happens to the specificity of the films of the new European extremism and their self-conscious address to the spectator when the category of extremism is opened up, and takes on global dimensions?" (Ibid)

Certainly, the New French Extremity—and its "extremism" siblings—continues to raise such integral questions and, therefore, requires much greater research to be conducted in order to fully understand this complex, diverse, and rapidly-shifting cinematic tradition.

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Conferences and Presentations

2013 FSAC-ACÉC Annual Conference, The Annual Conference of the Film Studies Association of Canada (FSAC) (Title: "Gaspar Noé's *Enter the Void* (2009) and the Haptic Image") *University of Victoria, Victoria, BC*	June 5, 2013
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