

**VIOLENT SUBJECTIVITY: NEW EXTREMIST CINEMA AND THE PHILOSOPHY  
OF JEAN-LUC NANCY**

by

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## Abstract

Non-simulated penetrative sex, graphic sexual violence, gore, cannibalism, murder, incest, and necrophilia: excessive violence and explicit sexuality characterize European new extremism, a contemporary arthouse film movement that challenges audiences through its visceral interrogations of the body. Affect and embodiment are at the heart of the discourse concerning new extremism. Although approaching the movement from different frameworks, scholars agree that these films are transgressive in terms of style as well as content: they foreground the ways that cinema is able to impact the body, rather than the mind, of the spectator, and in doing so challenge traditional notions of spectatorship. This thesis examines new extremism in light of the work of contemporary French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, whose ontology of the subject provides a fresh perspective on the confrontational and occasionally traumatic cinematic experiences offered by these films.

Nancy is a philosopher of limits: he argues that metaphysics has reached an impasse, and the way forward is to figure these limits in order to gesture towards what is beyond our ability to signify. He characterizes this excess in corporeal terms, arguing that there is always an excess in our material experiences that cannot be constrained to a system of thought. Using films such as Claire Denis's *Trouble Every Day* (2001), Gaspar Noé's *Enter the Void* (2009), Philippe Grandrieux's *Sombre* (1998), and Marina de Van's *In My Skin* (2002), I explore the ways that new extremism illustrates and exemplifies Nancy's argument that the body is in excess of our understanding. The subject for Nancy constitutes itself, and in so doing divides itself from its body: this results in paradoxes and contradictions that are inexorable to our metaphysical thinking. But these paradoxes are suspended over the groundless non-essence of reality, a reality that we make images of through art and language. Nancy argues that art and existence are

predicated on violence and cruelty, forces that he characterizes ambivalently as giving rise to the possibility of both abhorrent brutality and radical creation. New extremism touches on this ambivalence, using its central interrogation of the body to expose what is at the limit of our understanding.

## **Preface**

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Chelsea Birks.

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Finally, I would like to thank Jean-Luc Nancy for writing such challenging, provocative, and beautiful words.

## Introduction

“L’extrémité forme ainsi, à tous les égards, la position et la nature du *cogito*.<sup>1</sup>

-Jean-Luc Nancy, *Ego Sum*.

Uncompromising brutality and visceral affect characterize European new extremism, a cinematic movement that troubles the ethical and ontological status of genre, art, and culture at the turn of the millennium. While new extremism encompasses a diverse canon that exhibits a variety of technical, political, and aesthetic viewpoints, its films are related through a shared ability to exploit the physical impact of cinema. Employing the conventions of “lowbrow” genres like pornography and horror within the more “cultured” context of European arthouse cinema, new extremism complicates distinctions between the corporeal and the cerebral, challenging audiences through an assault of graphic and often gory displays of violence, sexuality, and sexual violence. The movement emerged in France at the end of the 1990s with films such as Virginie Despente and Coralie Trinh Thi’s blood-soaked road revenge movie *Baise-Moi* (1999), Phillippe Grandieux’s obscure and enigmatic serial killer film *Sombre* (1998), Gaspar Noé’s vitriolic criticism of right wing France in *I Stand Alone [Seul contre tous]* (1998), and Catherine Breillat’s sexually explicit *Romance* (1999). New extremist films continued to shock and challenge audiences through the 2000s, some of the more notorious examples including Claire Denis’s *Trouble Every Day* (2001), Gaspar Noé’s *Irréversible* (2002) and *Enter the Void* (2009), Catherine Breillat’s *Fat Girl [À ma soeur!]* (2001) and *Anatomy of Hell* (2004), Marina de Van’s *In My Skin [Dans ma peau]* (2002), and Bruno Dumont’s *Twentynine Palms*

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<sup>1</sup> “Extremity therefore forms, by all considerations, the position and nature of the *cogito*” (*Ego Sum* 115, translation mine).

(2003). Since the baptism of “the new French extremity” in a derisive *Artforum* article by James Quandt in 2004, the term has come to encompass transgressive cinema from Europe outside of France as well, and has been applied to filmmakers such as Lars von Trier (especially *Antichrist* [2009], although *The Idiots* [1998] and *Dogville* [2003] are also frequently referenced in discussions of new extremism), Gyorgy Palfi (*Taxidermia* [2006]), Yorgos Lanthimos (*Dogtooth* [2009]), Lukas Moodysson (*A Hole in my Heart* [2004]), Ulrich Seidl (*Dog Days* [2001] and *Import/Export* [2007]), and Michael Haneke.<sup>2</sup> While these films are diverse in approach and subject matter, they share a penchant for provocation, using extreme representations of sex and violence to push the limits of acceptability in cinematic art.

At the centre of a number of controversies, notably mass walkouts at Cannes in the cases of *Irréversible*, *Trouble Every Day*, and *Martyrs* (Pascal Laugier 2008), as well as criticism and censorship from various media and government institutions,<sup>3</sup> new extremism has also recently

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<sup>2</sup> While Haneke’s films (particularly *Funny Games* [1997 and 2007], *The Piano Teacher* [2001], *Caché* [2005], and *The White Ribbon* [2009]) are commonly associated with new extremism, his controlled aesthetic approach distinguishes him from the rest of the directors in this list. As Horeck and Kendall argue (though they include him in their volume on new extremism), “there is a clear need to differentiate the films of Michael Haneke, which, despite their reputation for brutality, are characterised more by visual restraint than excessive violence or horror, and the ‘self-consciously trashy’, in-your-face sex and violence of a film like *Baise-moi*” (5).

<sup>3</sup> A number of new extremist films have been censored or banned, particularly by the British Board of Classification, which cut or blurred penetration shots in *Seul contre tous*, *Baise-moi*, and Bertrand Bonello’s *The Pornographer* (2001). Daniel Hickin links new extremism with a rise in liberalism in the BBFC, who rationalized their releases of associated films (*Romance*, *Irréversible*, *Baise-moi*, etc.) by linking them to a European art-cinema context and crediting them with having “serious artistic merit” (for a detailed history of censorship and new extremism in the U.K., see Hickin “Censorship, Reception and the Films of Gaspar Noé”). *Baise-moi* was especially controversial in the U.K., as the right-wing media derided the board extensively for approving the film (albeit with cuts), while others heralded it as a sign of increased permissiveness and freedom of speech. The film also met with controversy elsewhere: it was banned in France before being granted an 18+ certificate that allowed it to be screened for adults,

become a focus of academic discourse concerning issues of embodiment, affect, and the haptic capacity of cinema.<sup>4</sup> Described alternatively as a “cinema of sensations” (Martine Beugnet) or the *cinéma du corps* (Tim Palmer), new extremism takes the body as its central subject matter, and the physical nature of these films makes them perfect for discussing cinema’s affective qualities: a number of scholars have written from a variety of critical perspectives on new extremism’s ability to “reach through the screen” and impact the spectator on a visceral level. Despite the depth and variety of writing on the subject, however, criticism of new extremism has reached a standstill, arguably echoing the status of the film movement itself. What seemed provocative and radical at the beginning of the millennium is now, a decade later, a waning fad, the ghost of which can be seen in certain relentless but decidedly less complex European “torture porn” films of recent years (*The Human Centipede* [Tom Six 2009], *A Serbian Film* [Srdjan Spasojevic 2010]). This decline has even been noted by Quandt, who remarks that films of the new extremism have become “desperate artefacts” of a particular period in French history, and even filmmakers previously associated with the movement (Claire Denis, Bruno Dumont, etc.) have moved on to other, less confrontational projects (“More Moralism” 209-13). While this might suggest that the movement has lost its relevance, this project aims to reinvigorate the discussion by reconfiguring its terms. I provide a fresh approach to new extremism by way of the

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and was also banned briefly in Ontario before being reviewed and passed as a result of outcry from prominent Canadian directors such as Denys Arcand, Atom Egoyan, and Patricia Rozema. It remains banned in Ireland (along with *Romance*), Singapore, and Australia (despite having been passed initially with an R rating).

<sup>4</sup> See in particular Martine Beugnet’s *Cinema and Sensation: French Film and the Art of Transgression*, Tim Palmer’s *Brutal Intimacy: Analyzing Contemporary French Cinema*, and Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall’s edited volume, *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe*. I shall return to these texts in more detail in Chapter One.

thought of contemporary French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, and to argue for the continued significance of new extremism as a movement that touches on violence, subjectivity, and the status of art in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While issues of spectatorship, affect, and the body will remain central to my project, through Nancy's thought I will re-assess their ontological underpinnings and ethical implications. This application of Nancy's thought to new extremist cinema is not arbitrary: Nancy has written extensively about aesthetics in general and cinema in particular, and since 2001 has had an ongoing intellectual relationship with Claire Denis, a key filmmaker associated with new extremism. Nancy has written several essays on her work, and in turn Denis has incorporated his ideas into her cinema, even adapting an autobiographical essay by Nancy into a film by the same name (*L'Intrus* [2004]). These points of intersection will allow me to expand on Nancy's thought and comment on its significance within and beyond the context of contemporary French cinema. As a film movement that is contextually and conceptually close to Nancy's thought, new extremism provides an entry point into Nancy's ontology of the image and of the subject while, inversely, Nancy's views on violence and art shed new light on the nature of transgression as evoked by new extremist film texts.

The relevance of Nancy's philosophy for film studies has been largely ignored or understated, so one of the aims of this project is to work out some of the implications of his thought for film theory and criticism. Chapter One will therefore tease out Nancy's theory of the subject and articulate its relationship to the image, exploring the pertinence of his ontology for film studies by applying it to the example of new extremism. An overview of the literature on new extremism to date, focusing in particular on Tim Palmer's *Brutal Intimacy: Analyzing Contemporary French Cinema*, Martine Beugnet's *Cinema and Sensation: French Film and the Art of Transgression*, and Tanya and Horeck and Tina Kendall's *The New Extremism in Cinema*:

*From France to Europe*, will contextualize my approach, articulating the gap in scholarship I wish to address through Nancy's philosophy. At the centre of these discussions of new extremism is the figure of the spectator, and the ways that new extremism uses affect to alter and interrogate the terms of spectatorship: my analysis therefore begins with a reassessment of the spectator. By considering the spectator according to Nancy's ontology of the subject, Chapter One seeks to provide new means of understanding the ways that the subject is evoked and impacted by art. Nancy argues that the subject figures itself out of an indeterminable groundlessness, and that it is this groundlessness that underlies our experiences of ourselves, of each other, and of the image: tearing ourselves out of this indeterminacy constitutes a certain violence, a violence that I argue is essential to the affective aesthetic experience elicited by new extremist films.

Chapter Two will examine the relationship between Nancy and Claire Denis, focusing primarily on the three films where their works intersect most clearly: *Beau Travail* (1999), *L'Intrus*, and *Trouble Every Day*. Given that *Trouble Every Day* is easily Denis's most controversial and denigrated film, conventional scholarship on Denis and Nancy tends to skim over or overlook it, but I argue that the film constitutes a significant exception in both Denis's cinema and Nancy's thought. Focusing in particular on the role of violence both within Denis's film and Nancy's discussion of it in an essay entitled "Icon of Fury," I contend that the film serves as a disruptive force that exposes essential contradictions in Nancy's thinking as well as Denis's cinema.

Chapter Three will discuss the disjunctive relationship between mind and body implied by the self-constitution of the ego, using Philippe Grandrieux's *Sombre*, Gaspar Noé's *Enter the Void*, and Marina de Van's *In My Skin* as illustrative examples. In constituting itself, the subject

divorces itself from its body, and it is this contradictory relationship between the mind and its material existence that I argue is at the heart of these films. Leading towards the ethical concerns that conclude this project, the third chapter articulates the ways in which the body comes to re-assert itself as a force in excess of our understanding.

Finally, the conclusion will address bigger-picture issues concerning the value and ethics of transgression in our post-theological, poststructuralist world. Drawing on the influence of Georges Bataille on Nancy's thought as well as on new extremism as a movement, I will argue that although transgression in Bataille's sense is no longer possible due to the proliferation and profitability of images of sex and violence in contemporary society, we nevertheless have a responsibility to interrogate our own limits. While Bataille views transgression as a crossing of boundaries and a means of accessing the sacred, Nancy's philosophy views the sacred as a spacing that occurs *at* the limit and not beyond it. The transgressions of new extremism re-space these limits, using the affective cruelty of art to expose the groundlessness of existence. My concluding remarks contend that new extremism is a fundamentally ethical cinema.

While Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall rightly warn against homogenizing the diverse group of films and filmmakers associated with the new extremism by assuming that they have the same intentions or effects on the spectator (5), Nancy's singular-plural ontology allows for recognition of the particularities of each film in the new extremist canon while nevertheless effectively evoking the ways in which they touch on each other and the spectators watching them. My project of necessity only addresses a small selection of new extremist texts—to give a comprehensive analysis of the movement is well beyond the scope of this project. It is my hope, however, that the application of Nancy's ideas to the group of films I have selected will suggest ways that his thought can be used in film studies and criticism more generally. The particular

films I have included were chosen because of their usefulness in explaining Nancy's concepts of subjectivity, aesthetics, and corporeality, although by no means are they the only films his thought might be applied to. For example, I suspect that some films in the French new wave of horror could be effectively analyzed according to the ontology outlined herein, especially ideas of pain and suffering as expressed in films like Pascal Laugier's *Martyrs* (2008) and Julien Maury and Alexandre Bustillo's *À l'intérieur [Inside]* (2007). Moreover, while I focus primarily on new extremism within France due to the limited scope of my project, Nancy's thought could also apply to examples beyond this immediate context in order to address European new extremism more generally: I especially think that Nancy's concept of community would provide an evocative framework for films such as *Dogtooth*, *The White Ribbon*, and *Antichrist*. These analyses would extend too far beyond the course of my own thought here, however, and therefore I leave them as suggestions for further research.

## **Chapter 1: Nancy and New Extremism**

“We touch on the intensity of this withdrawal or this excess.”

-Nancy, *The Ground of the Image* (9).

### **1.1 Context**

While the discourse on new extremism exhibits a variety of approaches, methodologies, and theoretical frameworks, there is a shared focus on the spectator and the ways in which new extremism exploits affect in order to renegotiate the relationship between subject and screen. Rather than countering any of these approaches, my project builds from previous scholarship in order to find new ways of understanding the affect elicited by these visceral film texts. Three recent publications provide the background to my own approach, and serve to contextualize my use of Nancy’s thought in theorizing the subject’s relation to new extremism: Martine Beugnet’s Deleuzian analysis in *Cinema and Sensation: French Film and the Art of Transgression* (2007), Tim Palmer’s empirical/cultural inquiry in *Brutal Intimacy: Analyzing Contemporary French Cinema* (2011), and Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall’s edited volume *The New Extremism in Cinema—From France to Europe* (2011). Each text provides a different way of conceiving and contextualizing new extremism; but whether from a bottom-up observational approach or a top-down theoretical approach all of these analyses argue that new extremism uses the materiality of the cinematic medium in order to impact the spectator on a raw, immediate level. My own analysis seeks to probe deeper into these concerns of subjectivity and affect, expanding the discussion through a deliberation on what it means to be a viewing subject in the context of the confrontational, visceral experience of new extremism.

Tim Palmer begins *Brutal Intimacy* by arguing against theoretical approaches to cinema, explaining that his “intention throughout is to offer any critical methods as defined by the actual

range of films encountered, not, as is regrettably customary, coercing a smaller set of cherry-picked texts into preexisting ideological or critical categories, inherited trains of thought” (4).

His text as a whole works as a polemic against the kind of critical approach I am taking here, an assertion that any analysis of film ought to begin with the films themselves and the cultural, economic, and technical conditions in which they are situated. While my approach does begin from a theoretical perspective and moves onto textual analysis only once this groundwork has been established, Nancy’s ontology re-interprets the very meaning of “preexisting . . . critical categories” and therefore grounds itself in a different kind of theory than what Palmer is positioning himself against. Since Nancy’s philosophy calls into question the possibility of understanding film at all, whether through empirical or theoretical means, the argument outlined herein contends that all perspectives on new extremism offered thus far serve as valid interpretations of the cinematic experience—although, as I shall explain in the following section, it is important to acknowledge these approaches *as* interpretations. By using Nancy’s philosophy as a theoretical framework, my hope is that I can create dialogue *between* approaches rather than advocating for one methodology over another. Palmer would no doubt find this evasion of his criticism rather slippery, but I leave it up to the reader in the end to judge my methodology and framework for themselves—while my analysis offers little to those looking for rigid foundations, it is my belief that a more holistic view is one that sees interconnections between thinkers as well as recognizing that *all* theories, no matter how rigorous, are limiting.

Tim Palmer’s empirical approach examines the cultural and economic landscape of France as it relates to the “ecosystem” of French cinema (2), arguing that what he calls the *cinéma du corps* both works from and innovates on French film tradition “to generate profound, often challenging, sensory experiences” (58). Because of his contention that French film should

be viewed as an ecosystem, his analysis covers a wide breadth of films and compares them through various devices, particularly intertextual connections, director biographies, and production histories. No film is considered in isolation; rather, each film is considered as a result of the interplay of forces at work in contemporary French film culture. He views the *cinéma du corps* to be a French film movement in the avant-garde tradition, similar to the French New Wave in that it is connected “loosely, through commonalities of content and technique” (58). Palmer sees something new and exciting in the way that new extremism uses visual and aural techniques to engage the viewer on both intellectual and physical levels, arguing that new extremism is more than merely artistic provocation for its own sake: for Palmer the “physical representations [of the *cinéma du corps*] . . . epitomize film as a medium” (89). He comments on the ability of cinema to translate immediate physical experience into something more lasting and permanent, and conversely its capacity for concretizing “ephemeral” ideas through the representation of bodies onscreen (89): through their affective and often assaultive interrogations of the body, the films of the *cinéma du corps* highlight the physical attributes of the medium, resulting in film experiences that are not easily forgotten, even if they are abhorred. Taking examples from the films of Claire Denis, Gaspar Noé, Marina de Van, Bruno Dumont, and Diane Bertrand (among others), Palmer explores how the movement offers a challenging and innovative alternative to the formulaic, often CGI-dominated films that meet the demand of the contemporary global marketplace. His attention to the climate of film production in France and his interviews with various filmmakers on their methods and intentions provide helpful insight into elements of new extremism that more theoretically based models tend to ignore (I shall return in particular to his reading of *In My Skin*, since his elucidative dialogue with Marina de Van plays into my Nancean/Cartesian analysis in Chapter Three).

Providing a more formalistic counterpoint to Palmer's observational analysis, Beugnet examines the way that a group of French new extremist films exploit style for physical impact and theorizes this impact according to the Deleuzian notion of hapticity. Her work follows in the wake of other theorists, such as Steven Shaviro, Laura U. Marks, Vivian Sobchack, and Linda Williams, who privilege the sensory experience of cinema over cultural, historical, or ideological concerns. Very much in line with my own inquiry in its assertion that "the customary tools of film studies (narrative and genre studies, semiology or even psychoanalysis) would yield few clues or openings" in analyzing the sensory qualities of new extremist films (7), Beugnet takes as her point of departure the fundamental, material qualities of cinema and the way that these qualities can be used in order to dissolve the boundaries between subject and object. By examining the formal and compositional elements of cinema, Beugnet's argument seeks to demonstrate the way that the sounds and images of new extremism—or the "cinema of sensation" as she prefers to call it, taking note of the way that labeling a film as "extreme" often downplays other significant features—can evoke the other senses and "invite the '*haptic*' gaze" (3). A haptic approach to cinema is one that recognizes film as a material entity (an assemblage of images and sounds) rather than a symbolic or ideological one;<sup>5</sup> Beugnet argues that the cinema of sensation exploits these material qualities in order to provoke synaesthetic responses in the spectator, and that its textures and noises elicit a feeling that more resembles the immediacy of touch than the distanced rationality of observation. Like Palmer, Beugnet argues that the

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<sup>5</sup> While Beugnet focuses primarily on the primary or "molecular" level of immediate sensory response, she does link this to the "molar" level of broader cultural concerns and anxieties about France's colonial history. See in particular her monograph *Claire Denis*, as well as "The Wounded Screen" from *The New Extremism in Cinema*.

heightened sensuality apparent in these contemporary French films reveals new and exciting possibilities for cinema as a medium.

While Beugnet situates her argument within Deleuzian discourse, she does address the kind of criticism levied from thinkers like Palmer who question an approach that seeks to position a body of films within a ready-made theoretical framework. Acknowledging that recent theorists advocating a sensory approach to cinema “have claimed the freedom to base their observations on apparently arbitrary samples of films, chosen irrespective of date and place of release, as well as genre and other categories,” Beugnet takes a more “old-fashioned” approach that combines close textual analysis with contextual concerns (11). While she admits that her method leaves out certain material concerns of cinema (such as production costs), she argues that a combined approach enriches our understanding of the ways that cultural and corporeal facets of film resonate with each other. Her approach therefore needs not be read as mutually exclusive with modes of study that abandon abstract theoretical concepts in favour of observation and cultural criticism; in fact, though the theoretical underpinnings are much different from Palmer’s, by employing a critical lens that privileges the physical, sensory qualities of cinema Beugnet’s analysis is just as in tune with new extremism’s empirical qualities as Palmer’s more historically-minded, intertextual approach. Given that Palmer and Beugnet draw similar conclusions about new extremism’s physical and affective qualities, it can reasonably be argued that the differences between them are more a matter of emphasis than the result of radically divergent points of view.

Like *Cinema and Sensation*, *The New Extremism in Cinema* addresses both conceptual and contextual concerns, expanding the discourse beyond the borders of France to explore extremity in contemporary films from throughout Europe. Taking a variety of approaches and addressing a range of subjects, from spectatorship to censorship to ethics to aesthetics, *The New*

*Extremism in Cinema* takes the fundamental premise that extremist films can be linked through an “uncompromising and highly self-reflexive appeal to the spectator” (1). While Horeck and Kendall acknowledge the importance of recognizing distinctions between films from different perspectives and cultural contexts, they argue that this shared sense of confrontational self-reflexivity is “indispensable to the critical task of rethinking the terms of contemporary spectatorship” (1). Featuring essays on films from a wide variety of filmmakers, including Gaspar Noé, Claire Denis, Phillippe Grandjeux, Ulrich Seidl, Lukas Moodysson, Lars von Trier, and Andrea Arnold, the volume contextualizes the work of a number of scholars (including Beugnet in an essay on history and the body in *Trouble Every Day*) within a framework that seeks to explore how new extremism can address the aesthetic, technical and ethical concerns of cinema in the 21st century.

*The New Extremism in Cinema* and *Cinema and Sensation* both draw heavily on the resistance of new extremist film text to established regimes of taste, genre, or political perspectives. Beugnet attributes this to the fact that new extremism privileges the physical elements of cinema over the way that these elements combine into a coded cultural whole; borrowing Deleuzian terminology, she argues that new extremism grounds itself in the “molecular” at the “micro level of perception,” rather than the “molar” level “concerned with ideological, social and psychological frameworks” (6). Horeck and Kendall make a similar argument, pointing out that attributing particular political viewpoints to new extremist films often “seems to drain them of much of their visceral intensity” (6). These ambiguities can be viewed as the result of the fact that new extremist films operate primarily at a physical level, which means that classification on “higher” levels of politics and culture tends to be difficult: new extremist films often straddle the lines between progressive and reactionary, trash and high

art. This does not imply that new extremism cannot be analyzed at the molar level, only that it tends to frustrate efforts to do so since it self-consciously places itself at a level prior to established patterns of representation. Affect therefore takes the central position in any analysis of new extremism, since the physical qualities of cinema and the way that these relate to an embodied spectator are prioritized and tend to problematize any other reading.

As this brief overview serves to show, the scholarship on new extremism up to this point has focused on its haptic or affective qualities, its capacity for social criticism, or its position in the context of contemporary French and European cinema. Like all of the scholars outlined above, my argument privileges spectatorial response and sensory engagement as a way of understanding new extremist films; however, I wish to begin from a different starting point. While Palmer, Beugnet, and Horeck and Kendall all provide excellent accounts of the sensory experiences, cultural contexts, and ethical implications of new extremism, what is lacking is an examination of the spectator itself: my project therefore begins from a place prior to the textual and contextual features of new extremism in order to examine affect and spectatorial response on a more basic level. By reassessing the cinematic spectator and its relationship to film texts, I aim to reinterpret the notion of affect that has been so central to previous discourse on new extremism.

## **1.2 *Veritas est Fabula***

Pointing out the extremes in reaction to the *cinéma du corps*, Tim Palmer argues that the movement “overhauls the role of the film viewer” by “rejecting the traditionally passive, entertained onlooker to demand instead viscerally engaged, active participant” (60); if this is true, then what is lacking from the discussion is an ontology of this viewer and an account of how this overhaul operates. While the figure of the spectator features prominently in the

discourse on new extremism, whether from an individual/affective perspective or with reference to broader sociological or political frameworks, the ontology outlined herein fills the gap in previous scholarship by theorizing the subject itself, in advance of its relationship to society or its position in front of the film screen. This might seem to be a contentious point of departure, since an image of the subject in advance of discourse or social construction goes against the postmodernist, poststructuralist, and psychoanalytic models currently favoured by many film studies scholars and journals; however, as shall become clear, Jean-Luc Nancy's ontology of the subject differs greatly from both the Enlightenment model of the subject as self-grounding and rational, as well as psychoanalytic and postmodern conceptions of the subject as constructed through language, structures of power, and/or desire. For Nancy, experience can never be fully explained through language, and his ontology of the subject is grounded not in a theoretical framework but in a logic of interpretation or fable. This ontology has radical consequences for the cinematic spectator, and consequently entails a new methodology for film theory, a methodology that I will attempt to demonstrate by employing it throughout this project.

While Nancy's theory differs for several reasons from the kind of Deleuzian/haptic approach taken by Beugnet in *Cinema and Sensation*, they agree in that they call into question the subject/object relation; I agree with Beugnet that new extremism collapses distinctions between the Cartesian subject and an external world that the subject is able to appropriate or master through reason. But while Beugnet describes the connection between subject and film in terms of "mimesis," arguing that sound and image serve to disrupt the state of "detached self-awareness" that audiences generally have towards more conventional narrative films in favour of a more active, physical form of involvement (5), my analysis regards the chasm between subject and art to be just as integral to the affective response as their connection. My argument therefore

abandons any notion of mimesis (in fact, Nancy argues vehemently against mimetic understandings of art in all of his writings on the subject, a point I shall elaborate further in the following section) in favour of a relation that relies as much on distinction and disruption as it does on connection and participation. In this respect my project expands the discussion beyond the immediate visceral concerns offered in *Cinema and Sensation*, as I understand the spaces between film screen and spectator to be just as important to the affective experience as the collapse in this distance that Beugnet argues is enacted by cinema's immediate physical qualities.

Like many French thinkers that emerged in the nineteen-sixties and seventies (Jacques Derrida, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Gilles Deleuze, etc.), Nancy engages heavily with Heidegger and Nietzsche in attempting to conceive of subjectivity and world-hood in a post-theological, poststructuralist era.<sup>6</sup> While Nancy's philosophy differs itself from his postmodern, deconstructive, and antifoundationalist contemporaries in several respects, his ontology of the subject is similar in that it calls into question the Cartesian, Enlightenment idea of the subject as self-grounding and rational. As Ian James argues, however, Nancy's thought distinguishes itself through a particular reading of Heidegger that engages with certain aspects of his thought while heavily critiquing others. The image of the subject that emerges has several features in common with the Heideggerian existential conception of the subject—called *Dasein*, literally “being there” or “existence”—but also bears certain significant differences.<sup>7</sup> Nancy radicalizes the anti-foundationalism at the core of Heidegger's reading of the subject, and extends it to community,

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<sup>6</sup> Another major influence on Nancy, Georges Bataille, will be addressed in the conclusion.

<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that Heidegger used the term *Dasein* instead of subject because he rejected the concept of subjectivity, which is generally conceived of as a definite mind or consciousness; describing *Dasein* as “Heidegger's conception of the subject” is therefore somewhat paradoxical. The relation between Heidegger's *Dasein* and Nancy's subject will be explored in more detail below.

aesthetics, and the general experience of being-in-the-world. The image of the subject that results is groundless—it lacks foundations, except for those foundations that it figures for itself—and participates in its community and its world through a shared relation to this groundlessness.

James argues that Nancy's conception of the subject is implicated in the general debate concerning the future of metaphysics after the “rupture” of its foundations, an event that Jacques Derrida locates in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and suggests is due to the deconstruction of Western thought found predominantly in the writings of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Freud (James 12). Western philosophy from Plato to Descartes to Kant has traditionally conceived of itself as having a privileged relation to truth, and has set for itself the task of uncovering those foundational truths that support the entire edifice of human knowledge—but the disassembly of metaphysics, enacted first by Nietzsche and continued by Heidegger and other postmodern or poststructuralist thinkers, has put philosophy in the position of interrogating its own limitations and finding a way forward without reference to or support from a ground or foundation. The problem with finding a way forward, however, is that we are constrained by the language of our past, and as Derrida, Nancy, and others have pointed out, this leaves philosophy in a state of contradiction, paradox, or aporia. The language we use to try to overcome metaphysics is itself imbued with metaphysical commitments, leaving us aware of our limits but without the means to determine or express them. Without a foundation to stand on, the logic of metaphysics inevitably turns in on itself, resulting in what Nancy argues is an essential contradiction in Western thought.

Nancy's contribution to this discussion is in how he conceives of this aporia and its implications for the project of philosophy in general. In a paper published in 1968 entitled “Nietzsche: Mais où sont les yeux pour le voir?” Nancy takes issue with the Heideggerian criticism of Nietzsche: while Heidegger claims that in attempting to overcome metaphysics

Nietzsche remains “hopelessly entangled within it” (James 16), Nancy argues that the logic of Nietzsche’s argument absorbs its own contradiction in the moment that it positions itself as interpretation. While it may seem that Nietzsche’s deconstruction of language is paradoxically proposing a foundation for philosophy by affirming its very lack of foundation, Nancy argues that Nietzsche’s logic exceeds the double bind in which it places itself. As Nancy explains, “maybe Nietzsche is here to turn us away [from the problem of metaphysics] instead of overcoming it, to shift us from the questions that enclose our troubled *logos*” (495, translation mine). Despite Heidegger’s claim that this deconstruction itself provides a new ground, in Nancy’s view for Nietzsche even this is merely fabrication; as James argues, “[i]nterpretation, figuration, and evaluation always precede and exceed any apparent gesture of foundation in Nietzsche’s thinking” (20). Nietzsche’s use of literary style is an attempt to embrace what is in excess of metaphysical logic and to acknowledge that truth is created rather than found; his thinking demands a philosophy that is conscious of its own self-fabrication. For Nietzsche, as well as for Nancy, truth and knowledge are always only interpretation, but the fact that this proposition applies to itself does not preclude its status as truth. According to Nancy’s argument, by positioning itself as interpretation or fable, metaphysical thought is able to exceed its own logic, and is opened up and exposed to its own limits rather than being closed through its inherent contradictions.

This re-thinking of metaphysical logic not only refigures the limits of philosophy, but also its conception of the subject. Even the *cogito* becomes another interpretation, one that cannot evade the language of philosophy in order to secure ground for the *res cogitans* that it theorizes. As Nancy argues in *Ego Sum*, his 1979 treatise on Descartes, the *cogito* works as a fable that purports to demonstrate the substance of the subject, while the reality underlying this

fable remains inaccessible and groundless. Nancy draws on the observation that Descartes frames his argument in *Discourse on the Method* as an autobiographical narrative to argue that the *cogito* is a story that the subject tells itself, and takes this argument one step further to claim that the subject can only figure itself *through* this narrative, fable, or fiction. Doubt is the method of the subject's self-apprehension, and it is this doubt that allows Descartes to ascertain the foundations of knowledge in the *cogito*; Nancy takes this doubt as evidence that fiction is a condition of the constitution of the subject. Descartes' doubt is fictitious both in the sense of being framed as a narrative and in the sense of being feigned by Descartes for the purposes of argument: he doesn't *really* doubt everything, but merely pretends to in the story he tells (in fact, nothing can be said about the "real" Descartes behind the image that he provides of himself in the *Discourse*, a point Nancy emphasizes throughout *Ego Sum*). It is this fiction that ascertains the truth of the subject, and for Nancy this means that the subject understands itself through this fiction and *as fiction*.

This fiction does not mask an underlying truth, but rather simply *is* the truth of the subject: as Nancy explains, "[t]he ontology of the subject is not one of subjective interiority or of a conscience, but is rather an ontology of the self-conception of being" (87, translation mine). The subject announces itself through the declaration "I think, therefore I am," but the mere fact that I think implies nothing about the thing that does the thinking: the substance that Descartes positions in the *cogito* (the *res cogitans*) becomes the substance of the *enunciation* "I think" rather than being the substance of the thinking thing itself. As James explains, "[w]e may see the representation or the picture of a subject, which comes to ground itself in a moment of self-apprehension or self-seizure, *I think therefore I am*, but this is not the same as the movement of the thought itself, which figures, represents, paints its own portrait" (57). The movement of the

thought cannot be figured for the same reasons that the foundations of philosophy cannot be determined: any figuration of said thought is going to be subject to language, and therefore is bound to be an interpretation or an image rather than a “real” representation with an indexical relation to the thought itself.

Each interpretation of the subject and of the world that the subject participates in is particular, temporal, historical, and unique: “Reality is always in each instant, from place to place, each time in turn, which is exactly how the reality of *res cogitans* attests to itself in each ‘ego sum,’ which is each time the ‘I am’ of each one in turn” (Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* 19). Rather than providing an unshakeable foundation for human knowledge, the *cogito* is only a figuration, a narrative told in a particular instant by a particular subject. In the same moment that the subject constitutes itself as a thinking thing, it undermines its own ability to apprehend itself as it exists before this constitution: before this figuration of the subject, there is nothing, since necessarily we cannot figure what comes before the figuration. This means that the subject, like metaphysics more generally, is groundless—and because it has no foundations, it cannot be the foundation for anything else. Our experience of reality is not based from any indubitable principle (consciousness, God, the categories, *a priori* intuitions, etc.), because any attempt to theorize or explain a principle is necessarily caught in Nietzsche’s double-bind of interpretation. Because in Nancy’s thought this logic means that something is always in excess of interpretation (the movement of the thought, the world it thinks of), the reality underlying our selves, our perceptions of the world, and our relationships to others is always unfigurable; we are suspended above an inexpressible groundlessness.

While Nancy’s ontologies of philosophy and of the subject might seem to suggest an inescapable nihilism, Nancy’s characterization (or, actually, non-characterization) of this

groundlessness opens the possibilities for creation rather than lapsing into relativism or non-meaning. Even nihilism is only an interpretation, and could not exist without the ontological commitments that it positions itself against; for Nietzsche, and for Nancy, we could always have created truth differently. Nancy uses Nietzsche's logic to argue that deconstruction of truth is used not for its own sake, but as a tool that can be used to call attention to philosophy's limits in an attempt to exceed them. While this does not allow him to overcome metaphysics, it does allow him to think around it; as Nancy argues, “[d]eliverance is the hidden face, the secret effect of nihilism” (“Nietzsche” 502, translation mine). Nancy conceives the groundlessness at the heart of this thinking in non-substantive terms: it is not an abyss, or a void. The groundlessness is merely *nothing*: it is not a thing, or even the absence of a thing, but rather is similar to Heidegger's being-towards-death in that it is the way that we exist in the world.<sup>8</sup> In *Being Singular Plural* Nancy refers to this non-substantive negativity as our shared Origin:

To reach the origin is not to miss it; it is to be properly exposed to it. Since it is not another thing . . . the origin is neither “missable” nor appropriable (penetratable, absorbable). It does not obey this logic. It is the plural singularity of the Being of being.

(13)

Nancy conceives of this shared finitude in ethical terms, and argues that attempting to appropriate the un-appropriable (the other, the world, existence) leads to violence, as there is always an excess that cannot be mastered or subjugated to a system. The ultimate example of this is the Holocaust, which Nancy argues was prefigured (not predestined, but set in motion) by the

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<sup>8</sup> Heidegger argues in *Being and Time* that death is a condition of being, not in the sense that we are living towards a terminable end point but that death figures our existence as we live it: our being already contains our not-being as its impossible limit.

ontological commitments of Western thought.<sup>9</sup> For Nancy the responsibility of philosophy, as well as of literature and art, is to figure this excess, this groundlessness that is the origin of Being, without appropriating it or en chaining it to a theory.

Despite Nancy's argument that existence is founded on a radical lack of essence, and that we figure our own existence and our own subjectivity, his thought cannot be categorized as anti-realist or idealist. Nancy is a "realist" (albeit of a very strange sort) in that he thinks thought, subjectivity, truth, and art all share a relation to reality, but he differs from other realists in that he does not construe this relationship as indexical. There is no distinct, objective, external world that we can understand or appropriate through theory, but nor is there merely a solipsistic flux of chaotic intuitions. For Nancy, the singular plurality of reality (of existence or Being) is a shared participation in non-essence, and this shared participation is situated, corporeal, and temporal. Reality is made up of plural instances of experience, experiences that share no singular meaning except for their irreducible contingency. While we can ascribe signification to the reality we experience (which is what we do when we write or talk about it), signification can never fully appropriate it: there is always something that exceeds our figuration, since our relationship to the world is not founded on the sort of metaphysical logic at work in the language we use to describe it. While these conceptions of the subject and of world-hood might seem to be overly obscure and abstract, Nancy is careful to remind us that his concern is with ordinary, everyday reality: his frequent allusions to his experience at the time of writing (the "brown and white cat . . . crossing the garden" in the beginning of *Being Singular Plural* [4], for example) and to current events like genocide and war serve remind the reader of what it is that he is attempting to evoke. The project

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<sup>9</sup> For more on the Holocaust and the ontological commitments of Western thought, see "March in Spirit in Our Ranks" from *Listening* and "Forbidden Representation" from *The Ground of the Image*.

of Nancy's writing is to connect to reality, to touch on the world as we experience it every day, each day.

What emerges from Nancy's ontology is a figure of subjectivity and of the subject's relationship to the world that acknowledges its status as interpretation. Of course, this is necessarily only an *image* of the subject, but the fact that the subject is an interpretation need not negate its existence—in fact, it is the *very nature* of its existence. By affirming its presence in the moment of the *cogito*, the subject effectively creates itself, but this creation, this self-figuring always supersedes its own logic in that the groundlessness at its base is never describable, always in excess of itself. It is this lack of substance or foundation for the subject that differentiates Nancy from theories that view the subject as constituted by itself, by language, or by structures of power: while the subject *as it figures itself* is shaped by these forces, Nancy opens a space for the subject *before* this figuration, a space that cannot be theorized but that nevertheless plays a crucial role in his ontology as the limit or extremity of our understanding. The subject, for Nancy, exists in relation to this groundlessness, shares in this relation with other subjects, and interprets this relation through signification. This is what it means to be in the world, and it is the task of philosophy and art to figure this unfigurable reality in the same way that the subject figures itself.

### **1.3 Cogito Violentia**

The singular plural experience of being at the crux of Nancy's thought is also the reality evoked, created, and touched on by art. Because he avoids systematizing or totalizing ontology, Nancy also avoids talking about generalized “art” as anything other than individual instances of exposure to particular arts. Art, like the subject, is singular plural: every work touches on the shared non-essence of the world, creating a new figuration with each brush stroke, each

metaphor, each note, each camera shot, etc. Nancy elaborates the particular ontology of the cinematic image in a book on the cinema of Abbas Kiarostami entitled *The Evidence of Film*.<sup>10</sup> Rather than understanding film's relationship to the spectator and reality through any conception of identification, representation, or mimesis, Nancy's ontology opens the possibility for a response to cinema in excess of signification. Consequently, Nancy's thought calls for a theory of film that is not "theory" at all, but a figuration that recognizes its own limitations, its own inability to express the experience that is cinema.

The radicality of Nancy's ontology of cinema is understated in his own writing, as he references other film theories in passing and distinguishes them from his own points briefly, almost casually. While this might seem to lack the rigor of more systematized modes of thinking, this way of engaging with other theories is a result of his views concerning philosophy in general. Because of his contention that, due to the force of their own logic, systematizing or totalizing ontologies are inherently self-contradictory, Nancy's philosophical project is an attempt to escape from this metaphysical aporia by calling attention to what is in excess of it. Nancy is not arguing against other theories, exactly, since his own thought cannot really be called a *theory per se*: rather, it is an attempt to touch on inexpressible reality, to evoke it instead of appropriating or mastering it. This means that he does not have to disprove or affirm the contentions of other thinkers in order to make a point, as such forms of engagement presuppose a reality that can be properly represented by language. Rather, Nancy's thought seeks to figure what is in excess of *all theories of film*, including his own, and the fact that the language he uses

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<sup>10</sup> While Nancy uses a particular example in *The Evidence of Film*, he uses it to talk about the nature of cinema more generally: Nancy chooses to discuss Kiarostami in part because of a long-standing admiration for him, and in part because he was commissioned to do so by the *Cahiers du Cinéma*.

to describe cinema necessarily falls short of the experience is part of the strength of his argument.

This relationship between spectator and screen does not reveal or represent reality, but rather opens onto a world through a certain obviousness antecedent to signification that Nancy calls “evidence.” By using the word “evidence,” Nancy seeks a way of figuring film’s relation to reality without using terminology associated with mimetic or representational theories of art, which he finds problematic in that they presuppose a totalizable reality that can be explained. Nancy explains that the truth of evidence “is something that grips and does not have to correspond to any given criteria” and that it does not constitute a revealing since “it always keeps a secret or an essential reserve” (42). This secret is what is in excess of signification: it is the reality that the image opens onto in the process of presentation. The filmic image gives evidence of this reality, and *creates* its own evidence through the act of self-manifestation.

The relation between spectator and screen that results from this presentation of evidence is not one of suture, or fetishistic voyeurism, or of desire to return to a pre-Symbolic state: it is only the temporal, contingent experience of Being in the particular context of cinema. Nancy’s ontology of cinema is therefore intimately bound up with his conception of subjectivity, something Nancy makes explicit in *The Evidence of Film* by arguing that the *cogito* is the most famous example of evidence in Western thought, “with which is given not, as is sometimes stated, a ‘self-consciousness’ (at least not in psychological or introspective terms) but an existence” (44). Existence for Nancy is self-evident because it presents itself as such, and just as the subject creates an image of him or herself in the moment of *cogito*, so too is film affirmed through the force of its own presentation. This presentation, like the existence of the subject, is finite and corporeal. Film for Nancy is a body—a “luminous materiality”—that we respond to *as*

bodies, as finite beings (48). The experience of cinema is an example of the singular plurality of Being: an experience caught in a different logic than those of representation or identification and thrust forward in time moment by moment, frame by frame, 24 frames per second collected into an inexpressible, inassimilable singularity.

This immediate, pre-linguistic, corporeal relation between spectator and screen cannot be dissociated from a certain kind of violence. In *The Ground of the Image* Nancy defines violence as “the application of a force that remains foreign to the dynamic or energetic system into which it intervenes” and argues that this force seeks to destroy the set of compossibles within a system in order to impose itself as truth (16). For Nancy the image is always violent in that it must “irrupt, tear itself from the dispersed multiplicity,” and to do so it “must grasp itself, as if with claws or pincers, out of nothing” (*Ground* 23). The image rips itself from the fabric of existence in order to present a facet of reality that did not exist before its presentation, and this process is necessarily violent in that it always involves the application of an external force. This force is applied by the image itself, through its distinction from both the world and the observing subject: both relationships are marked by a separation, as well as a connection through the force of this separation. By claiming that the image is always violent, Nancy is making an aesthetic point as well as an ethical one. In order for an image to function properly as art, it must do more than merely represent reality in the mimetic, reproductive sense: the force or violence of the image is the aesthetic experience that it draws from the world and provokes in the spectator. However, because the image requires the application of force, and force is always associated with the destruction of a system, there are ethical consequences resulting from this essential violence of the image.

The violence by which the image separates and imposes itself is characterized ambivalently, having the capacity to both carve out space for new ways of thinking as well as to close off the real by imposing itself as truth; the difference depends on the way that the image relates to its ground or outside, the “dispersed multiplicity” from which it presents itself as the unity of a force. This relation between the image and its ground has to do with the dual natures of violence and truth: while the “truth of violence both destroys and destroys itself,” “[t]he violence of truth is . . . a violence that withdraws even as it irrupts and—because this irruption itself is a withdrawal—that opens and frees a space for the manifest presentation of the true” (*Ground* 18). This functions in much the same way as the logic of interpretation Nancy locates in Nietzsche’s thinking: truth absorbs the force of its own violence in the moment that it imposes itself as truth, and withdraws in order to reveal something else entirely. As opposed to the kind of violence that imposes itself as truth, which Nancy likens to the torturer who takes pleasure in inflicting the marks of violence on his victims (20-21), the violence of truth employs the force of presentation to open onto *what is antecedent to presentation*. As I already argued in the previous section in relation to the subject, nothing is in advance of presentation: necessarily, what comes before presentation cannot be presented. The image, like the subject, is therefore groundless; the truth revealed by art “consists in the revelation’s not taking place, its remaining imminent. Or rather it is the revelation of this: that there is nothing to reveal” (*Ground* 26). The violence of the image can be used to either tear open the space for this revelation, or else to close it off by declaring itself as truth.

The ambivalent nature of the image is also reflected in the contradiction implied by the image’s withdrawal. Nancy describes the separation of the image in physical terms, noting that the etymology of distinction “refers back to *stigma*, a branding mark, a pinprick or puncture, an

incision, a tattoo” (*Ground* 2). Tattoos, pinpricks, and incisions are all images themselves, as well as being models for the ways that images can function: the force of the image’s separation is like a wound on flesh, marking either its own coagulated violence or an entry point onto a deeper truth. This physicality of the image is evoked in all of Nancy’s writings on aesthetics, as he is careful to draw on the material qualities of art and is always attentive to the particularities of medium. Despite this physicality of art, however, Nancy argues that in order for art to function as an entry point, it must also be untouchable. “One cannot touch it,” Nancy argues, “not because one does not have the right to do so, nor because one lacks the means, but rather because the distinctive line or trait separates something that is no longer of the order of touch” (2). The image’s very physicality is also what distinguishes it, since by marking itself off as a force rather than a form it removes itself from the world of things. There is therefore an essential contradiction to the materiality of art: the image is both withdrawn and present, physical and untouchable.

This contradiction is the means for the subject’s response to art, which consists in both participation and separation. The image is essentially distant, and this distance cannot be crossed by the subject precisely because the image is both touchable and non-touchable. While I can of course touch the brush strokes of a painting, I cannot touch what it is about the painting that touches me; it is precisely because the image is distant (both from me and from the world) that it is able to impress itself upon me. While mimetic theories of art suggest that the image relates to the world insofar as it imitates or represents it, for Nancy the image relates to the world and to the subject through *methexis*, a relation of separation and participation. Because the image does not correspond to a pre-given reality, the relation is created in the moment it is experienced: it is not merely an external object gazed upon by a subject, but is rather “presence *as subject*” (21,

my emphasis). The image relates to the world in the moment it is experienced as an image by a subject, a relationship that is complicated still further by the fact that the subject itself is also an image. This means that the image bears the same relationship to reality as the subject: the radical lack of essence underlying the *cogito* is the same groundlessness opened onto by art. The connection between the subject and art is predicated on this relationship to groundlessness, which is inherently violent in that it imposes force onto a reality that is essentially forceless.

The force of the image is characterized in physical, affective terms. As Nancy explains, “[t]he essence of such a crossing [between subject and image] lies in it *not* establishing a continuity: it does not suppress the distinction. It maintains it while also making contact: shock, confrontation, *tête-à-tête*, or embrace” (*Ground* 3). Because the image is by nature distinct, its relation to the spectator is always, in some way, confrontational and violent—the idea of separation itself implies that we respond to the image as an other, something foreign to ourselves. For my purposes, this means that Nancy’s ontology of the image suggests new ways of understanding the affective impact of new extremism; the space of excess evoked by Nancy’s thought suggests a new frame of reference for new extremist films and for the intense physical reactions they provoke. The characterization of the image as other, essentially confrontational and violent, allows for new ways of understanding how new extremism exploits the physical capacities of cinema. New extremism foregrounds the violence essential to the image, using affect to reconfigure spectatorial response. More conventional uses of onscreen violence are often limited to the “thick” or “stupid” kinds of violence that Nancy argues serve to block off truth instead of opening it: they delight in the exhibition of marks and wounds, desiring to “appropriate death: not by gazing into the emptiness of the depths, but, on the contrary, by filling [its] eyes with red (by “seeing red”) and with the clots in which life suffers and dies” (*Ground*

25). New extremism employs violence for different purposes, however. By foregrounding the violence inherent in the image and by resisting established systems of genre, taste, or meaning that might serve to explain or domesticate the experience, new extremism does “gaze into the emptiness of the depths”: it employs violence and affect in order to open onto a truth antecedent to signification.

While films that feature explicit violence are particularly apt in illustrating Nancy’s ideas, I do not mean to suggest that his contention that the image is always violent must be taken literally. Violence for Nancy is always the entry point for truth, and how we characterize this violence and this truth is, in the end, always a matter of interpretation. My project here must therefore be understood as just that: an interpretation, one aware of its own limits and attentive to what cannot be constrained to a system of thought. Through this attempt to uphold Nancy’s contention that existence can never be reduced to signification, I seek to evoke what is in excess of my own attempts to signify: the immediate physical experience of cinema. If, as Nancy argues, “it must . . . be admitted that not only violence but the extreme violence of *cruelty* hovers at the edge of the image, of all images” (*Ground* 24), then the raw brutal impact of new extremism provides us with a way of understanding this cruelty. True art, for Nancy, uses this cruel impulse in order to tear open the fabric of existence and expose the truth underlying it—a truth that for Nancy is *nothing*, in a more radical sense than a void or absence. Nancy argues that from this nothing arises the radical possibility for creation, a possibility that he characterizes ambivalently but not without optimism. New extremism touches on the present position of uncertainty in the post-theological, postmodern world of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century: suspended over the groundlessness of the real, constrained by the language of our past, we are in view of but not quite touching on a new horizon. The violence of new extremism tears open this truth and

exposes the nothing underlying it, but by positioning itself at the end and the beginning it never quite reaches this horizon of creation. As a movement symptomatic of its era, new extremism leaves the wound open, exposing the possibility of creation implied by the radical non-essence of being.

## **Chapter 2: Nancy and Claire Denis**

“There's not much violence in my film but what there is springs from something very deep. I would say it's about love in a way.”

-Claire Denis on *Trouble Every Day* (Smith).

### **2.1 Mutual Intrusion**

In exploring Nancy's philosophy, my point of departure is subjectivity: the theoretical framework laid out in Chapter One begins with Nancy's thought on Descartes and its implications for the subject and, consequently, for the film spectator. Those familiar with Nancy might question my decision to begin with the subject, given that his philosophy is critical of notions of subjectivity that privilege the individual and argues instead for an approach that views singular beings as essentially related to a plurality of other singular beings—in other words, a community. For Nancy, the individual subject is contingent on its community rather than the other way around, a perspective that stems from a critique of the ontological priority of Heidegger's *Dasein*. While Heidegger argues that *Dasein* comes before the state of Being-With, or *Mitsein*, the shared identity that comprises the community, Nancy reverses the formula and argues that in fact singular beings cannot be isolated from their communities; in Nancy's way of thinking *Mitsein* precedes *Dasein*.<sup>11</sup> This means that individual subjects cannot be separated from

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<sup>11</sup> Nancy's critique of *Dasein* as laid out in *The Inoperative Community* is in part a criticism of Heidegger's Nazism, as he argues that the ways that Heidegger formulates *Mitsein* has direct implications for his political thinking. As Ian James notes, Heidegger's commitment to community as a historical destiny of a people is problematic insofar as it implies a shared essence that in fact counters the thrust of his own thinking: James notes that since “Heidegger gives Nancy an opening in which he can think existence in excess of any logic of subjectivity and as a plural spacing of singularities or “being-to” of sense, then he also by the same token opens up a possibility of thinking community as the fundamental “being-with” of those singularities, not as a collection of individual subjects who bind themselves together on a basis of shared identity” (177). In a classically deconstructive move, Nancy unbinds Heidegger's logic by

their communities (a point that goes against the individualism of post-Enlightenment Western thought), but nor can they be fully subsumed under them: there is inevitably an excess which cannot be fully disavowed, nor can it be put to work in the service of prevailing ideologies.

Singular beings are contingent on communities comprised of other singular beings that cannot be reduced to a single communal identity or purpose; the impossibility of securing a meaning for community in light of its irreducible, “inoperable” excess is the central focus of *The Inoperable Community* (1986) and *Being Singular Plural* (2000), arguably Nancy’s most influential works. Nancy asserts that our ethical task is *not* to secure a meaning for community but rather to embrace the liberating possibilities of its inherent meaninglessness.

Because according to Nancy’s ontological system singular beings cannot be considered in isolation from their communities, any discussion of subjectivity must acknowledge the logical priority of community and avoid reducing the subject to an independent, individual Being. My argument in Chapter One takes a slightly different slant than the conventional scholarship on Nancy by beginning with the subject itself rather than its position in relation (or rather non-relation, since the essence of community for Nancy is its very non-meaning) to other subjects,<sup>12</sup> but this should not be taken to mean that I am arguing that the individual in Nancy takes precedence over its community. By deconstructing the subject from within rather than from without, my reading of Nancy does not deny the importance of community for his metaphysics, but rather suggests that his thinking on subjectivity is complex and accessible from several

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using it against itself, countering the ontological commitments of *Mitsein* through the formulation of *Dasein*.

<sup>12</sup> I am not alone in beginning my discussion of Nancy with the subject: Ian James’s *The Fragmentary Demand* also begins with the issue of subjectivity, although James too notes the importance of *Mitsein* for Nancy’s ontology.

different points of entry. To put it bluntly, there is more than one way to skin a cat: as the previous chapter serves to demonstrate, Nancy himself has deconstructed the subject in several different ways, not only through its relation to the community but also by shaking its foundational position in Western thought in general, from his critique of the Cartesian subject in *Ego Sum* (1979) to his reading of the unconscious in Lacan (with Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe) in *The Title of the Letter* (1973) and beyond.

Despite my intention to approach Nancy from a different angle by focusing on the inherent contradictions of subjectivity itself (rather than on how it relates to other subjects), the relevance of community for his way of thinking should not be understated. For my present purposes, it is important to note that Nancy's thought is clearly influenced by a community of not only other philosophers (such as Heidegger, Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Derrida) but also of artists and filmmakers. In particular, French filmmaker Claire Denis, who has made several films with and about Nancy, has inspired a number of Nancy's recent works on the subjects of film, art, and the legacy of the Christian tradition.<sup>13</sup> Most notable are his essays on *Beau travail* and *Trouble Every Day*, as well as his response to Denis's version of *L'Intrus* ("A-Religion," "Icon of Fury," and "*L'Intrus* selon Claire Denis," respectively). This remarkably productive symbiotic relationship has also been the focus of recent academic discourse: a number of articles have been written on Denis and Nancy for journals in fields such as philosophy, art history, and film

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<sup>13</sup> While religion plays only a minor role in my discussion, the importance of Christian thought in Nancy's philosophy should not be discounted. Nancy's beginnings as a Christian philosopher have had a profound influence on his work, and though his contemporary theory is atheistic in nature he continues to write on the ways in which Western thought is informed by Christian ways of thinking. See in particular *Corpus* (2008), *Noli me tangere* (2003), and "A-religion" (Vacarme 2001) for the role of theology in Nancy's thought. For a discussion of Nancy's deconstruction of Christianity, see Laura McMahon "Deconstructing Community and Christianity: 'A-religion' in Nancy's Reading of *Beau travail*" (2008).

studies, and an entire special issue of the journal *Film-Philosophy* devoted to the subject was published in 2008. Commentators such as Ian Balfour, Douglas Morrey, Thomas Elsaesser and Laura McMahon argue that Denis's cinema serves as an apt visual demonstration of some of Nancy's key ideas, and that Nancy uses examples from her films in order to expand on these ideas in his own writing.

Community has been among the most prevalent frames of reference for discussing the relationship between Denis and Nancy, as several scholars (including Elsaesser, McMahon and Anja Streiter) argue that Denis's films—especially *Beau travail* and *L'Intrus*—serve as effective illustrations of Nancy's notion of community and the ways that it might be evoked through cinema. Rather than contradicting this approach, I wish to extend the discussion to a different point of intersection by articulating the essential violence of the image that Nancy illustrates in *The Ground of the Image* and the implications of this violence for the viewing subject; violence is an idea that has not been explored at length in relation to either Nancy's thought nor Denis's cinema, although it is a prominent feature of both.<sup>14</sup> In order to characterize this violence, I shall draw primarily upon Denis's *Trouble Every Day*, easily her most vilified film: it caused a scandal at Cannes in 2001 due to its graphic portrayal of eroticized cannibalism, and reviews were mixed at best and outright condemnatory at worst. The marginal position of *Trouble Every Day* within Denis's oeuvre is potentially one of the reasons for the apparent reluctance of scholars to address it: while Nancy's essay on the film has necessitated some discussion from those scholars wishing to explore Denis and Nancy in tandem, most mention it only in passing and prefer instead to focus on *Beau travail* and *L'Intrus*, films generally seen to have more

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<sup>14</sup> This is not to suggest that no one has commented on violence in their works, only that it is seldom emphasized as a central concept.

complexity and artistic merit. I agree with most commentators that in many ways *Trouble Every Day* does not fit well within Denis's oeuvre, but rather than dismissing it as a lesser work I wish to examine what it is, exactly, about the film that sits so uncomfortably with critics and audiences. The uneasy situation of *Trouble Every Day* is even more interesting when we consider that the film is exceptional not only within the context of Denis's work, but also in relation to Nancy's writing. As McMahon points out, "Icon of Fury" marks a significant departure: by articulating touch as "a paroxysm of tearing, devouring and consuming," Nancy's reading of *Trouble Every Day* "is radically different from the way in which touch is articulated elsewhere in Nancy's work, that is, as a touch which cannot penetrate, a touch which cannot consummate itself" ("Post-deconstructive Realism?" 84).

This characterization of touch as violence in "Icon of Fury" disrupts Nancy's usual ways of writing about the relation between subject and world, and therefore has implications for Nancy's aesthetics in that it also reconfigures the relation between subject and art. As I explained in the first chapter, for Nancy art relates to the subject through its separation: it is precisely in virtue of the fact that the image is distinct, that is, neither me nor the object that it is an image of, that it is able to impress itself upon me. Its presence is asserted through its distinction, and my connection to the image—the affect it elicits—paradoxically depends on the distance between us. The violence of the image stands in apparent contradiction to this model, since the image's confrontational impact is described in language that seems in stark contrast to its characterization in terms of spacing and distance. While these contradictions within Nancy's thought might seem to imply a degree of incoherency or unintelligibility, it is important to note the importance of contradiction for Nancy's ontology of truth-as-interpretation. Contradictions are essential to Western metaphysical logic: Nietzsche's aporia cannot be resolved except through recognition

of the paradoxes inherent in our ways of thinking. Reading the contradictions within Nancy's thought against each other is a means of exposing the limits of language and metaphysics, of surpassing Nietzsche's aporia without resolving it. Violence intrudes on the spacing between subject and image, tearing open Nancy's philosophical system and forming another point of exposure to the nothing that he posits as the limit of our understanding. *Trouble Every Day* is therefore a limit case, an example that points to the tensions and contradictions at work in both Nancy's system of thought as well as Denis's cinema: it merits a closer examination as a film that can shed light on Nancy's ontology by calling attention to what pushes against and exceeds it.

## 2.2 Beauty and Excess: *Beau travail* and *L'Intrus*

The relationship between Denis and Nancy began in 2001, when Nancy published a short article entitled “A-religion” about ritual and the possibility of atheist art in Claire Denis’s *Beau travail* (1999). In the same year, Denis described her response to Nancy’s philosophy (and Jacques Derrida’s reading of it in *On Touching*): “The reading of [Nancy’s] *L'Intrus* was something very powerful for me and I entered in a mental dialogue with that book for months. I am still doing so now. I have the feeling that it is bringing me towards new work” (Renouard and Wajeman 19). Denis, who claims that her work before her adaptation of *L'Intrus* was in no way influenced by Nancy’s philosophy, acknowledges the remarkable similarity in the themes they address and admits that she herself is surprised by the degree to which their works intersect: “It’s as if we had been traveling in the same train or boat without knowing” (Davis).<sup>15</sup> The connections are

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<sup>15</sup> Given that Denis has been reading Nancy since at least 2001, it is difficult to take her at her word that the correlation between their works is mere coincidence. Laura McMahon makes a similar claim when discussing the overlaps between Denis’s *L'Intrus* and Nancy’s *Noli me tangere*, arguing that although Denis denies that the similarities are intentional, her admission

numerous, but their dialogues on the subjects of intrusion, foreignness, and alienation in particular have allowed them to expand on these ideas in light of each other's work. As Douglas Morrey argues in the introduction to the *Film-Philosophy* special issue, "it is the figure of the intruder that is central to the relationship between Nancy and Denis—that might, indeed, provide a figuration of that relationship, as though Nancy's philosophy had intruded upon Denis's cinema, and vice-versa" (ii). Intrusion as Nancy describes it in *L'Intrus* is a relation of simultaneous estrangement and confrontation: he takes his own heart transplant as a metaphor for the ways in which we can be strangers even from ourselves, and describes the impossibility of effacing difference and the ethical imperative to not attempt to do so. Our relationship with the other is inherently an intrusion; by definition there is something strange about a stranger, a strangeness that remains elusive to my perspective of the world. This essential separation between subjects implied by Nancy's model of intrusion has been the predominant framework for applying Nancy's thinking to Denis's cinema, especially *Beau travail* and *L'Intrus*. In order to expound the exceptional position of *Trouble Every Day*, understanding these readings of *Beau travail* and *L'Intrus* is therefore imperative; by reading these films against each other we can better understand the ways that violence serves as a disruptive, contradictory force. Intrusion itself is paradoxical in that it is characterized simultaneously by alienation and withdrawal as well as penetration and violent contact; all three films discussed here disclose this dual operation while emphasizing different properties of the impossible, irreconcilable contact we have with ourselves, the other, and the world.

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that she was reading the text "allows the possibility of influence to remain open" ("Withdrawal" 30)

*Beau travail* explores Denis's constant preoccupation with France's colonial history by depicting the social order of a fictional group of French Foreign Legionnaires posted in Djibouti, investigating the interactions between the men through an aesthetic that denies the psychological realism conventional of narrative cinema. The film was originally commissioned as part of a series on the theme of foreignness, a subject central to Denis's cinema since her debut feature *Chocolat* (1988), a semi-autobiographical account of a young woman coming to terms with her childhood in a colonial outpost in Cameroon. Because of her connection to colonialism, Denis is attuned to the ways that alienation can work to inform and disrupt identity, and admits that the idea of being a stranger is a common theme in her films. Speaking of *Beau travail*, she explains she wanted to delve into the true meaning of foreignness: "Going abroad would be like feeling like a stranger in a foreign country, but not enough to express something that you feel inside. I thought going abroad was a necessary aspect of the movie, but the centre should be being a foreigner to one's life" (Romney).

*Beau travail*, a loose adaptation of Herman Melville's 1889 novella *Billy Budd*, centers on Galoup (Denis Lavant), a wolfish man who jealously ruminates in his journals about a younger officer, the heroic foundling Sentain (Grégoire Colin). Whether a reaction against his repressed desire for Sentain or out of envy for the young man's favour with their commander Bruno Forestier (Michel Subor)—the film leaves both possibilities open—Galoup eventually plots to abandon the young man in the desert to die. This action results in his expulsion from the Legion and perhaps drives him to suicide, although the ending leaves Galoup's fate frustratingly ambiguous. The film concludes abruptly with him dancing alone in a Djiboutian nightclub seen earlier in the film, feverishly pulsating to Corona's "Rhythm of the Night"; it is unclear whether the scene is a flashback or a liberating, hallucinated fantasy.

While Galoup seemingly occupies the position of protagonist within the film, our alignment with him is thwarted by the fact that he is revealed to be rather unsympathetic and untrustworthy. His voice-over narrations of his journal entries provide our only access to his inner life—indeed, to *any* character’s inner life, with the possible exception of Forestier through his cryptic musings (“If it weren’t for fornication and blood, we wouldn’t be here”—and they often obfuscate more than they reveal. Obscure statements such as “I admired him [Forestier] deeply without knowing why,” and “I felt something vague and menacing taking hold of me” suggest that Galoup is as much in the dark about himself as we are. Furthermore, his monologues also occasionally directly contradict the reality depicted onscreen, most significantly after he leaves Sentain in the desert with a broken compass: while Galoup tells us that he was never seen again, this statement is later contradicted by a sequence that reveals Sentain to be alive after being rescued by a group of Djiboutians. Denis’s decision to focus on the mutinous Claggart character from Melville’s novel rather than Billy Budd, who is adapted in the film as Sentain, lends further credence to the idea that the film works to disrupt identification, since while Sentain would most likely serve as an appropriately sympathetic protagonist, Denis avoids revealing too much about him and leaves his motivations and feelings frustratingly mysterious.

The result of these disruptions in identification is that *Beau travail* de-emphasizes story and character, and calls attention instead to the film’s formal elements. Thomas Elsaesser links the film’s aesthetics and rejection of psychological realism to Nancy’s ideas of community, arguing that the film could be read as making a “persuasive case for Denis’s direction teaching the audience what it might mean to be-with someone, the *Mit-sein* discussed by Nancy, as neither identification nor projection, neither inside nor outside, neither in front of, nor hierarchically organized or fixed along perspectival sight lines” (717). The film is primarily

about bodies in space, and depicts their interactions, desires, conflicts and jealousies in a way that emphasizes their materiality and precludes our understanding of internal, psychological motivations. Because Denis rejects subjective camera work and avoids narrative devices that imply interiority, our observation of the bodies and characters constitutes another kind of “being-with,” a state that is uncomfortably close without taking us “within” (717). We watch the soldiers silently performing the duties required of their station—practicing, exercising, peeling potatoes, ironing, hanging laundry, shaving, showering—through a camera that objectifies them without being voyeuristic. While voyeurism requires the spectator’s adoption of a clear perspective, one that fits the observed object into its own scopophilic desire, Denis circumvents the voyeuristic function of the camera by refusing to definitively anchor its viewpoint. *Beau travail* disorients the spectator by denying the satisfaction associated with conventional continuity editing: shots of characters looking at something are seldom followed by reverse shots, and usual indicators of contiguous space such as eye-line matches and matches on action are used to connect shots with no apparent logical correlation. Intercutting scenes of the local Djiboutians talking to each other and engaging in every day tasks without any apparent contextualization within the narrative, the film also frequently depicts events that could not have been witnessed by the film’s central characters. As Elsaesser points out,

we, the audience, have to experience a sometimes awkward, sometimes bewilderingly intimate, and sometimes bafflingly remote condition of *Mit-sein*: a “being-with” that breaks with almost all the conventional spectator positions, such as voyeur or invisible fly on the wall, participant observer or aggressively implicated addressee. Instead, all possible forms of affective and perceptual responses to the protagonist have to be reassessed by the spectator. (718)

*Beau travail* therefore engages with Nancy's concepts of world-hood and community by refusing to adhere to conventional narrative structures and stylistic devices that envision a world that can be observed and moved through by central protagonist, one with a clear relation to his environment and distinguishable psychological motivations.

*L'Intrus* has also been read along the lines of the community in Nancy, as scholars such as Laura McMahon and Martine Beugnet have interpreted it as a way of interrogating the fraught relationships we have with our own bodies *as others*, as well as the bodies *of others*. As Nancy himself has pointed out, *L'Intrus* is less an adaptation as an “adoption” of his own semi-autobiographical account of his heart transplant and subsequent struggle with cancer (“*L'Intrus selon*” n. pag.). The film borrows only the title and the central image of the heart transplant as a metaphor for the ways that even our bodies are foreign to us, building the narrative around Louis Trebor, a man living near the border between France and Switzerland who goes in search of a lost son after an illegal heart transplant. Louis is depicted as calculating and brutal: he has no qualms against murdering immigrants who trespass on his property, and he funds his transplant with money from a dubious Swiss account. He rejects his son in France (Grégoire Colin, once again playing the virtuous outcast), longing instead for a son in Tahiti that he has never met—and who perhaps may not even exist. As with *Beau travail*, however, the formal elements of the film overshadow and complicate the narrative ones: the editing is even more disjointed than in Denis's earlier film, following a dream-like logic that often jumps impossibly between times and locations. When at the end of the film it is revealed that Trebor's heart appears to have come from his murdered son in France, it seems more like a nightmare produced by Trebor's guilt than an actual narrative possibility. Louis identifies the body of his son in a morgue in Tahiti, while previous sequences depicting the extracted heart lying on a bed of snow had implied that the

operation had been conducted in the Jura mountains, and the son had previously been seen inside Louis's house in France. The inexplicable appearance of the son's body at the end of the film is an assertion of the inescapability of mortality, a sentiment echoed by the presence of the Russian woman (Katerina Golubeva) that follows Louis throughout the film. Although it is implied that she has something to do with his black market operation, she seemingly serves no other narrative purpose except as a harbinger of the costs of cheating death. Denis eschews conventional narrative in favour of a metaphorical reflection on how identities (both individual and collective) are constructed through and mapped onto bodies and borders, confronting us with and profoundly alienating us from each other and ourselves.

McMahon views the confrontation with the other in *L'Intrus* according to Nancy's idea of touch, arguing that the film simultaneously emphasizes the body's materiality while also envisioning its relationship with itself and others as primarily one of fragmentation, spacing and withdrawal. The film is therefore as much about "a failure of contact" as it is about contact itself ("Withdrawal" 31). Beugnet elaborates on the political implications of this failed relationship between self and other in *L'Intrus* by contextualizing it within Denis's broader post-colonial project, arguing that by linking the corporeal to the political, the film serves to question "the deeply perplexing questions of identity and alienation, assimilation and rejection, desire and fear inseparable from the post-colonial malaise that affects France with particular acuteness" ("Community" 31). Trebor's heart, like Nancy's, is an intruder, one that he must accommodate in order to survive: boundaries of skin, flesh and bone (which we ordinarily like to imagine as impenetrable) must be breached, and what is inside must be exposed and laid bare in order to accept something which does not belong to it. We are reminded of the fragility of these borders frequently through tracking close ups on Louis's purple, rippling scar tissue, which demarcate

his limits like lines on a map. These images resonate both viscerally and politically as reflections on our contemporary situation in a post-colonial global culture: the boundaries between us have become so porous that even our bodies are constantly infiltrated, something that Denis (and Nancy) characterize ambivalently as intrusive and violent as well as potentially life-saving. Ironically, while Nancy recognizes the radical implications for identity implied by organ transplants—he remarks that his heart might have belonged to a black woman, for instance—Louis rejects these possibilities, demanding that his heart must come from a man; his outward xenophobia towards the immigrants on his property might be read as a cause of his internal xenophobia towards his foreign heart. Our relationships are predicated on interruption and difference, and the imperative of recognizing the other without effacing this difference, of allowing oneself to be confronted by the strangeness of the stranger, is a tenet of both Nancy's philosophy and Denis's cinema.

While Elsaesser, Beugnet and McMahon view these films as expressions of our fraught relationships with ourselves and each other, Nancy's own essays on *L'Intrus* and *Beau travail* view them from a somewhat different perspective: he views them as interrogations of the very possibility of art itself (although, as I shall argue below, these readings are far from mutually exclusive). Nancy views both films as self-referential, as investigations of the cinematic image and its capacity for beauty without recourse to an explanatory structure. With *Beau travail* he views this in religious terms, arguing that the Legion functions as a ritual without a determining order, a religion without God; he reads *Beau travail* as well as Melville's *Billy Budd* as works that explore the possibility of atheist art. He argues that the Legion is an "a-religion" in that it is "made up of a body of observances closed upon itself, referring only to itself" (16): it aligns itself with Christian rituals through themes of resurrection, symbols such as the Madonna, and

the Christ-like character Sentain, but it lacks the grounding presence of God. The symbols, like the rituals of the Legion, are therefore unfixed from the meanings granted to them from their religious context and denied the salvation generally associated with them. What takes their place is beauty, unfixed from the narrative and posed as a question in itself; Nancy writes that *Beau travail* is “a work on beauty: body, light, appearance, harmony, majesty, stark rhythm of editing, which holds the narrative at bay” (16). Nancy describes *L’Intrus* in similar terms, although he frames the question of beauty in relation to nature rather than religion:

The breadth and beauty of the landscapes in the two hemispheres gives to the images a force distinct from that of mere aesthetic decoration: the question is asked—for example, in a static long shot of dusk falling on the purple seas surrounding the islands [of the South Pacific]—of the nature of nature, if I can say it like that, for us today, and of the possibility of still living on the earth. (n. pag., translation mine)

Beauty in both films is therefore viewed as excessive and problematic, something unfixed from the narrative structures and posed as a question in itself.

The self-referentiality of *L’Intrus* and *Beau travail* means for Nancy that what is at issue is the filmic image itself. What Nancy calls the “ostentation of the image” in Denis’s cinema reflexively engages with the cinematic medium by privileging beauty over narrative through devices such as rhythmic editing and richly composed cinematography (“A-religion” 16). *Beau travail* and *L’Intrus* are therefore seen as interrogations of the possibility of art in the absence of structuring forces: without God, what can explain transcendent beauty? Nancy’s answer, characteristically, is that *nothing* can explain the beauty of art except for art itself; in the absence of an outside referent (such as God or Nature in the Aristotelian/teleological sense), art becomes

an image of itself. Denis makes a remark that elucidates this characteristic in her work when she recalls an incident with a filmgoer frustrated with the convoluted narrative of *L'Intrus*:

I think in a way people expect so much of a film, so many answers, that they are very much afraid to let themselves drift. My films are not highly intellectual ... That gentleman was furious, probably, because he thought it was a very arrogant film, that we didn't care whether people understood. And if I would have had time, I would have told him, "The level is not as high as you think." (Smith n. pag.)

Denis seeks to foregrounds what Nancy calls the “unbearable literalness” of the image (“A-Religion” 17), allowing cinema to engage with the spectator primarily through and as images rather than as a narrative or exposition. The ostentation of the image in *Beau travail* and *L'Intrus* calls attention to the self-referentiality of art, as the aesthetics themselves become their own explanation, their own *meaning*.

While Nancy’s readings of *Beau travail* and *L'Intrus* emphasize aesthetics over politics, the self-referentiality of the image relates to the issues of community and globalism elaborated above as well. Both the problematic excess of beauty in *Beau travail* and *L'Intrus* and the inoperable excess of community expounded by Beugnet, McMahon, Elsaesser and others are predicated on groundlessness, a shared absence of underlying meaning. There is *always* a remainder, a limit of our understanding that serves as a structuring force for our attempts to attribute signification to experience (whether it is given through art or language). This is what gives rise to the possibility of art in the first place, since the absence of meaning implies that we must create it; we must construct images of reality in order to make it signify. This has multifold political implications in that the failure to recognize the self-referentiality of our images of reality results in violence; Nancy consistently brings his arguments back to this point, whether he

is discussing painting, politics, music, psychoanalysis or film. The “Forbidden Representation” essay on art and the Holocaust from *The Ground of the Image* and the “March On” essay on Wagner and Nazism from *Listening* exemplify Nancy’s position that his ontology of the image cannot be separated from political concerns. Violence is therefore a specter that haunts Nancy’s aesthetics, and the possibility of inciting it through our patterns of thought and particular worldviews is something that he addresses throughout his work.

Given the importance of violence for Nancy’s philosophy, it is surprising that little has been written addressing the role of violence in the dialogue between Denis and Nancy. Violence is a feature of most of Denis’s films, from the serial murders of *J’ai pas sommeil* (1994) to the undercurrents of jealousy and violence in *Beau travail* to Louis killing immigrants in *L’Intrus*, but *Trouble Every Day* takes the violence common in her work to extremes. Considered in light of Nancy’s thought concerning the relationship between violence and art, the excessive brutality and gore of *Trouble Every Day* can be interpreted as a means of exposing the violence inherent in all artistic practice. Because violence for Nancy is profoundly ambivalent, having the possibility to both assert itself as truth or else open onto a truth beyond itself, *Trouble Every Day* is a reflection on the problematic nature of art. The self-referential image of *Trouble Every Day* functions to reveal the violence underlying our contact with each other and the world; the excessive nature of the violence serves to remind us of the limits of our own understanding and our fundamental inability to appropriate experience, despite our insistent desire to do so.

### **2.3 Excavating the Soul: *Trouble Every Day***

Nancy’s philosophy trades in ambivalence and ambiguity, and his logic requires him to accommodate contradictions and complications. While readers such as Laura McMahon and Thomas Elsaesser stress spacing and withdrawal as aspects of Nancy’s deconstructive project,

my own argument seeks to fill in the other side of the equation: experience is also essentially violent and confrontational. The disconnection implied by Nancy's ontology also implies a violence of contact, since it is only when I am separated from something that I can be violated, assaulted, or affected by it. While McMahon does point out this paradoxical nature of experience in her analysis of touch in Nancy, she generally uses language that calls attention to distance, space and separation; this is because one of her aims is to critique haptic theories of cinema from scholars such as Vivian Sobchack and Laura U. Marks, who argue that certain films impact the body directly through sensuous engagement. The difference between my argument and McMahon's is one of emphasis rather than disagreement: while McMahon presents a persuasive analysis of touch in Nancy, the function of violence for his thought, especially concerning aesthetics, has been mentioned only briefly in her work and is under-developed in the discourse on Nancy in general.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the image for Nancy is inherently violent in that it rips out and unifies a force from the world that is not found in the world itself. This is merely to point out that an image, whether it be a Van Gogh painting, a National Geographic photograph, a passage of literature, or a shot in a film, is different from the world as we ordinarily perceive it; Van Gogh's *Wheat Field with Cypresses* for example, was clearly inspired by a real place but unifies a vision of it that is present only in the image and not in the landscape that inspired it. For Nancy the very operation of unifying an image from a sensory multiplicity is violent in that it imposes itself as a way of looking: he argues that “[i]n the image, the thing is not content simply to be; the image shows *that* the thing is and *how* it is” (21). Therein lies the power of art: it is able to impact me through its distinction as a unified force or vision. The affective experience of art for Nancy is therefore conceived of in terms of violence, something that he elaborates at

length in “Image and Violence” from *The Ground of the Image*. The violence of the image is not merely a figurative way of describing the aesthetic experience, however; the image is also *literally* violent, or at least always implies the possibility of real violence. He points to the tendency throughout the history of Western art to depict violence, especially in images of Christ’s suffering and the martyrdom of saints, and argues that these are symptomatic of the cruel impulse to appropriate experience that underlies our creation and consumption of images.

This cruel impulse is ambivalent for Nancy in that it can operate in two ways: as I explained in the previous chapter, violence can either declare itself as truth, or else open onto a truth antecedent to itself. The problem is that it is difficult to discern the difference, and there is necessarily a murky ambiguity in between the two functions. This is because “a single principle governs the twofold allure of violence”: it is “intractable” in that it is always beyond the possibility of “negotiating, composing, ordering, and sharing” (18). Violence is always “in excess of signs” since its very nature consists in forcibly tearing apart a system (26). It defies reason and language because it wants to destroy rather than serve these structures, and is therefore essentially unreasonable, unexplainable. By tearing apart a system (language, reason, state, body, skin), violence *makes an image of itself*: the desired outcome of violence is to see itself imprinted on its object, as in a mark, bruise, or wound. These images of violence are illustrative of the image as such, since the image in general unifies and presents a force just as a cut or bruise presents evidence for the violence that caused it. The image, like the bruise, is the manifestation or self-presentation of violence.

Nancy is not merely attempting to be provocative in describing the image in such colourful terms, but rather is attempting to gesture towards the ethical implications of using images to envision, reflect on and even shape our realities. The twofold nature of violence

suggests the possibility for positive violence, *true* violence, violence motivated by truth and carried out for the right reasons: political violence, revolution, foreign intervention and war are overt political examples, but even the “interpretive violence” of discourse can be problematic if it seeks to lay claim to truth (18). Nancy cautions against assuming that we know the difference between the violence of truth and the truth of violence, since failing to recognize the ambiguity between them has potentially disastrous consequences. The ethical demand implied by Nancy’s dual ontology of violence and truth is that the ambiguity must be maintained. In order for an image to meet this ethical demand, then, it must bear witness to its own ambivalence and interrogate the force of its own particular violence.

As a film essentially *about* violence, *Trouble Every Day* participates in this ambiguity and therefore serves to illustrate the association between the image, truth and violence Nancy asserts in *The Ground of the Image*. Nancy argues that perhaps the fundamental question of aesthetics is in telling the difference between the “[v]iolence of violation or of desire” (19), a distinction (or lack thereof) that is at the centre of *Trouble Every Day*. Shane (Vincent Gallo) and Coré (Béatrice Dalle), the two monsters of Denis’s film, are infected with a disease that links sexual desire with an irresistible urge to kill and devour. Shane is a pharmaceutical scientist on his honeymoon in Paris, but his trip is revealed to have an ulterior motive: unable to consummate his marriage because of frequent, disturbing fantasies envisioning his new bride naked and covered in blood, he desperately seeks a former co-worker whose wife Coré suffers from the same affliction. By conflating violence and desire, or rather by graphically exposing the violence already inherent in desire, *Trouble Every Day* plays on the “terrible ambiguity” of truth and violence, ambiguity that is upheld by the film’s resolute lack of narrative closure (18). Lacking the recuperative function of more conventional kinds of genre cinema (such as Hollywood action

or horror), *Trouble Every Day* unleashes a force that by the film's end remains violent, excessive, and problematic.

*Trouble Every Day* has been criticized for its incomplete engagement with genre, evoking ties to vampire, serial killer and mad scientist films without following through with them. Reviewers often criticize the “dull” or “messy” narrative and are seemingly irritated that *Trouble Every Day* fails to fulfill the promises suggested by its affiliation with the horror genre.<sup>16</sup> Viewing *Trouble Every Day* as a failed genre film neglects the possibility that its narrative loose ends are self-reflexive, an interpretation supported by the fact that Denis often engages explicitly with genre cinema only to subvert its associated expectations. The masculine military film in *Beau travail*, the neo-noir/serial killer film in *J'ai pas sommeil*, the romance in *Vendredi Soir* (2002); all of these narratives are dislocated, pulled apart and left open-ended, the fragments left unexplained. The fact that Denis engages with genre at all points to a fascination with structure: genre is merely a system of signs attached through convention to certain meanings, and rather than attempting to eschew the system altogether, Denis engages with it in order to pull it apart. What remains when the structure is dismantled is something else entirely, an experience that is difficult to put into words for the very reason that it resists structure and therefore resists overarching explanations—this resistance might account for the frustration of reviewers, who seem disappointed that *Trouble Every Day* refuses to be recuperated into a coherent narrative

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<sup>16</sup> Popular review site *RottenTomatoes.com* summarizes the film as “an erotic thriller dulled by a messy narrative,” and the reviews on the page encapsulate some of the conflicting attitudes towards the film. While Eric Harrison of the *Houston Chronicle* praises Denis for her “extraordinarily reticent storytelling,” other reviewers view the film’s narrative less favourably: Mark Rahner from the *Seattle Times* writes that “[t]his erotic cannibal movie is boring,” and Andrew O’Hehir from *Salon.com* writes that it “is like biting into what looks like a juicy, delicious plum on a hot summer day and coming away with your mouth full of rotten pulp and living worms.”

that might explain all of its various parts. This tendency may be one of the reasons for Nancy's fascination with Denis, since employing the rules of genre against itself in order to expose an inassimilable remainder is very much a deconstructive gesture.

Denis subverts expectations by playing with generic signifiers and stereotypes. Coré seems at first to embody the most emblematic example of the victimized female: she is first seen next to a highway in a long coat and high boots, symbols that insinuate that she is a prostitute. The predatory look of the truck driver as he gazes at the sexualized figure of Coré and stops a few lengths up the road points to a myriad of cultural references concerning truck driver/serial killers,<sup>17</sup> while in fact it is Coré that is the predator, a point driven home by subsequent shots of her crouching in long grass, dripping with blood like a lioness post-kill. This subversion of the victimized female narrative is echoed in arguably the most disturbing sequence in the film, in which a young neighbourhood boy is lured into Coré's attic with the lure of sex and intrigue, only to be devoured in the middle of the act by the cannibal's voracious jaws. When the boy comes up her "tower" to rescue her, his fantasized fairy-tale narrative becomes a nightmare; Rapunzel turns out to be the Ripper.

Shane's parallel narrative also exploits gendered narrative conventions in order to undermine them. Shane at first seems to occupy the position of the potent male protagonist, since he begins the film with a clear agenda—find Léo and cure his disease—but like Galoup in *Beau travail* he fails to understand his own motivations enough to overcome them. His determination

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<sup>17</sup> Films such as *Duel* (Steven Spielberg 1971), *Road Games* (Richard Franklin), and *Joy Ride* (John Dahl 2001) deal with killer truck drivers; *Haute Tension [High Tension]* (Alexandre Aja 2003) and *À ma soeur! [Fat Girl]* (Catherine Breillat 2001), films linked to French new extremism, exploit the convention with some interesting twists. The FBI has stated that it believes that over 500 women have been killed by serial killers working as truck drivers in the United States, which suggests that, unfortunately, the cliché has its foundation in truth and expresses a legitimate cultural anxiety (Leonard).

to seek Léo comes across more as rudeness than masculine assertiveness, as his inquiries to Malécot (Hélène Lapiower) and the unnamed boss at Léo's old lab are repeated in an aggravated tone of voice more times than seems natural or necessary: he says "Hello? Hello, can anybody hear me? Can someone answer?" several times over the telephone before anyone figures to hang up or answer him, and once he arrives at the lab, he awkwardly repeats, "I really need to find him. Please. I really need to find him. Please." Gallo's performance is a disconcerting mix of flat disdain with a sense of mounting aggression, hardly sympathetic traits in a central character; by contrast, his wife June (Tricia Vessey), styled to look somewhere between Jean Seburg and Audrey Hepburn, is all wide-eyed innocence, an exaggeration of virginal femininity. The match between such contrasting characters only makes sense if we view them as gendered archetypes, Beauty and the Beast, but as with the neighbour boy, Denis denies them their happy ending. Shane never finds Léo, and discovers Coré at the scene of her crime only to choke her to death; failing to find answers, he eventually acts on his impulses and murders a chambermaid in the basement of the hotel. The film ends as June returns to the hotel to find Shane in the shower; her red gloves and the droplets of blood running down the shower curtain suggest a symbolic loss of innocence and hint towards her growing cognizance of his violent nature.

By utilizing an excessive number of symbols from a variety of genres—stock characters, lab coats, beakers, dissected brains, serial killers, gargoyles, gore, etc.—and refusing to tie them to an overarching explanatory narrative, *Trouble Every Day* obfuscates the functions of genre and blocks any sense of recuperative satisfaction. What is left after these narrative tropes are disassembled and investigated is an irreconcilable excess, unleashed by and inexorably associated with Coré and Shane's monstrous desire. Nancy argues in "Icon of Fury" that Coré and Shane's cannibalistic urges are a means of exposing the violent economy underlying all

desire, what he calls “the deep structure” or “the real” of the kiss (4). Desire as Nancy explains it in *The Ground of the Image* as well as “Icon of Fury” is related to the “outside” or limit of our understanding: it is an opening “of a space where a singular irruption of truth might emerge” rather than a closing “of truth’s being brutally encased in concrete, the bottom of a stupid and self-satisfied bunker” (*Ground* 19). Desire is therefore the will to open onto truth rather than closing it off; desire for another person is a wish to know the truth of the other, a longing to penetrate their being and expose the secrets underlying their external appearance and behaviour. Nancy argues that the bloodshed in *Trouble Every Day* is symbolic of this insatiable desire to uncover the inner workings of things, to bite through the skin of existence and feel all the bloody insides rush out. The “icon” referred to by the essay’s title is a bite mark on June’s skin, revealed as Shane tenderly lifts her out of the hotel bathtub: it stands as a symbol for the violent undercurrent of his love for her, an indication that his devotion masks a furious, insatiable hunger.

The film reveals this as an impossible process, a realization most explicitly evoked in the scene in which Coré devours the boy. Her desire to expose the lifeblood coursing through the body of her victim is automatically self-refuting in that once she bites through his skin, his lifeblood becomes *spilled* blood (“*cruor*, as distinct from *sanguis*, the blood that circulates in the body” [*Ground* 24]), which is now external and therefore invalid as evidence for his inner nature. The film opens onto a way of seeing, fits us into Coré’s desire: extreme close ups of skin track across the boy’s vulnerable body, a body about to be penetrated. She too, is penetrated, writhing up and down on top of him as she kisses him and, seamlessly, without changing registers, begins to bite him. He screams; blood pours from his nose and mouth as she tears into the flesh of his neck. Unhindered by the body’s borders, Coré punctures new holes, exploring them with eager

fingers and tongue as he gasps and gurgles helplessly. He is torn inside out, his contents spilled and painted on the walls in gory loops and crosses.<sup>18</sup> These are empty symbols: the images she paints are substitutes for the soul she could not find, bridges over the chasm of his groundlessness. They reveal nothing, that there was nothing hidden in the boy that could appease her monstrous hunger. While Coré wants to excavate the boy's soul, all she manages to uncover is gore, a "little puddle of matter" that stands in for her yearning to appropriate or understand death (*Ground* 25). The impossibility of fulfilling this self-refuting process renders Coré's desire—and by extension all desire—insatiable, a truth realized by Coré and evident in one of her very few lines in the film, which expresses her wish to die,<sup>19</sup>

This desire to expose the meaning of the other in *Trouble Every Day* provides a model not only for our relationships to other people, but also for the spectator's relationship to the screen. The film's self-reflexive engagement with genre works with the intense visceral affect elicited by the graphic violence to reconfigure the viewer's relationship with the film, allowing it to resonate as an excessive remainder. In "Icon of Fury," Nancy describes the cinematography of *Trouble Every Day* as a force that disrupts the very functioning of the cinematic image: "[t]he screen is torn into a wound streaming with blood. The image becomes an image of a torn image: no longer an image, or a figure, but an icon of access to the invisible" (6). This hints at a passage to something beyond itself, an opening onto truth; it also recalls Heidegger's death mask as Nancy explains it in *Ground*. Commenting on Heidegger's use of the death mask (a cast of a person's face taken after they die, generally for identification purposes) as a metaphor for the

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<sup>18</sup> Nancy calls them "improbable curves, like arches or vaults," which adds to the religious symbolism by calling the ceilings of churches to mind ("Icon" 5).

<sup>19</sup> Her only other line is in a flashback, when she asks Malécot for a cigarette.

Kantian schematism, Nancy argues that the death mask is an image of death, and makes an aspect of death visible (24): because death is invisible and inconceivable, by literally giving it a face the mask accomplishes the impossible task of representing the unrepresentable. This makes the death mask the “exemplary image” because *all* images represent the unrepresentable (24): like the *cogito*, which cannot think of itself as it exists before it thinks of itself, we can never represent what exists before a representation. Nancy follows Heidegger in figuring this limit of understanding in terms of and *as* death: death is the absence of meaning, the nothingness that is the groundless “ground” of the image.<sup>20</sup> Like the mask, the graphic violence of *Trouble Every Day* literally represents death; by repudiating narrative structures that might domesticate its disturbing images, it also opens onto the inexpressible reality underlying its representations. Affect in *Trouble Every Day* is therefore elicited not only through sensuous engagement provoked by visceral images of abjection and violence, as haptic theories would argue, but also in relation to this inexpressible, inexhaustible groundlessness: the *excesses*, both visual and narrative, serve to block rational response and foreground a less easily defined, more basic kind of experience. It is excess that unchains *Trouble Every Day* from the closed self-referentiality of the image; it exposes Denis’s films and their spectators to their own unimaginable groundless.

Like *Trouble Every Day*, *Beau travail* and *L’Intrus* also function through excess to disengage the spectator from narrative concerns and towards aesthetic and corporeal ones. The obvious distinction is that the extreme, controversial violence of *Trouble Every Day* is far less

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<sup>20</sup> Unlike Heidegger, however, Nancy does not conceive of existence as being-*towards*-death, but rather views death as the limit of existence. In *Corpus*, Nancy argues that death, like the body, is a limit of sense that cannot be crossed: “How are we to explain that existence isn’t ‘for’ death, but that ‘death’ is the body of existence” (*Corpus* 15, emphasis in original). Our existence is not *for* death, but rather touches upon it without crossing it, suspended onto the opening without passing over to the other side; there is no other side—there is merely the opening, the exposure to the limit. I will return to this idea of death as exposure in the next chapter.

subtle than the aesthetic excesses of *Beau travail* and *L'Intrus*: while excess works in much the same way in all of the films (to open onto truth rather than closing it off), in *Trouble* violence counteracts the distancing forces of Denis's cinematic image. While *Beau travail* and *L'Intrus* emphasize spacing and disconnection in the interactions between characters as well as between spectator and screen, figuring the separation between us as a necessary condition of our connection to each other, *Trouble Every Day* reverses the formula. While *Beau travail* and *L'Intrus* are about alienation, *Trouble Every Day* is about desire; it envisions desire as a violence that interrupts the interruption, intrudes on the spacing that Nancy argues is essential to experience. In fact, however, when we consider all three films together it becomes obvious that alienation and desire are two parts of the same operation: while alienation exposes the spacing between us and desire destructively seeks to intrude upon that spacing, they both reveal that true penetration of ourselves and the other is impossible.

Despite the inevitable disclosure of this truth, however, the violence of *Trouble Every Day* seeks to destroy it, to vehemently deny the separation by declaring itself as truth instead. In the face of an inevitable impossibility, it stubbornly asserts itself, maintaining the belief that in ripping apart flesh it can access the soul. This is the function of all violence, and the beauty of Denis's film is that it allows violence both kinds of truth at once: Coré's paintings are both their own truths, mere puddles of matter, as well as being openings onto something deeper. Denis, like Nancy, allows the contradictions of violence to stand. Violence is always an irrational force, seeking to break apart a system, *any* system, *even the system in which it is posited*: Nancy fully recognizes that his own philosophy is the kind of system that he cautions against assuming is able to appropriate experience. He therefore builds contradictions into his ontology to call attention to the limits of his *own* thought, not merely the thoughts of others: he tears his system

apart and leaves the wounds open. Just as it is the image itself that is at stake in Denis, it is philosophy that is at stake in Nancy, and his writing, like the image, is self-referential, seeking to open itself to what exceeds it. What this excess reveals is that violence and truth inevitably infect each other with an inexorable ambiguity: telling the difference between the two is, as always, a matter of interpretation.



**Figure 1: Bridges Over Nothing**

## **Chapter 3: Body Problems**

“It is certain that I (that is, my mind, by which I am what I am) is entirely and truly distinct from my body, and may exist without it.”

-Descartes, *Discourse on the Method* (115)

“I was drawn to the subject because of the feeling that the body could become a stranger, that there might be a distance between consciousness and the life of the body.”

-Marina de Van (qtd. in Palmer 80)

### **3.1 Corpus Carnage**

New extremism is a movement that foregrounds the body. Bodies in these films scream, ejaculate, bleed, and cry; they are stripped, raped, cut, dismembered, fucked. The vulnerability of our material existence is violently exposed through the extreme treatment of bodies onscreen, and also through the visceral reactions provoked in the spectator by such challenging subject matter. Not only do the films of the new extremism address the onscreen body and the body of the spectator, however; as Tim Palmer argues in *Brutal Intimacy* and Martine Beugnet argues in *Cinema and Sensation*, perhaps more significant is the way that these films treat film *itself* as a body. New extremism treats film as a *physical* medium, moving away from (although not abandoning) narrative concerns in favour of an engagement with sounds, textures, and colours in order to interrogate what Laura U. Marks calls “the skin of the film.” Informed by a long history of transgression in cinema (Buñuel, Brakhage, Pasolini, etc.), filmmakers affiliated with new extremism exploit these traditions and employ stylistic techniques to dissect and anatomize the material aspects of the filmic image. Palmer contextualizes what he calls the *cinéma du corps* within the avant-garde tradition, arguing that new extremism both builds upon and adds something new to the transgressive tendencies of French cinema through “effects derived from

an innovative composite of perceptual encounters—a raw and occasionally confrontational array of cinematic sensations” (60). By grouping them under the term “cinema of sensation,” Beugnet also emphasizes the corporeality of these films and the ways that style can elicit a powerful and often disturbing sensuous response in the spectator.

Both Beugnet and Palmer discuss the screen/spectator relationship created by new extremist films as direct and immediate, as though affect somehow annihilates the distinction between the film body and the body of the spectator. Palmer argues that new extremism exemplifies “film’s continued potential to inspire bewilderment—raw, *unmediated* reaction” (59-59, my emphasis), and Beugnet notes that the “intensity and physicality” of these films collapses the sense of mastery generally garnered by the classical, Cartesian sense of perspective, promoting “an involvement with the object of the gaze that pre-empts or supersedes this state of detached self-awareness” (5). I agree that new extremism evokes intense physical reactions from the spectator, as well as with Beugnet’s point that this serves to disrupt Cartesian subject/object relations; however, I disagree that affect creates a direct or unmediated impact on the spectator. That an experience is intense or traumatic does not imply that it is immediate, and the films of the new extremism provoke us to distance ourselves by recoiling and looking away as much as they grip us viscerally through affect. As I argued in the first chapter, Nancy impels us to think of experience in terms of withdrawal and distance, and the spacing between subject and art is an essential component of the experience; while violence and affect might seek to intrude on these spaces, they remain impenetrable and inescapable conditions of our relationships with the world. While the first two chapters outlined Nancy’s views on subjectivity in relation to new extremism, this chapter concerns itself with the body, re-considering the ways that the body is evoked and impacted through these films in light of Nancy’s thought regarding corporeality. I will focus on

three films in particular that play on the distinction between mind and body and as such articulate some of its inherent contradictions: Gaspar Noé's *Enter the Void* (2009), which is shot entirely from a first-person perspective as a drug dealer experiences death and its aftermath; Philippe Grandrieux's *Sombre* (1998), which evokes the troubled consciousness of a serial killer; and Marina de Van's *In My Skin* (2002), which focuses on a woman's exploration of her body through self-mutilation. Through these films, I will return to some of the ideas I brought up in the first chapter regarding Descartes and the *cogito*: by figuring itself, the subject delimits itself as separate from its body, a position rendered problematic in virtue of the fact that experience is inexorably corporeal. Despite the gap created by the subject in creating itself, the body always returns, not "cast out but completely at the limit, at an extreme, outward edge that nothing closes up" (*Corpus* 11). The body for Nancy is the limit of sense, the excessive remainder of signification that paradoxically makes signification possible; through the process of *excription* (a concept I will return to below) involved in sense, the subject divorces itself from the body, making the relationship between them impossible to conceive of through signification.

Nancy wrote *Corpus*, his treatise on the body, in 1992, at a time when he was enduring severe health problems related to his heart transplant and subsequent struggles with cancer. While he stopped teaching and quit participating in the academic community, he continued to write prolifically, and some of his best and most influential works, including *A Finite Thinking* (1990), *The Gravity of Thought* (1991), *The Sense of the World* (1993), *The Muses* (1994), and *Being Singular Plural* (1996), were published during this time; *L'Intrus*, published in 2000, explicitly deals with the experience and its impact on Nancy's thought. It is no surprise that embodied existence became such a central concern of Nancy during this period, and has remained so to the present. The process of touching on embodied existence through language is

the subject of *Corpus*, which comments on everything from the legacy of Christianity, the ramifications of globalization, the meaning of pain, and the difficult task of writing through its central interrogation of the body. The body as Nancy explains it in *Corpus* is both a construction of Western thought and the truth underlying this construction: it represents our desire to concretely present the chaos of experience while also positioning itself as the edge of that experience. Nancy takes the words uttered during the Eucharist as well as by Christ at the Last Supper, *Hoc est enim corpus meum*, “for this is my body,” as the starting point for *Corpus*: he argues that the phrase, as well as the associated Christian imagery of an embodied God, represents our obsession “with showing a *this*, and with showing (ourselves) that this *this*, here, *is* the thing we can’t see or touch, either here or anywhere else—and that *this* is *that*, not just in any way, but *as its body*<sup>21</sup>” (3). Nancy argues that this obsession with presenting something concrete is central to Western thought, and is apparent in everything from the *cogito* to Rousseau’s *Social Contract* to Nietzsche’s madness to the voices of opera singers (5); he goes so far as to suggest that “*Hoc est enim* … can generate the whole *corpus* of a General Encyclopedia of Western Sciences, Arts, and Ideas” (5). While this might seem like a grandiloquent claim, it is consistent with his view that the history of philosophy is marked by a compulsion to secure truth, a task rendered impossible in our current post-Nietzsche, post-theological condition. The desire to establish certainty is matched by an insistent anxiety about our inability to do so, our assertion that *this* material substance (bread, wine) really is the body of God plagued by the disappointing realization that “this … *this* is always too much, or too little, to be *that*” (5). Nancy remarks that [s]ensory certitude, as soon as it is touched, turns into chaos” (5): the reassuring sureness offered

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<sup>21</sup> All emphases are in original unless otherwise indicated.

by material substance falls apart when examined too closely, since materiality turns out to be different from the ways that we give it meaning through language, which is (at least the way Nancy usually describes it) immaterial and non-corporeal.<sup>22</sup>

In agreement with Ian James's reading of Nancy, I argued earlier that Nancy's philosophy is characterized by a logic of interpretation or fable, which views truth as created because of the inability of language to appropriate experience. I pointed out there that this way of thinking is heavily influenced by Nietzsche, who also viewed language as capable of providing nothing more than "a movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms" that do nothing more than provide interpretations of reality that become true only by convention (117). In *Corpus*, Nancy nuances this view through the concept of *excription*, the process by which signification marks off its own excess in the same moment that it inscribes itself as meaning. Unlike for Nietzsche, this means that language for Nancy is *more* than just interpretation and *does* bear a relation to reality, beyond merely being conventionally attached to established truths: it is precisely in virtue of the fact that language *cannot* access reality that it is able to gesture towards it, marking it off as the indescribable space beyond its self-imposed limits. What is excribed is the body, and the task of *Corpus* is to "begin by getting through, and by means of, the *excription* of our body: its being inscribed-outside, its being placed *outside the text* as the most *proper* movement of its text; the text *itself* being abandoned, left at its limit" (11). While writing

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<sup>22</sup> While Nancy discusses the "*incorporeality* of sense" as a reason for the difficulties involved in writing about the body (11), in other places he discusses language *as a body*, and argues that *because* language is a body it cannot penetrate other bodies (and vice-versa). He writes: "[b]odies are impenetrable to languages—and languages are impenetrable to bodies, themselves being bodies" (57), taking the observation that no two bodies can occupy the same space simultaneously to argue that words, each one a "hard, extended block of significance," can never access other bodies. As I have argued throughout this project, contradictory descriptions of concepts are characteristic of Nancy's thought: language, like the image, is both tangible and non-tangible at once.

cannot access the truth of the body, by acknowledging that his thought circumscribes its own limits, Nancy is able to touch upon them and gesture towards the space beyond: in the same way that Nancy argues Nietzsche's logic opens itself up rather than closing itself off through inherent contradiction, by figuring the limits of sense—both linguistic and bodily—Nancy makes room for something outside thought and language. Another influence reads strongly here: Kant's argument in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that knowledge is limited by the structure of our understanding follows a similar logic to Nancy's arguments concerning the limits of sense. Furthermore, Nancy's inscription/excription is structurally similar to Kant's assertion that the perceived *phenomena* of experience imply the idea of the inaccessible *noumena*, the world as it exists unperceived. Both Nancy and Kant posit what is beyond the limits of our understanding as impossible, existing for us only as a structuring force that determines our experiences in virtue of the fact that it delimits them.<sup>23</sup>

Nancy characterizes this limit differently than Kant, however, since for Nancy *experience itself* evades understanding, not merely that which lies beyond our experience. While *Corpus* focuses on the body as the inassimilable excess of experience, other works characterize the limit in different ways. *Listening*, for example, suggests that sound occupies this liminal position, since it is entirely distinct from the dominant visual framework through which we generally conceive of and understand reality. For *The Ground of the Image*, as well as *Being Singular Plural* and *Ego Sum* to a certain extent, the limit is death. It might reasonably be argued, however, that all the ways to characterize the limit come back to the body, to the brute fact of

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<sup>23</sup> Whether or not the *noumena* actually exists is widely debated in contemporary Kantian scholarship: while some argue that the world as it is perceived implies the existence of a world in-itself, others assert that the *noumena* exists *only* as the limit of our perception, and not as a thing in itself. This double possibility offered by the limits of our understanding is something played upon at length in Nancy's work.

material existence. In *Listening*, Nancy characterizes sound in corporeal terms, and argues that unlike the separation implicit in visual means of understanding, sound functions by reverberating *through* our bodies. Even death is often characterized in Nancy in terms of the *dead body*, giving it a concrete existence that at the same time obscures its “true” significance (for death is the absence of meaning). Our own material existence is beyond us, tangible yet ungraspable by the faculties of sense. This contradiction, of something corporeal and concrete that at the same time remains stubbornly extraneous to our understanding, is essential to Nancy’s philosophical project as a whole, and persists in his aesthetics, his politics, and his ethics. The ontology of the body outlined in *Corpus* is therefore *the ontology par excellence*, a point he drives home when he argues that “[o]ntology of the body’ = excription of being. Existence addressed to an out-side ... Existence: bodies are existence, the very act of ex-istence, *being*” (19). Being, for Nancy, always comes back to the body.

Like Kant, Nancy argues that we are organized for meaning: whether because of some inherent biological faculty or the force of the tradition of post-Enlightenment thought (Kant argues the former, Nancy emphasizes the latter), we want the world to *make sense*. The fact that it does not, entirely, means that we have to force the issue, and constrain experience into the limits we have established through language and history. The violence inherent in this process has already been elaborated at length in the previous two chapters, but it is worth taking note once again of the fact that Nancy means both a figurative kind of violence as well as *real, physical violence*. War, genocide, and murder are denials of the body, inscriptions in blood that ignore their own excribed remainder: by denying the body as Being, they *eliminate* being and are left with *only the body*. This results in the annihilation of sense at the same time as it fails to eradicate the body, despite its abolishing the body’s possibility for meaning: “[t]he cadavers in a

mass grave aren't dead, they aren't our dead: they are wounds heaped up, stuck in, flowing into one another, death ... bodies are only signs annulled: this time not into pure sense, but into its pure exhaustion" (77). New extremism plays on the distinction between sense and its exhaustion, exposure to death as a limit and the foreclosing of that limit through vehement, repudiating brutality. The body of the film and the body of the spectator relate through this fluctuation between exposure and foreclosure: they touch, intrude, wound, recoil, withdraw, violate.

### 3.2 Body Disembodiment: *Enter the Void*

Gaspar Noé's *Enter the Void* envisions a disjunctive relationship between mind and body, quite literally disembodying the subjectivity of the protagonist by granting him a perspective from beyond death. From Nancy's point of view, this perspective is impossible, since death is the inexorable limit of our understanding: passing outside the limit is in excess of sense and beyond signification. In granting us a disembodied perspective, however, Noé paradoxically emphasizes experience as inescapably corporeal. Once Oscar (Nathaniel Brown) "enters the void," he does not experience any sort of boundless, transcendental mysticism, but rather fixates on *bodies* and on his own sensual experiences of love, trauma, and pain. While we often tend to think of a void in terms of empty space (as in an abyss or the blackness of deep space), the concept takes on a different dimension in Nancy's work: for Nancy the void occurs *at* the limit, and not beyond it. The limit is a spacing that opens onto *nothing, period* since our world is not grounded by an external, structuring force (such as God or Plato's forms), but rather comes to ground *itself* from its own irreducible material existence. Rather than consisting of transcendent immateriality (or even its lack), the void that occurs at the limit of sense is related to materiality; it is a spacing where sense (in both senses of the word) voids itself of signification. As Nancy argues in "Fifty-eight Indices on the Body," "[t]he void itself is a subtle kind of body" (150): like corporeality,

the void is the excribed remainder that touches on the limit. Oscar's disembodiment serves as a contradiction that *articulates embodiment*, and reveals subjectivity to be a movement where the ego divorces *itself* from the groundlessness of its own material existence.

*Enter the Void* is shot entirely through a subjective camera from the point of view of Oscar, a drug dealer living in Tokyo with his sister Linda (Paz de la Huerta). We experience events through his eyes as he ingests DMT,<sup>24</sup> discusses the Tibetan Book of the Dead with his “junkie” friend Alex (Cyril Roy), walks through the streets of Tokyo, and eventually dies of a gunshot wound in a filthy bar bathroom. His hallucinations are digitally rendered as psychedelic configurations of geometric yet organic-looking objects that fluctuate in shape and colour, giving the impression of kaleidoscopic three-dimensionality. Oscar’s drug trip characterizes the look of the rest of the film, which flickers between neon tones of purple, green, and red (Gaspar Noé, who says that he based the aesthetic on his own perception, wanted to avoid the colour blue because it is absent in his recollections and dreams [B 18]).

Through a subjective camera, we see Oscar’s hands lighting a pipe, opening doors, etc., and his view is occasionally intercut with black frames to create a blinking effect. The effects of these efforts to ground the spectator in Oscar’s point of view are both intensely visceral and oddly alienating. While brief subjective camera shots are often exploited in cinema in order to connect the spectator to the impressions or sensations of a character, thereby intensifying affect (horror films are most notable in this regard, as first person perspective combined with sound

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<sup>24</sup> Dimethyltryptamine, or DMT, is a powerful hallucinogen found naturally in many plants as well as in the bodies of mammals, including humans (in trace amounts). It is the main psychoactive ingredient in ayahuasca, a liquid drug consumed by indigenous peoples of South America for healing and shamanistic purposes. It has been speculated that large amounts of DMT are released in the moments before death, and that the chemical is responsible for reported cases of “near-death experiences,” although there is little evidence to support this hypothesis.

effects such as heavy breathing are often used to elicit terror), this effect tends to diminish over time as the novelty of the technique wears off and the distinctions between our own perspective and the perspective onscreen are exposed. As an anonymous reviewer for *The New York Times* wrote about *Lady of the Lake* in 1946, Robert Montgomery's first-person film noir experiment and one of the inspirations for *Enter the Void*,

YOU do get into the story and see things pretty much the way the protagonist, Phillip Marlowe, does, but YOU don't have to suffer the bruises he does. Of course, YOU don't get a chance to put your arms around Audrey Totter either. After all, the movie makers, for all their ingenuity, can go just so far in their quest for realism. ("Lady in the Lake" n. pag.)

The emphatic use of the word "YOU" suggests the degree to which an attempt to immerse the spectator in another's subjectivity paradoxically results in a disconnection, a re-assertion of the spectator as a distinct entity from the subjectivity represented on film. Blinking is an illustrative example, as while a few black frames might initially create a sense of realism in subjective point-of-view shots, they soon become distracting: how does one convey cinematically the fact that we are always blinking, but seldom notice? Noé gets around this problem in part because Oscar's altered state already distorts cinematic realism in any sort of conventional sense—this is no *cinéma vérité*, and Noé has said that almost every frame in the film has been digitally altered (although purportedly users of DMT find the graphics quite convincing) (Harris n.pag.)—and in part because Oscar's death changes the rules altogether (it is impossible to say what a "realistic" perspective from beyond the grave might look like, unless perhaps a *very long blink*<sup>25</sup>).

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<sup>25</sup> Although Oscar's consciousness does continue to "blink" after he dies, this serves as a way of transitioning between memories rather than aiming at any kind of verisimilitude.

While sight serves to hold us at a distance, however, it is sound that most effectively gives the disconcerting impression of inhabiting Oscar's body. We hear the murmuring of his inner monologue (at least until he dies, after which point this aspect of his consciousness seems to disappear), and occasionally become aware of his breathing and heartbeat. The sound of Oscar's voice is muffled, distinct from the voices of those around him as though conducted through the bones and tissues in his head (as our own voices are), replicating the distinction between air-conducted and bone-conducted sound that is the reason that our own voices sound strange to us when played back on a recording. While the subjective position of the camera cues us that we are seeing the events of the film from Oscar's point of view, it is these sounds that serve to connect us to his *body*, giving us some sense of his physical experience by approximating the way he hears his own voice. Nancy argues that the subject does not experience its body as a solid block of matter, but rather as "a resonance chamber or column of beyond meaning" (*Listening* 31): sounds echo through the hollow spaces in our bodies, and Noé mimics this impression in order to evoke Oscar as ""a place that becomes a subject insofar as sound resounds there" (17).

Noé minimizes the alienating effects of the subjective camera during Oscar's death scene by exploiting this visceral connection to Oscar's body, eliciting a profound sense of horror by making us witness his demise through his own eyes and ears. Oscar leaves his apartment with Alex, and they walk down the streets of Tokyo discussing drugs and the *Bardol Thodal*, or Book of the Dead (the conversation provides an exact blueprint for the narrative, which, as Chris Norris observes, roughly follows the same three-act structure from death to experience to re-birth

(28)<sup>26</sup>). Alex stays outside as Oscar enters a bar ominously named “The Void” in order to conduct a drug deal; his client (later revealed to be Victor [Olly Alexander], the son of the “old bitch” Oscar had been chiding him for having sex with as they walked to the bar) apologizes meekly before police rush in, forcing Oscar to flee to the toilet. Panicking, he fumbles as he attempts to flush the pills down the toilet, yelling desperately for the cops to “hold on a minute” as they pound raucously on the door—the cacophony builds as Oscar pounds back, and then stupidly tells them he has a gun (he doesn’t). Possibly prompted by this remark (although it is not clear that they understand English), they shoot through the door; the sound of the blast kills the din, and Oscar’s heartbeat rises on the soundtrack as he touches the wound and looks down on his bloodied hands. The heartbeat quickens and then begins to grow dim as Oscar falls to his knees, hands trembling; vague thoughts emerge (“They shot me... Did they kill me?”), then wash out to a low, incoherent whisper. Fallen sideways on the floor (which is filthy, urine-stained and littered in pills and cigarette butts), Oscar blinks at his hands as black boots enter his field of vision; a pair of hands checks for a pulse as Oscar’s vision blurs and flickers, finally fading to black.

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<sup>26</sup> The acts begin with Oscar’s death, a transitional state that supposedly “brings a scintillating light of true reality” which is represented by the pale flickering glow after Oscar passes through the light in the bathroom (Norris 28). Oscar’s recollections are his journey through the *bardo* of experience. Norris describes the third *bardo*, rebirth, as “an extended art-film directed by one’s karma that tends to feature lots of people boning” (28), which explains the extended sequence towards the end of the film where Oscar floats through the levels of a love hotel and watches couples copulating with lights glowing around their genitals, finally entering the body of his sister and her boss as they conceive a child.



**Figure 2: Oscar Dies**

While subjective camera is often used to evoke the *fear* of death (as in horror movies, when victims are being chased by the killer for example), it is seldom used to actually represent the *experience* of death.<sup>27</sup> The result is deeply unnerving, as the chaos of sound and light and the visceral effect of the slowly ebbing heartbeat touch on the universal fear of dying—an experience that is, quite literally, the limit of our understanding. It is at this point—Oscar dies at around the 30-minute mark of the 161-minute runtime—that the film passes beyond the impossible. Oscar’s consciousness separates itself from his body and moves towards the light bulb in the ceiling, echoing Alex’s previous comment that the soul sees “all these different lights, of all different colours” after death, and that these lights pull it towards higher planes of existence (Oscar continues to be attracted to lights throughout the rest of the narrative). But while Oscar is disembodied, floating through the narrative as a ghost or astral projection, his

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<sup>27</sup> Some exceptions that come to mind are *A Fistful of Dollars* (Sergio Leone 1964), in which we get a subjective shot from the point of view of the villain as he dies, and “The Pointy End” episode of *Game of Thrones* in which Lord Stark is beheaded.

consciousness appears to be fixated on bodies, as if unable to completely tear itself away from the pains and joys of its material existence. Once he enters the light, the screen fills with a flickering, pale fleshy pink colour; after a time he emerges once again to look down upon his own body—already indicating Noé’s final point (as well as Nancy’s), that there is no “higher plane,” only endless iterations of this one—before moving on to float through memories of his childhood and the trauma that broke him and his sister apart, as well as the immediate aftermath of his death.

Oscar’s obsession with his sister is immediately (and uncomfortably) made apparent. He hovers over the club where she works and watches her strip, then follows her to dressing room where she begins having sex with her boss; Oscar enters the boss’s skull, ostensibly “possessing” him while they engage in intercourse. The sense of disgust associated with the incest taboo is aggravated by the subjective camera, which connects us physically to Oscar’s feelings for Linda (the sound of a heartbeat once again intensifies visceral affect). Oscar’s physical fixation on Linda is connected to the trauma they experienced in childhood, his incestuous feelings seemingly a desperate attempt to return to an idyllic childhood cut short by a violent car crash that killed both his parents and left him and his sister showered in their blood. The crash unexpectedly punctuates the narrative in several places with sudden, shocking impact, the truck horn and crush-splash sound brutally interrupting his sunny memories of summer picnics, breastfeeding, and bathing with his mother and sister. While the traumatic crash is the most intensely physical of his memories, however, they *all* emphasize the body, his own as well as those of his family: Oscar’s ghost transcends his body only to re-experience his life as fundamentally material. Further, Oscar’s experiences call attention to the body of the spectator, connecting us viscerally to feelings of disgust, fear, shock, and pain. While *Enter the Void* may

not evoke a “direct” engagement with Oscar’s subjectivity—the transgressive nature of Oscar’s experiences causes us to recoil as much as it causes us to connect to the experience through affect—the film undoubtedly touches on something physical. While its structure and religious source material might seem to suggest that *Enter the Void* attempts to depict a “metaphysical journey” beyond death, Noé gives us reason to doubt this interpretation: he explains that it is “not the story of someone who dies, flies, and is reincarnated, it’s the story of someone who’s stoned when he gets shot and who has an intonation of his own dream” (Stephenson n. pag.). Noé says that the woman who gives birth to Oscar at the end is not his sister but his mother; he is not reincarnated but remains inescapably tied to his own existence. This reading sees his “transcendence” as merely chemical, the effect of drugs on his dying body, and even these visions are essentially earthbound; *Enter the Void* provides no promise of a wider universe.

### 3.3 Medusa’s Head: *Sombre*

Like *Enter the Void*, Philippe Grandrieux’s *Sombre* envisions subjectivity as a disembodiment. Its protagonist violently divorces himself from material existence—not by dying, as Oscar does, but by killing others—and in doing so paradoxically manages to reassert the body, which grounds itself in the film’s excessive, sensuous aesthetics. While it lacks the ostentatious sex and gore of later new extremist films, *Sombre* nevertheless evokes intense affect through aesthetics that foreground the sensuous, material aspects of cinema, immersing the spectator in the troubled psyche of a serial killer. Released in 1998, *Sombre* is an early example of new extremism: it came well before the controversy surrounding *Baise-moi* in 2000 and preceded the films most associated with the movement (*Trouble Every Day* and *Fat Girl* in 2001, *Irréversible* in 2002, *Twentynine Palms* in 2003, etc.) by several years. The film centers on Jean (Marc Barbé), a puppeteer who follows the Tour de France and murders women, mostly prostitutes, along the

route. Grandrieux's background as a visual artist is apparent in the film, which accentuates sensual details and exploits them in order to intensify the film's pervasive feeling of dread and violence. Because of the eponymously dark, low-contrast lighting and intentionally out-of-focus cinematography, the image is often so dim and blurry it is difficult to discern exactly what is going on, especially during the murder scenes: the spectator must therefore negotiate the experience of watching the film through a disturbing array of sounds, colours, and textures that conceal as much as they convey. It is the lack of differentiation between sex and violence, the inability to determine exactly when one ends and the other begins, that is one of the films most disturbing features: in darkness, moans and muffled screams are nearly interchangeable.

Beugnet emphasizes these sensual, haptic qualities of the film, arguing that its style foregrounds a sense of tactility emphasized by the obscured visuals. Tim Palmer also takes note of the film's "visual abstractions," arguing that Grandrieux's work tends to convey "piece-meal narratives of implicit murder and brutality through lyrical flashes of unfocused colors, dense visual textures, handheld camerawork, and barely perceptible figure movements" (65). Both analyses suggest that by obscuring onscreen bodies, Grandrieux pulls the attention towards the *screen itself* as a body, and in doing so is also somehow able to impact the body of the observing spectator. How this movement between screen and subject occurs, however, is unclear. While Beugnet argues that it is a kind of "mimesis" through which the subject becomes involved with the sensuous qualities of the film (5), she does not elaborate on how this mimesis might work: how, exactly, does a spectator come into *direct* contact with a film across the physical distance that separates them? This question is not sufficiently explained by her argument that *Sombre* collapses perspective through its dark, blurred aesthetics, since it applies only to the space depicted onscreen and *not* the space between screen and spectator. While this space is largely

ignored in haptic theories (as well as film theory in general), it is an integral component of Nancy's aesthetics: because touch for Nancy is not a direct contact, it is the space between art and subject that allows a connection to occur. Affect is therefore not an immediate sensuous engagement, but a more complex movement predicated on spacing and withdrawal; by privileging bodily response, *Sombre* foregrounds this disjunctive relationships between subject and art, as well as between subject and body. Moving between embodiment and disembodiment, it exposes the distinction between mind and body as a construction, built from nothing and suspended on the fragile scaffolding of our fragmented consciousness.

Beugnet and Palmer de-emphasize narrative in focusing on tactility and sensuous engagement in Grandrieux's cinema—Greg Hainge goes so far as to argue that in Grandrieux's cinema “i) the body is everything; ii) the story is nothing” (153)—but *Sombre* does not abandon structure entirely. Grandrieux himself has said that *Sombre* is a “fairy tale” (qtd in Chamarette 72), a statement that grounds the film in a narrative tradition, older even than cinema: while he subverts and de-familiarizes the structural elements of the film through an aesthetic based in the corporeal, Grandrieux does make use of archetypes and recognizable narrative patterns. Pointing to Jean's lack of psychological depth as well as the wolf costume that he wears while performing his puppet shows,<sup>28</sup> several scholars, including Beugnet and Jenny Chamarette, have argued that Jean is an archetypal figure of evil, a “wolf-man” that embodies the darker side of humanity; he is offered a chance at redemption by Claire (Elina Löwensohn), a virgin who inexplicably falls in

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<sup>28</sup> We never actually see Jean in the costume, although Claire puts it in their hotel on after discovering it in one of his bags.

love with him.<sup>29</sup> Chamarette calls attention to Grandrieux's subversive use of narrative logic, and suggests that the film's fairy tale structure and use of archetypal characters gives the film a framework that allows it to evoke *non-human* subjectivities, in particular the subjectivities of animals and children. Drawing on Giorgio Agamben's *wargus* and the concept of base life in order to explicate Grandrieux's evocation of the "wolf-man," Chamarette argues that Grandrieux uses "scant traces of narrative" in combination with an ethical interrogation of cinematic corporeality to provide an alternative way of thinking through cinematic subjectivity (69). This allows him to engage with radically different viewpoints from the rational, dialogue-driven and psychologically transparent characters conventional of genre cinema, and results in a compelling examination of what it means to be human: she argues that "the presentation of human bodies in *Sombre* is, as such, not human, but rather symbolic of a structuring device in thinking what it is to be human—the archetype" (73). By giving presence to what human subjectivity ejects from its concept of being—the animal, the irrational—Grandrieux illuminates the way that these limits structure our internal conceptions of ourselves, as if he were giving us a view from the outside looking in.

It is this gap between the structuring device—the archetype—and the material reality—the body—that concerns me here. An archetype is a kind of disembodiment, a structural configuration of humanity drained of subjectivity: both Plato and Jung articulate the concept as a collective pattern of thought that is implanted into our minds, providing us with models through which we can interpret our experiences. This kind of thinking divorces form from matter, and

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<sup>29</sup> I do not have the space to elaborate on Jean's relationship with Claire here, although I have done so elsewhere. It is important to note, however, that Claire's attraction to Jean, narratively unsupportable within the diegesis (since she is aware of his crimes and the danger he poses), can be explained when we contextualize it within the narrative tradition of the fairly tale—he is the Beast to her Beauty.

assumes that experience fits into *a priori* frameworks inherent in our concepts of reality. By using an aesthetic that aggressively reasserts the body, however, Grandrieux gives material presence to the archetype: the material aspects of the image interrupt the narrative and preclude its ability to concretely situate or explain Jean's subjectivity. It is this disturbing dissonance between style and structure, body and mind that I argue is essential in understanding *Sombre*'s affective impact.

Jean, the wolf-man, is a primordial figure of evil, but as a serial killer he also embodies a more contemporary version of the symbol. The serial killer is an extreme example of the vehement denial of the sensuous inherent in the concept of the archetype, and recalls the life-denying, single-minded vision outlined by Nancy in *Corpus* that violently imposes itself on the bodies of others as a result of its inability to recognize the contractions inherent in the division between mind and body. Anything that cannot be accommodated in the killer's rigid conception of himself cannot be considered as subject, and is therefore merely object: this is apparent not only in the violence that he enacts against the bodies of others (particularly women, the most prototypal other figure), but also in his sociopathic lack of empathy, which denies the self-hood of the other. This vision is only possible under the assumption that mind and body are separate, since if we cannot consider the other as a mind, then it must be a body, one that can be probed, split open, and destroyed. A passage from *Corpus* outlining this kind of view is worth quoting at length here because of the remarkable parallel it draws with Jean from *Sombre*:

The mystical *epopteia* ... knows only one aspect and one vision: it is an eye planted in the middle of the face, in the very center of areality, in the slit or hole of the *ex*. It is properly and absolutely a vision of death, an absolute, mystical desire that cannot be fulfilled without blasting bodies apart (and thereby blasting apart its own sight as well...).

Everything about it is heavy and morbid, like the eroticism that takes pleasure in staring at the slit of the vulva, seeing it in the presentation of Medusa's head. A metaphysical eroticism of petrification is a sure sign of the denial of bodies. Medusa fixes the body's feature, paralyses its extension: it remains a masturbation of the eye. (45)

*Epopteia* is a “completed sight” into the mysteries of existence (45): the word itself means “the seeing,” and refers to the initiation ceremonies into the Eleusinian Mysteries held for the cult of Demeter in ancient Greece. Nancy points to the word’s association between vision and a “completed” understanding of mysteries to underscore the problematic implications of assuming that reality can be illuminated by a particular view, a particular way of understanding. Like Medusa, the vision of *epopteia* tends to “petrify” existence, attempting to freeze it into a particular framework and destroying anything that does not conform. The “morbid eroticism” is a reference to Freud, who argues that Medusa’s head is a symbol of castration anxiety: it represents the moment when, unable to cope with the uncanny horror incited by the sight of female genitals, the male child construes a phallic symbol—Medusa’s head, the snakes—to stand in for the woman’s lack.

This single-minded vision that ends in violence and the erasure of lack resonates strongly with the figure of Jean. A creature of habit, Jean conducts all of his murders in much the same way: he begins by demanding that the woman spread her legs wide and staring into her genitals, and ends by forcing his fingers into her mouth and choking her. Psychoanalytically speaking, this suggests a whole range of implications concerning castration anxiety, the uncanny, and the trauma of sexual difference: under this view, Jean’s misogyny and violence can be explained as a response to the inassimilable lack represented by the woman’s vulva. *Epopteia* provides another way of understanding Jean’s compulsion, however, as for Nancy the “morbid eroticism” that

fixates on and fetishizes the woman's genitals is the result of a more generalized urge to provide meaning where there is none: what is important in Freud's "Medusa's Head" for Nancy is that the snakes are an *image* that cover over *what cannot be imaged*—lack, death, absence. The vulva opens onto the real of difference, which Jean violently attempts to appropriate, "blasting bodies apart" in order to impose the force of his brutal and single-minded vision as truth. The women's visions are irreconcilable with this violence, and must therefore be eradicated (he even blindfolds one woman before he murders her, obscuring her sight before annihilating it completely).<sup>30</sup> The link between sight that imposes itself and the imaging function of violence is important to note here, as it points to the dual natures of truth and the image: Jean's truth is one that closes itself off, that annuls itself through its own self-exhaustion rather than opening itself to the (non)truth suggested by absence and difference. The image of Jean's violence is self-referential—it is death in the sense of the dead body closed in on itself (the victimized, assaulted bodies of the women onscreen) rather than opening onto death as non-essence, as truth beyond itself. Unlike Heidegger's death mask, which gives sight to that which does not see, the only sight Jean's violence gives is its own. Jean's *epopeic* vision is completed in death: it reduces women to things, to mere manifestations of violence "whose very essence now consists in [their] having been assaulted or violated" (*Ground* 16).

This vision is clearly deeply unethical, an extreme example pointing to the problematic implications of imposing a singular vision on an inassimilable world predicated on non-meaning and difference. While most commentators conflate Jean's vision with the film, however, suggesting that the film *evokes* Jean's psychotic subjectivity, I understand the opposite to be the

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<sup>30</sup> The image of the blindfolded woman also recalls a scene (memory? dream?) in which a blindfolded young boy searches with his hands through a field, finally touching upon the dead body of a naked young woman who could be his mother.

case: by stressing cinema's materiality, Grandrieux re-asserts that which Jean so vehemently denies—the body—and therefore the film's aesthetics *work against* and are *in excess of* Jean's subjectivity. Grandrieux avoids granting the spectator a masterful gaze over the image, as darkness blends the diegesis into a chaos of sensations: we do not orient ourselves easily onscreen, as the flattened perspective and the heavy use of close-ups confuse our understanding of onscreen space. Rather than being based around the actions of characters across three-dimensional space, movement is textural: light and shadow flicker across damask-pattern wallpaper; sunlight sparkles on rippling lake water; reeds and long grasses blow in the wind. An out-of-focus shot from the window of Jean's car on the highway turns the landscape into hazy splashes of greens and greys; the image blurs, and flashes of grasses and flowers are intercut rapid-fire with abstract patterns of blotches and lines; the image pulls back, blending these textures into a woman's hair fluttering in the wind as she leans out the car window. Rather than the sharply illuminated, easily discernible space of conventional narrative cinema, we have crepuscular obscurity, recalling a passage from *Corpus* in which Nancy describes the dawn: while "mysterious vision is always of noon or midnight," the indistinction of dawn is the "sole medium for bodies" (47). Like lighting in *Sombre*, the dawn "is not a chiaroscuro of contrast or contradiction" but rather a "half-tone" that allows the evidence of the body to emerge (49).

Sound in *Sombre* also touches on the body, amplifying ambient noise and shocking the ears with sudden increases in volume. The highway rushes by in a low rumble as Jean drives down a dark highway at night; helicopter blades churn the air over the Tour de France; heavy rain drums on a car's roof and windshield; Jean breathes labouriously as he performs a puppet show for children, and the children scream; these sounds are echoed in Jean's breathing and the women's screams as he murders them. Sound as Nancy describes it in *Listening* touches on the

limit of sense, as it is distinct from (but touching on) the schematic way we generally conceive of the world through sight: it resonates *through* us rather than impressing itself *upon* us from a distance, and as such, belongs to the body. By minimizing dialogue, *Sombre* emphasizes “sonority rather than the message” (*Listening 5*), disconnecting it from language and instead allowing sound to reverberate through the image and across the spacing that separates it from the spectator.

It is through this re-assertion of the body that Grandrieux makes emphatic the gap between matter and structure: it is as though the corporeal, which Jean ejects from his violently single-minded vision, comes to ground itself in the film’s aesthetics. It becomes an inassimilable excess that resonates with a spectator granted a different perspective from Jean’s mystical vision, creating a disturbing dissonance resulting from our own inability to subjugate the excessive aesthetics to a system (genre, narrative, language, etc). While Chamarette argues that Jean’s subjectivity is irrational, animal, and non-human, Nancy’s philosophy understands it to be *hyper* rational, a rationality that seeks a singular truth by denying other systems of thought and other perspectives: the sociopathic serial killer takes this logic to its extreme by exterminating those with visions that threaten his own. While Jean’s subjectivity is *disembodied*, forcing itself apart from its own material existence, embodiment proclaims itself through the aesthetics as a necessary part of the function: without the body there is no mind, as there could not be anything from which the subject could divorce itself from in order to proclaim its singular existence.

Both *Sombre* and *Enter the Void* move through subjectivity and corporeality, embodiment and disembodiment, exposing the distinctions between structure and matter as tenuous and contradictory. For Nancy,

the body is “always an “object,” body ob-jected precisely *against the claim of being a body-subject*, or a subject-in-a-body Here, again, Descartes is correct, and in the following way: I ob-ject my body against myself, as something foreign, something strange, the exteriority *to* my enunciation (“ego”) *from* this enunciation it-self. (*Corpus* 29)

Ego builds itself by distinguishing itself from its body, but this body remains a necessary condition of this construction, inassimilable by the ego (which defines itself in its distinction) and yet inexorably connected to it. *Sombre* and *Enter the Void* broaden this divide between mind and body, forcibly and violently tearing them apart, but in doing so they paradoxically make explicit the ways that they touch upon each other: despite the mind’s efforts at separation, the body inevitably re-asserts itself. By foregrounding tactility and affect at the same time as they evoke disconnected subjective realities, both films expose the ways in which mind and body are predicated on contradiction—subjectivity is necessarily infected with materiality, and “[i]ncarnation is structured like a disembodiment” (*Corpus* 69).

### **3.4   Erotic Wounds: *In My Skin***

The disembodiment through death of *Enter the Void* and the morbid, brutal eroticism of *Sombre* find their counterpoint in *In My Skin*, a film that focuses on a woman’s attempt to reconnect with her body through self-mutilation. Esther (played by Marina de Van) is a seemingly ordinary woman with a steady boyfriend and a good job as a market researcher for an international firm. She wounds her leg on scrap metal in the backyard at a house party, but does not notice the injury for several hours despite it being so deep that a doctor later tells her it barely missed bones and ligaments. The event jars her out of her routine existence and incites her with a disturbing fascination with her own body: she begins to self-mutilate, first worrying her wound with fingers

and metal implements, and then beginning to create new ones, pulling out bits of flesh and consuming them. While her boyfriend and a friend at the office (understandably) view Esther's compulsion as a symptom of depression, Esther does not self-mutilate out of hatred for herself or her body, as she unsuccessfully attempts to explain to her boyfriend at one point, but rather as a means of reconnecting with it. This reconnection is depicted as intensely erotic, an attempt to cross the distance separating her self from her flesh, rather than a desire to appropriate through violence or harm; *In My Skin* therefore presents the opposite problem from *Sombre* and *Enter the Void*, as Esther seeks not to divorce her mind from body but rather to *connect* them across the space of their separation. But as is inevitable in any relation between mind and body, Esther is mired in contradiction: her attempts at reconnection merely achieve a re-spacing, proving Georges Bataille's claim that the erotic "presupposes man in conflict with himself" ("Sanctity" 386)—or in this case, woman with herself.

Like *Sombre* and *Enter the Void*, *In My Skin* takes a broadly Cartesian approach to mind and body, asserting them as separate entities that nevertheless somehow touch on each other. Nancy allows us to reconfigure Descartes's mind-body problem as necessary and inescapable, but only *because we figure it so*: the subject distinguishes itself from its body, and in so doing eliminates its own ability to understand its body since it prefigures it as something *separate from understanding*. This figuration always leaves an excribed remainder due to the contradictions inherent in the fact that our physical experiences can never match up with our means of comprehending them. These contradictions are the reasons why Nancy argues that "it makes no sense to talk about body and thought apart from each other, as if each could somehow subsist on its own: they *are* only their touching each other, the touch of their breaking down, and into, each other" (*Corpus* 37). It is important to note here that although he argues that the division between

mind and body “makes no sense,” unlike monists and materialists he does not conflate them or argue that they are the same: just because we figure ourselves as separate from our bodies does not make this distinction untrue (in fact, for Nancy, figuring something is *the only way* to make it true). Consequently, he upholds the distinctions but reveals the contradictions and paradoxes that result from dualism, refiguring the mind-body problem as a relation that is always marked by an excised limit, a remainder that exceeds our ability to understand.

It is not by accident that *In My Skin* provokes such complex metaphysical questions. As Tim Palmer points out, de Van studied philosophy for a short period before applying to La Fémis, one of France’s leading film schools, where she began to see films as a means of investigating embodiment: it was “in her experiments behind and before the camera [at La Fémis], as writer, director, and actress [that] de Van began to conceive of film as the means for startlingly intimate studies—artistic diagnoses—of the body, often her own, on-screen” (Palmer 79). These investigations not only occur on the physical level of Esther’s onscreen body, but on the formal level of the film body as well. Palmer argues that through *In My Skin* de Van “pursue[s] the disjunctive capacity of film, its ability to divorce psychology from physicality by displacing the body of a real person onto abstracted images” (79): the disjunction between mind and body is therefore played out on multiple levels, manifest not only in the character of Esther but also in the relationship between de Van and the representation of her own body onscreen, as well as on the formal level of the screen itself as a body open to deconstruction and anatomization.

Beugnet also takes note of this formal deconstruction of the image as body when she argues that the “skin of the film” is cut and dissected through split screens that fragment the image during the opening credits and the final mutilation scene; she argues that de Van’s is a

“filmmaking that digs under the smooth shell of ordinary life’s implicit daily brutality, … seeking the shock of aesthetic techniques and fictional creations that can pierce through and reconnect with over planes of reality” (158). This transgression of boundaries in order to reach “other planes” is achieved in corporeal terms, seeking to rejoin us with the sensuality of experience that is ignored or disavowed in the sterility of contemporary urban life. In the opening credits, the sleek, shiny surfaces of Paris office buildings in La Défense are intercut with various functional office paraphernalia (paper clips, rulers, file folders); the screen is cut by a black line in the middle that divides them bilaterally, forming positive/negative mirror images (the right half is in somber tones of grey and blue, the other in over-exposed oranges and greens). These lines suggest cracks in the surface of modern existence, cracks that the protagonist fills with the flesh and blood that surges from the fissures she creates in herself over the course of the narrative. The same black line is used in the final mutilation scene, completing Esther’s self-fragmentation by portioning the image into patterns of gore: blood splashed across swatches of skin, red footprints on a hardwood floor, oozing chunks of flesh smeared over the surface of a knife. During all of this Esther takes close-up snapshots with a camera she had bought in a supermarket in the previous scene, effectively carrying out her desire to preserve her abstracted fragments (she later tries to tan a section of skin, but wakes up to find it hardened and brown; this causes her to cry, one of the very few times that she displays any genuine emotion). The camera self-reflexively points to film as another tool for dissection, simultaneously capable of taking things apart (close-ups, editing) and crystallizing them.

The inspiration for the film apparently came from an incident when de Van was eight years old and suffered an injury as a result of a car running over her right leg: she remembers feeling a strange sense of calm and distance, despite the fact that “[t]he limb was left horrifically

wounded, the rough edge of a snapped bone protruding through its flesh and skin" (Palmer 81). Esther in the film also exhibits an eerie detachment from her body, as even when she does notice the injury she does not go to the doctor right away; in his office she distractedly pulls up her shredded pant leg as she checks her cell phone, disconcertedly impassive about the thick red gash running almost the whole length of her right calf. The doctor is appropriately perplexed by this and conducts tests to make sure that she can feel her leg, but the problem does not appear to be that Esther *cannot* feel pain, only that she is strangely dissociated from it. When her boyfriend brings up the injury later, she changes the subject to work and apartment hunting, unwilling to address her body even in conversation. De Van says that she underwent extensive preparation in order to exhibit this kind of disconnect:

[s]uch were the demands of Esther that de Van instilled herself with an impartiality about her own body, the film's raw material. For a year in advance she carried out actorly exercises designed to increase her objectivity and self-detachment: walking around in uncomfortable shoes, buying and wearing clothes that she disliked, growing her fingernails to awkward lengths, and so on. (Palmer 84)

The resulting performance is a disturbing combination of obsession and deadpan apathy, as Marina de Van plays Esther as incapable of rationalizing or even concerning herself much over her compulsion to self-mutilate: she never provides a clear reason for it, and refuses to talk about it either with her boyfriend or her friend Sandrine (Léa Drucker). This detachment opens the possibility for reconnection, however, and her growing fascination with her body is staged erotically, as though her body is a lover that incites her with an indescribable and irrational desire to reconnect across the space that separates them.

While Beugnet sees Esther's self-mutilation as "a process of self-reappropriation" (161), a desire to reclaim the physical aspects of existence that are ignored in the corporate world of late-capitalism, she neglects the fact that this process is inherently self-contradictory: Esther's desire to reclaim her body paradoxically renders it *less* integrated and whole, and increasingly disjointed and fragmentary. The more Esther tries to reconnect with her body, the more disconnected it becomes, a process reflected in the way that her body is shot as the narrative progresses: while in the first mutilation scene we initially see her whole body in frame, observing her expression as she re-opens her wounds with a bent piece of metal in a storeroom at her office, later scenes are shot and edited in ways that break her body into pieces, separating her face from her limbs as though they belong to separate bodies. As separate bodies, they engage with each other erotically, and these later mutilations are filmed like illicit love scenes: Esther sneaks off to seedy motels and makes up lies to her boyfriend about them, even faking a car wreck at one point in order to explain her wounds. In one scene, she experiences disturbing hallucinations of her left arm detached from her body during a client dinner, after which she escapes and rents a hotel room: there, she begins to slit her arm—the same arm that she had imagined as disconnected—which responds by caressing her face tenderly, as though it belonged to someone else. She kisses the wound imploringly and takes bits of flesh in her teeth, and then begins to open wounds in her legs, holding them above her face and letting the blood drip down onto her in a process that is both revolting and startlingly intimate. It is Esther's fragmentation and disconnection with her body that gives rise to the possibility of erotic connection, a connection that is impossible and *predicated on this very impossibility*. Esther's desire (like all desire) is a wound that cannot be staunched, an opening that cannot be closed. Nancy argues that eroticism relies on the spacing between bodies: "they touch one another, they renew one

another's spacing forever, they displace themselves, they address themselves (to) one another” (19). A subject can only be affected by something (art, violence, another subject) if it is at a distance from it, and *In My Skin* plays on the distinction between mind and body in order to explore the erotic possibilities that this spacing offers.

In contrast to the morbid eroticism of Jean in *Sombre*, then, which seeks to destroy the distance of difference through violence, *In My Skin* articulates an eroticism of the wound: Esther delights in the re-spacing she enacts by wounding her own flesh, using it to re-figure her relation to her own body. While Jean’s eroticism is of “the blow,” a desire that completes itself in the image of its violence and “is in itself and in the moment its own ground” (*Ground* 25), the wound is an opening onto groundlessness, a gash from which the unstauntable excesses of existence spill out. Nancy argues that the wound is where the spirit emerges, a non-place where the spirit as the “nonform or ultra-form of the hole into which the body throws itself” emerges (75-77). He describes the spirit as what is left when the body is taken away: “at the same point of the body’s nonsite, the body is presented as a wound” (77). Because for Nancy *nothing* underlies the world or ourselves (there is no spirit; or rather, our spirit is nothing), the wound is a non-place that opens onto nothing, a site where meaning collapses. Esther’s wounding is therefore an ecstatic, indescribable nihilism, a delight in the non-meaning of the body that opens onto the non-essence of the soul. This might explain why Esther seems incapable of discussing her desire to self-mutilate, explaining to her boyfriend and her friend Sandrine that it is merely a “compulsion” that comes over her suddenly and that she cannot explain: the very act defies reason because its very nature consists in connecting with something beyond signification.

Esther’s self-mutilation is therefore in Nancy’s terms a bond with the sacred. The sacred as Nancy describes it is not some external, transcendental realm, but rather “signifies the

separate, what is set aside, removed, cut off” (*Ground* 1). It is that which, in our experience of it, evades us, as it refuses to be expressed or gathered in by a system of thought. A bond with the sacred is impossible, inherently contradictory and paradoxical, but at the same time, it is a contact through exposure, an exchange across an irreducible distance: “[w]hat it transports to us, then, is its very unbinding, which no proximity can pacify and which thus remains at a distance, just at the distance of the touch, that is, barely touching the skin, *à fleur de peau*” (*Ground* 4). *In My Skin* exposes this distance to be that between body and mind, a separation that cannot be reconciled, only re-spaced and redrawn with scalpels that cut through the skin of existence. We are left with wounds that refuse to heal, opening new spaces for new fragments to be carved out. *Hoc est enim corpus meum*: flesh is pulled out from under skin and distinguished from its unspeakable groundlessness, forming an image that, through its very distinction, is granted meaning and substance.

For Nancy, figuring our own subjectivities implies that we disembody ourselves: the *cogito* divides itself from its material existence in constituting itself as an immaterial, thinking thing. *Enter the Void*, *Sombre*, and *In My Skin* all expose the contradictions inherent in such a disembodiment, revealing that the body as the excess of our consciousness always re-asserts itself. The sensuous aesthetics of all three films, grounded in a tactility that exceeds generic and narrative frameworks, foreground the violence intrinsic to the relationship between the film body and the body of the spectator: these films are intrusive and confrontational, using affect to underscore the finite, flesh-and-blood physicality at the heart of experience. *Enter the Void* and *Sombre* show that the body always re-emerges, no matter how vehemently it is denied, while *In My Skin* reveals that the desire for reconnection is also inevitably met with failure. The distinctions are unbridgeable, since we figure ourselves as separate from our bodies; and yet,

mind and body are also always stubbornly touching on each other, a truth revealed more assertively the harder we try to broaden the gap.

## Conclusion: Limits and Cruelty

“But it is the extremes that are most meaningful.”

-Georges Bataille (53).

According to Nancy, we are at the end of philosophy.<sup>31</sup> Metaphysical thought has reached an impasse, as the language we use to formulate our existence is inexorably contradictory and embroiled in the problematic ontological commitments of our past; after Nietzsche’s death of God there is nothing to save us, no mediator of truth to help us find our way forward. Nancy’s thought does not doom us to a nihilistic chaos of non-meaning, however, nor does it resign us to complete relativism. For Nancy, *reality* is never in doubt: we exist in our irreducible contingency, our singular beings exposed to each other and the world through a tumultuous assemblage of sensations that always, in some way, escapes our understanding. This reality, though tangible and *present*, right here, in this moment, evades us: our words are always too much and too little to anchor it down, though we are always trying to capture fragments of it and wrestle them into increasingly complex networks of truths and logical conclusions. For Nancy, the way forward involves the recognition that in writing about (or talking about, thinking about, painting about, making films about, etc.) reality, we are *fabricating truths*: we are creating images of reality that are always, inevitably, separate from reality itself. These fabrications, however, far from being meaningless because they fail to connect to any sort of objective, external truth, imply the radical possibility for creation: they imply that we are *making the world mean* through our countless images of it. The limits of our thought are determined by the non-essence of the world, but by tracing these limits we can gesture towards what cannot be signified.

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<sup>31</sup> For more on Nancy’s thought concerning the way forward after this “end” or limit, see Hutchens *Jean-Luc Nancy and the Future of Philosophy*.

The way out of the metaphysical impasse is not to overcome it, or even to deconstruct it by articulating its inherent contradictions, but rather to *exceed* it.

Nancy argues that the limit where we find ourselves at this point in history belongs to the body: the time for “weak discourse about appearance and spectacle” is over, and “[n]ow comes *mundus corpus*, the world as a proliferating peopling of (the) body(‘s) places” (39). As I argued in the last chapter, the body for Nancy is the limit of sense, the excribed remainder of signification. We have figured ourselves apart from our bodies: as minds, as reason, as power, as language. In the moment of *cogito* the subject pulls itself out of its groundless existence and asserts itself as an entity, self-identical and yet divided in itself through this act of self-constitution. In inscribing its existence, the subject also figures its own excess: the body is an unsignifiable remainder that is beyond our faculties of understanding (and is such because we figure it so). Nancy vehemently denies the existence of any world but this one, and he must therefore characterize excess not in terms of transcendence (forms, structures, and gods exist only *within* our understanding, not in excess of it) but rather as what evades us *in our very experience of it*. Existence itself is beyond us: its weights and textures, its smells and sights and sounds and taste, all exceed our attempts to capture experiences and make meaning out of them. Nancy’s thought calls for us to recognize the body *as excess*, to recognize the ways that it reasserts itself at the limit rather than attempting to subsume it under signifiers that inevitably fail to constrain it to a system. We circumscribe our own limits, but in doing so we also open onto a space for something beyond thought and language: the body is a place of non-meaning, a place for existence that gives rise to the possibility for signification in virtue of the fact that it serves as its limit. The body is not to be *understood*, but *touched*: it is an imperfect skin, too

wrinkled and scarred to fit under the smooth, shiny surface of discourse. Nancy's ethical and ontological project impels us to think about the body in all its grotesque, finite vulnerability.

In doing so, we can come to recognize our own potential for creation. We are confined only by the limits we set for ourselves, and can figure our existence in an infinite number of ways. Our images literally make sense of reality, giving meaning by pulling a unity from an inappropriate diversity: as I explained in Chapter One, the image presents an aspect of the world that does not arise from the world itself, but constitutes itself through the force of its own presentation. We relate to the image though its distinctness, an aesthetic experience that is further complicated by the fact that the subject itself is also an image: the act of constituting consciousness in the *cogito* means that we suspend ourselves above the groundlessness that is our existence, creating images of ourselves that are self-identical in themselves but never quite identical to the self that underlies the constitution. We mark ourselves off as distinct from our bodies, distinct from the world, and distinct from each other, and our relationships with these other forces and facets of existence are therefore predicated on confrontation: as I have explained throughout, the separations between us are never quite overcome, but subsist as spaces that are constantly re-spaced, reconfigured, and intruded upon. We figure these relationships through a creative process that is predicated on non-meaning, constructing our ways of being out of the possibilities offered by the non-essence of existence. The world is a contagion of images, shared and participated as singular pluralities encroach on each other through the forces of their separation.

Nancy's philosophy views the non-essence of being as implying radical possibilities for creation; but however optimistic Nancy's philosophy might be, he characterizes this creative project ambivalently, attentive to the violence inherent in the process of making meaning. In

order to create images of reality, we must tear them out of the multiplicity of existence and present them as a force that violently imposes itself as a singular way of looking. The position where we find ourselves in history has been shaped and haunted by this kind of violence, a force that carries

the ambivalent name of that which exercises itself without guarantor and without being accountable. It is the ambivalent name of that which defines, in all its problematic character, the *habitus* if not the very *ethos* of our world: one that has no other world behind or above it. (20)

*Ambivalence* is of key importance here, since as I have argued throughout this project, violence holds the possibility both of brutally declaring itself as truth through the mark of its own destruction, or else of tearing open a space for the revelation of the true. The revelation exposed by violence is that truth is its own creation; there is no longer any possibility of subjugating existence to signification, and therefore our new ontological project is to *evoke* what we cannot signify. Nancy's ontology calls for thought attentive to the force involved in its creation, and aware of the fact that it cannot seek to appropriate an experience.

Nancy is a philosopher of limits. He traces the boundaries that we set for ourselves through thought and language, exposing the contradictions inherent in our systems of thought and the violence involved both in imposing and looking past them. Another influence on Nancy asserts itself here: Georges Bataille, writing in the first half of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, also positioned himself at the margins of thought, seeking to destabilize ontological categories through ideas of formlessness, transgression, and paradox. The influence of Bataille on Nancy's thinking is multifold, and it is from Bataille that Nancy draws much of his thought concerning the sacred as a limit of existence, religion as a shaping force in Western thought, and the social nature of

consciousness.<sup>32</sup> As a significant element of the French cultural fabric, Bataille is also an important reference for new extremism, a fact noted by Quandt in his description of the movement as “Bava as much as Bataille, Salò no less than Sade” (1). Tina Kendall argues that this is reflected in the scholarship on new extremism, which “has foregrounded the critical legacy of Georges Bataille as a key influence on the explicit sex and violence in the work of Catherine Breillat, Gaspar Noé, Lars von Trier, Michael Haneke and others” (44).<sup>33</sup>

It is through their transgressions that the films of the new extremism are most often linked to and legitimated through Bataille, as he argues that transgression is a sovereign act, a means of unbinding oneself from the life-denying structures of society. As the two extremes of transgression, sex and violence are regulated through taboos that seek to minimize their capacity to unfix systems and encourage disorder. Sex and violence—eroticism and death—are relations to the sacred, which he describes as an ungraspable limit in excess of the structures that regulate our societal existence.<sup>34</sup> Our contact with the sacred for Bataille is anguished, guilty, and *sinful*,

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<sup>32</sup> Like Nancy, Bataille argued that consciousness is not isolated and individualistic, but rather related to a plurality of other beings. Nancy draws his concept of the singular-plurality of being in part from Bataille, who argued that we relate to each other not through any sort of positive connection, since we can never know another’s experience, but rather through a shared discontinuity. Just as in Nancy, our social connections are paradoxically predicated on a *lack* of connection and a shared relation to non-essence and death. See *The Inoperable Community* for Nancy’s discussion of community and the political in Bataille.

<sup>33</sup> Kendall cites a number of scholars who point to Bataille’s influence on new extremist directors. See McNair’s *Striptease Culture*; Best and Crowley’s *The New Pornographies*; Beugnet *Cinema and Sensation*; Vincendeau’s “The New French Extremism”; Lawrence’s “The Death of the Animal and the Figuration of the Human”; and Angelo’s “Sexual Cartographies”.

<sup>34</sup> Before renouncing Christianity, Bataille was a deeply religious man: his later works maintain a religious character despite being anti-Christian and atheistic in that they deny the presence of God (in this he is much like Nancy, who began his career as a Christian philosopher and maintains an interest in the ways that Christianity has shaped Western thought). Bataille

as reaching it requires transgressing a limit, crossing the boundaries we impose on ourselves in order to co-exist: his writings—which are variously philosophical, anthropological, literary, and sociological—contain an abundance of transgressive images designed to unsettle the reader, and the feelings elicited by his sexualized descriptions of excrement, necrophilia, torture, and murder therefore attest to the *affective* nature of the sacred in Bataille's writings. The sacred is a feeling in between pleasure and pain, foreshadowed in the “little death” of orgasm and epitomized in the faces of torture victims in their last moments: at the threshold of death but not quite beyond it, their expressions mark an intense eroticism that is “at once ecstatic(?) and intolerable” (*Tears* 206).

The resonances for new extremism are clear, as all of the films described herein play on the affective nature of transgression, using sex and violence to gesture towards a meaning beyond words. While Bataille provides an evocative framework for new extremism, however, Kendall argues that much of what is radical and subversive in Bataille's work lost its relevance during in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as the proliferation of and increasing permissiveness towards “transgressive” texts such as pornography diminished the subversive appeal of sex and violence: transgression has become a marketable trait, serving rather than opposing the structures of global consumer capitalism. New extremism is no exception, since its transgressions are mediated through the culturally legitimated context of European auteurist cinema: as Kendall remarks, “reports of catcalls and mass walkouts, or of people fainting and vomiting in the aisles help to consolidate and to market the experience of these films as inherently transgressive and profoundly—even uncontrollably—visceral” (44). This contradictory position of new extremism

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converted to Catholicism in his youth, and maintained a fascination with the regulating functions of religion and the separation it creates between the sacred and the profane.

as inherently “transgressive” and therefore opposed to social mores and yet using this transgression to meet the demands of a certain niche market undermines the “radical” nature of these texts. If their position in the global marketplace drains them of much of their subversive potential, this raises the question: when transgression is marketable and everything has been done before, what aesthetic and ethical value can be attributed to shock tactics and provocation?

We live in a world of Internet pornography and violent videogames, where every fetish and perversion has a website and images of brutality propagate through various news and media sources. Transgression in Bataille’s sense has, as Steven Shaviro remarks, “lost its sting” and “become boring, trivial, and irrelevant” (n. pag.); even Bataille’s writings have become an established and profitable (albeit still somewhat marginal) feature of European “high culture,” available at mainstream bookstores and put on course reading lists at reputable universities. In a cultural climate where transgression has lost its political potency, one might question the ethics of new extremism, which trades on potentially exploitative images of acts such as rape, murder, torture, necrophilia, and incest. Further, as I mentioned in the introduction, new extremism seems to be on the decline, as filmmakers associated with the movement have moved on to less controversial projects. Catherine Breillat’s most recent films are fairy tales and period dramas (*The Last Mistress* [2007], *Bluebeard* [2009], *The Sleeping Beauty* [2010]). Lars von Trier’s *Melancholia* (2011) is a tragic, resigned counterpoint to the harsh brutality of *Antichrist*. Claire Denis’s recent films (*35 Shots of Rum* [2008], *White Material* [2009]) do not shy away from violence, but are a far cry from the carnal bloodbath of *Trouble Every Day* (although admittedly I have not seen her most recent film, *Bastards* [2013], which is currently running the festival circuit and received mixed reviews at Cannes earlier this year). Philippe Grandrieux’s *Un lac*

(2008) maintains the murky aesthetic of *Sombre* and his second film, *La vie nouvelle* (2002),<sup>35</sup> but, as Quandt observes, moves away from the director's obsession with "killing prostitutes" ("More Moralism" 212). The relevancy of new extremism appears to be waning, as filmmakers formerly obsessed with the vulnerability of our bodies and the capacity for cinema to evoke it have moved on to other, less visceral concerns.

Why new extremism, then? Why watch or study films that feature abhorrent acts of violence and explicit representations of sexuality, and often conflate the two? These are films created with the express purpose of eliciting an *unpleasurable* response, that seek to shock and provoke and that dare the spectator to look away. It is the excessive nature of this affective response that I argue is crucial in understanding the ethical dimension of new extremism. I agree with Horeck and Kendall in their assertion that an ethical cinema is not necessarily a moral one: citing Michele Aaron, they argue that to be ethical is not to blindly adhere to strict moral codes, but rather involves an interrogation of those codes by thinking through its assumptions and limitations; "[i]n this respect, the emphasis on violent excess, negativity and heightened moments of unpleasure in the new extremism may in fact be construed as an indispensable facet of its ethical appeal" (8). The transgressions themselves are of less importance than the affective response that they elicit, the *feeling* of witnessing or experiencing something that we cannot master through thought or subjugate to a system. The aesthetic and ethical value of new extremism subsists in its ability to evoke something in excess of thought or language, to employ violence in order to expose the ambiguous territory of the real.

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<sup>35</sup> *La vie nouvelle* is a loose appropriation of the gangster genre, using a similar aesthetic as *Sombre* in the context of a scattered narrative about human trafficking in Eastern Europe. It is also generally categorized as a new extremist film.

It is here that Nancy becomes a more suitable reference than Bataille, as Nancy is concerned less with transgressing the limits than the limits themselves. For Bataille the sacred is a going *beyond*, not in the sense of reaching a transcendent plane or a utopic future after death, but rather in overstepping the boundaries we place on ourselves. Bataille argued that it is sacrifice that marks our bond with the sacred: it is a life given over to the experience of death, an experience that is felt and shared by a community witnessing the act.<sup>36</sup> Despite Nancy's engagement with Bataille, however, he rejects sacrifice, and declares it impossible within the trajectory of Western metaphysical thinking. Miguel de Beistegui points out that for Nancy, the figures of Socrates and Christ complete the project of ritual sacrifice as a relation to the sacred: “[t]hese two figures lead back to ancient sacrifice, repeating it, but so as to modify it profoundly and to exceed it, to realize it in completing it” (159). Christ sacrificed himself for everyone, thereby abolishing the possibility of further sacrifice; sacrifice is therefore “sublated, since entirely internalized, and is infinitized, since inscribed once and for all” (159). The crucial point is that after the death of God, this sacrifice becomes bereft of sense: it remains inherent in our metaphysical logic without the external support to validate its unendurable cruelty. This truth for Nancy is painfully realized at Auschwitz, where death is forever disconnected from meaning: the death camps mark “the end of tragic death or of death as salvation” (*Ground* 44), an end already suggested (though not in any inevitable, teleological sense, as for Nancy we always might have created truth differently) by Christ’s sacrifice and its loss of meaning after Nietzsche.

In the absence of meaning, however, *cruelty* subsists, evident in the paintings depicting Christ’s suffering that proliferate in the history of Western art, as well as in the countless images

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<sup>36</sup> It is crucial for Bataille that the life is *wasted* in sacrifice, since waste is the mark of the sacred: it cannot be put to work or subsumed under a system for the very reason that it is what the system expels.

of violence that circulate in magazines, newspapers, web browsers, and television and film screens. We are fascinated by horror and bloodshed, continuously inflicting violence and then feeling the need to probe the wounds. New extremism touches on this fascination with cruelty, subjecting the spectator to excessive images of gore and violence: Coré's victim sputtering blood as she tears into his throat in *Trouble Every Day*; the heartbeat in Oscar's ears as he touches his fatal wound in *Enter the Void*; the chaos of sensations as Jean murders his victims in *Sombre*; the eroticization of flesh as Esther consumes her own body in *In My Skin*. These examples are illustrative of the affective nature of new extremism as such, and while they evoke and exploit this affect in different ways, they all operate through a shared desire to touch on the limits of the body, to expose the fragility of our finite corporeal existence.

This is an aesthetics of cruelty that exposes the cruelty of aesthetics as such. It is not the cruelty of the torturer who delights in the external marks of his violence (bruised bodies, scars, split lips—the brutal cruelty of Jean in *Sombre*), but rather the more “extreme violence of cruelty” that Nancy describes in *The Ground of the Image* as wanting “to see the internal life principle externalized, with all its colorful and flowing intensity” (24). This is the cruelty of Coré in *Trouble Every Day*, as well as of Esther in *In My Skin*: they tear open vulnerable skin in search of an immaterial truth, but all they find is blood and flesh. There is nothing to find but surface and gore, no deeper realization that can arise from the cruel impulse to externalize the internal principle of being. All that remains are images that function as evidence of cruelty: bloodstained walls, bloodstained floors, and bloodstained photographs. And yet, the aggressive ambiguity of these films exposes something further: they touch on the limitations of this cruelty, the impossibility of Coré discerning a soul from the matter of her victims, and the paradoxes inherent in Esther’s compulsion to secure a bond with her alienated body. Nancy argues that *all*

*images* depend on the cruel impulse made explicit in the films I have been describing herein, the desire to appropriate death by giving it evidence: an ethics of art depends on how this cruelty is characterized, on “the ambiguity of the image and of violence—of the violence at work [*à l’œuvre*] in the image and of the image opening itself in violence” (25). In order for art to open onto the real, it must employ this cruel impulse in order to tear open a deeper truth, a truth antecedent to signification. For Nancy, the only such truth is its impossibility; this is what the excess of new extremism, which refuses to harness its cruelties within frameworks that would dilute or domesticate them, exposes.<sup>37</sup>

While for Bataille the sacred is a going *beyond*, not in the sense of reaching a transcendent plane but rather in overstepping the boundaries that we place on ourselves, Nancy’s philosophy is a way of thinking *at* the limit, of excavating the space where thought opens onto nothingness. There is no sacred space beyond the limits of transgression for Nancy; there is *only* the spacing, and the delimiting of that spacing through the act of signification. This spacing happens *here, now, and in this moment*: it is finite, corporeal, and contingent. The limit of sense does not demarcate a boundary between our world and another: it is not the distinction between heaven and earth, *phenomena* and *noumena*, or body and mind. It is the space of our existence in this world, a world that we create through our images of it. We have not quite realized the possibilities that this implies; it is a future that we are only beginning to grasp. We will *always* only be beginning to grasp it, because at the beginning we are already at the limit. We are beyond the reach of understanding, at a horizon that exists for us “as an edge, a tracing, of

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<sup>37</sup> I do not mean to suggest that these films are without frameworks; they can certainly all be analyzed on a structural level, according to their use of genre, narrative, politics, etc. As I have been arguing throughout, however, these structural levels are obfuscated by the excessive aesthetics and extremes in violence.

bodies” (*Corpus* 41). By touching on the body, the images of new extremism position themselves at this ambiguous limit in history, tearing open a space for new possibilities to emerge while remaining constrained by violent impulses, oscillating between creation and destruction in an aesthetic aporia. There is no pre-figured solution to this tension: for Nancy, truth is in how we choose to figure what is in excess of our attempts to signify. Finding a way forward requires thinking at the limit—a kind of thinking that leaves its wounds gaping, refusing the coagulating impulses of totalizing ontologies and established theoretical frameworks

## Filmography

*35 Shots of Rum [35 rhums]*. Dir. Claire Denis. Wild Bunch, 2008.

*Anatomy of Hell [Anatomie de l'enfer]*. Dir. Catherine Breillat. CB Films, 2004.

*Antichrist*. Dir. Lars von Trier. Zentropa, 2009.

*Baise-moi*. Dir. Virginie Despente and Coralie Trinh Thi. Canal+, 2000.

*Beau travail*. Dir. Claire Denis. La Septe-Arte, 1999.

*Bluebeard [Barbe Bleu]*. Dir. Catherine Breillat. CB Films, 2009.

*Caché*. Dir. Michael Haneke. Wega Film, 2005.

*Dog Days [Hundstage]*. Dir. Ulrich Seidl. Allegro Films, 2001.

*Dogtooth [Kynodontas]*. Dir. Yorgos Lanthimos. Boo Productions, 2009.

*Dogville*. Dir. Lars von Trier. Zentropa, 2003.

*Enter the Void*. Dir. Gaspar Noé. Wild Bunch, 2009.

*Fat Girl [À ma soeur!]*. Dir. Catherine Breillat. CB Films, 2001.

*A Fistful of Dollars*. Dir. Sergio Leone. Constantin Film Produktion, 1964.

*Funny Games*. Dir. Michael Haneke. Wega Film, 1997.

*Funny Games*. Dir. Michael Haneke. Halcyon Pictures, 2007.

*The Idiots [Idioterne]*. Dir. Lars von Trier. Zentropa, 1998.

*In My Skin [Dans ma peau]*. Dir. Marina de Van. Wellspring, 2002.

*Inside [À l'intérieur]*. Dir. Alexandre Bustillo and Julien Maury. La Fabrique de Films, 2007.

*A Hole in my Heart [Ett hål i mitt hjärta]*. Dir. Lukas Moodysson. Memfis Film, 2004.

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