Ecologies of Desire: Cinema, Masochism, Time



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D E C L A R A T I O N

I declare that this thesis is entirely my own work, and except where otherwise stated, describes my own research.

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A B S T R A C T

This dissertation examines a corpus of contemporary French and international filmmakers (Claire Denis, Mati Diop, Lucile Hadžihalilović and Apichatpong Weerasethakul) interested in ecology and dilated temporalities. I begin with the premise that slow films are not simply endurance tests: in their evocation of time-scales beyond human cognition, these films are undeniably pleasurable, full of sensorial richness and detail. In inviting us to enjoy the protracted rhythms of the natural world, I argue that they elaborate a *psychoanalysis of nature*, allowing us to abandon the opposition between the nonhuman turn and psychoanalysis that remains operative within the humanities.

In my first chapter on Denis, I amend some of the extreme directions taken by recent non-anthropocentric theory, in the form of the ecological anti-humanism of the recent 'Dark Deleuze' trend. Reading this thought alongside *Beau Travail* (1998) and *High Life* (2018), I show how Denis can recuperate Deleuze's anti-humanist death drive into a renewed human sociality. My chapter on Hadžihalilović functions in a complementary manner, as I follow Maurice Merleau-Ponty in retrieving much of Freud's thinking of nonhuman life that has been de-emphasized by the linguistic emphasis of Lacanian theory. Following the Merleau-Pontian Freud, my readings of *Innocence* (2004) and *Evolution* (2015) argue that 'normal' adult sexuality requires recuperating childhood *and* nonhuman perversity. In my third chapter, I show how this time-straddling perspective takes on geo-political contours in Apichatpong's *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010) and *Cemetary of Splendour* (2015), as communal and intersubjective relations depend upon Freud's "animist" thinking. Finally, Mati Diop's *Atlantique* (2019) elaborates a similarly ambiguous and magical form of kinship that grants

agency to objects. Across all of these films, I outline how the relationality prized by psychoanalysis necessitates nonhuman life as its ecstatic unmooring towards the Other and reality.

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T A B L E O F C O N T E N T S

Introduction……..8

Denis, Hadžihalilović, Weerasethkul, Diop……...12

A Forgetting of Desire……...14
The Mother's Image and the Father's Word……..20
The Respiration-Image……...26
Mythic Time…….....31
Digging Time…….35

Chapter 1: Carrying the Earth to the Sky: Claire Denis's Perverse Ecologies……..41
Terre-Mère…….44
Something in the Landscape……..54
Solipsistic Sky……..67
Sky-Necessity……72
Radiant Self-Sufficiency……82
Conclusion…….88

Chapter 2: 'For the sake of its innocence, perhaps': Screening the Past with Lucile Hadžihalilović……91
Flowery Disguise……...92
Ananke, the Strict Educator……..97
The Convent is a Brothel……102
Iris……..110
A Phylogenetic Fantasy……...116
Evocation……...122
Screen Animals……...125
Creation……..131
Conclusion……..135

Chapter 3: Wounded Subjects: Apichatpong Weerasethakul's Primitive Spectatorship……....137
Becoming-man……138
Adhesion……..143
Primitive……..146
A Bed is a Boat……151

Animal Lures……..154
United by a Catastrophe……..161
Others are Present to Us as Dreams……168
The Body as Enclosure……176
Touching Cure……178
Spiritual Media……..181
Walkabout……..183
Conclusion……..187

Chapter 4: The Awakening of an Intractable Reality: The Nocturnal Poetics of *Atlantique*…..189
Death's Borders……..194
Intractable Reality……..199
Magic and Modernity……201
Her Music is a Djinn……...206
Luminous Events……212
Reversibility and Power……...218
Conclusion……...222

Conclusion……...224

Bibliography……231

Filmography……235

I N T R O D U C T I O N

In his last will and testament, the Marquis de Sade specified that he wished to be buried in an unmarked grave on his property at Malmaison without pomp or ceremony. In a movement both spectral and speculative, his provisions slowly creep beyond the act of burial:

> La fosse une fois recouverte, il sera semé dessus des glands, afin que, par la suite, le terrain de ladite fosse se trouvant regarni et le taillis se trouvant fourré comme il l'était auparavant, les traces de ma tombe disparaissent de dessus la surface de la terre, comme je me flatte que ma mémoire s'effacera de l'esprit des hommes.[1]

In this paradoxical movement, Sade desires his own annihilation: the image of a world without him, without the human, is *desirable*. More specifically, it is a masochistic desire, lending credence to Jacques Lacan's seemingly counter-intuitive claim that Sade was also a masochist: he experienced his enjoyment as a command from Mother Nature herself.[2] As Tracy McNulty comments, 'In vanishing from the earth without leaving a trace, Sade upholds the completeness of Mother Nature by ceding his symbolic place to her, healing the cut introduced into her great body by the laws of speech and language.'[3] Masochism here leaves the realm of human intersubjectivity to become a principle of cosmological unworking—an abdication from the human subject and its plans, projects and desires.

This thesis begins with the premise that Sade's perverse ecological vision is inherently cinematic. In imagining nature 'comme il l'était auparavant', his perspective anticipates the photographic realism advocated by theorists like André Bazin, Roland Barthes, and Gilles Deleuze, for whom the photographic image displaces human intentionality to reveal 'the world

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[1] Donatien Alphonse François de Sade, *OEuvres*, éd. par Michel Delon, vol. III, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade 449 (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), p. 145.
[2] Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* (Éditions du Seuil, 1966), p. 731.
[3] Tracy McNulty, 'The Anxiety at the Heart of Perverse Experience: A Clinical Perspective', in *Lacan's Cruelty: Perversion beyond Philosophy, Culture and Clinic*, ed. Meera Lee (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), p. 135.

without us'.[4] As important as perversion was to the 20th century French literary avant-garde, this thesis argues it is taking on a new life in our 21st century world of heightened ecological awareness and its increasing mediation by screens. Perhaps nowhere is this fact more evident than in the Slow Cinema movement. By this term I am referring to the emergence, starting in the 1970's, of an international and informal grouping of filmmakers—the most prominent including Chantal Akerman, Bela Tarr, and Tsai Ming-Liang—who explore the aesthetic potential of static camera positions, long takes, and sparse (and sometimes no) dialogue. The present study is devoted to a more recent corpus of French filmmakers—Claire Denis, Lucile Hadžihalilović and Mati Diop, as well as the Thai director Apichatpong Weerasethakul—and covers their films from the start of the new millennium to the present. While sharing the earlier generation's investment in dilated temporalities and absence of psychological characterization, these films more acutely respond to ecological and technological developments that have accelerated in relation to the possibility of extinction. In these films, Sade's perverse fantasy of 'ceding his symbolic place' to Mother Nature becomes a distinct possibility, thus demonstrating that this 'world without us' is infused with desire. Where film theorists, and humanities scholars as a whole, have traditionally fallen into opposing camps regarding psychoanalysis and non-anthropocentric theory, I argue these films invite us to abandon this distinction. They elaborate a *psychoanalysis of nature*.

Such terms may strike some as outlandish or contradictory, but my project has precedents: I borrow the phrase from Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who will be my guide in this endeavor alongside Gilles Deleuze. In his final, posthumously published work *Le visible et l'invisible* (1964), Merleau-Ponty devises an ontology of the world's flesh deeply indebted to

[4] Of course, all of these thinkers diverge in myriad ways, but I am strategically grouping them here as theorists invested in notions of immanence and immediacy, and who have traditionally been positioned in opposition to psychoanalytic film theory.

Freud, writing, 'faire une psychanalyse de la nature: c'est la chair, la mère.'[5] In his early, psychoanalytically-informed studies of perversion, *Présentation de Sacher-Masoch: Le froid et le cruel* (1967) and *Logique du sens* (1969), Deleuze, too, elaborates an ontology of the 'Terre-Mère' using a Freudian vocabulary. While Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty are often invoked alongside one another as ontological thinkers concerned with sensation, immediacy and nonhuman life, these shared commitments are understood to pit them against psychoanalysis, usually understood as limited to the study of speaking beings. However, with these notions of the maternal flesh and the 'Terre-Mère', Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty show how Freudian notions of looking—and touching, sensing, dreaming—intertwines us in a nonhuman ecology, a kind of primordial belonging they elaborate under the sign of early infant-mother relations.

In *Présentation de Sacher-Masoch* (1967) Deleuze draws on Freud's account of fetishism to examine how fascination with the stillness of the plastic arts—statues, tableaux vivants, paintings and photographs—instantiates a freezing of time meant to coincide with inhuman and ecological time-scales. Here we find a slow cinema *avant la lettre*: slowness becomes pleasurable. Likewise, Merleau-Ponty's late work on aesthetics and painting is elaborated through a kind of environmental, even cosmic masochism of the flesh, citing Paul Klee's maxim that 'le peintre doit être transpercé par l'univers'.[6] As fantastical as these dynamics may appear, I contend they resonate in regards to the ecological crisis and the interrogation of traditional gender roles that have accelerated in the new millenium, and it is the intertwining of these two developments that all of the filmmakers in my corpus explore. If the Anthropocene has rendered

[5] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l'invisible* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1964), p. 315.
[6] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L'Œil et l'Esprit* (Éditions Gallimard, 1960), p. 18.

the boundary of the human figure ambiguous, it seems natural to suggest that this bodily ambiguity is also a question of sexuality.

Reading these films alongside Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty's eco-psychoanalytic work allows us to clearly delineate the libidinal stakes of this non-anthropocentric perspective, as well as its ethical valence. This is also where these two thinkers start to diverge: how far are we willing to go in rendering the human figure porous? Both Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty view their submission to the maternal imaginary and flesh as processes of individuation, processes that implicate violence and trauma. While they are both willing to go to extreme lengths in their pursuit of this ecstatic ecological subjectivity, their divergent attitude towards Freud have conseequences for their respective ethical positions. Where the early Deleuze retains the descriptive, rather than normative, vocabulary of psychoanalysis, pursuing the death drive into a virtual realm outside of human subjectivity, Merleau-Ponty elaborates a positive Freudianism through his thinking of human-nonhuman sensorial intertwining. Freud, for Merleau-Ponty, is not a thinker urging adaptation to the status quo, but rather retraces the origins of the status quo, changing our conception of ourselves and the nonhuman past we thought was behind us.

It is precisely this question of boundaries and prudence that my corpus asks alongside Deleuze, Merleau-Ponty and Freud. All of these filmmakers induce states of fascination, even enchantment, in their images of vibrant matter and human-nonhuman hybridity. Through this fascination, they attenuate the human figure to a point of near-withdrawal. As women and queer filmmakers, they are willing to follow Deleuze in his unparalleled questioning of the human, while also probing at the perverse idealization of Mother Earth, suggesting she may have desires of her own. Like Merleau-Ponty and Freud, they imagine how we can be better humans rather than abdicating from the category of the human. They therefore allow us to imagine renewed

relations between human and nonhuman, men and women, outside the spectacular scenarios of dissolution, withdrawal, and extinction.

Denis, Hadžihalilović, Weerasethkul, Diop

Ecologies of Desire covers roughly twenty years of art cinema, ranging from *Beau Travail* (1998) to *Atlantique* (2019). Pointing to the collaborative, almost filial relationship between Denis and Diop—the latter starred in Denis's *35 Rhums* (2008), recently returning for a smaller role in *Avec amour et acharnement* (2021)—the framing of these two films conveniently highlights the internal, self-referential relation of the corpus. While not comprising a movement *per se*, all of these filmmakers cite one another as influences, sharing several key formal and thematic interests. While invoking the rigorous, almost ascetic discipline of Slow Cinema, these films also contain a degree of 'impurity', whether it be in the form of sentimental narratives of family, in Denis and Apichatpong, or genre tropes in Hadžihalilović and Diop.

This return to narrative speaks to the increased awareness of ecological crisis beginning in the 1990's, and even the impending possibility of extinction. Where the initial emergence of Slow Cinema responded to post-May '68 political disillusionment and tended towards narratives of entropy, these films start from a position of pessimism—political, ecological, existential—and search for, to use Deleuze's words, '*raisons de croire en ce monde*.'[7] All of these filmmakers are willing to go to extreme places in imagining sexuality beyond human biology, and even question the future of the human organism: Denis and Hadžihalilović orchestrate parthenogenetic experiments to re-engineer reproduction, while Weerasethakul and Diop imagine romances

[7] Gilles Deleuze, *L'image-temps* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1985), p. 223.

between characters that have traversed boundaries between human and nonhuman, the living and the dead.

For all of these filmmakers, this search takes them to alternative epistemologies and ontologies: they blur distinctions between past and present, reality and fantasy. This common gesture is at least partly due to their remarkably similar biographies, comprised of movements of dislocation and exile. In the case of Denis, Hadžihalilović, and Diop, these movements operate within the networks created by French colonialism: Denis, the daughter of colonial administrators, was raised in French Cameroun and Djibouti before finishing her schooling in Paris, returning to film *Beau Travail* in Djibouti; Hadžihalilović grew up in Morocco, also studying film in Paris before shooting *Evolution* (2015) on the island of Lanzarote. Diop reverses this trajectory: born in Paris to an illustrious family of Senegalese immigrants (her father is musician Wasis Diop, brother of filmmaker Djibril Diop Mambety), she studied film at Harvard and then returned to her family's place of origin, filming *Atlantique* in Dakar. Apichatpong, a native of Thailand, went to study film in Chicago, where he was exposed to the work of North American and European avant-garde filmmakers, before returning to Thailand, where all of his films up until the recent *Memoria* (2020) are set.

In all of their respective filmographies, notions of exile, nostalgia and hybrid post-colonial identities come to the fore. So, too, does a certain proclivity towards surrealism: each of these filmmakers cathects their 'home' with the unique valence of the marvelous and *fantastique*. Naturally inviting a psychoanalytic perspective, home, and the enchanted childhood period associated with it, becomes a tantalizing yet unattainable goal of fusional identity. While these films deal with the temptations of incest, neurotic regression, and fetishistic fixation on images of the past, these forms of regression are also provisional, means of imagining alternatives to an

unjust status quo. Denis and Hadžihalilović wrestle with neurosis, but this dislocation is also ambiguously forward-looking, as both filmmakers imagine communities existing outside patriarchal norms: women become ravishing monsters and men become prisoners and victims. Apichatpong and Diop draw on the animist and Islamic cultural traditions of Thailand and Senegal, respectively, to fashion men's transformation into 'monkey ghosts', in *Uncle Boonmee*, and *faru rab*, wandering 'boyfriend ghosts', in Diop. Despite partaking of these diverse cultural paradigms, all of these filmmakers are united in their attemps to imagine how these fantastical forms of subjectivity can also form the basis for modern and future-oriented forms of community and kinship. The images these characters are fixated on are ambiguous, necessitating the presence of the Other and intersubjective interpretation.

Lastly, these filmmakers are also united in the attention they give to the rhythms of lived embodiment. Denis's focus on the details of the legionnaires' routine of hanging up laundry, in *Beau Travail*, and the circulation of bodily fluids on the spaceship in *High Life*, aligns with Apichatpong's long takes of comatose soldiers in *Cemetary of Splendour*, bodies that nonetheless still urinate and twitch their muscles. Hadžihalilović's hula-hooping girls and writhing reptilian bodies join the shuffled gait of Diop's white-eyed zombies, both reflecting the seductive iridescence of the Atlantic Ocean. In other words, no matter how fantastical these experiences become, they are always rooted in the materiality of the body and surrounding environment. These are films that linger, finding pleasure, and fantasy, in the protracted rhythms of the quotidian.

A Forgetting of Desire

In elaborating a film theoretical approach capable of accounting for this pleasure in ecological rhythms, I aim to unsettle the rigid distinctions between psychoanalysis, on the one hand, and phenomenology and Deleuze on the other, that remain operative within film studies and the humanities as a whole. Due to 1970's psychoanalytic film theory's concentration on disembodied questions of ideology and scopic mastery, phenomenological and Deleuzian film theorists have largely sought to distance themselves from Freud: Vivian Sobchack and Laura U. Marks, emphasizing the embodied and immersive dimensions of film spectatorship, both position their interventions in opposition to psychoanalysis.[8] As Deleuze's cinema books were written after his vitriolic denunciation of Freud co-written with Guattari in *L'anti-oedipe* (1972), he is largely indifferent to psychoanalysis in these works, seeming to give Deleuzian film theorists little reason to put them in dialogue with Freud. What this perspective ignores, however, is that the emphasis on experiences of exhaustion and waiting in these works is a direct continuation of Deleuze's elaboration of masochism in *Présentation de Sacher-Masoch* and *Logique du sens*.[9]

Indeed, Gaylyn Studlar recognized the cinematic potential of Deleuze's work on masochism in her study *In the Realm of Pleasure: Von Sternberg, Dietrich, and the Masochistic Aesthetic* (1992).[10] Studlar elaborates the 'frozen' aesthetic of Masoch—his fetishistic fascination by the plastic arts—into a cinematic aesthetic of lingering and dilated temporality. It

[8] See Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992) and Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006).
[9] I am referring here to chapter VII, 'La pensée et le cinema' and chapter VIII, 'Cinéma, corps et cerveau, Pensée' and to the references to Maurice Blanchot and Antonin Artaud in particular.
[10] Gaylyn Studlar, *In the Realm of Pleasure: Von Sternberg, Dietrich, and the Masochistic Aesthetic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

is worth highlighting that both Sobchack and Marks favorably cite Studlar's work, building on her notions of fascination by the superficiality of the image, but without retaining their libidinal contours. This attitude is in line with larger trends within film theory: while Studlar's work on masochism was published in 1992, soon to be followed by Steven Shaviro's similarly oriented *The Cinematic Body* (1993), these works did not result in any sustained discourse around masochism and film or media theory.[11] In some sense, these works arrived too soon: it is only since 2010 that the humanities have witnessed a real profusion of interest in Sacher-Masoch and masochism, although these interventions have largely occurred outside the context of film and media studies.[12] McNulty, whose reading of Sacher-Masoch I discuss in the next section, does not position her intervention in this context either, but I nonetheless aim to unpack the implications of her provocative scenario for my corpus: pleasure taken in the slowness of the image implicates unlived and nonhuman pasts.

In these films, desire opens towards *the great outdoors*: beyond film studies, I hope this eco-psychoanalysis has implications for the nonhuman turn in the humanities more broadly. By this term, I am referring to the proliferation of discourses in the new millennium—post-humanism, affect theory, new materialism, speculative realism—that share a commitment to ontology and a certain (though not exclusive) debt to the thought of Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze.[13] Despite this inheritance, I contend these discourses have largely ignored the libidinal

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[11] Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

[12] To take a few recent examples, see Anne Dwyer, 'The Multilingual Pleasures of Slavic Worlds: Sacher-Masoch, Franzos, Freud', *Comparative Literature* 65, no. 2 (1 June 2013): 137–61; David Sigler, ''Read Mr. Sacher-Masoch': The Literariness of Masochism in The Philosophy of Jacques Lacan and Gilles Deleuze', *Criticism* 53, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 189–212; Joseph Metz, 'Sacher-Masoch and the Jewish Bildungsroman', *Journal of Austrian Studies* 48, no. 1 (2015): 59–80.

[13] All of these discourses diverge from one another, in a manner that can also be mapped onto the differences between Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze—post-humanism and affect theory retaining Merleau-Pontian notions of subjectivity, while new materialism and speculative realism tend to dispense with the subject along the lines of Deleuzian immanence.

dimension of Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze's environmental thinking. The contemporary representatives of psychoanalytic theory are again at least partly to blame for this state of affairs. Slavoj Žižek's positioning of Freud as the culmination of a German Idealist thinking of autonomy has been achieved via a stark anthropocentrism: the human is the free (neurotic, sick) animal due to having 'cut his umbilical cord with nature, with animal homeostasis.'[14] In a similar manner, due to Jean-François Lyotard's influential critique, the idea has also persisted that Merleau-Ponty's flesh is a serene and harmonious ontology, devoid of more troubling psychoanalytic questions of anxiety and desire.[15]

Despite the importance of desire for Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty's thinking—in all of its anxiety-inducing vicissitudes—scholars interested in nonhuman life have tacitly conceded such 'darker' notions to an anthropocentric psychoanalysis. While new materialist thinkers like Jane Bennett and Elizabeth Grosz have evocatively outlined the expressivity of both animate beings and even inanimate matter, if desire comes up in such accounts, it is usually in its Spinozist form: positive, expansive, and joyous.[16] Discussing the ascendancy of these discourses with Masaya Chiba, Alexander Galloway attempts to outline the latent libidinal negativity I am hinting at: 'In general, most speculative thinking is driven by a desire to outsource authority to a place beyond the human. Thus, we are dealing with an instinctively if not fundamentally *masochistic* era in philosophical theory: we are nothing, but the molecules and the rhizomes buzz

[14] Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, The Essential Žižek (London and New York: Verso, 2008), p. xxvii.
[15] See Jean-François Lyotard, *Discours, Figure* (Éditions Klincksieck, 1971), p. 22. For a more recent appraisal that concedes the question to Lyotard, see Galen A. Johnson, 'The Beautiful and the Sublime in Merleau-Ponty and Lyotard', *Chiasmi International* 10 (2008): 207–25.
[16] See Elizabeth Grosz, *The Incorporeal: Ontology, Ethics and the Limits of Materialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017) and Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010).

and bloom.'[17] In other words, these thinkers are always talking about desire, even if it is only present in the human figure's negative outline.

My theoretical intervention has two goals, first descriptive—arguing that the nonhuman turn implicates questions of desire—and second normative, asking: how does this ecological desire affect our notions of human relationality and community? What does it mean to desire, like Sade, one's own absence for the sake of buzzing and blooming molecules? Dominic Pettman has recently tackled this problem with his notion of 'Peak Libido', meant to summarize a widely held perspective (best encapsulated, in his view, by Bernard Stiegler) that 'The modern libido, if we may posit such a thing – cultivated in Japan, the United States, and Europe – has peaked and is now dipping dramatically.'[18] Thinkers like Stiegler, according to Pettman, invoke the falling birthrates, declining reports of sexual activity, and their possible correlation with the addictive quality of dating apps, pornography, and social media as a whole, as evidence that 'we are reverting to an "animal" phenomenology, trapped in 'the digital enclosure.'[19] As a counter-perspective, Pettman invokes what he calls the 'edgelord anti-humanism' of Georges Bataille and subsequent accelerationist thought, which valorizes a general economy of energy transcending human purposefulness and utility. More useful for my own purposes is the recent trend of 'Dark Deleuzians', emblematized by Eleanor Kaufman and Claire Colebrook, for whom the exhaustion of the human figure is not necessarily negative.[20] Kaufman turns to Deleuze's 1960's work on masochism and perversion to position him as a contemplative, even morbid,

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[17] Alexander R. Galloway and Masaya Chiba, 'The Desire Called Speculative Realism,' *Culture and Communication* (blog), April 25, 2016, http://cultureandcommunication.org/galloway/the-desire-called-speculative-realism.
[18] Dominic Pettman, *Peak Libido: Sex, Ecology, and the Collapse of Desire* (Cambridge, UK ; Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2021), p. 12.
[19] Pettman, *Peak Libido*, p. 72.
[20] See Claire Colebrook, *Death of the PostHuman: Essays on Extinction, Vol. 1* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Open Humanities Press, 2014) and Eleanor Kaufman, *Deleuze, The Dark Precursor: Dialectic, Structure, Being* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2012).

thinker, developing a slow ontology emphasizing states of 'stuckness', exhaustion, inertia and withdrawal (thereby providing a link between the masochism text and the cinema books I alluded to above.)[21]

There are shortcomings to both of these positions, but they are a useful way of revealing the extreme polarities of a possible dialogue between psychoanalysis and the nonhuman turn. While I offer a critique of Kaufman's work in Chapter one, the Dark Deleuzian trend is useful in that they speak the same language as psychoanalysis. It is one that is more sociologically grounded, acknowledging that even if the rhizomes and molecules buzz and bloom, the human figure itself seems to be exhausted. As an aesthetic response, it even has a certain gothic appeal, aligning with Pettman's characterization of late 20th century fictional explorations of dehumanized desire, as he cites the way in which 'J. G. Ballard, David Cronenberg, Joanna Russ, Kathy Acker, and many others have demonstrated that intense eroticism can indeed thrive under technologically advanced, alienated conditions.'[22] To this list I would add Hadžihalilović, Diop, Apichatpong, and Denis—the 'fuckbox' of *High Life* seems like a perfectly apt crystallization of Pettman's intense yet alienating eroticism.

Yet at the same time, Denis, and all of these filmmakers, move beyond a Dark Deleuzianism in seeking to subsume this alienation into a renewed human futurity. In theorizing this movement, I follow Pettman in seeking to mediate between the alarmist humanism he outlined above, of Stiegler et al., as well as the anti-humanism he associates with Bataille (that could apply equally well to the Dark Deleuze and Sade.) Like the filmmakers in my corpus, Pettman seeks to incorporate the exhaustion of the human into a renewed ecological libido:

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[21] Eleanor Kaufman, *Deleuze, The Dark Precursor: Dialectic, Structure, Being* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2012), p. 4.
[22] Pettman, *Peak Libido*, p. 20.

> Perhaps there is a more hopeful counternarrative, however, in which the wider collapse of desire brings down our own inveterate species-centrism with it. In the process of removing the debris of our own more egregious and exaggerated forms of human chauvinism, we may indeed begin to clear the outlines of a radically alien cultural space: a space in which we can begin to dream up and perform meta-natural experiments regarding our own renewed sense of cosmic belonging, a belonging that lurks just below, or just beyond, our intrinsic sense of estrangement from the thoughtless continuity of existence. The libido is dead! Long live the libido![23]

For Pettman, our imbrication in ecological milieus bolster our ability to desire, rather than dampen it. However, he is dismissive of Freud and psychoanalysis as contributors to his 'eco-libido'. I would counter, however, that Freud is a thinker entirely capable of opening us to a 'radically alien' space, the alterity of the unconscious, in which we can *dream* up the new 'meta-natural experiments' Pettman calls for. In order to open up this dimension of Freud's thought, this thesis will draw on Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty, with supporting appearances by Roland Barthes and Jean Baudrillard. In what follows of this introduction, I will elaborate Freud's thinking of the image and its effect on desiring relations, exploring how the visual can articulate, rather than diffuse, desire.

The Mother's Image and the Father's Word

In Freud's dazzling late work *Moses and Monotheism* (1938), he advances a speculative hypothesis on the origin of monotheism that has generated infinite commentary in virtually every field of the human sciences. Most important for my purposes is Freud's association of monotheism with the emergence of patriarchy and a new relation to sense perception and images. The Judaic prohibition of images, for Freud, intertwines the two registers of sexuality and aesthetics, as he writes:

[23] Pettman, *Peak Libido*, p. 72.

> Under the influence of external factors into which we need not enter here and which are also in part insufficiently known, it came about that the matriarchal social order was succeeded by the patriarchal one—which, of course, involved a revolution in the juridical conditions that had so far prevailed. An echo of this revolution seems still to be audible in the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus. But this turning from the mother to the father points in addition to a victory of intellectuality over sensuality—that is, an advance in civilization, since maternity is proved by the evidence of the senses while paternity is a hypothesis, based on an inference and a premiss. Taking sides in this way with a thought process in preference to a sense perception has proved to be a momentous step.[24]

The passage seems designed to provoke infinite commentary, having already fascinated generations of French commentators. Freud's reference to the *Oresteia* and the 'revolutionary' dimensions of this turning away from the mother will find echoes in Jean-Paul Sartre and his re-imagining of the *Oresteia* in *Les Mouches* (1947), as well as in Alain Badiou's call for a militant psychoanalysis based on Aeschylus rather than Sophocles.[25] In his foreclosure of the origin and indexicality in favor of legal convention and hermeneutics, we can also see the importance of Freud for Jacques Derrida and his method of deconstruction. To sum up, Freud—and the ancient Jews he portrays here—were both modern and post-modern *avant la lettre*. If the mother's image tethers one to the simple self-evidence of the natural world, for these thinkers the father's word creates the empty space necessary for the emergence of autonomous human subjectivity.

I offer this schematism in order to throw Deleuze, Merleau-Ponty and Barthes' divergence into stark relief. While contemporaries and sometimes interlocutors of the thinkers cited above, they have a markedly different relationship to sexuality, to aesthetics, and to modernity, largely due to their attitude towards Freud.[26] This divergence is explicitly outlined by

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[24] Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, vol. XXIII (London: Hogarth Press, 1999), p. 114.
[25] Alain Badiou, *Théorie du sujet*, L'Ordre Philosophique (Paris: Seuil, 1982), p. 182.
[26] Of perhaps equal importance here, regarding the relation between sense perception and cognition, is their attitude towards Hegel. This dynamic is outside the scope of my argument, although I do discuss Merleau-Ponty's differentiation between Freud and Hegel in a later section of this introduction.

Barthes in *La chambre claire* (1980). In implicit dialogue with Freud, Barthes turns to the topic of the Judaic prohibition of images by way of Jean-Joseph Goux:

> J.J. Goux explique que le judaisme a refusé l'image pour se mettre à l'abri du risque d'adorer la Mère; et que le christianisme, en rendant possible la représentation du féminin maternel, avait dépassé la rigueur de la Loi au profit de l'Imaginaire… devant la Photo du Jardin d'Hiver, je m'abandonnais à l'Image, à l'Imaginaire.[27]

Barthes frames much of this work as a divergence from Freud, and in particular his work on mourning. Barthes' insistence on his mother's irreplaceability becomes synecdoche for a broader philosophical position, one shared by Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty: a fidelity to the image over signification, immediacy over mediation, and the concrete over the abstract.

In other words, these are thinkers who *linger* over images and their indexical power, a phenomenon that becomes most polemical in Deleuze's work on masochism. For Deleuze, the stillness instantiated by the plastic arts—statues, paintings, *tableaux vivants*, and photographs—figures the freezing of time evoked by Freud's notion of fetishism. While fetishism, for Freud, is a defensive attempt by the (male) child to preserve their phallic narcissism by believing in a maternal phallus or fetish object, for Deleuze, the fetish constructs an alternative, matriarchal Symbolic order presided over by a non-castrated mother, as portrayed by Sacher-Masoch in his literary imaginings of the dominant Slavic and Jewish women of his native province of Galicia. McNulty describes how this matriarchal order is not merely regressed to (according to the temporal schema of Freud's fetishism), but is instead made present through the masochistic ritual of waiting: 'It does not merely come before (as something that would have been lost with the advent of patriarchy) but is *still there*, frozen, waiting to reassert itself; we only have to slow down, to wait, to catch a glimpse of it.'[28] Masochistic ritual is a form of spectatorship, as

[27] Roland Barthes, *La chambre claire: note sur la photographie* (Gallimard Seuil, 1980), 117.
[28] Tracy McNulty, 'Unbound: The Speculative Mythology of the Death Drive', *Differences* 28, no. 2 (2017), p. 107.

McNulty turns to the tension between motion and stillness within the cinematographic apparatus. As the spectator glimpses 'the still image at the heart of the moving image… that subtends and supports the illusion of movement',[29] they participate in a masochistic process of converging with the eternal or frozen temporality of the inanimate, the source and cause of animation and movement.

While Deleuze wants to rid fetishism of its association with fixation and regression, the idealizing aspects of his framework, emphasizing the frozen and eternal nature of the fetish, cannot help but render it autonomous relative to the movement that it conditions. In this regard, it is perhaps unsurprising that he is sometimes accused of being a nostalgic thinker: in implicit dialogue with Freud's theorization of monotheism, Žižek frequently disparages Deleuze (as well as Merleau-Ponty) as a 'pagan' philosopher, unable to account for the freedom that arises through the modern subject's rupture with 'nature'.[30] Regardless of the accuracy of such a charge, this cathexis of the nonhuman world as a scene of enchantment is a gesture he shares with the filmmakers of my corpus, who undoubtedly wrestle with questions of nostalgia and magical thinking. Their colonial upbringings—Denis's Djibouti, Hadžihalilović's Lanzarote, and Diop's Dakar—become, like Sacher-Masoch's Galicia, the site of an idealised pre-Oedipal idyll, places where the 'la chair, la mère' takes on animacy and agency (Apichatpong's movement from rural Isaan to Chicago and back again evidences a similar trajectory in a non-Francophone context.)

At this point it is worth pausing to ask a question: must the human subject and nonhuman environment become autonomous at the expense of the other? If we return to Freud's own theorizing in *Moses*, the distinction entertained by both Deleuze and psychoanalytic thinkers like

[29] McNulty, 'Unbound', p. 107.
[30] Slavoj Žižek, *Organs without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 29-30.

Žižek—between the mother's image and the father's word, the enchantment of nature and the disenchantment of human subjectivity—starts to break down. After the passage cited above, Freud softens the distinction he has made between sensibility and the human intellect, although this gesture has received far less commentary. There is an 'intermediate phase' between nature worship and the monotheistic rupture, as Freud falls back on sensibility as our only means of verifying human intersubjectivity:

> If we may rely upon the evidence of language, it was the movement of the air that provided the prototype of intellectuality [*geistigkeit*], for intellect [*Geist*] derives its name from a breath of wind--'animus', 'spiritus' and the Hebrew 'ruach (breath)'. This too led to the discovery of the mind [*Seele* (soul)] as that of the intellectual [*geistigen*] principle in individual human beings. Observation found the movement of air once again in men's breathing, which ceases when they die. To this day a dying man 'breathes out his spirit [*Seele*]'.[31]

In delineating this interdependence of invisible, intellectual forces upon the sensible signs of the breath, Freud's text itself 'breathes', oscillating between near-abstraction and lived embodiment. While Freud is no doubt proud of the singular achievement of human cognition, this capacity nonetheless contains a prototype in the embodiment we share with nonhuman life.

This prototype is not definitively superseded, but remains the ineradicable condition for the more differentiated forms it gives rise to: human consciousness can announce itself only by *lingering* alongside, and intertwined with, its fellow living, breathing beings. Freud is therefore explicit that identification with our fellow humans cannot help but entangle us with nonhuman life: 'Now, however, the world of spirits [*Geisterreich*] lay open to men. They were prepared to attribute the soul [*Seele*] which they had discovered in themselves to everything in Nature. The whole world was animate [*beselt*]'. Although he feels obliged to qualify this tendency, adding that 'science… had plenty to do in divesting part of the world of its soul once more; indeed it has

[31] Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, vol. XXIII (London: Hogarth Press, 1999), p. 114.

not completed that task even to-day',[32] I contend that in mobilizing science *and* its limits, here Freud himself is again participating in the continuing movement of ambiguous, rhythmic respiration. Human and nonhuman move towards one another without reaching any fusional identity. Freud's thinking here complicates any excessive nostalgia *or* hubris on the part of the human: there is no simple regression to more primitive forms of life, because those life forms are always engaged in an enigmatic and unfinished movement of anticipation.

It is precisely this discovery that is made by the characters of my corpus: as we will see most pointedly in Denis's *High Life* and Hadžihalilović's *Innocence*, characters long to return to an anterior stage of life only to discover that these experiences are pointing towards the human figure. *Innocence*, in particular, demonstrates this super-imposition of childhood and adulthood, as the film oscillates or *breathes* between the two seemingly contradictory perspectives. (figure 1.) By turning to Freud's writings on neurotic symptom formation and dreams, I will show how this respirational movement is precisely what he attempts to demonstrate to his neurotic patients: their seeming regressions to the pleasures of the past always implicate the future. In elaborating the anticipatory dimensions of the image and nonhuman life, I also aim to develop a Freudian thinking of the visual that is less iconophobic (and anthropocentric) than traditional psychoanalytic film and media theory. Such an approach is merited by these filmmakers: they construct respirational images, poised between visible and invisible.

[32] Freud, *The Standard Edition*, vol. XXIII, p. 114.



Figure 1: Neurotic longing and regret in *Innocence* (2004).

The Respiration-Image

In Freud's clinical case studies of neurotics, he is intent to show an orienting telos of adult sexuality is already present in childhood perversity. Giving a summary of his clinical methodology in the Wolf Man study, he defines neurosis in terms of 'a turning away from reality, of a substitutive satisfaction obtained in phantasy, of a regression to material from the past'.[33] Thus a hysteric like Dora, fleeing with disgust from genital sexuality, is able to find a substitute libidinal satisfaction through the symptom of a cough—reactivating her polymorphous body, her libido flows backwards towards the pre-genital, oral pleasure she derived from nursing at the breast during infancy. Yet Freud also claims an additional dimension to his conception of neurosis, deriving from an ambiguous dimension of childhood sexuality: 'Side by side with this [regressive movement] I left room for another influence which, starting from the impressions of childhood, operates in a forward direction, which points a path for the libido that is shrinking away from life, and which makes it possible to understand the otherwise inexplicable regression

[33] Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, Repr, vol. XVII (London: Hogarth Press, 1999), p. 54.

to childhood.'[34] So while Freud may use a language of regression when dealing with neurotics, the perverse childhood pleasure they regress to is, ironically, *progressive*. Dora's infantile experience of nursing at the breast was *already sexual*, pointing towards the future and able to be iterated across a series of love objects.

This regressive-progressive movement is inscribed in the functioning of the psychic apparatus and its relation to images. On the one hand, Freud characterizes the transformation of repressed thoughts into perceptually experienced situations in dreams as a 'regression to the visual', which is also a temporal regression to a more archaic functioning of the psychic apparatus (in both ontogenetic and phylogenetic terms.)[35] Yet at the same time, the visual rescues repressed thought from complete oblivion. As we have seen in *Moses*, it shelters thinking and allows for an oblique expression, anticipating the moment of articulation:

> the transformation of thoughts into visual images may be in part the result of the attraction which memories couched in visual form and eager for revival bring to bear upon thoughts cut off from consciousness and struggling to find expression. On this view a dream might be described as *a substitute for an infantile scene modified by being transferred on to a recent experience*. The infantile scene is unable to bring about its own revival and has to be content with returning as a dream. [Emphasis in original.][36]

There is communication between past and present, the visual memory of childhood and the adult wish expressed in linguistic terms: the infantile memories are 'eager for revival' and able to exert 'attraction' on the present-day repressed sexual desire because the infantile experience was already ambiguously sexual. The present is molded into an image of a past experience, but a past that was already enigmatic, still containing hidden depths to be explored.

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[34] Freud, *The Standard* vol. XVII, p. 54.
[35] Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, Repr, vol. V (London: Hogarth Press, 1999), p. 548.
[36] Freud, *The Standard Edition* vol. V, p. 546.

If the visual allows us to linger, for Freud, it is because it contains these hollows and folds that comprise his understanding of sexuality. This contouring of the visual is demonstrated in the climactic dream of Dora's analysis, in which she recounts an experience of fascination by Raphael's Madonna in Dresden. Freud summarizes: 'She remained *two hours* in front of the Sistine Madonna, rapt in silent admiration. When I asked her what had pleased her so much about the picture she could find no clear answer to make. At last she said: 'The Madonna.'[37] In this instance, Dora's relationship to the painting appears to align with the perverse scenario outlined by Deleuze: the ineffable beauty of the painting appears as an erotics of surfaces, or, to use the language of the cinema books, pure optical and sound situations. While this framework could also partially describe the characters in the films of my corpus, as we find characters who have become spectators of their own lives, these are also films that trace a hinge-like, double movement. The image entrances its spectators only to better reveal latent meanings and significations. For example, in *High Life*, the crew's mesmerization by the night sky also prompts a burgeoning romance between Monte (Robert Pattinson) and Boyse (Mia Goth), as fascination leaves room for intersubjectivity (figure 2).

[37] Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, Repr, vol. VII (London: Hogarth Press, 1999), p. 96.



Figure 2: The crew transfixed by the stars in *High Life* (2018).

It is this respirational movement that Freud's thinking of the image ultimately elaborates. In the Dora case, Freud unfortunately stumbles over this point, as he ignores his own dialectical insight, earlier in the text, that 'calm' (*ruhig*) in German also means 'excited': he interprets Dora's fascination as a flight away from sexuality, longing for the chaste ideal of the Virgin Mary.[38] Feminist psychoanalysts have amended Freud's oversight in this regard, as Bracha Ettinger argues that Dora's fascination by the Madonna is also forward-looking, oriented towards an enigmatic adult sexuality—Dora 'desired to be caught in a move of fascination that belongs to

[38] This oversight is all the more uncharacteristic given the fact that Freud is often keen to highlight how sexual content hides within chaste religious imagery—see *Gradiva*, where he references a Félicien Rops painting of a voluptuous woman taking the place of Jesus on a crucifix as an example of how the agent of repression becomes the vehicle for its return.

femininity, a move composed of a fascination of a girl toward a woman-mother figure'.[39] Jamieson Webster evokes the way Raphael's Madonna's 'face indicates her coming intimacy with loss', a posture which stimulates 'Dora's attempt to acquaint herself with a more intimate knowledge of desire and death'.[40] In these interpretations, the image takes on depth—or rather, it is superficial and deep at the same time.

Freud is more attentive to this process in his subsequent analysis of Dora's dream, in which the folds of the visible are instantiated through a bucolic Alpine environment. Freud draws attention to a 'thick wood' by a lake populated by 'nymphs', inspired by a painting Dora had seen at a secessionist exhibition, as well as the scene of her suitor Herr. K's proposal at the lakeside Alpine resort.[41] Pointing to the fact that *Nymphen* in German represents both nymphs and the labia minora—terms Dora had confessed to nervously researching in an encyclopedia late at night, glancing over her shoulder to make sure she wasn't being watched—Freud argues the ecology of the dream elaborates a 'fantasy of defloration' in which Dora diffuses her body across the Alpine dream-environment, leading him to gleefully pronounce, 'Here was a symbolic geography of sex!'[42] Once again, we have a perverse image, nymphs frolicking in a wood, that simultaneously represents the genitals. Both perspectives are present, but not at the same time. In a kind of parallax view, the image flickers—between past and present, beauty and disgust, pleasure and pain, childhood perversion and adult sexuality. This same respirational movement will be present in *Innocence*: the film is and is not sexual at the same time, both bucolic nature

[39] Bracha Ettinger, 'Fascinance and the Girl- to-m/Other Matrixial Feminine Difference', in *Psychoanalysis and the Image: Transdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Griselda Pollock (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), p. 61.
[40] Jamieson Webster, *Conversion Disorder: Listening to the Body in Psychoanalysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), p. 280.
[41] Freud, *The Standard Edition* vol. VII, p. 99.
[42] Freud, *The Standard Edition* vol. VII, p. 99.

preserve and shot through with adult desire. As seen in the image below (figure 3), the girls, seemingly carefree, contain an undeniable flicker of exhibitionism.



Figure 3: Like Dora's nymphs, the girls of *Innocence* flicker between childhood play and adult sexuality.

The image is poised on the hinge between visible and invisible, perception and imagination, subjectivity and objectivity. Just as Dora the voyeur found herself pulled into the respirational rhythm of the dream, confusing what is actually in the world and what her desire has put there, Hadžihalilović submits her audience to a similar confusion: the pleasures of the past are shot through with the pain and discomfort of the present.

Mythic Time

Hadžihalilović helps reveal how Freudian sexuality, far from being a simple answer to the problem of existential significations, is instead a never answered enigma. Desire, for Freud, is continually reshuffling subject and object positions, and it is this emphasis on ambiguity that Merleau-Ponty values in Freud's thinking. In this section, I will show how the Freudian respiration-image becomes a property of the visible as such, allowing Merleau-Ponty to expand Freudian aesthetics beyond individual subjectivity towards a broader ecology. Merleau-Ponty picks up on this trans-individual dimension of Freud when he confidently asserts that 'la philosophie de Freud n'est pas philosophie du corps mais de la chair'.[43] In his last published essay *Eye and Mind* (1961), Merleau-Ponty evokes Freud's respirational rhythm when he defines the flesh in terms of an 'inspiration et expiration de l'Être, respiration dans l'Être'.[44] Alongside this image of respiration, Merleau-Ponty will define the flesh in terms of an architecture of pivots, hinges, chiasms, hollows and folds, in order to evoke the sensible giving rise to an idea 'qui n'est pas le contraire du sensible, qui en est la doublure et la profondeur.'[45] Merleau-Ponty also wants to linger with the sensible not for its fascinating surfaces, but for the way it takes on depth and contouring, leaving room for transcendence within immanence.

This oscillation between the visible and invisible is clearly inherited from Freud and the dialectic he outlines in libidinal development. Merleau-Ponty pays tribute to Freud's insistence on the continued importance of polymorphous perverse sexuality, writing: 'Quand le concept de refoulement est présenté par Freud dans toute sa richesse opérationnelle, il comporte un double mouvement de progrès et de rechute, d'ouverture à l'univers adulte et de reprise en sous-main de

[43] Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible*, p. 318.
[44] Merleau-Ponty, *L'Œil et l'Esprit*, p. 31-32.
[45] Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible*, p. 193.

la vie prégénitale'.[46] For Merleau-Ponty (unlike Deleuze), Freud does not introduce the concept of perversion as a negative foil for normative development: the two perspectives presuppose one another in this double movement. Freud therefore allows Merleau-Ponty to modify the three-part Hegelian dialectic and its culminating synthesis, instead offering a 'philosophie de l'ambiguïté' or a 'dialectique qui… n'est pas dépassement définitif (à la différence de dialectique hégélienne).[47] In *Le visible et l'invisible*, he will term it a 'hyperdialectique' (one which is 'instable'), operative across the world's flesh.[48] As seen in Dora's dream of the Alpine forest, we find a fleshy respiration between perversion and genitality, visible and invisible, without one perspective definitively edging out the other.

In the same gesture, the ambiguity of the polymorphous perverse body suggests an ambiguity inhabiting the sensible world. Merleau-Ponty makes it explicit that Freud's hyper-dialectic between aimless immanent activity and teleologically oriented purpose intertwines the human body with the nonhuman flesh. Just as the aimless perverse body contains a precocious flicker of purposive genitality, the sensible world suggests a nascent form of proto-civilization. Merleau-Ponty thus credits Freud with discerning an ecological dynamic in this pulsation of libido:

> L'*Eros* et le *Thanatos* freudiens rejoignent notre probleme de la chair avec son double sens d'ouverture et de narcissisme, de mediation et d'involution - Freud a vraiment vu avec la projection-introjection, le sadomasochisme, le rapport *d'Ineinander* moi-monde, moi-nature, moi-animalite, *moi-socius.*[49]

Here Merleau-Ponty's flesh operates according to the respirational rhythm of Freudian drives, withdrawing only to expand. As Merleau-Ponty writes, 'Le « Plaisir » est hanté par la

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[46] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Résumés de cours Collège de France, 1952-1960* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982), p. 193-194.
[47] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L'institution, la passivité: Notes de cours au Collège de France (1954-1955)* (Paris: Belin, 2015) p. 199-200.
[48] Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible*, p. 124.
[49] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *La nature: notes cours du Collège de France* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2021), p. 288.

« realité ».'[50] The aimless free play of the pleasure principle is haunted by something purposeful outside: the flesh is full of hollows and folds, its visibility shot through with invisibility, its pleasure with pain.

It is this notion of *Ineinander*, or intertwining, that reveals Merleau-Ponty's Freudian thinking of the image. As we saw in Dora's dream, the sensible world and intelligible wish were intertwined in an ambiguous manner: it is impossible to say what is already 'in the world' and what Dora's desire has put there. It is this very ambiguity that broaches what Merleau-Ponty calls 'un temps mythique'.[51] This enigmatic notion connects Merleau-Ponty's thinking on Freud to his thinking on aesthetics, as Mauro Carbone argues that we are put in contact with this experience of mythic time through the painter's ambiguous vision outlined in *L'Œil et l'Esprit* (1960). There Merleau-Ponty describes vision as a 'précession de ce qui est sur ce qu'on voit et fait voir, de ce qu'on voit et fait voir sur ce qui est'.[52] This term 'précession' is both spatial, evoking the paradoxical image of two terrestrial bodies each orbiting around the other (confusing notions of planet and satellite), but more importantly it is also temporal, describing a phenomenon of mutual anticipation. In this example, precession is describing the way there is a mutual approach between sensing and sensible, imagination and perception, the gaze of the painter and the things themselves. Neither have absolute priority, as Carbone writes, 'Autrement dit, on en vient à mettre hors jeu la possibilité d'affirmer, une fois pour toutes, lequel des deux termes est premier et lequel doit être considéré, pour reprendre l'expression de Merleau-Ponty, comme 'une seconde chose'.'[53] What is true of the painter is equally true for the dreamer: as demonstrated in Dora's dream, in which the frolicking nymphs give expression to the genitalia,

[50] Merleau-Ponty, *La nature,* p. 288.
[51] Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible*, p. 292-293.
[52] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L'Œil et l'Esprit*, Folio/Essais (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), p. 87.
[53] Mauro Carbone, *La chair des images: Merleau-Ponty entre peinture et cinéma* (Paris: Vrin, 2011), p. 122.

there is no 'second thing', no before or after, no absolute priority of sensible or intelligible: we watch the sprouting of a fleshy moebius strip.

With this dynamic in mind, I think we can also understand the two hours Dora spends in front of Raphael's Madonna as a precise example of this 'precession'. She both sees and does not see, as the image continually morphs between chastity and sexuality, past and future, refusing to definitively settle into either perspective: there is no second thing. She lives in what Merleau-Ponty, following Cézanne, calls 'L'instant du monde'[54] before the painting is either sexual or chaste: it is made and remade, breathing, in mythic time. In this sense, Dora could easily identify with Merleau-Ponty's experience of observing a painting: 'Car je ne le regarde pas comme on regarde une chose, je ne le fixe pas en son lieu, mon regard erre en lui come dans les nimbes de l'Être, je vois selon ou avec lui plutôt que je ne le vois.'[55] She wanders within the painting, as it morphs according to her desire. Following Carbone's suggestion that this precession 'est un movement retrograde qui creuse dans le temps une profondeur bien particulière',[56] I contend that with the extended duration of Dora's wandering spectatorship, we find a concrete example of the way mythic time 'digs' into lived time. As Ettinger (herself a painter) evocatively writes, Dora experiences 'instants of eternity' in front of the painting, as the horizontal flow of time takes on an immemorial depth.[57]

Digging Time

Dora's spectatorship—transpiring in 1901, when the cinematograph had already begun to transform human attention and perception—is quasi-cinematic. If a painting can dig moments of

[54] Merleau-Ponty, *L'Œil et l'Esprit*, p. 23.
[55] Merleau-Ponty, *L'Œil et l'Esprit*, p. 23.
[56] Carbone, *La chair des images*, p. 123.
[57] Ettinger, 'Fascinance and the Girl- to-m/Other Matrixial Feminine Difference', p. 62.

eternity within lived time, birthing its own form of spectatorial duration, I would like to suggest there are also films that *are dug* by mythic images, producing extended and extreme forms of duration in response. Such are the films of my corpus. Emblematized by the photograph of a 'monkey ghost' taken by the protagonist of *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall his Past Lives* (figure 4), these are films oriented by the fascinating, and, I would add, mythic and indestructible, power of images.



Figure 4: Photograph (under magnifying glass) of the 'monkey ghost' in *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010).

Chasing the creature through the jungle, Apichatpong's protagonist cannot tell if he is a witness or man of desire, as his camera seems to magically summon the source of his obsession. This

phenomenon is applicable to all of these films: they open onto the great outdoors only to give their protagonists more room to dream.

In Chapter one, I examine Claire Denis's films *Beau Travail* (1998) and *High Life* (2018) in relation to Deleuze's essay 'Michel Tournier et le monde sans autrui' (1967) and its uptake by Kaufman. Deleuze takes precedence in this chapter, as I show how the Tournier essay, and Kaufman's dark Deleuzianism, elaborates the perverse erotics of surfaces into a foreclosure of intersubjectivity. However, I foreground this element of Deleuze's thought to show how it can (contrary to his wishes) be dialecticized, subsumed back into an embodied socius. While Merleau-Ponty is only implicitly present here, I nonetheless rely on the 'hyper-dialectic' I have outlined in this introduction, arguing it is equally operative for Denis. Her films show how movements of withdrawal necessitate a converse movement of expression, as her characters approach oceanic fusion only to find themselves steered back to the human figure.

In the second chapter, I turn to Lucile Hadžihalilović. I begin with her controversial film *Innocence* (2004) reading it alongside Freud's writings on the role of education in managing children's polymorphous perverse sexuality. I show how the paradoxical temporality I reference in the introduction is a necessary part of normal sexuality, for Freud, as adult sexuality is constantly recuperating childhood polymorphous perversity. It is instead neurosis which falls victim to the prejudices of educators, a linear evolutionary perspective which views the past and childhood as definitively chaste. I argue that this neurotic perspective organizes the film's images in the form of a screen memory or dream, inflected with Merleau-Ponty's idiosyncratic understanding of the dreamer as an anonymous subjectivity. Turning to Hadžihalilović's second film *Evolution* (2015), I use Merleau-Ponty's elaboration of the nonhuman and environmental

dimensions of the screen memory to explore how the perverse sexuality we recuperate is an explicitly nonhuman sexuality, an idea supported by Freud's own writings.

My third chapter begins by analyzing the ambiguous intertwining of subjects and objects in Apichatpong Weerasethakul's films and Roland Barthes' writings on ravishing and wounding via images. I show how Apichatpong's fascination with indestructible, mythic images—indebted to Chris Marker—invokes perverse fixation only to allow for a more fluid or respirational movement to take place. Barthes' conception of the maternal photograph inflects Deleuze's frozen virtual with a more embodied and phenomenological dimension, one that also accounts for death and collective mourning. Turning to *Cemetary of Splendour* (2015), a film following a secretive government excavation of an ancient burial ground, I argue that its narrative is quite literally 'dug' by mythic time. As phantoms move between the ground and the dreams of soldiers suffering from a mysterious sleeping sickness, Apichatpong explores the political risks and dangers that arise through Merleau-Ponty's mythic time.

The last chapter focuses on Mati Diop's *Atlantique* (2019) and its critique of patriarchy and neoliberalism encroaching on contemporary Senegal. I argue that both these phenomena rely on an epistemology of hyper-real production outlined by Jean Baudrillard, in which all phenomena are forced into appearance, visibility, and financial securing of the future. I use his opposing notions of seduction (and its connection to Barthes' writing on photography) to outline how the younger generation mounts a form of resistance to this political regime, embracing a nocturnal aesthetic of ambiguity and illusion. I argue that this strategy also draws on an Afro-futurist tradition developed by black electronic music producers, instantiated in the film's stylized electronic score by Fatima al-Qadiri and digital photography.

Regarding these filmmakers' shared attention to lived embodiment that I invoked earlier, I would now specify that this attention is particularly focused on the eye as organ of vision. The eye is the privileged origin not just of their aesthetics, but also their ethics and politics: this commitment can be seen in the name of the protagonist Iris in *Innocence*, her character orienting the film's time-straddling mode of vision. This is a form of sensing that also implicates the nonhuman, as seen in the makeshift 'Irises' in the canopies of the trees, as well as the Iris-shaped starfish of *Evolution*. When Boonsong becomes a monkey ghost in *Uncle Boonmee*, he tells us that his hair grew long and his pupils dilated, anticipating the men returning as zombified, white-eyed women in *Atlantique*. While Denis may not have a commensurate image of the pupil (as far as I am aware), I open my analysis of *Beau Travail* with a discussion of Michel Tournier's novel *Vendredi et les limbes du pacifique* (1967), in which the protagonist Robinson recognizes the humanity of the Creole Vendredi through noticing the delicate—almost floral—structure of his iris. It is a moment of intertwined sensation that ripples through every one of these films and philosophical texts; as Merleau-Ponty writes, paying homage: 'Freud: sentir, c'est déjà être homme.'[58]

[58] Merleau-Ponty, *La nature,* p. 288.

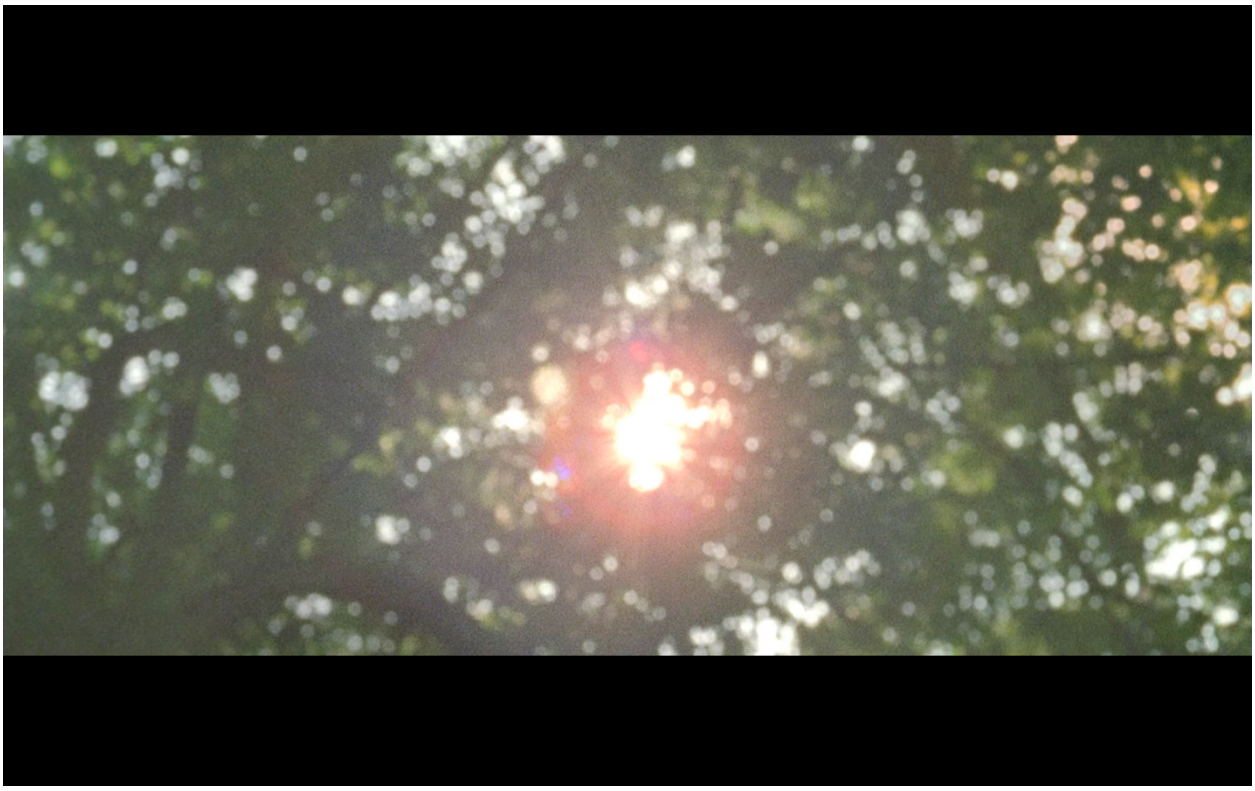


Figure 5: The tree-canopy ‘Iris’ from *Innocence*.

CHAPTER ONE

Carrying the Earth to the Sky: Claire Denis's Perverse Ecologies

If talk of 'de-centering the human figure' has now become familiar, even commonplace to scholars working in French and Film Studies, it is difficult to imagine this development without the films of Claire Denis and philosophy of Gilles Deleuze. Having come to constitute something of a natural pairing, both offer an unflinching vision of subjectivity as a volatile configuration of human and nonhuman elements. This chapter begins with the contention that this dynamic enmeshment entails and complicates a psychoanalytic understanding of desire. In *Beau Travail*, the activities of the French Foreign Legion in Djibouti evidence a strange harmony with geological time, as sexual desire gives way to a diffuse, ambient sensuality. In *High Life*, a father and daughter journey into a black hole aboard a spaceship, coming dangerously close to one another and to a devouring cosmos. To explicate this phenomenon, I turn to Deleuze's early essay 'Michel Tournier et le monde sans autrui' (1967), a study of Tournier's novel *Vendredi ou les limbes du pacifique* (1967). Deleuze and Tournier describe how the isolation of a desert-island fantasia allows bodies to regress to a perverse intertwining with the 'Terre-Mère' as boundaries of self and other, animate and inanimate collapse.

I use this idiosyncratic psychoanalysis to bring together two of Denis's longstanding interests that have been treated as relatively distinct by scholars—sexuality and the nonhuman environment.[59] The Djiboutien desert and interstellar space participate in a long lineage of

[59] The ecological approach to Denis has been pioneered by Martine Beugnet and Laura McMahon, both of whom I discuss in a later section of this chapter. Both use Deleuze's work with Guattari to examine Denis's interest in nonhuman becomings and the agency of landscape. The psychoanalytic perspective is best evidenced by Leo Bersani, who finds in *Beau Travail* a positive example of human subjectivity abdicating from the violence of Oedipal desire. Using the early 'eco-psychoanalytic' Deleuze of the Tournier essay, I treat these two perspectives as complementary.

'perverse ecologies' in Denis's films: remote and isolated locales that inflame desire, taking on a strange animacy and participation as desire ferments into unrecognizable forms. Here we might think of Louis (Michel Subor) in *L'Intrus* (dir. by Denis, 2004), dragged by dog-sled through the snow-covered Jura forest in a sado-masochistic ritual; or Shane (Vincent Gallo) returning from the rainforests of Guyana with the virus triggering his sadistic libido in *Trouble Every Day* (dir. by Denis, 2001); and with this viral sexuality, we are not far off from Boni (Grégoire Colin) masturbating with the pizza dough in *Nénette et Boni* (dir. by Denis, 1996), a moment Elena del Río characterizes as 'a non-localized, molecular-based sexual paradigm where bodily fluids and chemical reactions seem predominant'.[60] In *Beau Travail*, this intimacy with the nonhuman raises a startling question: how to relate to the human Other in a world of heightened animacy? *Beau Travail*'s perverse ecology both helps and hinders the establishment of community and kinship ties, as it is only once the legion's filial attachment to landscape is forsaken that a truly sustainable relationship between humans, and between humans and the nonhuman environment, can be established. Through attention to the racial and post-colonial dynamics of the landscapes she surveys, Denis paradoxically makes room for the relational Other in Deleuze's 'world without others'.

I begin my discussion of *High Life* by arguing that the stakes of the Denis-Deleuze relationship have been raised in recent years on both sides, revealing the less familiar and potentially uncomfortable implications of the non-anthropocentric perspective: when does de-centering the human figure verge into dissolution? The film expands Denis's interest in nonhuman life to include nonliving, interstellar matter, seeming to diffuse the human figure to

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[60] Elena del Río, 'Body Transformations in the Films of Claire Denis: From Ritual to Play', *Studies in French Cinema*, 3 (2003), 185–97, p. 188.

the point of unrecognizability. In a parallel fashion, a growing trend within Deleuze studies, using the Tournier essay as a key source, has advanced the idea of a 'dark Deleuze' indifferent to issues of lived embodiment. Scholars such as Eleanor Kaufman have provocatively embraced a charge his critics have long alleged: that his philosophy constitutes a one-way flight out of this world towards the incorporeal.[61] By reading the film alongside this dark Deleuze, I hope to illuminate the most radical elements of Denis and Deleuze's interest in the nonhuman, as well as their productive differences concerning the social and ethical dimensions of a non-anthropocentric perspective that willfully abandons the human figure.

A key difference between them is the role of race and dynamics of post-colonialism. Obviously central to Denis' concerns, Deleuze's essay (and its uptake by Kaufman) is guilty of sidelining the important racial dynamics of Tournier's novel. Deleuze's opposition to the sensory-motor regime causes him to miss the central role both embodiment and race play for Tournier's thinking of ecology, a contribution I argue is also essential to Denis' work. My use of Deleuze is therefore supplemented by Édouard Glissant, for *Beau Travail*, and Fred Moten, for *High Life*, both of whom modulate Deleuze's ecological thought with a more careful thinking of alterity. What has ossified into unilateral death-drive towards inertia in the 'dark Deleuze' becomes, in Glissant and Moten, a dynamic give-and-take, in which socio-political impasses are nonetheless ripe with desire and futurity.

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[61] Eleanor Kaufman, *Deleuze, The Dark Precursor: Dialectic, Structure, Being* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2012). See also Claire Colebrook, *Death of the PostHuman: Essays on Extinction, Vol. 1* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Open Humanities Press, 2014), and Andrew Culp, *Dark Deleuze* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016). I take Kaufman's work as emblematic of this trend both due to its chronological priority—Colebrook wrote an enthusiastic review of *Deleuze and the Dark Precursor* that presaged her own engagement with similar ideas in *Death of the Posthuman*—as well as its strict periodization, emphasizing the Tournier essay and Deleuze's other 1960's works as evidencing a bias towards ontology, abstraction and structure missing from his work with Guattari. Culp's text, while emphasizing Deleuze's injunction to cultivate 'hatred of this world', understands this 'dark' quality in a different, more political sense, motioning towards the post-anarchist Deleuze associated with the Tiqqun collective.

It is this paradox that animates *High Life*. Denis demonstrates, in a similar manner, how the radicality of Deleuze's elemental sexuality can be channeled into durable forms of human kinship. Through a close-reading of *High Life*, I argue that Denis's exploration of incest and perversion functions as an idiosyncratic coming-of-age narrative. Involution with nonhuman forces does not dissolve the subject, as in the dark Deleuze, but rather enables an initiation into recognizable forms of human sociality. I therefore argue that Denis mediates Deleuzian ontology with a more conventional narrative of individuation, exploring the farthest reaches of 'vibrant matter' without leaving the social behind.

Terre-Mère

I will begin with an analysis of 'Michel Tournier et le monde sans autrui', as it is undoubtedly the clearest expression of Deleuze's early eco-psychoanalytic perspective, while Tournier's novel, *Vendredi ou les limbes du pacifique* (1967), itself strikingly anticipates the themes of Denis's work. The choice of text is overdetermined on Deleuze's part: Deleuze was adolescent friends with Tournier, the two young men bonding over their mutual obsession with Sartre's *L'Être et le Néant* (1943) during their time at lycée together.[62] This enthusiasm seems to have marked both men's mature work, as the Sartrean problematic of the Other comes to the forefront in both Tournier's novel and Deleuze's commentary on it, although, as I will show through a close reading of the novel, the two men also diverge over how far they are willing to take this 'world without others'. Deleuze's outright hostility to the Other makes his sustained re-evaluation of perversion in the 1960's—comprising *De Sacher-Masoch au masochisme* (1961), *Présentation de Sacher-Masoch: Le Froid et le cruel* (1967) and the Tournier essay, published in

[62] François Dosse, *Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari: Intersecting Lives*, Pbk ed (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 46.

1967 and then as an appendix to *Logique du Sens* (1969)— perhaps the most singular and uncompromising phase of his career. During this period, Deleuze devotes himself to the then-unfashionable domains of ontology and metaphysics, cutting a striking figure in relation to both his post-structuralist contemporaries and even his own later work with Guattari. Perversion plays such a key role in this ontological investigation because it functions as an adhesion to pre-individual, impersonal Being, indifferent to the developmental trajectory of psychoanalysis. It is thus a refusal of both the subject and the corresponding notion of alterity, which Deleuze sees as an obstacle to his immanent ontology of emergent life.

In the Tournier essay, Deleuze nonetheless credits Lacan and Sartre for articulating this obstacle, an 'Other-structure' that a priori determines a perceptual field in terms of distinct subjects and objects. Deleuze emphasizes the temporal consequences of this structure, as the Other also ensures 'la distinction de la conscience et de son objet, comme distinction temporelle.'[63] Intersubjective relationality and chronological time are mutually implicating, and Deleuze elaborates this point with reference to the classical psychoanalytic model of desire: 'Autrui est un étrange détour, il rabat mes désirs sur les objets, mes amours sur les mondes.'[64] In Freudian terms, the 'étrange détour' Deleuze protests here is cathexis, the libidinal investment in an object perceived as outside the ego. In this model of desire-as-lack, the object is transcendent and yet to be realized, requiring a chronological investigation and appropriation of alterity.

Deleuze turns to Tournier's novel to show how this structure—seemingly inevitable from a Freudian position—can instead be foreclosed. Reimagining the story of Robinson Crusoe shipwrecked on the desert island of Speranza, Tournier uses this isolated ecology to re-negotiate colonialist power dynamics in an inter-textual, queer manner that would seem to appeal to Denis

[63] Gilles Deleuze, *Logique du sens* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1969), p. 361.
[64] Deleuze, *Logique du sens*, p. 368.

as much as Deleuze.[65] Deleuze describes how the novel fashions a perverse model of desire that collapses both temporal and intersubjective distance: 'il laisse la conscience coller ou coïncider avec l'objet dans un éternel présent.'[66] Without anything *other* to desire, Robinson discovers a 'conjugaison de la libido avec les éléments',[67] as animate and inanimate, self and other flare up in mutual conflagration. Deleuze calls this undifferentiated state the 'image': it is a superficial state, 'une surface pure'[68] in which narcissistic interest in one's own body also entails interest in its fleshly intertwining with the inanimate, now seemingly alive. The image releases that impersonal part of Robinson that the Other repressed, his 'surface' that resonates immediately with the nonhuman environment.

Deleuze associates this reactivation of the inanimate with an incestuous return to the 'Terre-Mère', in a manner nonetheless distinct from Freud. Assuming a binary opposition between the animate and inanimate, Freud understands this experience as a dissolution or death of the individual that must be guarded against.[69] Yet this Freudian self-destruction, becomes, in the eyes of Deleuze, a form of self-expression, or rather expression without a subject. Descending into the depths of the Terre-Mère, Robinson convulses in ecstatic pleasure, now merely one element in a becoming that traverses hierarchies of the human and nonhuman:

> Robinson s'enfonce jusqu'au centre intérieur de l'île, et trouve une alvéole où il arrive à se recroqueviller, qui est comme l'enveloppe larvaire de son propre corps. Régression plus fantastique que celle de la névrose, puisqu'elle remonte à la Terre-Mère, à la Mère primordiale: 'Il était cette pâte molle saisie dans une

[65] As far as I am aware, Denis has not referenced this essay, although she has referenced Deleuze's thematically similar essay 'L'Île déserte'. See Frodon, Jean-Michel. 'Trajectoires de *L'Intrus*'. *Cahiers du cinéma* 601 (2005): 45.
[66] Deleuze, *Logique du sens*, p. 361.
[67] Deleuze, *Logique du sens*, p. 364.
[68] Deleuze, *Logique du sens*, p. 366.
[69] While a definitive valence of Freud's death drive is impossible to determine, the most famous instance of this position is in the final paragraph of *Civilization and Its Discontents*; see Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, Repr, vol. XXI (London: Hogarth Press, 1999), p. 145.

> poigne de pierre toute-puissante, il était cette fève, prise dans la chair massive et inébranlable de Spéranza'.[70]

Deleuze here shows how perversion radicalizes the Freudian death drive: it diffuses the subject into a materiality that is not inert, but rather the virtual matrix of all life, whether human or nonhuman. Robinson's burial in the Earth is thus 'l'enveloppe larvaire de son propre corps', a crucible of rebirth as a new impersonal consciousness.

This regenerative dimension of the 'Terre-Mère' is paramount for Deleuze, serving as another case for his attempt to elaborate a thinking of the 'mother' as a virtual, onto-genetic principle. In his reading of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, Deleuze turns to Carl Jung in order to fashion incest with the 'Terre-Mère' as a form of symbolic (rather than literal and Freudian) death, thereby demonstrating its resonance with a broad swathe of cultural-mythological narrative. The secret matriarchal societies or heterocosms of Sacher-Masoch resemble Speranza in their isolation from the law-giving Other — incest is not subject to paternal prohibition, but rather maternal encouragement. It therefore becomes a key motif of regeneration: 'l'inceste signifie la deuxième naissance, c'est-à-dire une naissance héroïque, une parthénogenèse (entrer une seconde fois dans le sein maternel pour naître à nouveau ou se réenfanter)'.[14] The son sacrifices his genital sexuality and likeness to the father in order to experience parthenogenetic rebirth through the mother alone, becoming asexual and undying. As on Speranza, this incest is a distillation, reducing the organism to its most elemental virtual components.

For Deleuze, this form of evacuated subjectivity enables new forms of relationality beyond humanist ethics. After Robinson's re-emergence from the Terre-Mère, he happens upon an 'other', Vendredi, who will paradoxically play a key role in sustaining this world without

[70] Deleuze, *Logique du sens*, p. 365.

others. Rather than appearing as a recognizably human other, Vendredi is 'Non pas un autrui, mais un tout-autre qu'autrui.'[71] Robinson and Vendredi's (non-)relation thus remains fundamentally indeterminate:

> Mais l'essentiel est que Vendredi ne fonctionne pas du tout comme un autrui retrouvé. C'est trop tard, la structure ayant disparu. Tantôt il fonctionne comme un objet insolite, tantôt comme un étrange complice […] Tantôt presque comme un objet ou un animal, tantôt comme si Vendredi était un au-delà de lui-même, un au-delà de Vendredi, le double ou l'image de soi. Tantôt en deçà d'autrui, tantôt au-delà.[72]

It seems as if Robinson's attainment of the pure surface engenders a parallel transformation in Vendredi, as they resonate in the impersonal same-ness of the image. Deleuze describes how Vendredi leads Robinson in an escalation from his Earth-bound sexuality to a solar sexuality, as he 'porte la terre dans le ciel' and 'libère les éléments': 'Mais la terre, c'est ce qui les renferme et les astreint, les contient dans la profondeur des corps, tandis que le ciel, avec la lumière et le soleil, les porte à l'état libre et pur, délivrés de leurs limites pour former une énergie cosmique de surface'.[73] Deleuze acknowledges that the descent into the Terre-Mère was only provisional, paving the way for a truly *incorporeal* sexuality. In the light of the sun we find the elements in 'l'état libre et pur, délivrés de leurs limites' in the body.

Yet Deleuze's demotion of the sensory-motor organism leads him to ignore the racial dimension of Vendredi's otherness, and thus also the precise nature of *why* Robinson must transition from the earth to the sky: the Terre-Mère is equally conducive to both regeneration and stasis. While Deleuze is correct to point out that Robinson's descent into the Terre-Mère is what first allows him to glimpse that there is 'another island' underneath his cultivated, colonialist

[71] Deleuze, *Logique du sens*, p. 368.
[72] Deleuze, *Logique du sens*, p. 367-368.
[73] Deleuze, *Logique du Sens*, p. 351.

fantasy, Tournier repeatedly emphasizes that remaining at this stage can lead to inertia or addictive over-indulgence, a process that has deleterious consequences that are equally colonialist. Robinson's whiteness is most apparent in his descent into the cavern, as Tournier points to his red-haired and pale appearance; inside the cave, the optics of his ecstatic experience seem racially coded: 'Le noir où il baignait vira au blanc. Désormais c'était dans des ténèbres blanches qu'il flottait, comme un caillot de crème dans un bol de lait. Aussi bien n'avait-il pas dû frotter de lait son grand corps blanc pour pouvoir accéder à cette profondeur?'[74] As the novel progresses, these 'ténèbres blanches' take on added resonance: it is a paleness associated with lack of exposure to sunlight, as Robinson's explorations of the Earth expose him to various other white entities such as a mandrake root.

Whiteness thus becomes associated with the inhabitation of a shelter, a seductive lure of absolute belonging and rootedness. In a particularly haunting image, the bottom of the cavern contains a concave mold perfectly outlined to fit Robinson's body: 'finding his niche' leads into an addictive quest to regain direct access to the maternal breast. His intoxicating convulsions in the Terre-Mère turn his appearance gaunt, even vampiric, the toll on his body becoming clear after he emerges from the cave into the sunlight: 'Il était nu et blanc. Sa peau se granulait en chair de poule, comme celle d'un hérisson apeuré qui aurait perdu ses piquants. Son sexe humilié avait fondu.'[75] Here the asexual and undying quality of the Deleuzian masochist is rendered startlingly abject. Like Shane (Vincent Gallo) in *Trouble Every Day* (2001), returning from the rainforests of Guyana with a virus that turns his libido into an insatiable vampiric drive,

[74] Tournier, *Vendredi*, p. 326.
[75] Tournier, *Vendredi*, p. 337.

Robinson's alternative sexuality brings an equal dose of pain along with its immediate pleasures, leading him to ask 'Est-ce un bien, est-ce un mal?'[76]

Tournier suggests that it is in the Earth that oppositional relations of blackness and whiteness are maintained—the fair-skinned Robinson using the darkness of the Terre-Mère as a nourishing shelter to maintain his whiteness, a shelter that only has room for one. The consequences of Robinson's over-indulgence are therefore not just biological, but also ecological. Noticing that the island's fecundity had begun to wither in correlation with his trips into the cave, he confesses, 'Speranza s'épuisait… dans cette vocation maternelle monstrueuse qu'il lui imposait.'[77] He therefore acknowledges that he has outgrown his perverse routine: 'J'y trouvais, certes, la paix et l'allégresse, mais j'écrasais de mon poids d'homme ma terre nourricière.'[78] Here Robinson joins a cast of Denis characters outlined by Adrian Martin: 'chic whites 'slumming it' in the underworld of The Other… and sometimes again deciding, as on the war field or in the camps, who shall live and who shall die.'[79] In this regard, Robinson invokes the bohemian-racist vagabond Luc (Jean-Claude Adelin) in *Chocolat* (1989), as well as Maria (Isabelle Huppert) in *White Material* (2009), whose rigid attachment to the land leads her to collapse at the film's end in the embrace of an African woman, pleading for a maternal figure.

For Robinson, too, the terrestrial leads all too easily into the territorial. His attachment to the Terre-Mère engenders a racially charged sexual rivalry when he finds Vendredi also copulating with the Earth, as he exclaims, 'Speranza bafouée, salie, outragée par un nègre!'[80]

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[76] Tournier, *Vendredi*, p. 338.
[77] Tournier, *Vendredi*, p. 348.
[78] Tournier, *Vendredi*, p. 350.
[79] Adrian Martin, 'Ticket to Ride: Claire Denis and the Cinema of the Body', *Screening the Past*, 2006, https://www.screeningthepast.com/issue-20-first-release/ticket-to-ride-claire-denis-and-the-cinema-of-the-body/#_edn3.
[80] Tournier, *Vendredi*, p. 549.

During this early period of their relationship, Robinson has not yet fully embraced the consequences of his elemental sexuality, still clinging on to a fantasy of rootedness that the Terre-Mère affords. Yet in direct contrast to Deleuze, the rapprochement between Robinson and Vendredi happens through the body. Robinson comes to realize Vendredi's humanity through his capacity for embodied sensing, as he marvels at the intricacy of Vendredi's eye:

> Dans la masse transparente de l'iris est noyée une infime corolle de plumes de verre, une rosace ténue, infiniment précieuse et délicate… Comment une pareille merveille peut-elle être incorporée à un être aussi grossier, ingrat et vulgaire ? Et si en cet instant précis il découvre par hasard la beauté anatomique stupéfiante de l'œil de Vendredi, ne doit-il pas honnêtement se demander si l'Araucan n'est pas tout entier une addition de choses également admirables qu'il n'ignore que par aveuglement ?[81]

Robinson's attitude towards Vendredi is simultaneously objectifying and subjectifying. It is as if studying Vendredi's eye allows Robinson himself to learn to see, to overcome his metaphorical blindness. Intertwining his senses with the Other, they are both intertwined in a broader ecology, as the intricate design of Vendredi's eye alludes to the structure of feathers and flowers. Robinson begins to glimpse 'sous le métis grossier et stupide qui l'irrite, l'existence possible d'un *autre Vendredi* – comme il a soupçonné jadis, bien avant de découvrir la grotte et la combe, une *autre île*, cachée sous l'île administrée.'[82] Robinson's descent into the Terre-Mère was not entirely in vain, as his attunement to nonhuman sentience becomes the foundation for a renewed ethical relation to other humans. This burgeoning relation with Vendredi does not negate his elemental sexuality, but rather 'fait changer d'élément'[83] from the terrestrial to the solar.

[81] Tournier, *Vendredi*, p. 565.
[82] Tournier, *Vendredi*, p. 566.
[83] Tournier, *Vendredi*, p. 717.

The move from the earth to the sky is a process of exposure, as Robinson's whiteness, maintained through his solitary shelter, takes on colour through the communal experience of solar illumination. Robinson's marveling at Vendredi's eye becomes part of a broader injunction to *take in light*. Against the Platonic injunction to exit the cave in order to attain the illumination of reason, Speranza's illumination is decidedly corporeal:

> Ses séjours au fond de la grotte, puis son intimité avec la terre avaient achevé de donner à sa chair la blancheur laiteuse et fragile des raves et des tubercules. Encouragé par Vendredi, il s'exposait nu désormais au soleil. D'abord apeuré, recroquevillé et laid, il s'était épanoui peu à peu. Sa peau avait pris un ton cuivré. Une fierté nouvelle gonflait sa poitrine et ses muscles. De son corps rayonnait une chaleur à laquelle il lui semblait que son âme puisait une assurance qu'elle n'avait jamais connue. Il découvrait ainsi qu'un corps accepté, voulu, vaguement désiré aussi – par une manière de narcissisme naissant – peut être non seulement un meilleur instrument d'insertion dans la trame des choses extérieures, mais aussi un compagnon fidèle et fort.[84]

Vendredi's blackness, and Robinson's taking on of 'color', is the result of sensory-motor movement towards the outside. Robinson comes to laugh at his having inhabited the role of 'l'Anglais méthodique, avare et mélancolique'[85] as he basks in the sun, sharing an experience both universal and embodied. There is therefore little basis for Deleuze's claim that the elements must be liberated from a body that somehow limits them; there is no 'pure' or 'incorporeal' state to attain here. It is only through the body that Robinson and Vendredi liberate the elements, attaining their solar sexuality by rejoicing in the feeling of sun on their skin. This sensation leads into perhaps the ultimate sensory-motor celebration—dance. Robinson describes how a goat, once 'âprement enraciné' to the hillside is, after its death, skinned and turned into a kite by Vendredi. As the goat-skin flails and dances in the wind, Robinson comes to see it as an allegory

[84] Tournier, *Vendredi*, p. 597.
[85] Tournier, *Vendredi*, p. 585.

for his own transformation—he is both rooted, almost umbilical cord-like, to the Earth, yet also capable of being moved by the wind and atmosphere.

Robinson becomes 'nomadic' not through leaving the body and intersubjectivity behind, but through embracing them: 'Il flottait désormais, libre et apeuré, seul avec Vendredi.'[86] This development is possible due to Vendredi's unique lack of belonging and rootedness. Robinson first discovers him fleeing from a sacrificial ceremony carried out by Aracaunians who have landed on the island, as Vendredi is the scapegoat to be sacrificed, presumably because of his 'métis noir' (mixed Amerindian and African) blood. Initially identifying more with Vendredi's pursuers (only shooting them, instead of Vendredi, by accident when his dog nudges him), Robinson eventually comes to embrace his own lack of rootedness: the sole survivor of a shipwreck, he, too is a functional scapegoat, 'condemned' to life outside civil society.

On Speranza, Robinson and Vendredi are both included by virtue of their mutual exclusion and non-belonging. In this regard, both characters embody Édouard Glissant's concept of creolization, a form of hybrid subjectivity, that, although inspired by the mixed Amerindian, African and European population of the Carribean, is also, for Glissant, constitutive of all subjectivity in a globalized and diasporic postmodernity. Drawing on Deleuze's later work with Guattari in *Mille Plateaux* (1980), especially their notions of the nomad and rhizome, Glissant is wary of how ontological thinking can lead to forms of rootedness and attachment to territory. Creolization is therefore intertwined with Glissant's notion of 'l'identité-relation', a form of belonging that nonetheless interrupts all ontological rootedness. Like Robinson, both rooted to the earth and moving in the wind, Glissant is careful to balance both terms of this equation: it is 'une errance enracinée', an 'errance qui oriente'.[87] Indeed, Birgit Mara Kaiser comments that

[86] Tournier, *Vendredi*, p. 591.
[87] Édouard Glissant, *Poétique de la Relation* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1990), p. 61.

Glissant finds the tendency in recent French theory 'to go beyond questions or dimensions of identity' to be 'unviable'; his thinking is always a bilateral negotiation: 'Glissant's own flip-side of creolization is relation-identity, which precisely prevents creolization from driving at a dissolution of all components in an amorphic homogeneity or at an errance detached from all concrete others, or indifferent to surroundings.'[88] Probing at Deleuze's drive towards the incorporeal, Glissant theorizes a world *with* embodied others that nonetheless allows for fluid renegotiation of identities. This relationality is also inextricable from what Glissant calls a new 'ésthetique de la terre'. Glissant distinguishes that what he is envisioning is 'non pas l'absolu sacralisé d'une possession ontologique, mais la complicité relationnelle.'[89] Where ontological possession is intertwined with Oedipal notions of filiation and territory—as we saw in Robinson's initial possessiveness towards Vendredi—Glissant's aesthetics of the earth is rhizomatic, a spontaneous 'ésthetique du bouleversement et de l'intrusion.'[90]

Something in the Landscape

Much like Tournier on Speranza, in *Beau Travail* Denis presents us with a post-colonial arena of indeterminate valence, reveling in the void left after the collapse of a civilizing mission. This void gives rise to the heightened animacy of a 'Terre-Mère', with its own delicate balancing act between liberating purposelessness and privileged self-indulgence. The film's narrative tracks how this impasse festers into a sadistic Oedipal rivalry. Loosely adapted from Herman Melville's 1888 novella *Billy Budd*, the film is narrated in flashback structure by Galoup (Denis Lavant), an

[88] Birgit Mara Kaiser, 'Poésie en Étendue: Deleuze, Glissant and a Post-Postcolonial Aesthetics of the Earth', in *Revisiting Normativity with Deleuze*, ed. Rosi Braidotti and Patricia Pisters (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012), 131–45, p. 140.
[89] Glissant, *Poétique de la Relation*, p. 161.
[90] Glissant, *Poétique de la Relation*, p. 165.

officer in the French Foreign Legion. He recounts how his rivalry with a new recruit Gilles Sentain (Gregoire Colin) for the affections of his commanding officer Bruno Forrestier (Michel Subor) erupts into a murderous scheme requiring Galoup's dismissal from the legion. As described by Glissant, we find an issue of belonging and exclusion, refracted through the heightened animacy of the post-colonial landscape: earth has become territory, intertwined with filiation. Galoup is therefore prone, like Robinson, to a territorial possessiveness bordering on sadism. It is only once Galoup embraces his exclusion, his lack of belonging to the land and legion, that he is able to find a durable form of elemental relatedness.

With the discussion of Deleuze serving as a proleptic guide, my reading will bring together two approaches to the film—ecological and psychoanalytic—that have yet to be put in conversation with one another. On the one hand, Martine Beugnet and Laura McMahon have demonstrated the film's interest in non-human becomings that traverse hierarchies of the inanimate and animate, while on the other, Leo Bersani finds a rethinking of relationality through Denis' interest in an impersonal commingling of bodies. I will therefore argue that these themes are intertwined: the nonhuman becomings of the characters effect a new form of elemental sexuality. Yet as we saw on Speranza, this state comes with its attendant potentials and perils, requiring a careful working through of post-colonial and racial dynamics.

Much of the transformation Denis effects through her images is dependent upon the specificity of the landscape of Djibouti. The country's isolation, existing in dynamic tension between mountains, desert and sea is heightened by Denis' camera, becoming a 'desert island' in the manner of Speranza. Having lived in Djibouti for a year as a child, in an interview Denis dwells upon its geographic (and aesthetic) distinctiveness:

> I remember being dazzled by the beauty of the Red Sea, the desert. You don't forget a landscape like that. I always thought of Djibouti as a place where human

> history hasn't really begun yet—or perhaps it's already over. There's something in the landscape that's stronger than human civilization. There's no agriculture, for example, and there are live volcanoes. And there's the Legion.[91]

Denis here suggests a non-anthropocentric perspective in which landscape is no longer a mere background. Like the 'other island' lurking underneath Speranza, 'another Djibouti' surges to the foreground with a heightened animacy. Yet Denis is wary of complete fusion with the Terre-Mère, commenting that 'The attraction of beautiful landscape is something dangerous for film. You must know exactly what you want to express with a landscape because if the camera is hypnotized, then it's dangerous.'[92] Denis, like Tournier and Glissant, suggests moderation in this elemental itinerary, collaborating with the landscape without remaining attached to it. Henrik Gustafsson argues that landscape in Denis's films 'stalls and interrupts… attempts to overcome a distance, to form a bridge or bond with the past and the land.' Denis' approach to Djibouti is thus closer to Glissant's non-Oedipal, non-filial 'aesthetics of the earth'; in Gustafsson's words, it 'does not suture us into identification but leaves us outside. However, in doing so, it also enables another viewing position.'[93] It is this process of moving outside that comprises the task that Denis' characters must work through: learning how to engage with the elemental in a dynamic and forward-moving, rather than static and monotonous manner.

In Beugnet's early and influential reading of the film, the historical reality of post-colonial Djibouti foregrounds the obsolescence of the French Foreign Legion and its aspiration towards a 'single, unified collective identity' of Eurocentric assimilation.[94] As alluded to by Denis, history seems to have stopped. Laura McMahon picks up on this thematic, pointing out

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[91] Claire Denis, Who Wants to Be a Legionnaire?, interview by Jonathan Romney, June 2000, https://www.theguardian.com/film/interview/interviewpages/0,6737,338784,00.html.
[92] Denis, Who Wants to Be a Legionnaire?
[93] Henrik Gustafsson, 'Points of Flight, Lines of Fracture: Claire Denis's Uncanny Landscape', in *The Films of Claire Denis: Intimacy on the Border*, ed. Marjorie Vecchio (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), p. 555.
[94] Martine Beugnet, *Claire Denis* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), p. 122.

that shots of rusting tanks alongside the legionnaires' dance 'suggest an erosion of human history itself.'[95] Now devoid of the proud civilizing mission of the French empire, the legion has become an anachronistic band of costumed men turning in circles. Yet this impasse is surprisingly fecund: Beugnet describes how in the opening 'Dance with the weeds', the 'static' being of the legionnaires also evidences a strange harmony with deep geological time: 'the relationship between bodies and earth also signals the constant pull of the organic, the suggestion that this collective body is being reclaimed by the natural world… the body of the legion appears at risk of merging with the plants and the rocks'.[96] While Beugnet points to these vestiges as 'afterlives' or 'ghosts' of colonialism, this sense could be further developed and literalized.[97] The film does indeed posit something that persists *after life*: beyond the confines of the individual there is an undying remainder, the impersonal image. Like the Deleuzian masochist reborn as immortal and undying through incest with the 'Terre-Mère', here the legionnaires' spectral, absent quality reveals a similar rebirth, seen here in 'the collective body… reclaimed by the natural world'.

This becoming-elemental is inextricable from a perverse sexuality. As Leo Bersani argues, the 'desert sexuality' of the film becomes a de-facto laboratory of desire, a movement away from everyday social relations in order to distill and reformulate them. For Bersani, the legionnaires discover ways to 'reinvent their own being-together.'[98] He points to their march to the remote seaside barracks as one of the major catalysts of this reinvention. Although initiated by Galoup's plotting to keep Sentain away from Forrestier, this 'marche au désert' seems to

[95] Laura McMahon, 'Beyond the Humand Body: Claire Denis's Ecologies,' *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 7 (2014): 1–18, p. 3.
[96] Beugnet, *Claire Denis*, p. 114.
[97] Beugnet, *Claire Denis*, p. 103.
[98] Bersani, *Thoughts and Things*, p. 11.

entail a becoming outside of these intentions. In this isolated location 'an energetic choreography stifles the movements of desire before they can become psychic designs. Sensuality, depsychologized, is prevented from mutating into the sexual.'[99] Most of the group exercises—although sensual and attentive to the movement of the shirtless bodies—are not a means to any end outside themselves, instead serving as modular, self-contained set-pieces. Denis does not use them to develop or carry forward any narrative tension, including the tension between Galoup and Sentain. In this regard, Bersani's reading of the queer relation between the two characters, a continuation of his notion of the 'homo' or a desiring for 'sameness',[100] evokes Deleuze's reading of the love between Robinson and Vendredi on Speranza: it is a perverse erotics of surfaces. This new mode of desire is perhaps already on display when the legionnaires' dance with local women in the nightclub: Bersani writes that they 'don't dance in couples; each person is both dancing alone and participating in the rhythm of a mildly sensual sociability.'[101] There is an impersonal intimacy at work here, but one with a perhaps different valence than Bersani realizes, as Denis states that these women are prostitutes.[102]

Bersani therefore admires the legion, seeing their sociality as a tool in his project to theorize an escape from the constraints of Oedipal desire. He writes that these exercises stage a

> 'collective psychic rebirth' along the lines of what Foucault calls 'a 'new relational mode,' an as yet contentless sociality that seductively sets the stage for the invention of other manifestations of nonsadistic movement, both within the individual psyche and between the human subject and the world.[103]

The reference to Foucault and his 'new relational mode' is a familiar refrain from Bersani's work, an orientation meant to lead beyond the object-relating focus of psychoanalysis. It is

[99] Bersani, *Thoughts and Things*, p. 12.
[100] Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).
[101] Bersani, *Thoughts and Things*, p. 10.
[102] Castanet, 'Interview with Claire Denis', p. 145.
[103] Bersani, *Thoughts and Things*, p. 12.

significant that the same reference appears in relation to Bersani's recent discussion of the work of Peter Sloterdijk, and in particular his investigation of how pre-natal, womb-like states can persist into mature sexuality and inform relationality outside of the subject-object dichotomy. Sloterdijk's idea of 'nobjects'—something that is neither subject nor object, reminiscent of the oceanic state of early infant-mother relations—has striking convergence with the new relationality of Terre-Mère. Yet the fact that this discussion leads Bersani to an anguished dead-end in relation to Sloterdijk's recent xenophobic turn perhaps signals that he is perhaps too idealizing in his embrace of the non-relationality of the legion. At the end of his discussion on Sloterdijk, Bersani lucidly articulates the question that has guided our discussion of Deleuze and Denis up to this point: 'Can the dream of a recovered, life-sustaining interiority be expanded to include an otherness that, simply by being human, can never truly be an 'outside'?'[104] Bersani shares with Deleuze an allergy towards any form of transcendence, failing to consider that the 'outside' can also develop the 'life-sustaining interiority' he cherishes.

Beau Travail, I am arguing, demonstrates this possibility, insofar as we are willing to leave the legion behind. Bersani sees the withdrawn sociality and womb-like contentment of the legion as a definitive solution to the question of how to live alongside the other. Yet I believe the lingering question of race ensures that this solution is instead a provisional one. While Bersani sees Galoup's euphoric explosion into dance at the end of the film as a simple return to the sociality already achieved by the legion, I contend that this movement consists in *going beyond* the legion, beyond a territorial and filial attachment to the landscape of Djibouti in order to become truly nomadic. The position of the legionnaires is thus comparable to that of Robinson's forays into the Terre-Mère: the elemental renewal is incomplete, still not fully metabolized.

[104] Leo Bersani, *Receptive Bodies* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2018), p. 105.

Their sense of 'another', more animate land underneath the territory is still compatible with the rigid drills, routine and schedule of a colonialist fantasy, what Robinson calls the 'cultivated' island.

The seeming 'static' harmony between the legionnaires and the landscape complicates their ability to relate to the historical reality of Djiboutiens. On the one hand, the relative purposelessness of the legion's exercises offers them up to the quizzical gaze of the locals; yet at the same time, it offers them as withheld, closed in on themselves. Most tellingly, the Djiboutiens gaze from behind barriers such as fences or barbed wire, respecting the militaristic demarcations of the legion. The most pointed example of this gaze comes when the legionnaires are working on the side of the road, digging a ditch, while a mini-bus of Djiboutiens ride by. Denis lingers on the faces of the Djiboutiens, as the legionnaires stare back, now the object of scrutiny. Denis gives an explicitly theoretical justification for this scene: 'Sartre says that, for a thousand years, we Westerners have contemplated the world, and one day perhaps we will be confronted by the look of others, who will in turn contemplate us, and then we will feel ashamed to have looked on calmly, without ever asking ourselves just who it was that we were looking at. I think that this is what I have tried to put into play with the minibus scene.'[105] Denis' description here recalls Robinson's own denial of, and eventually shame before, Vendredi's subjectivity. Just as it was Robinson's appreciation of the island's nonhuman sentience that allowed him to come to an appreciation of 'another' Vendredi, Galoup and Sentain's elemental trajectory will also allow them to work through the asymmetrical power dynamics of Djibouti.

It is only once they realize the land is not 'theirs' that they are forced into the outside and a relation with the Other, a relation based on their mutual exclusion. Galoup's murderous scheme

[105] Didier Castanet, 'Interview with Claire Denis', *Journal of European Studies* 34, no. 1/2 (November 2000): 143–60, p. 143.

culminates in sending Sentain off on a suicide mission into the desert with a malfunctioning compass. Sentain is thus made into a scapegoat, a sacrificial victim excluded by the legion's aspiration towards unity and wholeness. In other words, he has become 'creolized', nomadic. Abandoned in the salt flats of Lac Assal, his prostrate body, near-death, seems to verge towards reabsorption by the inanimate (figure 6).



Figure 6: Sentain's becoming-mineral.

Yet Beugnet highlights how this seemingly static time—divorced from history and movement—nonetheless contains a unique dynamism:

> in its vivid evocation of a process of 'becoming-earth', the sequence works as a metaphor for the legion's anachronistic ideal of self-effacement and timelessness – the subject trapped and 'fossilised' in the static space of myth. At the same time, the poignancy of the embodied process of metamorphosis counterbalances the

> abstracting effect of the metaphor and reinjects timelessness with change, even if it is the slow, inexorable rhythm of organic alteration.[106]

What seems 'static' from an anthropocentric perspective, reveals, upon closer inspection, nonhuman forces working at different speeds of change and becoming. While there is indeed the danger of Robinson's intoxicating near-death—'the subject trapped and 'fossilised' in the static space of myth'—here the Terre-Mère also nudges Sentain along towards renewed relationality. If Sentain's journey initially appears as a line of flight into the elemental—a complete dissolution of narrative orientation—it paradoxically contains, in Glissant's words, 'une errance qui oriente'.

Sentain's elemental trajectory must therefore pass through the Earth on the way to the Sky. Denis shows us Sentain, prostrate on the ground, trying to use his backpack to create a shadow, relief from the pulverizing sun. Yet the sequence underlines that this is a landscape without shelter and belonging. When Sentain is discovered on the ground by the nomads, he resembles the fragile whiteness of Robinson emerging from the cave drained by his convulsions, yet also exposed to the outside. Denis states,

> Grégoire's body is the body of a young white man, well nourished, fleshy, even if it is sunburned. And we see these men who have come to save him, twice as thin as he is, dried out, wearing those little shoes. I think that shot says more than the entire film. The film is in it. It is not exoticism. It is about a relationship, in other words between two elements together that create a circuit that means something.[107]

Here we find a white body that has enjoyed the benefits of a shelter suddenly exposed to an outside, one that is shared with others. Like Vendredi fleeing his Araucanian captors, the nomads do not 'belong' to the land, but are themselves excluded from and rebuffed by it. But it is at the level of this mutual exclusion that they are able to meet Sentain, all moving around, together, underneath the same sun. Denis recapitulates Glissant's rhetorical question and answer whether

[106] Beugnet, *Cinema and Sensation,* p. 139.
[107] Castanet, 'Interview with Claire Denis', p. 147.

an aesthetics of the earth is possible even in 'la poussière famélique des Afriques', affirmatively qualifying it as an 'ésthetique du bouleversement et de l'intrusion.'[108]

It is this same trajectory that Galoup spends the film preparing himself for—stepping outside and being seen. In a striking shot at the barracks, shortly before sending Sentain off on his suicide mission, we see Galoup sitting at a desk, the darkened interior contrasting with the sun-bleached, arid landscape outside (figure 7).



Figure 7: Galoup sheltering in the barracks.

Gustafsson highlights the recurrence, particularly evident in *Beau Travail* and *L'Intrus*, of these compositions of landscape foregrounding rupture or discontinuity: 'Cut out and suspended in midair, the landscape lingers as a pause or a question mark.'[109] This shot condenses the

[108] Glissant, *Poétique de la relation*, p. 165.
[109] Gustafsson, *Claire Denis's Uncanny Landscape*, p. 545.

precarious situation of the legion—they have constructed a makeshift shelter allowing them some degree of territorial comfort in Djibouti, without being able to truly step outside, in concert with the Djiboutiens. These shots of landscape function in a similar manner to the Djiboutiens gazing into the camera, a question meant to unsettle the premature answer of the legion concerning their identity and belonging.

Galoup, lilke Sentain, has this question forced upon him when he too is expelled from the legion. He now drifts through his own desert, the streets of Marseille, where his narration circles around questions of regret, nostalgia, and loss. However, in the penultimate scene of the film, Galoup's voice-over ceases as he sits with himself in solitude, reconfiguring his relationship to the past. As on Speranza, the body is the privileged site where nomadism and rootedness can be reconfigured. This sensation is conveyed by a brief shot of the legionnaires positioned in front of the Red Sea, an image whose function is too ambiguous to simply be labelled a flashback (figure 8).



Figure 8: The legion in their solar and atmospheric element.

In dynamic tension with the photographic stillness of the shot (the precise framing and posed quality of the bodies), the frame rate seems to have sped up, a fact apparent from the accelerated pulse of the waves hitting the shoreline as well as the flapping of the legionnaires' pants in the wind. The impression is of the landscape tearing itself away from the legion, becoming solar and atmospheric, as they struggle to remain rooted on the ground. Yet it is this disjunctive relationship that renders the 'truth' of the legion, as they gaze directly into the camera at Galoup, partaking in the same elemental exclusion as the Djiboutiens and now Galoup himself.

In Galoup's euphoric explosion into dance in the final scene, we find an oriented wandering. Like Robinson's vision of himself as the goat-kite dancing in the wind, he is both rooted to the Earth and pulverized by solar, atmospheric forces. McMahon, comparing this scene

to the long-take of Grégoire Colin dancing alone to the Animals' 'Hey Gyp' in *U.S. Go Home* (1994), finds a 'masturbatory dimension' to dance in Denis' work that is also 'mysteriously transformative'.[110] Galoup successfully 'changes his element', moving from the terrestrial to the solar. In response to the 'volcanic rhythms' Denis Lavant described in the film, McMahon wonders whether

> his dance in the final scene is an attempt to incorporate something of those volcanic rhythms. The criss-crossed, mirrored surfaces of the disco in which the dance takes place invoke Deleuze's crystal of time (Davis 196). In a hall of mirrors that seems abstracted from the desert landscapes of Djibouti, a volcanic force erupts: within this crystal-image the movements of the body and the earth, the human and nonhuman, coexist, fleetingly indiscernible.[111]

It is only once he is separated from Djibouti that Galoup achieves any fusion with the landscape. No longer relying on Djibouti and the legion as his sheltering territory—Robinson's 'vocation maternelle monstrueuse'—the landscape itself becomes liberated alongside him in a virtual volcanic eruption.

Despite inhabiting the closed interiority of the club, Galoup has also virtually stepped outside in his channeling of Djibouti's volcanic rhythms. Like Robinson's sudden shame, in front of Vendredi, at inhabiting the role of a 'melancholy Englishman', Galoup breaks out of his sheltered routine in order to move freely and rejoice in his body. He thus provides an affirmative answer to Bersani's question of whether it is possible to bring 'life-sustaining interiority' into an 'outside'. In the mirrored reflections, Galoup sees himself objectified in the world, the audience for his own performance. Bersani literalizes this reflexivity when he writes 'It is as if, at this final moment, the actor, Denis Lavant, were stepping out of his role just before the camera stops

[110] Laura McMahon, 'Rhythms of Relationality: Denis and Dance,' in *The Films of Claire Denis: Intimacy on the Border*, ed. M. Vecchio (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 175–88, p. 180.
[111] McMahon, 'Beyond the Human Body: Claire Denis's Ecologies,' p. 5.

filming him.'[112] Galoup-Lavant becomes aware of the audience, of the Other, and thus aware of his role. Spectatorship is no longer a matter of rigid borders and barbed wire, as it was on Djibouti, but a fluctuating, communal process diffused across the crystalline reflections of the club. The asymmetry of the post-colonial gaze has given way to a reciprocal regime of sensing, both universal and particular.

Solipsistic Sky

Denis's artistic trajectory, over the roughly two decades between the release of *Beau Travail* and *High Life*, forms a rather extreme oscillation: she has become increasingly bold in her exploration of violence and incest in films like *Trouble Every Day* and *Les Salauds* (2013), while also retaining a more humanistic and sentimental approach in *Vendredi Soir* (2002), *35 Rhums*, and *Un Beau Soleil Intérieur* (2017). Arriving in 2018, *High Life* was perceived by critics as residing squarely in the former category: one of Denis's most pessimistic, even nihilistic films, seemingly indifferent to the audience in its suicidal trajectory into a black hole. In this regard, the film invites an encounter with the 'Dark Deleuze' development, as scholars like Eleanor Kaufman and Claire Colebrook use the Tournier essay to argue that only the purely virtual and incorporeal nature of Deleuze's thought is able to orient us in a world in which the human organism has become unviable. Despite the striking convergences between this dark Deleuze and Denis in their exploration of 'perverse ecologies', I contend that *High Life* is not the expression of a 'dark Denis'. Her attention to issues of post-colonialism and race again complicate any absolute endorsement of a 'world without others', instead finding forms of community and relatedness even at the seeming nadir of the human's exhaustion.

[112] Bersani, *Thoughts and Things*, p. 13.

The Tournier essay seems to have taken on a new life via the Dark Deleuze trend, revealing a thinking of extinction and cosmological anti-humanism that also resonates with the suffocating universe of *High Life*. I will briefly return to the essay with this contemporary framing in order to develop these questions, and their implications for thinking race, that remained latent in *Beau Travail*. Kaufman's reading of the Tournier essay emphasizes an 'interstellar' element in Deleuze's thinking that is not contained in the novel: Robinson and Vendredi's disappearance into the sky, which he terms 'le ciel solipsiste'.[113] The pair's trajectory invokes, for Deleuze, a liberation from the confines of the living organism in favour of the inorganic matter that subtends life: 'Le monde pervers est un monde où la catégorie du nécessaire a complètement remplacé celle du possible: étrange spinozisme où l'oxygène manque, au profit d'une énergie plus élémentaire et d'un air raréfié (le Nécessité)'.[20] The world without others is a world without oxygen and the organisms it makes possible, opening onto the necessity of incorporeal and inorganic matter that persists outside cycles of life and death. Deleuze thereby arrives at a Nietzschean anti-politics in which agency and freedom no longer reside in the individual, but in the elemental processes animating them. While submission to this sky-necessity ostensibly entails a state of renewed virtual potential, Robinson and Vendredi's fate seems closer to suicide, as the virtual becomes an end rather than a means.

It is undeniable that in the Tournier essay, Deleuze does indeed advocate for a movement 'out of this world'. Kaufman grants that it is an instance of his oeuvre that falls prey to Peter Hallward's now well-known critique: that Deleuze is a philosopher of spiritual withdrawal and political quietism, elevating the amorphousness of the virtual over its real-world actualizing

[113] Deleuze, *Logique du sens,* p. 366.

potential.[114] In contrast to most Deleuzians, however, Kaufman chooses to embrace Hallward's critique, finding generative ontological potential in the Tournier essay's divergence from the more political tenor of Deleuze's work with Guattari. While granting that this 'dark ontology' was abandoned by Deleuze himself, Kaufman attempts to further elaborate his thinking on the superiority and autonomy of the virtual in order to reveal 'an extreme state of negation, lack of oxygen, death, purity, sadism, intemporality, incorporeality, and an eschewal of the other and of communication and relation that… forms the hidden kernel of Deleuze's philosophical project'.[115] Kaufman justifies her exploration of these states as an attempt 'to examine why certain situations of extreme exploitation, illness, and alienation may not be as uniformly negative as they may appear from the outside' as 'it seems that those facing the most difficult circumstances are in fact forced to engage the toughest ontological questions in unmediated fashion.'[116] On one level, Kaufman is remarkably proximate to the situation portrayed in *High Life*, a dystopian near-future of carceral capitalism and environmental apocalypse. Her insistence on the autonomy of these negative states is harder to sustain, however, when they are concretized as historical traumas. It is therefore telling that Deleuze' black and postcolonial readers, while also willing to find generative potential in these states of exhaustion, aim for something beyond mere ontological contemplation.

The limitations of Kaufman's 'dark ontology' become especially apparent when considered in the light of race, and in particular against the deceptively similar work of Fred Moten. Moten is the thinker who has perhaps most successfully put Deleuze into dialogue with the black radical tradition, and like Glissant, Moten pushes back on the same ontological

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[114] Peter Hallward, *Out of This World: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Creation* (London: Verso, 2006).
[115] Eleanor Kaufman, *Deleuze, The Dark Precursor: Dialectic, Structure, Being* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2012), p. 111.
[116] Kaufman, *Deleuze, The Dark Precursor*, p. 4.

absoluteness in Deleuze that Kaufman seeks to amplify. Where Kaufman pursues a pessimist, unilateral course towards inhuman and impersonal being, Moten finds room for a bi-lateral, social engagement with these states, undertaking a careful negotiation of what he sees as the equally valid insights of Afro-pessimism and black optimism. While assenting to the Afro-pessimist claim that black subjectivity exists outside the realm of the political—Frantz Fanon's 'zone de non-être'[117]—for Moten this means that black life is unavoidably social. In striking proximity to and distance from Kaufman, he writes, 'I want to consider exhaustion as a mode or form or way of life, which is to say sociality, thereby marking a relation whose implications constitute, in my view, a fundamental theoretical reason not to believe, as it were, in social death'.[118] In place of Kaufman's exhaustion as immobile and inert being, Moten's exhaustion is a 'fugitive' and social course that disrupts any ontology.[119]

In focusing on the generative potential of the social in the void of the political, Moten highlights Foucault's study of the 'ship of fools' and its development by Deleuze and Blanchot: a paradoxical form of containment and banishment, of exile and strange liberty, where the condemned 'est prisonnier au milieu de la plus libre, de la plus ouverte des routes'.[120] The ship of fools is, for Moten, a prefiguration of the slave ships of the middle passage, which he terms 'the hold', arguing that this nadir of human misery nonetheless contains its own form of futurity and sociality. His argument builds on the work of Glissant, who characterizes the slave-ship as a creative-destructive maternal principle: 'Cette barque est une matrice, le gouffre-matrice. Car si tu es seul dans cette souffrance, tu partages l'inconnu avec quelques-uns, que tu ne connais pas

[117] Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire masques blancs*, Points Essais 26 (Paris: Éd. du Seuil, 2015), p. 6.
[118] Fred Moten, 'Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)', *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (2013): 737–80, 738.
[119] Moten, 'Blackness and Nothingness', 742.
[120] Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la folie à l'âge Classique* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), p. 22.

encore. Cette barque est ta matrice, un moule, qui t'expulse pourtant.'[121] Moten, too, asserts the seeming abyss of the ship harbors the oblique potential for renewed relationality: 'I plan to stay a believer in blackness, even as thingliness, even as (absolute) nothingness, even as imprisonment in passage on the most open road of all, even as—to use and abuse a terribly beautiful phrase of [Frank] Wilderson's (2010: xi)—fantasy in the hold.'[122] This poignant sentiment brings out both the subversive and the hopeful character of Deleuze's perverse ecology: finding a place for desire even in the total evacuation of the human.

I want to extrapolate Moten's balancing of Afro-pessimism and black optimism to the work of Deleuze and Denis, in order to show that their seemingly anti-social elements contain an internal dynamism. In Moten's words, we should not be seduced 'into mistaking an alternating current for a direct one.'[123] This dynamic undergirds Denis's entire filmography: she is enamoured with the quasi-incestuous isolation of families and marginalized groups, not for their own sake, but for the oblique social potential they harbour. Although *High Life* appears to deal less explicitly with race than many of Denis' other films, it condenses her interest in marginalization in the figure of the carceral spaceship on a suicide mission, an image that evokes both the ship of fools and middle passage. This ship therefore invokes the shelter of a 'dark ontology' only in order to reveal its impossibility, instead charting a fugitive course that holds out for the illumination of alterity. Even in the inhuman void of interstellar space, there remains room for 'fantasy in the hold'.

[121] Glissant, *Poétique de la relation*, p. 18.
[122] Moten, 'Blackness and Nothingness', p. 743.
[123] Moten, 'Blackness and Nothingness', p. 745.

Sky-Necessity

High Life follows an experimental program by Dr. Dibs (Juliette Binoche) to rehabilitate prisoners aboard a spaceship. Ostensibly a mission to extract energy from a black hole, this explanation increasingly comes, over the course of the film, to seem more like an alibi. Under Dibs's matriarchal rule, the ship becomes a laboratory of desire that, like the 'Terre-Mère', or Glissant and Moten' Middle Passage, both constrains and releases characters towards new forms of kinship. *High Life* is divided into two sections, each with their own perverse satire of the Oedipal scenario: in the first, Dibs as masochistic matriarch, with Monte (Robert Pattinson) as her de-sexualized 'son'; in the second, Monte and Willow (Jessie Ross) as literal father and daughter, albeit in incestuous tension alone on the ship. In both cases, these fraught relationships reach resolution through a movement that comes ambiguously close to incest and suicide. However, a repeated refrain in the film—'the sensation of moving backwards, while moving forwards', articulated in Monte's voice-over and the Tindersticks' song for the credits—introduces an 'alternating current' that complicates this unilateral trajectory. I argue that Denis's originality lies in that, in both episodes, the backward movement of 'incest' becomes indistinguishable from the forward movement of maturation. Dibs realizes her incestuous relation with Monte only by thrusting him out towards fatherhood, just as, more mysteriously, Monte and Willow simultaneously approach and diverge from one another in the film's enigmatic ending in the black hole.

Denis therefore allows us to see the perverse-structure and the other-structure as co-imbricated, even indistinguishable. Denis has long been interested in the coming-of-age process' intertwining with ambiguous, symbolic forms of incest—most notably in *U.S. Go Home* (1994), *Nénette et Boni* (1996), and *35 Rhums* (2008). In these films, father and daughter, or brother and

sister, live alongside one another in fraught over-proximity, a tension that simultaneously isolates the couple from the social while also leaving them exposed to a transformational Other. *High Life* manifests a nonhuman, environmental dimension to this process, revealing that this incestuous over-proximity is an embrace of the human's virtual, rather than just biological, origins. In the depths of the cosmos we find human and nonhuman others that are mysteriously Janus-faced, enabling rites of involution and initiation. Denis thus imagines processes of maturation—coming of age, falling in love, leaving the home— not as a renunciation of one's intertwining with pre-individual, environmental forces, but rather as an intensification of them, as the emergence of the Other 'liberates the elements'.

The character of Dibs is an illustrative example of these dynamic, double-sided figures: her perverse experiments in inhuman parthenogenesis eventually enable her normative role as a mother. Having killed her own husband and children (before the film's opening) and bearing a scar across her stomach, Dibs functions as Deleuze's perverse mother of 'primary nature': an impersonal force of creation and destruction seemingly divorced from all sentimental attachment to the nuclear family, the heterosexual couple, and subjectivity itself. Denis invokes the myth of Medea as an inspiration for the character, stating 'She's made herself the opposite of what a real mother is supposed to be. Medea is a queen, so Dibs is the ship's doctor.'[124] As 'the opposite of what a real mother is supposed to be', Denis hints at the incestuous dimension hovering around Dibs—the devouring mother of castration.

In her relationship to the ship's captain (Lars Eidinger), we can see how Dibs assumes the Symbolic function in the absence of paternal authority. After his hesitant advances towards her,

[124] Claire Denis, 'Claire Denis on Black Holes, Olafur Eliasson, and the Making of High Life', interview by Dan Schindel, 16 April 2019, https://hyperallergic.com/495099/claire-denis-on-black-holes-olafur-eliasson-and-the-making-of-high-life/.

she 'castrates' him by extracting a digital chip from his finger (the means of accessing the ship's communication center). She then puts him to death in a strangely intimate scene of lethal IV injection, in which Emma Wilson compares her to a 'female insect'.[125] Referencing the fact that the captain is already going blind—symbolically castrated—Monte's voice-over states 'everything he sees is bathed in a black halo'. Denis then shows us an image of Dibs looking through her microscope, the embryonic, cellular life reflected upon her shadowy face as a network of illuminated white 'halos'. Where the castrated father's vision is subtended by blindness, his life oriented around death, Dibs's blindness is a form of vision, as the death and castration she brings functions as a strange form of life. This maternal enclosure, as well as Monte's de-sexualization, is highlighted in Denis's mythic background for Monte's character. She states that Monte is 'a knight. Like the Knights of the Round Table. Robert is Percival. He acts as if chastity keeps him protected, acts like a shield.'[126] According to most versions of the legend, Perceval was raised by his mother alone until his chance sighting of a group of knights initiates a series of events that lead to him joining King Arthur's round table. The myth therefore explicates both Monte's chastity—the other prisoners nickname him 'the monk'—as well as his later maturation towards fatherhood.

Monte's monk-like character is revealed in his choice to spend most of his time working in the ship's garden, where he finds the sole prisoner he can commiserate with, the African American crew member Tcherny (André Benjamin), who is also set apart from the rest of the group due to his relatively mild-mannered and sociable nature. Tcherny appears to have one foot outside the world of the ship, and, by extension, the diegesis — he is the one character in the film

[125] Emma Wilson, 'Love Me Tender: New Films from Claire Denis's, *Film Quarterly* 72, no. 4 (Summer 2019): 18–28, p. 22.
[126] Denis, 'Claire Denis on Black Holes,' https://hyperallergic.com/495099/claire-denis-on-black-holes-olafur-eliasson-and-the-making-of-high-life/.

who references a family left behind on Earth, and when another black crew member Elektra (Gloria Obianyo) dies, Tcherny offers the meta-commentary: 'Even up here the black ones are the first to go'. Because Tcherny is able to scrutinize the film in a reflexive manner, the ship's existential despair seems to have less purchase on him. The 'fugitive' aspect of Tcherny's sociality is made explicit when, later in the film, he lays down in the soil and literally dissolves into the earth. The act is both suicidal and emancipatory, as if he is choosing to exit the ship to rejoin his family on Earth, or even more radically, simply abdicating from the suffocating diegesis of the film itself.

Tcherny's descent into the 'Terre-Mère' — an involution that is also an expulsion — informs the elemental trajectories of other characters in the film, first of all Dibs. In including black and female characters as protagonists in this perverse ecology, Denis subverts the relatively limited casting of Deleuze's world without others, in which the 'Terre-Mère' and Vendredi are supporting roles enabling the transformation of white male subjectivity. In commingling multiple roles, engendering the perverse transformation of others as well as her own, Dibs comes closer to Mary Ann Doane's definition of the femme fatale: a figure that is able to seduce others by example, having also given herself over to the passive enjoyment of the drives.[127]

This subversion occurs most flamboyantly in Dibs's use of the 'fuckbox', a sequence that demonstrates how her death drive becomes strangely (re)productive. Descending into the 'womb' of the ship, she experiences a self-shattering akin to Robinson's ecstatic fusion with — and rebirth through — the 'Terre-Mère' on Speranza. As Dibs writhes in ecstatic pleasure, the handheld camera loses both focus and exposure, her figure diffusing into the darkness around

[127] Mary Anne Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 7.

her: the image becomes an interplay of light and shadow, flesh and hair, indifferent to corporeal boundaries (figure 9). So, too, does the dirge-like drone-metal score function as a kind of aural earthquake, its bass-heavy distortion threatening to buckle and collapse the instrumentation into undifferentiated sludge. As Dibs appears to climax, fantasy and reality blur as the prosthetic device she straddles momentarily turns, without explanation, into a writhing, furry animal. Her centripetal drive bursts out towards centrifugal dispersal, implicating an animality already inhabiting the self.

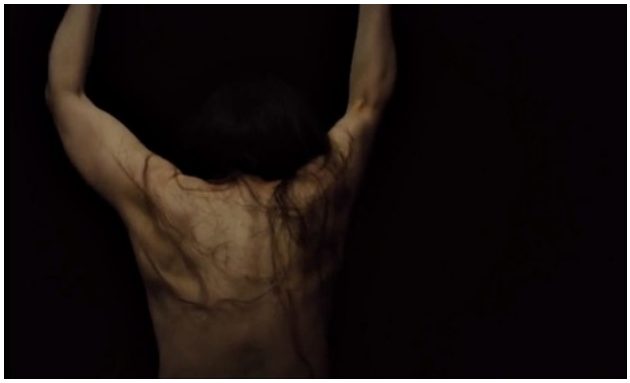


Figure 9: Dibs's descent into the 'Terre-Mère'.

I'd like to suggest the scene functions as one of many explorations of 'dance' in Denis's work—both in its non-narrative qualities and its mysterious way of blurring the boundaries of the human figure. Its obvious precedent in this regard is *Beau Travail*, a film that stages its own dance with the Terre-Mère, as Sentain and Galoup experience a 'rebirth' through their convergence with nonhuman rhythms. And as we have seen, these transformations have a latent eroticism, at work in even the most seemingly quotidian arenas such as Alain's solo bedroom dance in *U.S. Go Home*. In this regard, Dibs's solipsistic mutation in the fuckbox encapsulates and literalizes the 'masturbatory transformations' of Denis's characters. From the 1960's French suburbs, to the Djiboutien desert and then to outer-space, we find the same dynamic, carried

from the earth to the sky: an explosive, solitary *jouissance* that threatens to render the human figure unrecognizable. This threat is never completely realized, however, as Denis, diverging from a dark Deleuzianism, is intent on exploring how one's most seemingly anti-social drives can nonetheless be brought into the human fold. This is a problem of both libidinal and narrative economy: these dance scenes appear with little connection to the events preceding them. They function as modular, self-contained set pieces, spectacular arenas of self-dissolution.

However, the subsequent introduction of a gaze sustains, rather than dissolves, the intensity of these scenes. Denis revels in colliding these modular set-pieces with the reaction of the Other, as all of these solo 'dancers' are rediscovered by witnesses: Sentain, by a group of nomads; Galoup, by the audience, as he self-reflexively steps out of his role as the credits begin; and most relevant for *High Life*, Alain's dance routine is walked in on by his sister, Martine (Alice Houri). The subsequent scene unfolds as if Alain has literally, rather than figuratively, been caught masturbating: Martine snidely mocks him, lending their relation an incestuous dimension that will propel the rest of the film's narrative. Literalizing Alain and Martine's interaction, Monte does catch Dibs masturbating, as she exits the fuckbox as if walking from a proscenium into the backstage wings of the theater. Monte taunts her as he wipes sweat from her face while they have a flirtatious exchange: the play-acting continues. What seemed destined to remain a mute, narcissistic pleasure settles into a discursive register, one that contains its own form of verbal 'dance': there is again an impossible, incestuous tension to Monte and Dibs's relationship here, as they dart around the issue of her being a 'witch' or 'shaman of sperm' while she teases him for his celibacy.

Dibs's solipsistic *jouissance*—and all of Denis's solo dancers—serve as a reproductive paradigm for diverse relational configurations in *High Life*: the ability to lose oneself in diffuse

environmental participation paradoxically makes one easier to find. This dynamic can be seen in a beguiling scene of narrative suspension, in which we cut between the crew staring, seemingly transfixed, at a galaxy or cluster of stars, and the image of cellular embryos reflected upon Dibs's face as she stares through a microscope. As in *Beau Travail*'s nightclub, we see a collapsing of spatio-temporal scales into a kind of crystalline refraction: the microscopic inception of life mirrors the ancestral vastness of stellar bodies. This scalar oscillation is encapsulated in Monte's voice-over narration that states, 'At 99% the speed of light, the entire sky converged before our eyes. The sensation of moving backwards, even though we're moving forwards, getting further from what's getting nearer, sometimes I just can't stand it.' Here the human organism seems to be irrelevant, or stretched to a dangerous breaking point, in relation to this impersonal play of molecules and stardust.



Figure 10: The crew transfixed by the starry sky.

The scene also suggests an alternative perspective on this dilemma, showing how this intertwining of stellar bodies and embryonic life can be mediated by a more recognizably human relationality. As the group stares at the cluster of stars, the future mother of Willow, Boyse (Mia Goth), glances over at Monte, longingly, which seems to be noticed by Dibs. A warped Oedipal triangle (mother, daughter, son) emerges out of, and exists alongside, a more diffuse sense of environmental participation. Monte's movement 'forwards', towards mature object-relation and procreation, is indiscernible from a movement 'backwards', towards his virtual mother(s). The 'sky-necessity' of the world without others and the 'possibility' of the Other-structure become indiscernible: Monte and Boyse seem drawn towards one another, fatalistically, pawns of astronomical movement (and soon Dibs's laboratory experimentation); yet their attraction also seems to emerge spontaneously, Boyse breaking from the relative automatism of the group to turn her gaze towards Monte.

It is this emergence of the Other that paradoxically allows Dibs and Monte to consummate their incestuous relationship. The cosmological imagery resurfaces as Dibs rapes Monte while he sleeps—this transgressive element foregrounding the forbidden, symbolically incestuous dimension of the act—before carrying his semen in her hands and inserting it into Boyse. As Denis again shows us images of the milky way set to Stuart Staples' lush ethereal score, the rape suggests continuity from the tacit, harmonious Oedipal contract of the previous scene. In an outlandish paradox, Dibs therefore commits incest with Monte by simultaneously (and literally) 'handing him off' to a new partner. The regressive, castrating aspect of the copulation is highlighted by the fact that Dibs's body language recalls her murder of the captain—here, too, she gently strokes and whispers to her unconscious male partner. Yet at the same time, her seduction functions in the service of 'life' and procreation. Maternal incest and

coming-of-age are intertwined through a strange cosmological necessity: 'The sensation of moving backwards, even though we're moving forwards'.

While Denis is no stranger to transgressive, and often downright disturbing depictions of sexual violence, I contend that this bizarre interaction can be illuminated by one of the more apparently tender and sentimental moments in her filmography: the father-daughter-suitor dance in *35 Rhums* (2008). As in the Yasujiro Ozu films from which Denis took her inspiration, this climactic moment is motivated by meteorology, another instance of 'sky-necessity' inseparable from human possibility: a rainstorm that brings the warped Oedipal trio together in one location, an after-hours restaurant, in which a symbolic form of incest both does and does not occur. The father, Lionel (Alex Descas) 'hands off his daughter' Jo (Mati Diop) to her suitor, Noé (Gregoire Colin) through a quasi-ritual movement: father and daughter dance, in amorous embrace, before he steps aside for Noé to take the lead. As in *High Life*'s cosmological choreography, bodies move towards and away from one another with a fatalism that is not oppressive, with a contingency that feels guided or charmed. The scene blurs the boundaries between individual and environment, childhood and maturity, activity and passivity, as nonhuman affective forces play matchmaker between the young lovers.

Viewing *High Life* with this scene in mind explicates the initially bizarre sentimentality Denis is attempting to convey in the montage of the milky way, while this montage makes manifest the ambiguous boundaries—both between family members and between humans and the nonhuman environment—of the more familiar romance of *35 Rhums*. Against the traditional Oedipal framework, Denis imagines forms of sexual maturity not based on repudiation of, but rather continued receptivity towards, various human and nonhuman others. In these two films, constellations of stars and weather patterns align with human desire and psychology, tracing

paths that lead people towards rather than away from one another. Although these encounters may include jarring instances of sexual aggression and passivity, I think Denis—as unpalatable as this may be to some viewers—uses this extreme sexuality in order to question notions of agency more broadly, suggesting that it can include forces beyond the human figure.

This suspension of agency comes to the fore in the film's ambiguity over who, exactly, Willow's parents are. As she prepares to eject herself from the ship (having presumably served her purpose in the film's narrative), Dibs tells Monte 'I salvaged your daughter. Born of your genes. She's strong made. Like her big-booty mother. For me she's perfection.' Here Dibs seems to participate in Willow's procreation as a virtual midwife, still foregrounding Willow's genetic resemblance to Boyse. Wilson takes this idea one step further and argues that Willow in fact bears a greater physical resemblance to Dibs:

> the film plants an unexplained resemblance between Willow and Dibs. It is as if Dibs's will to make a child and her reproductive engineering have left their mark in the girl who was conceived. Beyond nature, beyond artificial insemination, Denis imagines new forms of parthenogenesis.[128]

If we read this analysis alongside Dibs's own remarks, we can see two contradictory perspectives as true: Willow is a product of sexual union, as well as Dibs's diffuse molecular experimentation. Here Dibs's connection to the Terre-Mère aligns this paradox with archaic myth. In Claude Lévi-Strauss's foundational analysis of the Oedipus myth, there is an unresolvable antinomy between the belief that we are autochthonous or 'born of the earth' and the knowledge we are born from sexual union between two people.[129] In *High Life*, the relation is no longer one of opposition: our intertwining with the earth (or interstellar matter) *enables* sexual union. In this regard, the film elaborates the deconstruction of natality that Kristin Lené Hole

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[128] Emma Wilson, 'Love Me Tender: New Films from Claire Denis's, *Film Quarterly* 72, no. 4 (Summer 2019): 18–28, p. 22.
[129] Claude Lèvi-Strauss, *Anthropologie Structurale* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1958), p. 236-237.

identifies in *Nénette et Boni*: 'In front of Denis's lens, natality is freed from biological essentialism. At the same time, natality reframes the dissolution of the subject as an affirmative and creative possibility, rather than a cause for crisis or despair'.[130] Against tired psychoanalytic clichés equating the 'womb and the tomb', Denis lends a vitalist animacy to molecular, nonhuman forces—not in the service of human dissolution, but rather new forms of kinship.

Radiant Self-Sufficiency

Denis's sustained interest in such incestuous dynamics is shown in the fact that, after Dibs and Monte's copulation, the startling cosmological montage arrives at the same scenario we saw in *35 Rhums*. After an image of Boyse lactating, a single edit brings us ahead years to a shot of Willow, now adolescent and menstruating, sleeping alongside Monte in his bunk. This impersonal commingling of bodily fluids and nonhuman matter nonetheless forms a strangely coherent progression. We find a passing of the baton from one incestuous relation to another: mother and son give way to father and daughter. Monte has been 'reborn' through Dibs's maternal castration—not, as in Deleuze's masochistic scenario, as immortal and asexual, but rather as a father (although far from a conventional one.) Her purpose accomplished according to the film's perverse logic, Dibs then extracts the prosthetic chip from her finger to give to Monte (having usurped it from the captain), and promptly commits suicide by jumping off the ship. Like Perceval's mother, she faints once her son has become a knight.

In this introductory scene of teenage Willow, we see that Monte has assumed the same threatening libidinal aura of Dibs's perverse mother. He sleeps alongside Willow in the same bunk in which he was raped by Dibs, bathed in the same blue light. After Willow walks back to

[130] Kristin Lené Hole, *Towards a Feminist Cinematic Ethics: Claire Denis, Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-Luc Nancy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), p. 29.

her bunk, she shoots an accusation at Monte: 'You killed your friend over a dog' to which he responds, with an unnerving grin, 'yea, a crazy girl'. The response is ominous on multiple levels, not least in that Monte had just referred to Willow herself as a 'crazy girl'. Just as Dibs was haunted by her murder of her children, Monte now has his own murderous past to answer for, lending a devouring element to his paternal imago. This same set-up is used in a jarring moment early in the film—when Willow is a baby—that lends credence to her later invocation of his murderous power. Monte, hovering over baby Willow in the same bunk, tells her, 'I could've drowned you like a baby kitten. It would be so easy. You first, then me.' Yet the moment also commingles contradictory impulses: Monte is bathed half in cold blue light, half in a warmer yellow, as he tenderly strokes Willow. Like Dibs in her murder of the captain and forced procreation with Monte, Monte himself is now a harbinger of both death and life.

Monte's devouring nature thus segues into a form of nurturing collaboration. In a scene soon after Monte's violent despair, we see him teaching baby Willow how to walk—a moment that has an added documentary quality in that it was also the actress' (Scarlett Lindsay's) first steps. Holding his daughter's arms in his hands, Monte and Willow are entangled in one another, each body an extension of the other. Yet at the same time, the movement is also the emergence of Willow's independence: the two bodies coincide only in order to release Willow towards her own sensory-motor exploration. This ambiguous, collaborative aspect of Willow's maturation is hinted at in the montage as well. As the camera glides along the floor, following the rhythm of the tentative steps in enraptured immediacy, we suddenly flash back to an image of Dibs gazing through the window of her laboratory door, becoming a virtual spectator of Willow's growth (figures 11 and 12). The seeds of her experimentation thus continue to flourish, simultaneously indebted to and independent of her. One gets the sense she is a surrogate for the gaze of the

filmmaker: having designed this moment according to the necessity of her script, Denis was nonetheless astonished to see it emerge spontaneously and take on a life of its own.[131] Necessity and possibility are again intertwined, as this moment of singularly human independence is mysteriously indebted to forces beyond the individual's understanding.



This pivot between environmental collaboration and human growth is encapsulated in the only one of the 'images from earth' that is repeated in the film. Denis plays a clip from Edwin S. Curtis' film *In the Land of the Headhunters* (1914), a hybrid documentary chronicling the vanishing culture of the Kwakwaka'wakw people of British Columbia. As baby Willow watches from her crib, the film plays in another monitor alongside the video feed of Monte repairing the ship. The sequence shows the protagonist, the similarly named Motana, diving onto the ground in front of a burning fire, as the inter-title (not included by Denis) explains: 'Through fasting and hardships Motana, the son of a great chief, Kenada, seeks supernatural power. In his vision-sleep the face of a maiden appears to him. It is Naida, the daughter of Chief Waket.' In an early use of super-imposition, the woman's face does indeed appear in the log smoke, signaling the appearance of Motana's future bride. In a seeming anticipation of *High Life*'s ending, the entire

[131] Claire Denis and Robert Pattinson, For Denis and Patterson, a cosmic connection in 'High Life', interview by Jake Coyle, 10 April 2019, https://apnews.com/article/3d52f7f55c5b4e48b12e8cb74db4a65b.

image dissolves into flickering whiteness (an effect added to the film by Denis), prompting Willow's intense cries. Recalling Monte's Percival-like maturational quest and foreshadowing Willow's own, Motana journeys into the solitary wilderness only to be steered back towards the human figure.

This hinge-like movement within the film is redoubled in Denis's own repeated use of it: it appears once, associated with Willow's infancy, and again, during her adolescence, a Monte and Willow prepare the space pod to fly into the black hole. Rather than signaling a regression to infancy, or a repetition-compulsion of the death-drive, the clip's reappearance develops its own internal dynamism, its opening towards the Other and a new phase of life. Here the inter-textual grafting (familiar from *L'Intrus*) functions in the manner described by James Williams, in which Denis 'works through the opacity of otherness precisely by negotiating it at a formal level'.[132] The clip is a breach into the hermetically sealed world of the film: like Tcherny's exit from the ship, here the Other also foregrounds the fictional status of the narrative death-drive, implicating the film in a wider textuality just as it seems to be approaching solipsism.

Monte and Willow's journey into the black hole suspends involution and maturation, functioning both as a solitary quest and as an intertextual working through of otherness. As they put on their spacesuits, preparing the space pod to leave, Willow asks Monte a series of questions about her identity, seeming to infantilize herself through their repetitive, probing quality. Captured in a long take, Willow hovers behind a spacesuit, her back to the camera, while Monte faces us. She is a child beseeching an authority: 'Do I look like my mother?' she asks, to which he responds 'No', and adds 'you have rodent teeth, you're a little rat.' When she adds 'Rats are incredibly intelligent animals' he offers 'You're special, you're so different, you're like no one

[132] James S. Williams, 'Beyond the Other: Grafting Relations in the Films of Claire Denis', in *The Films of Claire Denis: Intimacy on the Border*, ed. Marjorie Vecchio (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 263–309, 295.

else, I love that.' The exchange foregrounds Willow's nonhuman, 'autochthonous' origins; in Deleuzian terms, she embodies a pre-individual singularity. Monte's attitude towards this dimension of Willow is alternately teasing, proud, and strangely enraptured. Their relationship again recalls Dibs's fascination with Monte's younger self as a 'happy monk', or even Galoup's ambivalent obsession with Sentain's purity, a quality Thomas Elsaesser terms 'radiant self-sufficiency'.[133]

This parental gaze, emphasizing the qualities of the child that are 'special' and 'different', has traditionally been coded as maternal: an attempt to withdraw the child from the world, even *devour* the child, as we saw in Monte's destructive instincts towards his 'baby kitten' Willow. Yet Denis imagines that it can do the opposite: make the child more available for something, even *someone*, else. Due to the extraordinary circumstances of Willow's birth, Monte perhaps realizes that the 'specialness' he sees in Willow is not his, does not belong to him; rather, it is the fact that she originates from cosmic matter, and is still intertwined with it, that thrusts her along towards the Other. Her self-sufficiency is radiant in that it extends outwards, overflows. After the discussion about her maternity, Monte surveys Willow in her spacesuit, adjusting her helmet. The moment recalls the wedding preparation in *35 Rhums*: Lionel gazes upon Jo in her wedding dress as he attaches her mother's floral necklace, a singular kind of maternity that hands the child off to someone else.

The last we see of Monte and Willow, they are bathed in golden light, standing in front of the black hole. Shot on 35mm, the scene has a warm, nostalgic glow, a 'mnemonic force' that leads Wilson to invoke the image of the unnamed woman from Chris Marker's *La Jetée*

[133] Thomas Elsaesser, 'European Cinema and the Postheroic Narrative: Jean-Luc Nancy, Claire Denis, and Beau Travail', *New Literary History* 43, no. 4 (Autumn 2012): 703–25, p. 721.

(1962).[134] The comparison is apt in that, as in Marker's film, this desire to consummate a past obsession is simultaneously an anticipation of future loss. Although Monte and Willow assent to what Denis has described as a 'marriage proposal'—she responds 'Yes' to his question 'Shall we?'—with the previous scene in mind, I would like to suggest it is ambiguous who, exactly, Willow is getting married to.[135] As the golden band of light dilates, becoming a white screen, the credits begin, featuring a song, 'Willow', written by Denis's regular collaborators the Tindersticks. As signaled by the title, the song's lyrics are addressed to the titular character and sung by Robert Pattinson. It therefore inhabits an ambiguous space that serves as a continuation of the diegesis: 'Willow, where are you hiding now? / In the dappled light, deep in the trees / The spiders and the centipedes / crawl across your hands, across your knees'. What is immediately striking here is the elegiac tone of the song: rather than any consummation of incest, Monte seems to have lost Willow irretrievably. Like the rainstorm and the milky way, the black hole brings the family together only to pry it apart.

In the Ozu films which inspired Denis, the male suitor is often de-emphasized (or left offscreen entirely), serving as a structural placeholder enabling the daughter's separation from the family. So, too, are the Vincent Gallo and Grégoire Colin characters in *U.S. Go Home* and *35 Rhums* ciphers, blank screens upon which to project a new and uncertain future. *High Life*'s literal blank screen now functions in a parallel manner, the Other inviting Willow, like Robinson emerging from the Terre-Mère, to step outside and unfold under the illumination of the sun. The appearance of the Other thus reactivates a new swarm of possibility, both concrete and abstract, personal and impersonal, complete with 'spiders and centipedes'. Denis allows us to see the

[134] Wilson, 'Love Me Tender: New Films from Claire Denis's, p. 24.
[135] Jean-Sébastien Chauvin and Stéphane Delorme, 'Tabou: Entretien avec Claire Denis,' *Les Cahiers du cinéma* n°749 (2018): p. 36.

necessity of subjective individuation, not as a process of disenchantment, but rather re-enchantment, in which all sorts of creatures, moods, and affects participate. Sky necessity and human possibility are once again indiscernible.

Conclusion

Although in many ways *High Life* constitutes a rupture in Denis's career—her largest budget feature to date, as well as her first in the English language and in the science-fiction genre—she began conceptualizing the film 15 years prior to its production. Her account of the film's genesis evokes her previous explorations of elemental family dynamics, emphasizing a core of human sentiment:

> I never thought I was going to do a movie in space. I thought I was going to do [a story about] a man alone with a baby. The link for me is that emotional thing when two people meet, like when Monte opens the incubator and looks at the baby. It's something he has not expected to feel in his life. That sort of love.[136]

I think there is a productive dissonance between Denis's characterization and the film's most shocking provocations, incitements that led many reviewers to perceive the film as unrelentingly bleak and misanthropic. While Denis is perhaps over-emphasizing the film's conventionality, I think her remarks should nevertheless give us pause in pursuing a dark Deleuzian perspective that, capitalizing upon on the film's perceived misanthropy, would view the ending as an embrace of the human's exhaustion. By viewing the film's transgressive and conventional aspects as mutually reinforcing, I have tried to demonstrate that it is more internally dynamic than it initially appears, concerned with transitions and new beginnings rather than extinction. *High Life* does not offer us adequate ground to speculate upon the exhaustion of the human, but

[136] Claire Denis and Robert Pattinson, 'The Artistic Chemistry of Robert Pattinson and Claire Denis's, interview by David Sims, accessed 22 February 2021, https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2019/04/robert-pattinson-and-claire-denis-talk-high-life-artistic-collaboration/586768/.

it does reveal, with imaginative flourish, the way the forces of exhaustion and renewal are already at work in the fluctuations of human life.

This perspective becomes clear once we consider that the ambiguous, transitional space of the black hole has several worldly precedents in Denis's work: Lac Assal and the nightclub in *Beau Travail*; the after-hours restaurant in *35 Rhums*; the fortune teller's apartment in *Un Beau Soleil Intérieur* (2017); and the house-party in *U.S. Go Home*. These are liminal spaces of both involution and initiation. Through a kind of contingency bordering on the miraculous, characters' drives towards inertia discover someone else, a new force waiting on the other side. Against the dark Deleuzians, I'd like to suggest that this element is latent, rather than absent entirely, from Deleuze's world without others. The elemental sexuality Robinson discovers in the Terre-Mère has the potential to lead, on its own accord, to the illumination of the Other, Vendredi. As in Denis, what appears as one's most anti-social traits can nonetheless be found, recognized, and appreciated by others.

If this dynamic still sounds too miraculous, or science-fiction-like, I'd suggest it is at work in another 'dark cave' with which we are all intimately familiar: the space of the theater. Like the fuckbox or black hole, with which it seems to be co-extensive, it is a space of provisional solitude and dissolution that segues, as in a moebius strip, into social re-emergence. It thus allows us, like Denis and Deleuze's protagonists, to explore anti-social drives only in order to be found again, outside. The black hole leads naturally into the elegiac credit sequence, ushering Willow towards a new phase of maturation, and the audience into the daylit world of the social outside the theater: a cut to white, rather than black. I have tried to show that, rather than being either a simple negation or consummation of a monotonous film, this white frame has been figuratively interlaced throughout it, the necessary underside of its anti-social drive. If, for

Denis, growing up is as miraculous as childhood, leaving the theater behind is also as wondrous as entering it.

This is the perspective reached by Galoup in his euphoric dance at the end of *Beau Travail*. Like all of Denis's protagonists, the realization of one's self as an object alongside other subjects is not an experience of alienation but rather rejuvenation. He steps outside the enclosure—of mythic identity and narrative—in order to move into an ambiguous space of newfound psychic mobility. If *High Life* is largely consigned to a heterosexual imaginary in elaborating this coming of age process, Galoup's trajectory demonstrates that this dynamic can also encompass queer desire. In the next chapter, I will examine how Lucile Hadžihalilović also probes at the enclosure of narrative in a manner that critiques patriarchy and its reinforcement of heterosexual identity. In so doing, she allows us to see how we are always entering and exiting these enclosures, rendering childhood and adulthood, perversion and normality, ambiguous and even indistinguishable.

CHAPTER TWO

'For the sake of its innocence, perhaps': Screening the Past with Lucile Hadžihalilović

Hadžihalilović's films *Innocence* (2004) and *Evolution* (2015) seem to exist in isolation. Producing films at a protracted pace, her hermetically sealed dream-worlds appear oblivious to the crowded scene of contemporary French filmmaking, as well as to the 'outside world' that is only enigmatically alluded to within her narratives. There has been a tendency amongst film scholars to take this phenomenon at face value, treating her films' polished surfaces with enraptured amazement. Both films, however, whether through the literal presence of adult characters or through more allusive formal strategies, invoke the immersive world of childhood only to hold it in productive tension with troubling questions of adult sexual desire. *Innocence*, an adaptation of Frank Wedekind's *Mine-haha or the Corporal Education of Young Girls* (1903), is thus both an immersive exploration of the life-world of young girls at a boarding school and a study of the production of patriarchal subjects; *Evolution* mobilizes the childlike perspective of a fairy tale that is also shot through with horror tropes and surrealism. The majority of commentators, however, focus on the former aspects of these films, drawing on haptic theory and phenomenology, with no reference to their psychoanalytic resonances.[137] While both films are obviously sensuous, immersive and non-conceptual, they are also mediated by adult longing and regret. Despite initial appearances, childhood, for Hadžihalilović, is not simply a vacuum-sealed enclosure.

[137] See Emma Wilson, 'Miniature Lives, Intrusion and Innocence: Women Filming Children', *French Cultural Studies* 18, no. 2 (June 2007): 169–83 and Joseph Jenner, 'Towards a Chthonic Spectatorship: Becoming-With the Aquatic in *Evolution*', *Film-Philosophy* 23, no. 3 (October 2019): 372–90.

In order to develop the film's oscillating perspective—between past and present, inside and outside—I will turn to Freud's notion of the screen memory, a key instance of the 'respiration-image' I outlined in the introduction, alongside his subversive writings on sexual education. In these essays, Freud outlines a paradoxical temporality that accounts both for the immediacy and given-ness of sense experience as well as its retroactively mediated qualities. Adult longing, regret and disappointment find an ally in childhood memory-traces—often of nonhuman life—that are distorted yet nonetheless real. Most intriguingly, Freud reserves caustic scorn for educators who insist on understanding these childhood proclivities as innocent and devoid of sense (sexual and otherwise.) He instead elaborates a vision of 'normal' adult sexuality that requires a shuttling between past and present, continually unfolding the ambiguity of the past. As Hadžihalilović makes explicit that this past is both polymorphously perverse and nonhuman, she adds a subversively queer edge to Freud's time-travelling: the production of the patriarchal (human) subject is always in danger of lapsing into something else.

Flowery Disguise

'Screen Memories' (1899) is an overlooked essay in the Freudian oeuvre. Roughly contemporaneous with the writing of Wedekind's novel, it is poised in between Freud's early work on hysterical trauma and the arrival of his celebrated dream theory of *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899). Freud opens the essay by pointing to a curious reversal that takes place in regards to the connection between a retained memory and its psychical significance for consciousness. It is only from around six or seven years of age, he argues, that our common-sense notion of important memories being retained and unimportant ones being forgotten comes into effect. Freud often encountered hysterics who had amnesia surrounding the events

precipitating their illness, while conversely, they retained memories that appeared trivial or quotidian. He emphasizes that these trivial memories are nonetheless recollected '*too* clearly… in every detail, while approximately contemporary events, even if, on the evidence of their parents, they moved them intensely at the time, have not been retained in their memory.'[138] As an example, he points to a man who, during a period of his family's intense mourning over his grandmother's death when he was four years old, recalls only a basin of ice sitting on the dining table. The seemingly banal image simultaneously puts us into contact with, and withholds, an un-representable trauma.

Here we find the same psychic mechanisms that were soon to become famous in Freud's dream-theory. He describes how the screen memory is a compromise-formation satisfying two warring impulses—an unconscious trauma pushing its way forward towards consciousness, and the resistance of the ego or secondary process. He writes: 'What is recorded as a mnemic image is not the relevant experience itself-in this respect the resistance gets its way; what is recorded is another psychical element closely associated with the objectionable one'.[139] Freud goes into greater detail concerning the mechanism by which these two psychical elements are associated, finding either 'a case of displacement on to something associated by continuity; or, looking at the process as a whole, a case of repression accompanied by the substitution of something in the neighborhood (whether in space or time).'[140] In both cases, there is a transfer of affect, in which intensity of the experience is registered even while the content remains unconscious. In this way, we can account for the intense detail of the seemingly trivial memory: 'The result was a compromise by which the innocent passages emerged in the patient's memory with pathological

[138] Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, Repr, vol. III (London: Hogarth Press, 1999), p. 305-306.
[139] Freud, *The Standard Edition* vol. III, p. 307.
[140] Freud, *The Standard Edition* vol. III, p. 307-308.

strength and clarity.'[141] There is something '*too* clear' about these images, a pathological innocence.

Freud repeatedly uses the word 'innocence' and its association to childhood memories to illustrate how innocuous memories become ideal candidates to disguise disruptive sexual feelings. Engaging in a performative dialogue with himself concerning his own life history, Freud recounts how upon returning to his childhood home in Freiburg at age seventeen from Vienna, his longing for a local girl incited an overwhelmingly vivid memory of his youth in the town. The seemingly quotidian scene features himself, his male friend and the friend's sister picking dandelions in a meadow. After the girl ends up with most prized of the bunch, Freud and his friend violently snatch them away. The girl runs in tears towards a peasant-woman who gives her a loaf of black bread in consolation, and the three children all eat the bread together. Freud emphasizes the heightened sensorial detail of certain key elements: 'The yellow of the flowers is a disproportionately prominent element in the situation as a whole, and the nice taste of the bread seems to me exaggerated in an almost hallucinatory fashion.'[142] Engaging in self-analysis, Freud discovers these two exaggerations conform to two contemporary anxieties: the yellow sunflowers to his sexual desire to 'deflower' the local girl, and the bread to his father's pressure on him to adopt a realistic career in order to 'earn bread'.

For Freud, this is evidence that the memory does not, in fact, date (entirely) from childhood, but has instead been 'worked over' or revised in response to this recent adolescent trip. These present-day anxieties over 'hunger and love' open onto a more capacious nostalgia, as Freud recounts how his happy childhood in Freiburg was composed of frolicking in the forests and meadows with his neighborhood friends. In a fittingly Oedipal development, this idyll was

[141] Freud, *The Standard Edition* vol. III, p. 308.
[142] Freud, *The Standard Edition* vol. III, p. 312.

brought to an abrupt end by his father's financial misfortunes, causing the family to relocate to the metropole of Vienna where Freud professed to be perpetually unhappy. The memory of the children in the meadow expressed Freud's regretful adolescent wish: 'If only I had stopped at home and grown up in the country and grown as strong as the young men in the house, the brothers of my love! And then if only I had followed my father's profession and if I had finally married her-for I should have known her intimately all those years!'[143] The memory tells us much more about the present than it does the past, leading Freud to hypothesize that it is doubtful 'whether we have any memories at all *from* our childhood: memories *relating to* our childhood may be all that we possess.'[144] Childhood becomes a kind of murky reservoir fluctuating in response to our needs in the present.

It is tempting to jump to the conclusion that these memories are just fantasies, but Freud's point is subtler than this conflation: there is ultimately a relation between past and present. On the one hand, the memory's satisfaction of two fantasies seems the stuff of pure wish-fulfillment, and Freud admits as much in stating that he had 'projected the two phantasies on to one another and made a childhood memory of them.'[145] Yet at the same time, he maintains the memory is real; he had 'selected it from innumerable others of a similar or another kind because, on account of its content (which in itself was indifferent) it was well adapted to represent the two phantasies'.[146] There is a 'memory-trace' that comes to meet the fantasy half-way; in this case, it was a literal memory of snatching flowers away from a young girl and eating bread. While many other screen memories may falsify the original impression more freely, in this case the fantasy's contribution to the remembered image is relatively modest, confined to the hallucinatory

[143] Freud, *The Standard Edition* vol. III, p. 313.
[144] Freud, *The Standard Edition* vol. III, p. 322.
[145] Freud, *The Standard Edition* vol. III, p. 315.
[146] Freud, *The Standard Edition* vol. III, p. 315.

distortion of the two key elements that are also able to be infused with symbolic meaning: 'the childhood scene seems only to have had some of its lines engraved more deeply: think of the over-emphasis on the yellow and the exaggerated niceness of the bread. But the raw material was utilizable.'[147] The past event is a work of art necessarily left unfinished. It waits for the subject to return at a later date to add the finishing touches, engraving the lines more deeply.

We therefore arrive at an indeterminate temporality in which the past comes to meet the present half-way. The past is open to being re-worked, unfolding its own ambiguity, with sexuality as the motivating force operating this re-engraving. The childhood scene is not simply sexual or asexual, but rather has the *potential* for sexualization. Freud finds an apt metaphor for this receptivity to sexuality when he writes that the sexual drives are 'attached like parasites, as it were, to the other bodily functions.'[148] In the context of this childhood scene, its embodied meaning (hunger) is 'engraved in', as it were, unchangeable. Yet it is sexuality that reveals the scene as ambiguous and unfinished, returning to the memory to parasitically embellish some lines and not others.

From this perspective, we can more easily discern the reason, often left implicit by Freud, for *why* sex is subject to repression. As we have seen, the ego is associated with the instincts of hunger and survival, maintaining homeostasis of the organic domain. It is therefore threatened by the destabilizing perturbation of sexuality, as Jean Laplanche describes:

> s'il est vrai que nous sommes effectivement en presence de cette sorte d'effraction de la sexualité humaine dans l'ordre vital, si c'est la 'vie' que la sexualité vient déranger, ne serait-ce pas l'ensemble des forces qui protègent cette vie—réunies sous le terme de 'pulsion d'autoconservation'—qui deviendraient le moteur du refoulement?[149]

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[147] Freud, *The Standard Edition* vol. III, p. 318.
[148] Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, vol. XVI (London: Hogarth Press, 1999), p. 355.
[149] Jean Laplanche, *Vie et mort en psychanalyse* (Paris: Flammarion, 2001), p. 76.

As Freud outlined in the *Three Essays*, sexuality, unlike the need for nourishment and shelter, is not given biologically in the human due to our premature birth relative to most mammals. It therefore becomes mediated by our environment and upbringing; it comes from the outside, in both an intersubjective and temporal sense. Where the ego wants the organism to remain 'complete' unto itself, the parasite of sexuality returns to render the organism unfinished. If Freud implies that sexuality is where the human is most free, it is due to the fact that sexuality allows us to change the past. While the organic domain is subsumed under the linear, biological temporality of evolution, sexuality emerges retroactively, a parasite latching on to and elaborating an ambiguous childhood 'innocence'.

Ananke, the Strict Educator

In Freud's writings on education and childhood, he demonstrates how educators, as practical representatives of the popular conception, take the side of the ego against the temporal confusion introduced by sexuality. Freud gives education the colorful personification as 'Necessity *('Avdyxrj* [Ananke]). She has been a strict educator and has made much out of us.'[150] Educators invoke necessity in the belief that sexuality 'naturally' emerges out of a linear, progressive development, whereas Freud continually highlights sexuality's inability to be located in space and time: as we have seen, ego-instincts such as hunger are dependent upon external reality for their satisfaction, while the polymorphous character of human sexuality can be satisfied auto-erotically or through fantasy. This means that the sexual drives 'are to begin with withdrawn from the educative influence of real necessity, and they retain this characteristic of being self-willed and inaccessible to influence (what we describe as being 'unreasonable') in most people in

[150] Freud, *The Standard Edition* vol. XVI, p. 355.

some respect all through their lives.'[151] It is only the reproductive function, arising during puberty, that requires external objects to function, and even then it still 'makes use for its purposes of physical and mental material already present.'[152] Once again, we are returned to the sketch of memory, the present deepening the grooves already laid down in childhood. Freud evokes this strange admixture of freedom and determinism when he writes, 'The little creature is often completed by the fourth or fifth year of life, and after that merely brings gradually to light what is already within him.'[153] From this retroactive temporality, it is impossible to know which exact dimensions of childhood experience *will have been* sexual: such is where our freedom lies.

Freud describes how educators are dimly aware of this temporal lag. They therefore educate what they can control—the intellect. In other words, educators strengthen the ideological censorship of the conscious ego to prepare it to clamp down on the unpredictable vagaries of unconscious desire: '[Education] is also concerned to postpone the full development of the instinct till the child shall have reached a certain degree of intellectual maturity, for, with the complete irruption of the sexual instinct, educability is for practical purposes at an end.'[154] As I outlined in the introduction, we must remember that mature object-relating, for Freud, reactivates perverse infantile wishes: it 'makes use of material already present to accomplish its goals.' The awakening of the reproductive function after the latency period is simultaneously the reawakening of perverse libido, as Aaron Schuster describes: 'Adult sexuality is a pretext that allows for the reactivation of the diverse pleasures of infantile sexuality which have since fallen under repression owing to shame and disgust and internalized prohibitions.'[155] Educators must

[151] Freud, *The Standard Edition* vol. XVI, p. 355-356.
[152] Freud, *The Standard Edition* vol. XVI, p. 311.
[153] Freud, *The Standard Edition* vol. XVI, p. 356.
[154] Freud, *The Standard Edition* vol. XVI, p. 311-312.
[155] Aaron Schuster, *The Trouble with Pleasure: Deleuze and Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2016), p. 115.

therefore 'aim' for the early polymorphously perverse period, attempting to suppress or at least canalize the 'raw material' that will be re-activated during puberty. Education is an attempt to control the future.

Educators suppress perverse infantile sexuality in order to displace the emergence of sexuality as close to puberty (the awakening of reproduction) as possible, a strategy that amounts to a kind of coercive heterosexuality. This attempt is self-deluding, as Freud sarcastically highlights: 'an ideal was set up of making the life of children asexual… Children are pure and innocent, and anyone who describes them otherwise can be charged with being an infamous blasphemer against the tender and sacred feelings of mankind.'[156] In insisting on the existence of childhood polymorphous perversity, Freud, perhaps surprisingly, wants to advocate for a richer and more unpredictable source of experience for adult sexuality to draw on—experiences that may develop into queer or non-normative sexual practices. Freud reveals his allegiances by characterizing the neurotics he treats as victims of over-education: 'The neurotics are among those of [Ananke's] children to whom her strictness has brought evil results'.[157] He thereby implies that in the neurotic, education has succeeded in bolstering the intellectually mature and censorious ego at the expense of sexuality: they are over-civilized.

The neurotic, unable to reactivate their own childhood perversions required for a functioning adult sexuality, becomes a civilization-wide problem in modernity. In order to conceive of itself as the summit of progress and a rupture from the past, modernity has to repress its reliance on the past; it has to portray the past as a stage that has been definitively superseded. In *Civilization and its Discontents* (1931), Freud is clear that this neurotic response ignores the fact that authentic civilization is constantly recuperating and reinventing the past it has repressed.

[156] Freud, *The Standard Edition* vol. XVI, p. 312.
[157] Freud, *The Standard Edition* vol. XVI, p. 355.

He therefore outlines a dialectic in which, after having tamed nature in the name of human order, a people only become truly civilized if their cities include that which 'has no practical value whatsoever': the 'useless' beauty of parks, gardens, and townhouses with flower-pots in the windows.[158] This practical uselessness of nature reveals its libidinal coloring in 'Two Principles of Mental Functioning' (1911), in which the introduction of the reality principle 'splits off' phantasying into a separate sphere governed by the pleasure principle, which Freud compares to the way an industrialized nation 'will yet set aside certain areas for reservation in their original state and for protection from the changes brought about by civilization (e.g. Yellowstone Park.)'[159] According to Freud's dialectical logic, this phantasying activity is not problematic in itself—what is problematic is its enclosure into the interior psychic sphere of neurosis. As demonstrated in his holistic vision of the civilized garden city, Freud wants the nature reserve to overrun its enclosure and re-infuse civilization with its vital impulse. So, too, must practical, teleologically-oriented adult sexuality draw on 'useless', polymorphous perverse childhood sexuality to accomplish its aims. Past and present, inside and outside must enter into dialogue.

This synthesis does occur in the neurotic, but only unconsciously, via compromise formations of dreams, symptoms and screen memories. The temporal indeterminacy of these states will therefore be misrecognized as regression, according to a linear temporality of evolution and de-evolution, rather than the more paradoxical disjunctive temporality of 'normal' adult sexuality (a normality that is by no means normative.) In other words, the neurotic remains enclosed within the bounds of the 'nature preserve'. Freud invokes this enclosure when he describes how his neurotic patients 'give us an impression of having been 'fixated' to a particular

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[158] Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, vol. XXI (London: Hogarth Press, 1999), p. 92.
[159] Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, vol. XII (London: Hogarth Press, 1999), p. 222.

portion of their past… they then remained lodged in their illness in the sort of way in which in earlier days people retreated into a monastery in order to bear the burden there of their ill-fated lives.'[160] Other famous examples in Freud of this ascetic fantasy at work include the archaeologist's flight away from his neighbor's love towards the image of an ancient Pompeiian woman, in *Gradiva*; Dora's summoning of infantile love for her father as a defense against her adolescent homosexual urges; and Freud's own dive into the past with the screen memory of the girl in the meadow. All of these figures from the past become a 'screen', both presenting and disguising sexual urges in the present.

Yet Freud's point is that these fantasies of innocence are already obliquely sexual, directed outside towards the future. In fact, the more innocent the image appears, the more prone it becomes for sexual distortion. Discussing his screen memory of the flowery scene, Freud outlines how past and present move to meet one another halfway. He starts in the present, describing how as the marriage fantasy approaches the explicit image of sexual conquest, it must 'slip away into a childhood scene' of 'deflowering' the young girl.[161] The fantasy

> must be content to find its way allusively and under a flowery disguise into a childhood scene.
> 'But why precisely, into a *childhood* scene, I should like to know?'
> For the sake of its innocence, perhaps. Can you imagine a greater contrast to these designs for gross sexual aggression than childish pranks?[162]

While on one level, the childhood scene is disguising the sexual wish, it also allows it to be expressed in the first place. Adult Freud runs away from the fantasy into the reality of the past, but at the same time, childhood reality also blooms into a sexual fantasy that was always latent in it.

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[160] Freud, *The Standard Edition* vol. XVI, p. 273.
[161] Freud, *The Standard Edition* vol. III, p. 318.
[162] Freud, *The Standard Edition* vol. III, p. 312.

Who wins out in this neurotic scenario? Has Freud simply become the unwitting accomplice of Ananke? The neurotic retreats to the past out of 'an incapacity for meeting a *real* erotic demand',[163] which, in the case of Dora, could include a homosexual erotic demand.[164] And while Freud's repressed desire to 'deflower' the girl would seem to be a clichéd patriarchal fantasy, it is also subtly subversive in its unproductive quality (its failure to 'earn bread'), a quality that engenders the scorn of Ananke in the guise of his disapproving father. Due to the unsuitability of Freud's desire, it makes its way into the flowery disguise of the innocent childhood scene, both preserved and forgotten. Perhaps sensing that it is fighting a losing battle, the strictness of Ananke would seem to prefer, when faced with the possibility of unpredictable sexuality, this outcome of neurosis—as long as the unconscious sexual content is not recognized, that is. There is a contradictory tension here: in the unconscious, the fantasy is repressed, but also preserved as immutable. The childhood scene saves Freud's desire from complete oblivion, as the past comes to the rescue of the present. The screen memory, like the symptom or the dream, is a preparation for the act, allowing desire to articulate itself. Even the neurotic's monastery is not safe from the sexual parasite.

The Convent is a Brothel

Innocence takes place at a boarding school, set in a walled enclosure surrounded by pine forests, following the progressive development of a cadre of young girls until they reach puberty. The

[163] Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, Repr, vol. VII (London: Hogarth Press, 1999), p. 110.
[164] As another example of Freud's progressive attitude towards homosexuality, we could look to the Wolf Man case, in which he blames the patient's neurosis on his repressed homosexuality. Freud instead tries to 'liberate' this repressed libido, writing: 'it was a most remarkable experience to see how (without any direct advice from the physician) each piece of homosexual libido which was set free sought out some application in life and some attachment to the great common concerns of mankind.' See Freud, *The Standard Edition* vol. XVII, p. 70-71.

girls' development comprises discrete stages marked in the form of different colored ribbons, with the final stage necessitating their performance, in a clandestine theater, for a paying audience of adults (which is also the source of the school's funding.) The film focuses on the newcomer Iris (Zoé Auclair), who becomes attached to the older Bianca (Bérengère Haubruge), and is dismayed at the latter's divergent trajectory through the secret theatrical rituals that precede her 'graduation' from the enclosed community. In this manner, the educators of the school carefully manage the emergence of the girls' sexuality through definitive stages, orienting it around the emergence of the reproductive function that will allow the girls to function as heterosexual subjects in patriarchal society. They carefully manage boundaries between inside and outside, past and present in order to prevent any 'unnatural' deviations from this prescribed route. However, in Freudian fashion, this linear, evolutionary temporality is perturbed by ambiguity. Sexuality is not simply localized in the subterranean theater, among the older girls—it is everywhere and nowhere. Hadžihalilović encourages this perspective when she states that the school 'evokes both a convent and its opposite, a brothel, without being one or the other'.[165] In other words, we are invited not to choose between the present-tense immersion of the children's innocence and the retrospective gaze of adulthood—the two perspectives presuppose one another. These images have been literally and figuratively 'worked over', attracting the parasite of sexualization precisely because of their ostensible innocence.

In interviews, Hadžihalilović reveals that the film's very texture has undergone a retroactive distortion. While the film was shot on 16mm, lending it a soft, ethereal quality, the colors were also digitally enhanced during post-production to lend an added vibrancy.[166] As in Freud's hallucinatory distortion of the yellow flowers, Hadžihalilović invites us to question our

[165] *Innocence* Press Kit, Wild Bunch Films, 2004.
[166] Jonathan Romney, 'School for Scandal', *Sight & Sound*, 2005.

perspective on the image, and the unconscious desires orienting it. In this regard, the dream-like distortion of the film invokes a similar technique used by Michelangelo Antonioni in *Red Desert* (1964), in which various forms of pictorial abstraction—emblematized by a set of out of focus flowers—are meant to convey the perspective of the neurotic protagonist Giuliana (Monica Vitti). In an influential analysis of this technique, Pier Paolo Pasolini positions it as an example of what he calls 'free indirect point-of-view shot', in which the film as a whole—not just this or that POV shot—expresses Giuliana's perspective. Yet Pasolini ultimately argues that it would be more accurate to say that Antonioni has developed the character of Guiliana to express his own aesthetic sensibilities: 'by means of this stylistic device, Antonioni has freed his most deeply felt moment: he has finally been able to represent the world seen through his eyes, *because he has substituted in toto for the world view of a neurotic his own delirious view of aesthetics*'.[167] The same substitution is implemented by Hadžihalilović, in which the childlike perspective of Iris expresses her own adult neurotic perspective.

This perpsective is already present in the form of Wedekind's novel. His narrative follows the education of a young girl, Hidalla, but it is narrated from the perspective of an 84-year old retired school teacher, Helene Engel, whose manuscript is stated to have been 'discovered' by Wedekind after her suicide. We are therefore dealing with a hyper-mediated story, in which the linear temporality of the young protagonist is disturbed by a series of frames indicating adult anxieties: the figure of the young girl is an expedient means of adult desire. These framings are palpable in the film's enigmatic opening, as the sound of a train plays over the credit sequence. Rather than having a discrete border, as the school's authorities seem to insist on, this world is enigmatically open to the outside. While on one level, the train journey,

[167] Pier Paolo Pasolini, 'The 'Cinema of Poetry'', in *Post-War Cinema and Modernity*, ed. John Orr (Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 37–53, p. 47.

transporting Iris via coffin, is part of the film's enigmatic narrative of arrival at the school, I contend the perspective here is a double one, also comprising a *journey into the past*. In other words, this railway journey into the film is not only Iris'. As signaled by her name, and physically instantiated via the coffin's star-shaped grating, Iris is perhaps only an aperture or opening onto this world, one that is 'screened': there is an enigmatic someone else looking through her.

While images of train travel proliferate in Freud's work (most famously as sexual enjoyment), they often serve as a metaphor for what Laura Marcus characterizes as the 'lines of conduction' guiding unconscious thought processes.[168] Freud elaborates this metaphor as a model for his self-analysis or 'inner work', as he calls it in a letter to Wilhelm Fliess. A few days after he had recounted to Fliess a memory of seeing his mother naked at age three—itself a reconstruction or screen memory, as he admitted—Freud compares this mental drift to a train ride into the past:

> I am gripped and pulled through ancient times in quick association of thoughts; my moods change like the landscapes seen by a traveler from a train; and as the great poet [Goethe] using his privilege to ennoble (sublimate) puts it:
> Und manche liebe Schatten steigen auf:
> Gleich einer alten, halbverklungnen Sage Kommt erste Lieb' und Freundschaft mit herauf.
> [And the shades of loved ones appear, and with them, like an old, half-forgotten myth, first love and friendship.][169]

Freud's scene is evocative of cinematic automatism and its capacity for visual reanimation. The traveler drifts into another time according to the dictates of desire, but a desire that is

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[168] Laura Marcus, *Dreams of Modernity: Psychoanalysis, Literature, Cinema* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107045422, p. 51.
[169] Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, ed., *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess (1887-1904)*, trans. Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson (Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 275.

unconscious, rendering the subject passive. What then appears before him is a kind of primal fantasy, necessarily obscured, a 'half-forgotten myth'.

Drawing on Lacan and Merleau-Ponty's readings of Freud, I would suggest that this passivity of the subject broaches an impersonal or collective unconscious. The desire that speaks through us, whether in the free associative drift of the psychoanalytic session or in the various psychopathologies of everyday life, is the desire of the Other—the desires of friends, family members, and the Symbolic order as a whole. Regardless of whether these images are expressive of Hadžihalilović's own personal fantasy, they also clearly index the anxieties of society writ large: the biases of educators and their neurotic 'victims' outlined by Freud, the widespread condition of modernity. The film's images, running away from sexuality only to be re-confronted with it, are oriented around an anonymous neurotic adult longing and regret, and crystallized via the numerous adult figures foregrounded throughout the film.

We first see this superimposition in the form of the old maid Madeleine (Micheline Hadžihalilović), introduced as the girl's servant during Iris' first dinner at the school. Hadžihalilović gives us a clue in the form of her name, presumably a reference to Proust and/or the female protagonist of Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1957), with the connection between these two references synthesized by Chris Marker's commentary in *Sans Soleil* (1983). In all of these cases, we are dealing with a temporal vertigo or spiral, characters attempting to relive the past. The adult consciousness orienting *Innocence* aligns with Marker's description of the time travelers in *La Jetée* (1962)—people 'given to very strong mental images… if they were able to conceive or dream another time, maybe they would be able to live in it.' Madeleine instantiates this dynamic in a later scene right before the introduction of Edith, in which she observes the girls from behind a glass-paneled door. Looking out at the girls frolicking from the darkened

interior of the building, Madeleine appears like a prisoner behind the wrought-iron of the glass pane, or ensconced within the 'kinetoscope' coffin with the star-shaped Iris: she is living vicariously through these children.

In Freudian terms, we are not simply seeing childhood—we are seeing a *relation* to childhood. The creative dimension of this working over and embellishing process is acknowledged more directly by the character of Miss Edith, the butterfly collector and thereby filmmaker-surrogate. Davina Quinlivan cites Hadžihalilović's admission that she wishes she had attended a boarding school, yet argues that 'it is Edith and not one of the schoolgirls that tends to emerge as the French female director's double, a guardian of a preserved and adored self-contained world.'[170] With this character, Hadžihalilović again foregrounds an adult's 'delirious view of aesthetics' in place of childhood innocence. Hovering over her display cases and carefully arranging her desiccated butterflies with a scalpel and tweezers, Miss Edith creates a world of arrested motion that is a synecdoche for the enclosure of the school, and the diegetic film-world as a whole.

Yet there is a darker and more ambivalent dimension to Edith's creation of an enclosed world that Quinlivan does not touch upon. Edith's lame leg invokes one of Freud's more fanciful descriptions of neurotic illness: he invokes a bricklayer, who, having been crippled and begun to live by begging, eventually comes to prefer his new livelihood to the possibility of a cure: he 'lives by his disablement.'[171] Edith, through her butterfly collecting, also lives through her disablement, creating a world of arrested motion. In keeping with the film's use of butterflies as a metaphor for sexual maturity, Edith's association with the static butterfly invokes the neurotic

[170] Davina Quinlivan, 'The French Female Butterfly Collector: Hadžihalilović, Denis, de Van and the Cinéma Du Corps', *Studies in European Cinema* 10, no. 1 (1 March 2013): 35–44, p. 36.
[171] Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition* vol. XVI, p. 273.

as victim of over-education. Indeed, legs, in the film, serve as a metonymic displacement of sexuality, as Madeleine tells Bianca, underneath the theater, that 'tu sauras profiter des jambes quand tu seras dehors.' Like her butterflies fixed in place, Edith is physically mature but unable to 'make the most of' her legs, a neurotic 'incapacity for meeting an erotic demand'.

The anxiety underpinning the school is revealed in the sole conversation we are privy to between Edith and Eva. As Edith adjusts her butterflies with tweezers, localizing the enclosure beneath her gaze, we get a sense of standing outside the film's diegesis as the two women reflect on Alice's eagerness to graduate: 'le dehors n'est pas forcement ce qu'elle croit,' Edith laments. 'Si elle est déçue, elle va souffrir.' Here Edith fears that Ananke's strictness has perhaps made Alice a potential victim of neurosis. For most of this sequence, Eva responds to her from a position off-screen, probing at Edith's statements in a guarded manner ('qu'est-ce que tu en sais?') Edith then reveals that this speculation is drawn from personal experience: 'Je veux pas qu'elle devienne comme nous.' In other words, this is a woman who has herself been disappointed by the outside world, compensating with a fantasy of innocence. Yet in this back and forth, the term fantasy verges closer to 'fiction', one that is collective and disruptive of the solitary auteur: the two women give the impression of a writers' room arguing over the fate of their characters, de-realizing the girls and revealing the contrived dimension of their linear trajectory.

Eva/Edith's ambiguous relationship to the girls is further explored at the celebratory New Year's Dinner, this marker of time causing a breakdown in Eva. As the girls celebrate at tables behind her, the camera lingers on Eva sitting at her table, suddenly overwhelmed with emotion as she bursts into tears. The shallow depth of field and golden light from a nearby lamp set Eva apart from the girls behind her, almost giving the effect of rear-projection or a split diopter; the

girls are ‘screened’ (figure 13). Eva’s world suddenly feels all too real, with the girls behind her comprising a part of her morphing fantasy.



Figure 13: Eva juxtaposed against her ‘screen’.

This sensation is evoked as the sound of the girls playfully tapping their utensils against the glassware segues into a non-diegetic score comprised of chimes. The aural distortion conveys a sense of metered time blurring into reverie, as if the recurring ringing of the grandfather clock in the film had started to malfunction. The adult attempt at maintaining enclosure—of the diegetic dream-world, and of childhood itself—reveals itself as a strained psychic defense mechanism. Childhood fluctuates according to the needs of adult desire. Having regained her composure with Edith’s help, Eva returns to engage with the girls. Asking Iris what she is wishing for to mark the new year, she responds ‘toujours rester avec Bianca’. Is this the wish orienting the film’s drift

into the past? Eva's face retains its forced smile, suggesting that if so, it is a wish whose full implications can't be avowed.

Iris

The girls, however, are more than just a dream or fantasy Eva must wake up from. As we have seen in Freud's screen memory, the past also moves forward in response to adult desire. In turning to the ambiguous childlike perspective of Iris, we can see *why* these adults are 'regressing' in the first place. In this regard, I would offer a slight modification of Pasolini's formula—the adult neurotic perspective, emblematized by Hadžihalilović's 'delirious view of aesthetics', does not definitively supersede the childhood perspective. In this respirational movement, both perspectives are operative and necessary—the film enjoins us to become absorbed into the enclosure of the fiction, via the child-like perspective of Iris, *and* to look from the outside in, as adults cognizant of sexuality.

This balancing of perspectives is intrinsic to the experience of the dream, as Merleau-Ponty argues in his reading of Freud. Again modifying the individualistic character of the Freudian dream-work, he writes: 'Le 'sujet' du rêve (et de l'angoisse, et de toute vie), c'est *on*—i.e. le corps comme *enceinte*—Enceinte dont nous sortons puisque le corps est *visible*, une 'sorte de réflexion'.'[172] Here Merleau-Ponty captures how the dream is a regression to the perspective of childhood, in which we are 'enclosed' within our own consciousness (a 'primitive' perspective Freud also associates with animism.) Yet in seeing ourselves in the world, we also see ourselves from the outside: we see our body as it is for others, implicating an adult sexual perspective. As in Dora's dream of the bucolic nymphs that morph into the female genitalia,

[172] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l'invisible* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), p. 310-311.

childhood satisfaction segues naturally into adult sexuality. It is a respirational movement of withdrawal, into the perceptual enclosure, and expression, of behavior directed towards the world outside. The childlike perspective is therefore just as important as the adult perspective: in his readings of Freud's *Gradiva* and Dora case studies, Merleau-Ponty invokes 'la productivité, la fécondité du délire' to describe how these fantasies of regression naturally, inexplicably, lead Freud's neurotic protagonists towards 'amour réel'.[173]

In the context of *Innocence*, there is also something fecund about these adults' delusion: their wistful gaze at childhood innocence could become a second chance at salvaging sexual desire in the present. Educators have succeeded, in the timeline of evolution, of producing adult neurosis instead of sexual deviance. But the past (and present) is still up for grabs, if the dream can be deciphered and desire articulated. It is a matter of Edith realizing that her enclosure is not a world of arrested motion, but is instead still moving and ambiguous: by fixating over the past, she is also changing the past. The childlike vision instantiated through the character of Iris thus functions as a second chance for the adult neurotic to recognize the ambiguously sexual content of their past memory. If the adult neurotic regresses towards childhood chastity, Iris' chaste vision 'blooms' towards adult sexuality.

This ambiguous vision is present at Iris's arrival at the school, an episode I contend is one of rebirth. We arrive at the girls' boarding room in the school, finding the coffin from the train now sitting in the center of the room. As the girls begin to crowd into the room, the camera remains fixed on the coffin, its frame cutting them off at the torso. Emma Wilson compares this choice of framing to the disfigured dolls of Hans Bellmer and their invocation of sexual abuse;[174]

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[173] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L'institution, la passivité: Notes de cours au Collège de France (1954-1955)* (Paris: Belin, 2015), p. 185-186.
[174] Emma Wilson, 'Miniature Lives, Intrusion and Innocence: Women Filming Children', *French Cultural Studies* 18, no. 2 (June 2007): 169–83, p. 177.

in a similarly Sadean-Surrealist vein, the image also recalls the opening scene of Robert Bresson's *Une Femme douce* (1969), in which the camera frames the body of the female protagonist, dead after leaping from a window, surrounded by the shuffling feet of passersby. Here, too, Iris' arrival at the school via coffin blurs life and death, beginnings and endings. She has the perspective of someone having already lived, a child with an oblique awareness of sexuality and mortality.

This sense of a second chance is evidenced when the girls first enter their biology classroom, guided by Edith. Here Hadžihalilović juxtaposes the quotidian routine of Edith, presumably having delivered this introduction many times, with the chaotic energy of Iris and her classmates, bursting with the excitement of their first day of class. Edith's immobility contrasts with the gliding Steadicam, hovering around the scampering girls as they rush towards the various animals with rapt fascination. As some animals are stuffed and mounted and others living within cages, the mise-en-scène blurs boundaries between the animate and inanimate, motion and stillness: there is a hushed sense of possibility even within an apparatus of capture. This sense of communication between opposites continues as Edith draws the girls' attention to a chart displaying an evolutionary 'tree', tracing the emergence of life from the sea to land-based lifeforms, with the human at its supposed summit. However, the chart's arrangement problematizes Edith's interpretation: in order to contain all of its diverse life-forms, the evolutionary tree curls back on itself, moving from left to right to left again, positioning the human figure uncannily close to the supposed 'primitive' lifeforms of the sea. In a wide shot of Edith pointing at the chart with her cane, the frame cuts off the human figure's head, again displacing the superiority of the rational animal while also invoking the acephalic girls from the opening scene (figure 14). So, too, is Edith, the lame neurotic locked into a mental automatism,

positioned alongside these ‘headless’ children and their inchoate identities: the over-ripe fruit of the evolutionary tree is never cut off from its vital roots. We thus find an image of education’s inability to contain the unruly forces of life and sexuality, constantly turning back on itself and rendering progress ambiguous.



Figure 14: Edith guides the girls along the evolutionary tree.

This instability is demonstrated in a scene between Iris and Alice in the forest, as sexuality’s ‘flowery disguise’ is almost dropped far from the watchful gaze of the school’s authorities. Alice, responding to Iris’ desire to know about Bianca’s ‘secret’, decides to play a game. Alice strokes Iris’ face with a plant stem, causing Iris to slap it away: ‘Tu as perdu’, Alice taunts, followed by Iris pleading, ‘Non, on commence’. The interaction escalates, as Iris runs away from Alice’s blows, tripping, as Alice then begins to gleefully beat her with a branch until

she bleeds, before licking her blood. Here we see Freud's 'childish pranks', ostensibly meant to disguise the desire to 'deflower' one's partner, drop the pretense of innocence, revealing homosexual, even sado-masochistic desire. Iris' perception, then, contains the germ of a dream or depersonalization. This brazen eroticism seems to be corrected in the next scene, as we see Iris in bed, sucking her thumb, once again infantilized. The juxtaposition creates a respirational rhythm of expression and withdrawal, sexuality and chastity, as the dream verges on revealing desire only to back away. This rhythm continues as Iris sits up and checks her legs, finding that the cuts are indeed there, although she herself seems to have difficulty believing it. She is wrestling with ambivalence, as she then quickly hops out of bed and runs towards Bianca's bed. 'Je veux dormir avec toi' she pleads, to which Bianca responds, 'c'est interdit.' The next day, in ballet class, Iris' bruises draw the attention of Eva, who questions whether she's happy at the school and gives her a stern warning about the necessity of obedience. Iris is guilty, in her eyes, of being in communication with the outside.

The film's startling conclusion reveals that the enclosure of the school is indeed in communication with another time and place. Just as the opening train journey functioned as a drift into the past, here we seem to follow a journey into the future. As the train journey begins, Eva lights a cigarette, morphing from a *fin-de-siècle* governess into a mid-century urbanite. So, too is the organic, Symbolist and Surrealist-derived iconography of the school replaced by the monumental neo-classical buildings of a large 20th century metropolis. As Marcus outlines, Freud also associated the train with 'childhood experiences of loss and dislocation', as it was the construction of the railroad, bypassing Freiburg, that caused his father to pack the family up and move to Vienna.[175] In this manner, the railroad network functions according to Lacan's symbolic

[175] Marcus, *Dreams of Modernity*, p. 45.

network: it is a kind of pharmakon, displacing the child from their pre-Oedipal idyll but, through the unstable associative chain of signifiers it introduces, also allowing veiled access to the past through free-association, dreams and screen memories. The past is gone but not forgotten, and it is the impetus to remember, against the school's censorship, that takes on a political cast for the girls. In response to Bianca's nervous questions about their destination, Eva states, 'Tu vas nous oublier très vite'. Throughout the train ride, the lights flicker on and off, occasionally plunging the compartment into darkness. It is as if Bianca's consciousness is already fading, drifting into a soporific state that will engulf and bury her childhood memories. Here we see the school's ideology at work, 'screening' childhood off from the world of adult sexuality.

Yet in the final scene, it is clear that all the elements of the past have been preserved, in sublated form, in this modern setting; the political imperative lies in *recognizing* this fact. As in Freud's properly civilized garden city, the terraced fountains and lounging city-dwellers show a bucolic past peeking through the concrete and steel of modernity, and the glimmer of childhood perversions underneath adult heterosexuality. As Bianca and a young man step into the fountain and approach one another, splashing water in a flirtatious manner, the Steadicam glides around them with an enraptured immediacy: we are back in the pond with Iris and the other girls playing with hula hoops. It is *the same water*, recalling Freud's assertion, in 'On Narcissism' (1914), that there is only one form of libido. In this sense, the intricately terraced fountains show how adult sexuality literally canalizes the streams of polymorphous childhood sexuality towards new ends. To admit this fact would be to acknowledge that heterosexuality draws on a vast, unruly and unknowable source to accomplish its aims, that sexuality is far more *fluid* in both its aim and object than patriarchy would like to admit. It is this fact, the interpenetration of past and present, perversion and heterosexuality, that Eva exhorts Bianca to forget.

Hadžihalilović reminds us of the connection between inside and outside, dream and reality. By reading her alongside Freud, I have demonstrated that this connection also reveals the porosity between past and present, innocence and sexuality. Both show us the futility of attempting to live solely in the past *or* the present, and the necessity of inhabiting the disjunctive space in between. The past is not an enclosure, but the vital, animating source of the present and future. In this manner, Hadžihalilović shows how Freudian ambiguity is an invaluable resource for queer theory. It is the very ambiguity of the past that fuels an ongoing re-interpretation of the present, turning the solidity of identities into an open-ended process. Perhaps Eva realizes that the past is where Bianca is most free, where the lines are waiting to be engraved more deeply. The patriarchal subject of Ananke is a fragile achievement, only a brush-stroke away from morphing into something else entirely.

A Phylogenetic Fantasy

Hadžihalilović's next film, *Evolution* (2014), is an equally provocative, and perhaps even more puzzling film. While *Innocence*'s delirious world serves as a distorted imagination of patriarchal reality, *Evolution*'s narrative at first appears to subvert recognizable gender roles: the film follows an isolated community of women on a volcanic island engineering reproductive experiments on young boys, producing hybrid forms of subjectivity infused by the marine life surrounding them. However, in interviews Hadžihalilović has revealed that this film too has an autobiographical inspiration: she grew up in Casablanca, Morocco, facing the island of Lanzarote where the film is shot, and the film's medical-scientific storyline is based on her childhood hospitalization for appendicitis, in which she endured invasive questioning by doctors

concerning her quasi-pubescent body and impending menstruation.[176] At the same time, however, she also admits that the uncertain coming-of-age story of her male protagonist Nicolas (Max Brabant) is a means of interrogating the male body and norms of masculinity. I thus contend that Hadžihalilović's subversive vision of masculinity does not lie with the women's experiments, which instead function on the side of *Ananke* and education, now attempting to engineer male sexuality towards the reproductive function. It instead lies in her assertion that boys, like the girls of *Innocence*, also time travel into the past, outside the technological control of the adult women educators in the film. Nicolas, guided by the nurse Stella (Roxane Duran), escapes from these educators and returns to the sea in order to fashion a more unpredictable and ambiguous sexuality. The film re-traces the evolutionary tree from *Innocence*, now making explicit that the childhood past we recuperate is a nonhuman past.

As the film transpires in an indeterminate time and place, mixing signifiers of scientific modernity and pre-modern agrarianism, I contend that the form of this film, too, functions as a dream or screen memory, super-imposing diverse people, places and times. Based on the shocking final scene, in which Nicolas drifts through the night towards an ominously illuminated factory, it seems that we are once again dealing with a consciousness that has been disappointed by the outside world. The structure of the film is thus oriented by adult longing and regret: here Stella plays the role of lost object in place of Bianca, as Nicolas' pained cry, once Stella delivers him away from the island only to herself swim back, echoes across the film's dream-like narrative. However, Stella's abandonment of Nicolas is precisely the point: she was always thrusting him forward, towards the outside. In this regard, Stella, and the starfish associated with

[176] Laura Kern, 'The Miracle of Life', *Film Comment*, June 2016.

her, both function as metonymy for the nonhuman world: primordial symbols that draw us into the past only to push us forward.

Evolution is an occasion to return to Freud's own thinking on evolutionary theory and biology. Due to the continued dominance of Lacan's anti-naturalist model within psychoanalytic theory, this dimension of Freud's thought has tended to be actively de-emphasized by humanities scholars. This position has been most forcefully expounded by Laplanche, who seeks to actively suppress Freud's famed invocation of Darwin as a '*biological* blow to human narcissism':[177] for these thinkers, any recourse to biology would tether the human to a fixed or instinctual model of sexuality. Yet if we revisit this passage with our above discussion of childhood and education in mind, we can see how the same adult hypocrisy that suppresses childhood sexuality also suppresses our common being with the animal: there is something unruly and mysterious in our animality. Freud's tone verges on the caustic as he describes the 'pretentious' attempt of humans to suppress this dimension of our existence:

> In the course of the development of civilization man acquired a dominating position over his fellow-creatures in the animal kingdom. Not content with this supremacy, however, he began to place a gulf between his nature and theirs. He denied the possession of reason to them, and to himself he attributed an immortal soul, and made claims to a divine descent which permitted him to break the bond of community between him and the animal kingdom. Curiously enough, this piece of arrogance is still foreign to children, just as it is to primitive and primaeval man. It is the result of a later, more pretentious stage of development... A child can see no difference between his own nature and that of animals. He is not astonished at animals thinking and talking in fairy-tales; he will transfer an emotion of fear which he feels for his human father onto a dog or a horse, without intending any derogation of his father by it. Not until he is grown up does he become so far estranged from animals as to use their names in vilification of human beings.[178]

[177] Freud, *The Standard Edition* vol. XVI, p. 141.
[178] Freud, *The Standard Edition* vol. XVI, p. 140.

Children's innate sense of animality parallels their innate possession of sexuality: both are present, in a matter-of-fact form, much to the detriment of adult educators. While Freud's animals are sometimes faulted for being a one-sided projection by the subject (most famously by Deleuze and Guattari),[179] here he implies there is reciprocity between the human and nonhuman. As Merleau-Ponty writes in his commentary on Freud, 'Notre déplacement sur l'animal reflète l'animalisation de l'homme par l'animal.'[180] If there is no 'derogation' in associating the father to an animal, there is something 'fatherly' already there in the animal.

Moreover, Freud never implies that this childhood affinity is something we ought to outgrow. Rather, it is confirmed by science—the paragon of maturity for Freud—in the form of Darwin's theories: 'Man is not a being different from animals or superior to them; he himself is of animal descent, being more closely related to some species and more distantly to others. The acquisitions he has subsequently made have not succeeded in effacing the evidences, both in his physical structure and in his mental dispositions, of his parity with them.'[181] What we share with the animal is not merely some brute biological being, but mental life as well. Freudian sexuality, hovering between psyche and soma, is a property of the flesh.

If the child's sexuality is in a sense animal, this does not tether them to a deterministic biology: there is a freedom and divergence already there in the animal. In his unpublished metapsychological paper, 'A Phylogenetic Fantasy' (1912), Freud sketches a speculative and evolutionary theory of sexuality that is left tantalizingly undeveloped in his subsequent work. He writes, 'One gets the impression that the developmental history of the libido recapitulates a much older piece of the phylogenetic development than that of the ego; the former perhaps

[179] Gilles Deleuze et Félix Guattari, *Mille Plateaux* (Paris: Minuit, 1980).
[180] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L'institution, la passivité: Notes de cours au Collège de France (1954-1955)* (Paris: Belin, 2015).
[181] Freud, *The Standard Edition* vol. XVI, p. 141.

recapitulates conditions of the phylum of vertebrates, whereas the latter is dependent on the history of the human race.'[182] The implications of this perspective allow us to modify the opposition, influentially maintained by Lacan and Laplanche, between the organic quality of the ego and the excessive and semiotic dimension of human sexuality. Here Freud implies the ego is connected not to the organism in general but to the *human* organism, and the excess introduced by sexuality is a nonhuman excess. If the ego thus takes the side of education in defending against the unruly excess of sexuality, we can now see how this neurotic defense is an all-too-human attempt to ward off an environmental outside. While a thinker like Laplanche will occasionally invoke the 'alien' force of sexuality, he also insists that this sexuality is still unique to the human, with the animal subsumed under the linear, natural and programmatic course of Darwinian evolution.

Freud, however, has a much more enigmatic and complex view of evolution and phylogenetic inheritance. The animal is not the stable foil for the wildly neurotic and perverse human—rather, it is the ambiguous source humans return to in their time-travelling recuperation of perverse libido. This fact can be seen when Freud, following Haeckel's model of ontogeny recapitulating phylogeny, asserts that the human infant's passage through the various stages of sexual development (oral, anal, etc.) recapitulates various forms of nonhuman embodiment:

> In the case of the development of the libido, this *phylogenetic* origin is, I venture to think, immediately obvious. Consider how in one class of animals the genital apparatus is brought into the closest relation to the mouth, while in another it cannot be distinguished from the excretory apparatus, and in yet others it is linked to the motor organs… Among animals one can find, so to speak in petrified form, every species of perversion of the sexual organization.[183]

[182] Sigmund Freud, *A Phylogenetic Fantasy*, ed. I. Grubrich-Simitris, trans. A. Hoffer and PT Hoffer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 12.
[183] Freud, *The Standard Edition* vol. XVI, p. 355.

If we have already seen that the polymorphous perverse past remains present in adult sexuality, we can now see that this past is a nonhuman one. The creativity of the human sexual instinct is a continuation of and development of the creativity of life as a whole.

Against the temptation to read this process as a teleological orientation towards the genital (or the human), Freud himself complicates its linear dimensions, in a dense but richly suggestive passage:

> In the case of human beings, however, this phylogenetic point of view is partly veiled by the fact that what is at bottom inherited is nevertheless freshly acquired in the development of the individual, probably because the same conditions which originally necessitated its acquisition persist and continue to operate upon each individual. I should like to add that originally the operation of these conditions was creative but that it is now evocative. Besides this, there is no doubt that the prescribed course of development can be disturbed and altered in each individual by recent external influences.[184]

In claiming this phylogenetic perspective is 'partly veiled' in the human, Freud is not simply returning to a renewed human exceptionalism. Rather, he is making the claim that our phylogenetic, evolutionary inheritances are unstable, leaving room for ontogenetic events. His claim that 'the same conditions… persist and continue to operate upon each individual' signals that the contingencies that befall us, and the creativity they engender, are shared with nonhuman life. Our inheritance is not drawn from a distant and now-superseded past, but is instead 'freshly acquired' by each individual: the past we dive into to fashion our adult sexuality is shared with other life-forms. Yet in his distinction between the creative and the evocative, I contend that we see the tension introduced by education: instead of an ambiguous and unpredictable coming-to-presence, educators insist on ready-made representation and technological control.

[184] Freud, *The Standard Edition* vol. XVI, p. 355.

Evocation

This distinction governs the tension in the film between the women, who merely 'evoke' the life-giving power of the marine eco-system through clandestine rituals, and Nicolas, aided by Stella, who dive back into the sea in order to fully embrace its creativity and the ongoing ambiguity that comes with it. Here we find the evolutionary tree from *Innocence*: the human is positioned ambiguously, uncomfortably, close to the marine life they seek to distance themselves from. Nicolas' coming of age process thus becomes an unpredictable source of anxiety for the women educators in the film, as he has an innate sense of sexuality—a sexuality that we can now see emerges from a shared animality. Mirroring the trajectory of Iris in *Innocence*, here the boys are also subsumed under a linear temporality, as the women separate the younger boys from the older ones who are transported to an isolated hospital once they are presumed to be ready to undergo their sexual operation, in which the women attempt to recreate the life-giving powers of the sea within the claustrophobic and morbid setting of a decaying laboratory. This attempt to confine and localize nonhuman sexuality fails, however: sexuality proliferates across the film in an unpredictable manner, encapsulated in the enigmatic trajectory of the starfish. Following the version of Freud I have outlined above, marine life, in the film, is both excessive and semiotic—full of primordial symbols that necessitate ongoing interpretation, unfurling us towards an outside.

The women in the film attempt to clamp down on this process, limiting the boys' access to the unstable world under the waves. Although the women in the film are positioned as authoritarian custodians of the boys, it is also hinted that they, like the women in *Innocence*, may also be the neurotic products of over-education. Hadžihalilović has stated that there was a longer version of the script in which it was implied that the women were also victims of scientific

experimentation.[185] A hint of this backstory is suggested in a scene in which Stella shows Nicolas photographs of women with male doctors touching their backs, covered with amphibian-like suction cups. The black and white photographs invoke the famous photographs taken at Jean-Martin Charcot's Salpêtrière clinic, which featured both male and female hysterics, as Hadžihalilović positions the victimized boys and women on the same ontological register.

However, this perspective is repressed by the women. They instead display a hypocrisy concerning their nonhuman sexuality, forbidding the boys from going into the ocean unsupervised and only begrudgingly and secretly enjoying it themselves. This dynamic becomes clear in a scene of nighttime revelry, as Nicolas and his friends witness the women writhing in ecstatic pleasure on the beach with various amphibian creatures. The scene, illuminated by greenish-yellow lanterns, has the air of a clandestine, arcane ritual. It invokes and parodies the Freudian primal scene, as what Nicolas discovers is not heterosexual coupling, but rather an orgiastic, nonhuman jouissance. While Hadžihalilović stages the scene through horror tropes, this seems less a judgment of its content than of the shameful attitude taken towards it by the women—it is 'a dirty secret', to invoke Foucault and Deleuze's criticisms of psychoanalysis. As Nicolas' mother basks in enjoyment, she makes eye contact with Nicolas staring back at her. Aligning with Freud's description of the primal scene, here the child already has a nascent awareness of adult sexuality. This sensation is confirmed when Hadžihalilović shows us a close-up of Nicolas' eye, in which we see the green reflected glimmer of the orgy: Nicolas is implicated in the milieu around him, despite the best efforts of these women to keep it a secret. This dynamic is present in the following scene, itself a parody of the discovery of castration. After running home from the nighttime orgy, Nicolas peeks into the bathroom where he spies

[185] Lucile Hadžihalilović, 'Evolution' Q&A: New Directors New Films, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EFZLot0Cj3g.

upon his mother showering. Hadžihalilović cuts between Nicolas' eye, isolated by the narrowly open door, and his mother's back covered in suction cups. This shot-reverse shot gives attention to the water trickling down the moistened disks, rendering them as virtual organs of sight. The montage ties Nicolas and his mother together as vulnerable, exposed perceivers, yet Nicolas' mother attempts to repress this connection, looking back at him only to turn away in shame and denial.

Nicolas thus introduces another, more unstable, form of vision into the closed world of the island. Hadžihalilović introduces us to her thematic of vision in the opening shot of the film, an underwater long-take of the sunlight diffusing through the water, appearing like an iris. The shot recalls a similar moment in her short film *Nectar* (2014), in which the sunlight diffused through the tree canopy also forms a nonhuman aperture or eye, suggesting a world that looks back at us. It is possible to trace this interest in the perceiving eye back to her short film *Good Boys Wear Condoms* (1996), in which we see a close-up of a dilating pupil during a group sex scene, further highlighting the ecstatic and anonymous dimension of embodied perception. As the shot is juxtaposed with close-ups of an open mouth and an ejaculating penis, Hadžihalilović foregrounds the eye as an organ that is naked and exposed, as well as wet, and it is this liquid and vulnerable dimension of perception that will be explored throughout *Evolution*.

Aligning with the role of Iris, Nicolas occupies a privileged perspective in the film due to the fact that he has a relation to the outside: although he is not presented as a newcomer to the island, he nonetheless retains memories of a mother and world outside the island. He is also someone who sees with an ambiguous vision, a de-facto 'iris'. Indeed, when we are introduced to Nicolas, he is floating on the surface of the water, a shadow-like eclipse in front of the nonhuman 'eye'. We are then presented with multiple shots lingering on the efflorescence of

marine life. This marine world is also a tantalizingly forbidden space: in a subsequent shot, we are shown Nicolas' POV as he is shocked to discover a boy's decaying corpse with a bright-red starfish on his stomach. The sense of wonder and marvel, in the previous shots of underwater vitality, gives way to a sudden apprehension of death, according to the aesthetic of suspended animation favored by the Surrealists. Hal Foster explains their practice of the veiled-erotic and fixed-explosive as emblematic of 'the uncanny confusion of the psychic role of sexuality: does it serve life or death?'[186] Nicolas, like Iris' vision of the acephalic girls, has a nascent awareness of sexuality and mortality, and this will bring him into conflict with the women in the film.

Screen Animals

The role of the starfish deserves further commentary, as it is an unstable symbol that proliferates across different contexts in the film. In this regard, the film's surrealism invokes the common appearance of animals as screen memories in Freud's work, most notably in 'Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood' (1910). In this essay, Freud argues that Leonardo projected a memory of a vulture striking his lips, as an infant, in order to 'screen' off the experience of his over-affectionate mother; the vulture serves as a suitable image due to the rumor, heard by Leonardo, that vultures do not have mates but are instead inseminated by the wind.[187] Leonardo's identification as a 'vulture-child' became an inspiration to the surrealists, and in particular Max Ernst, who attributed the hybrid human-animal forms of his paintings and collage novels to his readings of the Leonardo essay. In her discussion of Ernst's use of screen-animals, Rosalind Krauss explains, 'These elements are provided to the subject readymade, Freud states; they are

[186] Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1993), p. 27.
[187] Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, Repr, vol. XI (London: Hogarth Press, 1999), p. 90.

what the child picks up from the scraps of overheard conversation, from images happened upon in books, from the behavior of animals both seen and recounted.'[188] This notion of the readymade further problematizes the claim that Freud's screen animals are solely a projection by the subject, instead pushing towards a non-representational aesthetic. As Krauss alludes to with 'the behavior of animals both seen and recounted', the reason for this selection is not so much a collective Jungian archetype with a pre-determined meaning, as much as it is unique to the lived experience of the subject. The animal does not have a meaning as much as it *has meaning*, emerging out of the interaction between subject and object.

While Hadžihalilović cites Ernst as an inspiration for the film's Surrealist aesthetic, it is another one of her stated influences, the Surrealist-inspired Robert Bresson,[189] who most explicitly instantiates this intertwining of human and animal trajectories. Bresson's narratives, like Ernst's collage novels, are also structured around cyclical narratives of androgynous, human-animal metamorphosis. This tendency becomes most explicit in *Au Hasard Balthazar* (1966), which tracks the parallel life trajectories of a young girl Marie (Anne Wiazemsky) and the titular character of the donkey. In his study of Bresson's surrealist influences, Raymond Watkins argues that Bresson, inspired by the painter Balthus (the brother of 'dissident surrealist' Pierre Klossowski, cast by Bresson in the film) was interested in the pubescent body and its manner of accentuating the pliability of the human form—many Bresson protagonists find themselves in 'an intermediate state characterized by elasticity and androgyny', primarily due to the fact that these adolescent characters 'have been prematurely removed from a carefree

[188] Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, 1st paperback ed, An October Book (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994), p. 65.
[189] Bresson was an associate of the Surrealists in the 1930's, and his production designer, Pierre Charbonnier, was himself a surrealist painter. Charbonnier's interest in planar oscillations between surface and depth—often in the form of juxtaposing opaque surfaces with empty windows and doorways—influenced Bresson's own compositions, alongside more well-known surrealists such as René Magritte.

childhood'.[190] It is precisely this elasticity that links Marie to Balthazar, as both girl and donkey become chattel to be exchanged from one owner to the next. Marie's love for the donkey, expressed through close-ups of tender caresses, is both a protective 'screen' against sexuality as well as an oblique anticipation of the more ambiguous and traumatic sexual encounters that lie ahead: Balthazar, too, is moving.

The starfish therefore parallels Nicolas' trajectory across the film, much in the same manner as the donkey Balthazar does with Marie. The animal is not a natural ground as much as a technical form: something in the starfish solicits Nicolas' investment in it, as the animal contains a pliable semiotic dimension. When we meet Nicolas' 'mother', in a drab, spartan house reminiscent of Bresson's rural dwellings, she gives him sludgy looking food containing a mysterious medication. She explains to him that he is reaching an age where his body is changing, as they both associate the transition of puberty with the fragile molting of lizards and crabs, and the regenerative ability of starfish. Here, too, his mother's explanation is an attempt to screen off the disturbance of sexuality and naturalize Nicolas' trajectory as one of linear development. She must therefore refuse the ambiguous dimensions already present in the nonhuman: after Nicolas claims to have seen the dead boy with a starfish on his belly, his mother tells him, 'dans la mer on croit voir beaucoup de choses'. Here again we find the impetus to forget coming from the representatives of education, enjoining the child to repress their ambiguous vision.

Nicolas' identification with the starfish and nonhuman life pulls him in directions that exceed the ideology espoused by the women and performed by the other boys. In an early

[190] Raymond Watkins, 'Bresson's Flirtation with Surrealism: Sexual Desire, Masochism, and Abjection', in *Late Bresson and the Visual Arts: Cinema, Painting and Avant-Garde Experiment*, ed. Raymond Watkins (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 154.

sequence in the film, we see the boys arrayed on the rocky shoreline against the crashing waves. Standing in a stiff, imposing posture, they almost appear to be junior members of the legion in *Beau Travail*, aspiring towards an ideal of the armored masculine body (figure 15). Nicolas' mother then emerges out of the sea, bearing the starfish in her hand. 'Il y a jamais eu un enfant noyé,' she asserts, attempting to sever the fleshy ties linking the mortal human body to the marine creature. The other boys also gleefully share this perspective, attempting to distance themselves from the marine life surrounding them. In a subsequent scene, they dare Nicolas to bash off the leg of a starfish, in a game of sadistic and puerile one-upsmanship reminiscent of Gerard's gang torturing the donkey in *Balthazar*. After severing one of the starfish's legs, we cut to Nicolas' face, now with blood trickling from his nose. Nicolas is 'castrated' alongside the marine creature, both partaking of the same suffering flesh.



Figure 15: The boys as legionnaires.

This imbrication is also the source of Nicolas' creativity and growth. The regenerative potential of this flesh is demonstrated at a formal level, as the role of the color red in the film, and its instantiation via blood, reveals the pliability and creativity of organic matter. Patricia Pisters associates the film's use of red with Jean-Luc Godard's famous statement 'not blood, just red' and 'not red, just blood'.[191] Hadžihalilović, like Godard, thus imagines that the most seemingly 'natural' substance, blood, is also the most artificial and plastic. Nicolas' sanguine connection to *la mèr(e)*—encapsulated in his underwater vision of the red starfish—is not a form of natural rootedness, but rather expresses a divergence and freedom inherent to biological matter. After his discovery of the underwater corpse, we cut to him running, in a vast wide-shot, through the volcanic landscape of Lanzarote, his red bathing suit a small flicker of life against the desolation around him (figure 16). Later, while he is wearing a red t-shirt, some of the other boys come to his window and tell him they are going to bury a dead lobster. Taunting him with the corpse on a stick, Nicolas is unafraid, as he caresses the pink flesh of the lobster while the other boys pour volcanic soil over it. At the nadir of the lobster's objectification by the human and confinement in the inorganic, human and animal experience an oblique communion through their mutual exposure.

[191] Patricia Pisters, *New Blood in Contemporary Cinema: Women Directors and the Poetics of Horror*, 1st ed. (Edinburgh University Press, 2020), https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9781474466950.001.0001, 24.



Figure 16: Nicolas' red vitality.

This fleshy communion can be seen in the sequence in which Nicolas is transported to a decaying hospital facility on the island, where he undergoes surgical procedures alongside the other boys. As he is transported on a rolling cot, he looks up at the overhead lamp, uncannily arranged in the shape of a five-pointed starfish. The image concretizes the way technological rationality must continually recuperate nonhuman life, as well as how the animal, in Bressonian fashion, is itself moving in a progressive dimension that parallels Nicolas' trajectory. The rest of the sequence demonstrates how this unruly excess of fleshy sentience persists through the women's appropriation of nonhuman vitality. After Nicolas resists, he is sedated by the women and put under an IV drip. The camera lingers on the bubbling liquid, as we then cut to an image of tentacular underwater vegetation, revealed to be a dream sequence as we jump from Nicolas' face underwater to his eyes suddenly opening back in the hospital. The extreme close-up draws attention to the moisture of his eye, with his eyelashes recalling the underwater sea vegetation from the previous shot. We then see a lizard clinging to the wall of the hospital, and Nicolas' face covered in perspiration. In the first medium shot of the sequence, Nicolas is revealed to be

covered in red bed sheets, surrounded by the other boys splayed around him. They hold up the drawing of his mother against his red bed sheets, as one of the boys' nose starts to bleed. We then cut from the dripping blood to water trickling down the walls of the room, and condensation on the IV, before the women re-enter, causing the lizard on the wall to scamper away. The sequence thereby suggests an eco-system of perceiving beings tied together by water and blood—to see is to cry, to sweat, and to bleed.

Creation

It is this sentient link towards the world outside that Stella will seek to cultivate in Nicolas. This gesture is first seen when Stella stitches up his bleeding hand after Nicolas cut it on a rock while searching for the boy's corpse underwater: she whispers to him that he's a good boy while his mother watches suspiciously behind them. As the corpse becomes the first of a series of drawings that Nicolas undertakes, comprising his attempt to come to terms with the enigma of sexuality and its link to mortality, it is fitting that Stella encourages this activity in him as well. All of his drawings therefore have a link to an enigmatic past outside of the island: a ferris wheel, a horse, and a woman who he describes as his real mother. As Pisters argues that his mother's red hair 'seems to be inspired by the trails of wavy coral that he has seen in the deep sea'[192], this mother intertwines *la mer* and *la mère*, the generative potential of the nonhuman world outside his window. Against the technological control of sexuality instantiated by the women in the film, the drawings constitute the singularity of Nicolas' own unconscious fantasy program, necessarily diving into a nonhuman past. Like Leonardo, Ernst and Bresson's screen

[192] Pisters, *New Blood in Contemporary* Cinema, p. 24.

animals, these forms are the ready-mades that come to meet the subject half-way, emerging out of the innate affinity between child and animal.

Stella and Nicolas' relation therefore develops in a tactile manner evocative of Bresson's girl and donkey. This situation becomes clear when, in the decaying hospital on the island, we are shown Nicolas receiving an ultrasound scan, with gel rubbed on his stomach. His mother, Stella and the other nurses gaze approvingly at the nascent life growing inside him. Here sexuality is the culmination of a technological program—it is conscious, willed and instrumental, the gestation of life displayed for the gaze of scientific authority. Yet something nonetheless goes astray. Diverging from the rest of the group, Stella takes pity on Nicolas as she operates the machine on his stomach while tenderly stroking his face, drawing the suspicion of the woman operating the computer display. We are confronted with two forms of touch—one coldly clinical and instrumentalizing, the other ambiguous. Exceeding the control of medical authorities, the gesture is therefore seductive in the influential sense described by Laplanche—the moment when the child, nursing at the breast, unconsciously senses that the mother is (consciously or unconsciously) enjoying the process. Sexuality is introduced in excess of the nutritive function, as the breast becomes a symbol or enigmatic signifier.

Going beyond Laplanche's anthropocentrism, Hadžihalilović is clear that this tactile and semiotic communion parallels the communion between human and nonhuman we have seen between Nicolas and the starfish, itself an enigmatic signifier. This fact becomes clear when soon after, Stella leads Nicolas down to the sea. She shows him her exposed back, as he strokes her suction cups. In a wide-shot, Nicolas and Stella are positioned in front of an illuminated patch of water, resembling the ultrasound image. What they share is their common objectification and victimization as flesh—in other words, their *non*humanity. In an escalation of the contradictory

touch from the previous scene, Stella drags Nicolas underwater against his will, holding him there to the point of death only in order resuscitate him, training his respiratory abilities: objectification and care go hand in hand. This dynamic is reduplicated across species lines in the following scene, as Nicolas undergoes a dream sequence in which a slug extends its tentacles towards his navel, seeming to probe at an entry point into his body. The navel, like the suction cup, functions as a surrogate eye, as Hadžihalilović cuts to Nicolas' actual eye frantically moving back and forth. The scene mirrors the ultrasound encounter with Stella, as woman and animal both ambiguously probe at the limits of Nicolas' bodily integrity while also seeming to tenderly caress him. However, at the moment of contact between tentacle and navel, Nicolas suddenly wakes up. There is no fusion or definitive consummation between partners in this scene: demonstrating the impossibility of the sexual relationship, they approach each other only in order to remain separate.

The film does give a hint of where this fusion might lead, suggesting that the women's surgical engineering comprises an attempt to make the sexual relationship possible. Yet this attempt seems to engender a state akin to a deathly, self-reflecting narcissism. One night at the hospital, Nicolas is forced to undergo the surgical procedure, as the women doctors apparently implant a fetus into his stomach. The next we see of him, he is strapped in a tank of ominously illuminated green water. If red, in the film, is generally associated with life and freedom, this milky, glowing green color, seen emanating from the water tank as well as jars containing fetuses, is associated with confinement and control. Rather than the efflorescence of life in the open ocean, here we find a closed, morbid fermentation. The eerie color also echoes the lighting of the subterranean theater from *Innocence*, another arena of surveilled and administered sexuality. The theme of confinement is also instantiated at a psychic level: Nicolas is doubled, by

his reflection in the water, and in the alien-like fetus creatures attached to his stomach. The mutual tenderness and vulnerability of touch we have witnessed between Nicolas and Stella, or the starfish, crossed gendered and species boundaries while still remaining separate, leading towards resuscitation and awakening. Yet here we find a narcissistic doubling of the human form that verges into a stagnant *mise-en-abyme*, as the scene fades out into unconsciousness.

Nicolas' escape with Stella, however, fully embraces the unpredictability that comes from letting in the outside. It is only after Nicolas undergoes the operation that he is rescued by Stella, in an abstract sequence beginning with a blinding white light penetrating into the murky darkness of the tank. In a development of the previous swimming training scene, we again see Nicolas and Stella seated in front of the sea, this time with Stella tracing her fingers along Nicolas' back: he has now truly suffered as much as she. When they finally do dive into the sea for their final exit from the island, they are locked together in amorous embrace, their bodies seeming to mirror each other in a visual rhyme from the shot of Nicolas and his reflection in the water tank. Yet the murky stasis of that shot has now been replaced by a propulsive dynamism, with the couple surrounded by other life forms, as the film seems to have recaptured the euphoria of the opening underwater sequence. Nicolas has rediscovered la mèr(e), not as a regression to a lost pre-Oedipal utopia, but rather as a refashioning of those ties: Stella's respiratory training, neither natural ability nor prosthetic enhancement, instead developed the pliability of her and Nicolas' own flesh, bodies able to die, and therefore also feel and grow. Importantly, they are also bodies that can connect only by coming apart. Stella thrusts Nicolas towards the outside, confirming the progressive direction of this return to la mèr(e).

Conclusion

As Nicolas drifts towards the factory, his trajectory mirrors that of Bianca arriving at the modern metropolis of *Innocence*. The infernal illumination of the industrial cityscape, composed of a series of phallic spires, suggests a patriarchal world akin to the one in which we leave Bianca. As the credits scroll over the image, puncturing the diegesis, it is clear that this outside world is meant to be our own. Yet Hadžihalilović again subtly underscores the continuity between the enclosure and the world outside. Joseph Jenner points to the visual rhyme between the island and industrial reality: 'the shot of the factory is imbued with the same pale yellow and green lighting that characterises the film as a whole, connecting the reptilian or subaqueous lighting of the women with this image of the industrial human, characterizing both of these spaces as strange and otherworldly.'[193] Additionally, the light of the factory towers is reflected on the surface of the sea, again pointing to the manner in which technology relies upon the vitality of nonhuman life. Although Nicolas seems to be entering into a mode of alienated masculine labor that mirrors the patriarchal femininity of Bianca, this identity is again unstable. The enigma of the starfish will persist alongside him, engendering ever-new transformations.

In both of these films, Hadžihalilović underscores the impossibility of definitively managing and controlling sexual development. The 'normal' outcomes of children's sexual development are shown to be fragile achievements, vulnerable to changes coming from a perverse past, in *Innocence*, and a nonhuman past, in *Evolution*. By reading these two films together, I have sought to elaborate a dimension of Freud's thought that has lain dormant: it is animality that is the source of human's sexual freedom and inventiveness. As the trajectory of the starfish across the film demonstrates, the animal itself morphs and grows in tandem with the

[193] Joseph Jenner, 'Towards a Chthonic Spectatorship: Becoming-With the Aquatic in *Evolution*', *Film-Philosophy* 23, no. 3 (October 2019): 372–90, p. 389.

human, an emblem of the never solved enigmas of the flesh. Hadžihalilović's films are Freudian in that they remain in this space of ambiguity, while also underscoring, with great melancholy, the futile efforts of educators who insist on reducing this complexity to neat linear trajectories. In the next chapter, we will look at how the films of Apichatpong Weerasethakul also turn to 'primitive' forms of embodied subjectivity in order to reimagine masculinity, this time outside nationalist narratives of cultural progress.

CHAPTER THREE

Wounded Subjects: Apichatpong Weerasethakul and the Primitive Spectator

If the polymorphously perverse body constitutes a scandal in the films of Hadžihalilović, in the work of Apichatpong this role is shared by the sleeping body and the corpse. Intertwining resistance and escape, passivity and animacy, these bodies introduce ambiguity into the streamlined trajectories of gendered and nationalist development. Apichatpong, too, is interested in what it means to become a man, actively subverting patriarchal and militaristic notions of armored invulnerability. The ambiguity of the flesh therefore invites a reckoning with finitude and unknowing, and in order to elaborate this dynamic I will turn to Roland Barthes and his development of the psychoanalytic notions of the wounded or ravished subject. Scholars have mostly analyzed Apichatpong's films within their local idiom, or turned to the thought of European thinkers like Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari who embrace the animist dimensions of ecological thought and process ontology.[194] By turning to a somewhat different (yet not opposed) psychoanalytic bibliography, consisting of Freud and the uptake of his thought by Barthes and Merleau-Ponty, I will argue that Apichatpong is equally interested in questions of desiring subjectivity and its consequences for collective politics.

Moreover, the psychoanalytic subjectivity developed by Barthes and Merleau-Ponty reveals dimensions of Freud's thought that are consonant with Apichatpong's 'eastern' perspective: a thinking of ecological, and even Buddhist and animist, notions of collectivity. Through a close reading of Barthes' notions of ravishing and wounding via the image, I show

[194] See David Teh, 'Itinerant Cinema', *Third Text* 25, no. 5 (September 2011): 595–609, and Isaac Marrero-Guillamón, 'The Politics and Aesthetics of Non-Representation: Re-Imagining Ethnographic Cinema with Apichatpong Weerasethakul', *Antípoda. Revista de Antropología y Arqueología*, no. 33 (October 2018): 13–32.

that in *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*, Apichatpong's interest in meditation, spectatorship and mortality carry this distinctly eco-psychoanalytic thinking of subjectivity. In this manner, I develop the more rapturous questions of desire in Apichatpong's film, while also revealing the surprisingly fantastical and surrealist dimensions of Barthes' thought. In *Cemetary of Splendour* (2015), this question of wounding develops into an investigation into the problem of intersubjective unknowability. Following soldiers suffering from a mysterious 'sleeping sickness', the film elaborates Freud and Merleau-Ponty's shared insight that dreams and fantasies cannot be simply 'cured', but instead shared and transformed. I thereby argue that for Apichatpong, desire is a form of magical thinking, an uncertain but nonetheless real bridge between self and other.

Becoming-man

Although the Thai slow cineaste and French theorist could seem, at first glance, to have little to do with one another, I want to begin by situating Apichatpong alongside Barthes in a lineage that has been outlined by Carol Mavor: 'boyish men' wounded by an image from the past. Inaugurated by Marcel Proust and also including Chris Marker, Mavor characterizes these artists as 'stuck' or 'adhering' to the mother.[195] Between Proust's madeleine and recollections of 'maman's kiss', and Barthes and Marker's photographs of the mother and the unnamed woman of *La Jetée* (an update of Proust's madeleine by way of Hitchcock's in *Vertigo*), Mavor finds a fetishistic fascination with 'miniscule things that loom large with significance. It is a wound from yesterday felt today.'[196] Encapsulated by the spiral hair tie of Madeleine (Kim Novak) in

[195] Carol Mavor, *Black and Blue: The Bruising Passion of Camera Lucida, La Jetée, Sans Soleil, and Hiroshima Mon Amour* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), p. 12.
[196] Mavor, *Black and Blue*, p. 13.

Vertigo that fascinates Scottie (James Stewart), these wounds persist and insist, luring the protagonist into an obsessive quest backwards through time. Developing the temporal aspect of this wound, Mavor points to the fact that 'A bruise is often in the form of a circle', suggesting that *La Chambre claire* and *La Jetée* 'ring time, just as a bruise circles and fills a bodily insult with its injurious colors.'[197] Both works' temporal loops and disjunctions are expressions of underlying embodied, affective states, disrupting the conventional linear time of mourning. Mavor invokes André Breton's statement that 'there are fairy tales to be written for adults',[198] while also arguing that in these fairy tales, the body leads the way: 'a bed is a boat in many fairy tales.'[199] The wound takes us back to the body and back to childhood, while also leading somewhere unpredictable.

It is this double movement that Barthes attends to in his writings on woundedness: while well known as a theorist 'stuck' to his mother, Barthes is also interested in the more future-oriented question of what it means to be a desiring subject. Barthes first elaborates this understanding of wounding through his notion of the 'sujet amoureux' which appears in *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* (1975). In the section devoted to 'Le ravissement', Barthes discusses the longstanding linguistic equivocation between love and war. He argues that in modernity, the traditional association of man with hunter and women with prey has been inverted, writing:

> Cependant, curieux chassé-croisé : dans le mythe ancien, le ravisseur est actif, il veut saisir sa proie, il est sujet du rapt (dont l'objet est une Femme, comme chacun sait, toujours passive); dans le mythe moderne (celui de l'amour-passion), c'est le contraire: le ravisseur ne veut rien, ne fait rien; il est immobile (comme une image), et c'est l'objet ravi qui est le vrai sujet du rapt; *l'objet* de la capture devient le *sujet* de l'amour et le *sujet* de la conquête passe au rang *d'objet* aimé. (Du

[197] Mavor, *Black and Blue*, p. 15.
[198] Mavor, *Black and Blue*, p. 13.
[199] Mavor, *Black and Blue*, p. 21.

> modèle archaïque, subsiste cependant une trace publique: l'amoureux - celui qui a été ravi - est toujours implicitement féminisé.)[200]

Barthes appears to be drawing here on Lacan's reading of Marguerite Duras' *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* (1964), and its foregrounding of the ambiguous sense of 'le ravissement' associated with Duras' titular young woman protagonist: 'ce mot nous fait énigme. Est-il objectif ou subjectif à ce que Lol V. Stein le détermine?'[201] Following Lacan, 'le mythe moderne' Barthes invokes above is thus psychoanalysis' original object of study: the hysteric and their ambiguous intertwining of subjectivity and objectivity. Far from a catch-all concept referring to a vague feminine madness, as it often did up through the 19th century, I intend this term as clarified by more recent Lacanian theory: a hysteric is someone of any gender who (initially) takes a passive or reactive position vis-à-vis the desire of the Other.[202] The hysteric, however, derives agency by making themselves the ravishing object of the Other's desire, as Barthes alludes to: 'le *sujet* de la conquête passe au rang d'objet aimé.' Likewise, in an inverse movement, they produce their partner, 'l'objet ravi', as 'le *sujet* de l'amour'. The object, ravished and ravishing, exercises power through their passivity, engendering their partner as a ravished (or 'feminized') subject. In other words, there is something contagious about ravishing.

This subjectivizing dimension of the hysteric's ravishing is confirmed in a consonant passage from Lacan. Continuing the line of inquiry he developed through Duras, in *Séminaire XX*, Lacan pronounces that 'L'hystérique fait l'homme'.[203] He is suggesting that the hysteric both plays the part of the man, i.e. a phallic agent, and makes her partner into a man, i.e. produces him as a lacking and desiring subject. Reading this pronouncement alongside Barthes

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[200] Roland Barthes, *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*, Collection Tel quel (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1977), p. 223.
[201] Jacques Lacan, *Autres écrits*, Le champ freudien (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2001), p. 191.
[202] Patricia Gherovici, 'Where Have the Hysterics Gone?: Lacan's Reinvention of Hysteria', *ESC: English Studies in Canada* 40, no. 1 (2014): 47–70.
[203] Jacques Lacan, *Encore*, éd. par Jacques-Alain Miller, Folio (Paris: Seuil, 1998), p. 77.

softens traditional associations around masculinity, allowing us to see that this lacking and desiring subject is a *wounded* subject. Continuing from his above discussion of ravishing, Barthes writes: 'le « sujet », c'est pour nous (depuis le christianisme?) *celui qui souffre:* là où il y a blessure, il y a sujet : *die Wunde! die Wunde* dit Parsifal, en devenant par là « lui-même »'.[204] Barthes is alluding here to the episode in Wagner's opera in which the titular hero, a boyish naïf, is 'hystericized' via his seduction by the hysteric Kundry, whose strategy involves manipulating his nostalgia for his dead mother. That is to say, he is both 'feminized', as Barthes alluded to above, *and* 'made into a man', as Lacan argued, as the bruise engenders a new form of subjectivity.

Barthes' evocation of a kind of feminine masculinity, objectal subjectivity, and passive activity is not meaningless wordplay, but is rather meant to evoke a movement from mastery towards lacking desire. This paradox becomes clear as Barthes elaborates the form of this wounded subject, writing:

> plus la blessure est béante, au centre du corps (au « cœur »), plus le sujet devient sujet : car le sujet, c'est *l'intimité* (*«* La blessure [...] est d'une intimité épouvantable »). Telle est la blessure d'amour : une béance radicale (aux « racines » de l'être), qui n'arrive pas à se fermer, et d'où le sujet s'écoule, se constituant comme sujet dans cet écoulement même.[205]

Here the subject is constituted as a kind of emptiness, or even disappearance: it forms itself 'dans cet écoulement même.' Although clearly influenced by Sartre's notion of the subject as *néant*, Barthes' romanticism diverges from Sartre's stark dualism between subjects and objects: the wound here evokes a suffering and ambiguous passivity, an active embrace of becoming an object.

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[204] Barthes, *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*, p. 224.
[205] Barthes, *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*, p. 224.

In *La chambre claire*, this paradoxical state of the subjective object becomes a kind of living death through the photograph. Recounting his experience being photographed, Barthes states, 'je ne suis ni un sujet ni un objet, mais plutôt un sujet qui se sent devenir objet: je vis alors une micro-experience de la mort'.[206] In his fascination with the winter garden photograph of his deceased mother, in which she is both '*morte'* and *'va mourir*',[207] Barthes realizes that he, too, is already dead, via this photographic 'micro-expérience de la mort', and still going to die. He is ravished, hystericized, feminized by the photograph of his mother. She is not brought back to life through the photograph as much as he is plunged into death through a kind of contagion: 'C'est parce qu'il y a toujours en elle ce signe impérieux de ma mort future, que chaque photo, fût-elle apparemment la mieux accrochée au monde excité des vivants, vient interpeller chacun de nous, un par un, hors de toute généralité'.[208] Barthes realizes his subjective singularity through the photograph: like Parsifal, he 'becomes himself'—becomes a man—via the wound, draining out of himself towards death.

As Blanchot wrote of the image, there is something cadaverous in the photograph: it engenders a form of subjectivity predicated upon a persistent emptiness. Barthes uses a Chögyam Trungpa quote as an epigraph to *La Chambre claire*, as Buddhism becomes a key source in elaborating the animating force of death. Jay Prosser outlines how the state known as the Bardo—'a gap, between death and life'[209]—is, for Tibetan Buddhists, always at work in everyday situations, even if we most often choose to ignore it. As alternatives to this quotidian perspective, Prosser compares Barthes' mad embrace of death in the photograph with the

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[206] Roland Barthes, *La chambre claire: Note sur la photographie* (Gallimard Seuil, 1980), p. 30.
[207] Barthes, *La chambre claire*, p. 151.
[208] Barthes, *La chambre claire*, p. 97.
[209] Jay Prosser, *Buddha Barthes: What Barthes Saw in Photography (That He Didn't in Literature)*, Literature and Theology, Vol. 18, No. 2 (June 2004), pp. 211-222, p. 219.

similarly striking Tibetan practice of meditating upon corpses. In charnel grounds, 'surrounded by bones and skulls, they would have been faced with the aliveness of death, as in Barthes' photograph, the live corpse.'[210] Meditation upon the corpse, is, I would offer, not far from Barthes' *ravissement*: the living becomes infected with death, not as a contingent encounter, but as the intimate source of their life and subjectivity. As the Buddha himself says, 'This body is of the same nature [as a corpse], will become like that, is not exempt from that fate'[211] while Trungpa advises the Tantric practitioner to become an 'open wound'.[212] The meditator becomes themselves via draining out of themselves, corpse-like.

Adhesion

In his short essay *En sortant du cinéma*, Barthes develops an account of cinematic spectatorship that preserves the wounded, double embodiment of the photograph. Beginning with an evocation of Lacanian film theory, Barthes describes the imaginary lure of the filmic image as a kind of 'bêtise', gluing or 'coller' the spectator to the screen. Seemingly still interested in becoming unglued from this fascination by the image, Barthes describes the well-known Brechtian method of critical vigilance as a way of 'décollant'.[213] Yet the climactic move of the essay is his postulation that there is another, more subtle, way of coming unglued from the image: 'en s'y laissant fasciner deux fois: par l'image et par ses entours'.[214] Barthes even goes so far as to suggest that it is 'comme si j'avais deux corps en même temps: un corps narcissique qui regarde,

[210] Prosser, *Buddha Barthes*, p. 220.
[211] Prosser, *Buddha Barthes*, p. 220.
[212] Prosser, *Buddha Barthes*, p. 216.

[213] Roland Barthes, *En sortant du cinéma.* In: Communications, 23, 1975. Psychanalyse et cinéma. pp. 104-107, 106.

[214] Barthes, *En sortant du cinéma*, p. 106.

perdu dans le miroir proche, et un corps pervers, prêt à fetichiser, non l'image, mais précisément ce qui l'excède'.[215] As we saw with Merleau-Ponty's account of the subject of the dream in *Innocence*, here we find a respirational movement in and out of the enclosure. We can think of the narcissistic body as a kind of pure subjectivity or voyeur, losing itself in the image, while the perverse body takes account of its own objectivity, one body amongst others. Again, the latter is the condition of the former: Barthes' cadaverous objectivity enables his animated subjectivity.

Barthes' perverse pleasure is not properly mediated outwards, into the fiction, but into the immediate space he shares with the other bodies: he takes himself as object alongside them. Patrick ffrench, commenting on the 'autoerotic' dimension of Barthes' model of spectatorship in the essay, argues that that it 'establishes the basis for what might now be called a theory of queer spectatorship, or at least for a queering of spectatorship whereby the body of the subject as spectator is doubled and troubled by an erotic body.'[216] Barthes perversely enjoys seemingly improper, now extra-diegetic sensoria: 'le grain du son, la salle, le noir, la masse obscure des autres corps, les rais de la lumière, l'entrée, la sortie'.[217] The impropriety of his attention finds something cadaverous; like the Tibetan monks meditating on corpses, Barthes is fascinated by his own immanent and carnal continuity with the world. Without the protective guardrail of a fictional diegesis, there is a thrill that comes with knowing that, in the words of the Buddha, his body 'is not exempt from that fate' of the bodies around him.

Beneath the carefree and perversely erotic veneer of Barthes' cinema-going is a subtle negotiation with death. ffrench picks up on this dimension in a comparative study of Barthes alongside Sartre's account of cinema-going in his autobiography *Les Mots*, writing that for both

[215] Barthes, *En sortant du cinéma*, p. 106.
[216] Patrick ffrench, *Roland Barthes and Film: Myth, Eroticism, Poetics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), p. 194.
[217] Barthes, *En sortant du cinéma*, p. 107.

authors, 'the 'salle de cinéma' is a space of desire, pregnant with the possibility of affective contact.'[218] Sartre recounts how, during his childhood, going to the cinema with his mother constituted a kind of Oedipal transgression of the stern law of his grandfather: 'Je me sentais clandestin', he writes, reveling in the multi-sensory overload as 'l'odeur et les fruits de cette nuit habitée se confondaient en moi'.[219] In place of the pomp and ceremony of the theater, in which the bourgeois social hierarchy remained on display, the anonymous bodies of the dark cinema hall suggested an alternative, communistic[220] vision of society—Sartre writes that, 'plutôt que par une fête, ce public si mêlé semblait réuni par une catastrophe; morte, l'étiquette démasquait enfin le véritable lien des hommes, l'adhérence.'[221] Sartre here develops the element of danger that is only implicit in Barthes' account of the cinema (although, as we have seen, present elsewhere). Moreover, it is this sense of danger, or woundedness, that unites the individual bodies into a crowd, *adhering* to one another.

In a striking temporal super-imposition, the cinema hall, and its sense of embodied adhesion, anticipates the political collectivity Sartre experiences during the second World War. The experience of immediacy is intertwined with an appreciation of mortality, as Sartre rediscovers this embodied 'adhésion' in a POW camp: 'Je pris en dégoût les cérémonies, j'adorai les foules; j'en ai vu de toute sorte mais je n'ai retrouvé cette nudité, cette présence sans recul de chacun à tous, ce rêve éveillé, cette conscience obscure du danger d'être homme qu'en 1940, dans le Stalag XII D.'[222] The mode of relation underlying the seemingly anodyne pleasure of cinema-going strangely prefigures the experience of mortal struggle—both rely on an unmediated and

[218] Patrick ffrench, *Catastrophe, Adherence, Proximity: Sartre (with Barthes) in the Cinema*, Sartre Studies International, Vol. 19, No. 1 (2013), pp. 35-54, 49.
[219] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Les Mots*, Collection Folio 607 (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), p. 102.
[220] In *La Nausée*, 'l'Autodidacte' describes how a similar experience of 'adhésion' in a POW camp during World War I inspired him to become a communist.
[221] Sartre, *Les Mots*, 103.
[222] Sartre, *Les Mots*, p 103.

uncanny exposure to bare life. As ffrench writes, 'The 'true bond' is an affective one, and this affirmation also insists on the fundamental, which is to say primal relation to the mother.'[223] Both Barthes and Sartre, are, in a sense, 'stuck' on the maternal imago. Yet appreciating the full resonance of the *coller* and *adhésion* allows us to view this bond not as a trifling fancy, but a drive with existential, mortal stakes. Their wounded embodiment allows them to come into being as subjects, necessarily partaking of the collective.

Primitive

Apichatpong, like Barthes and Marker, is a 'boyish man', who, picking at a bruise, ends up opening an existential confrontation with death. Yet he also wagers that this confrontation can be revivifying, once we realize it is always already happening by virtue of our embodied intertwining with the world. For Apichatpong, like Barthes, it is Buddhism that helps him accede to this perspective. While having the benefit of being raised in a Buddhist nation, his understanding of the religion is just as idiosyncratic as Barthes'. Devoid of any institutional affiliation, Apichatpong also invokes Buddhism to justify his own singular, embodied perspective, and the exposure to worldliness, finitude, and suffering that it brings. Buddhism is therefore related to the photograph in its power to ravish us and bring us to these heightened forms of awareness. Both are subsumed under Apichatpong's notion of the primitive: before the re-animating power of the moving image, there is the de-animating power of the photograph and meditation, allowing us to commune with the nonhuman, nonliving beings through our cadaverous materiality. Apichatpong's characters thus explore the most visionary reaches of human subjectivity only by appreciating their animality and mortal embodiment.

[223] ffrench, *Catastrophe, Adherence, Proximity*, p. 51.

Apichatpong's maturation as an artist follows a strikingly similar (if inverted) trajectory to Barthes' late career as a philosopher. He regularly turns to foreign (European and North-American) cultural sources to elaborate his attachments to his indigenous culture or motherland—or, in some cases, his literal mother. One of his earliest short films, *0116643225059* (1994), made while attending the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, is constructed around homesick phone calls to his mother in Khon Khaen. As David Teh argues, the *nirat*, a Thai lyric genre composed around narratives of melancholy and longing, is foundational to his work, concerned as it is with 'uncrossable expanses of space time'.[224] Yet this attachment to the home is mediated, as is obvious from even a brief synopsis, by his exposure to European avant-garde filmmakers like Chantal Akerman and her epistolary docufiction work *News from Home* (1977). So, too, is his interest in Thai animist and Buddhist beliefs in *Uncle Boonmee* nourished by his exposure to French surrealism. Just as Barthes turned to Eastern religion to elaborate his state of wounded subjectivity, Apichatpong looks to the European and North American avant-garde as confirmation of the worldview of his childhood.

As a result of this immersion, his return to Thailand, and the native customs he grew up with, constitutes a kind of de-distancing. He is fascinated by the local supernatural beliefs of the Isaan region, but without fully subscribing to them himself. While Apichatpong identifies as a Buddhist, his practice has an oblique relation to the institutionalized and often conservative Buddhism propagated by the Thai government, instead inhabiting a more syncretic form that does not discriminate between animist and Buddhist beliefs. As Teh outlines, 'While Buddhist symbols appear frequently in his work—as in everyday life—he avoids the sacral zones of religious life, instead framing the clergy (sangha) in profane and quotidian contexts.'[225] As we

[224] David Teh, 'Itinerant Cinema', *Third Text* 25, no. 5 (September 2011): 595–609, p. 607.
[225] Teh, 'Itinerant Cinema', p. 602.

will see in *Uncle Boonmee*, Apichatpong is interested in the worldly aspect of religion, as the figure of 'the monk' becomes a subject to be ravished and turned into a man.

As a result of this ambiguous position, it is easy for foreign observers to smooth out the intricacies of the local culture: the film is set in an interstitial space, the border region of Isaan. As the border with Laos was only demarcated relatively recently, Isaan has retained a distinct culture at odds with the nationalism espoused by the Thai government. The local dialect is Lao, rather than Thai, and village life was traditionally matriarchal and included elements of animism alongside Buddhism. The region's geographic and cultural distance from Bangkok made it a hotbed of communist agitation during the Vietnam War in the 1970's, with student radicals and Vietcong supporters eventually retreating into the dense jungle along the border with Laos. These fugitive scenes fed into the existing animist belief system, as the border zone become a place haunted in a polyvalent, political sense. The region became a thorn in the side of the Thai government intent on—and eventually successful in—implementing a 'monological Siamese-Buddhist patriarchy'.[226]

It is this trauma that Apichatpong remains 'stuck' on. Like 'a wound from yesterday felt today', these images *insist*, leading Apichatpong, like Barthes, to turn to the photograph as his political medium of his choice. In the *Primitive* project, subsequently incorporated into a sequence in *Uncle Boonmee*, Apichatpong assembled a series of photographs he had taken of local adolescent boys around the town of Nabua in Isaan. These stylized photographs, depicting the children of the insurgents who disappeared into the forest in the 1970's posing alongside costumed 'monkey-ghosts', disrupt the official history of the Thai state and its recourse to teleological narratives of modernization and cultural homogenization. Apichatpong thus allows

[226] Teh, 'Itinerant Cinema', p. 602.

us to understand the 'primitive' aspect of the photograph in a polyvalent sense: it is a stillness that haunts the moving image, an animality that haunts the human, a cave (or theater) full of corpses that haunts the voyeurist subject. The still photos comprising *Primitive* are played in *Uncle Boonmee* as the titular character enters a cave—which he refers to as a 'womb'—as he nears death. Apichatpong himself draws attention to this association: 'And when Uncle Boonmee goes back to the womb in the cave I wanted to take the movie back to its origins, before the image moved, before it became the moving image.'[227] The return to origins—photographic, animal, maternal—is not regressive, but centers us squarely in the present. It is the cadaverous body that is the source of our life and subjectivity.

While Apichatpong references the photograph as 'the origin' of the moving image, he is not creating an absolute hierarchy of media as much as he is valorizing a more 'originary' type of looking: 'A monk recently told me that… when one meditates, one doesn't need film. As if film was an excess. In a way he is right. Our brain is the best camera and projector. If only we can find a way to operate it properly.'[228] A monk meditating can access the 'aliveness of death' carried by the photograph and the space of the theater. Apichatpong therefore emphasizes that this originary form of looking is the result of a singular, embodied perspective: 'Usually in science you have an apparatus to measure things, but in the Buddhist way the body is the apparatus, the machine to do that, and it's up to the individual to measure'.[229] Acquiescing to this embodiment re-calibrates what we find interesting and enjoyable in a film: we look for too long in the wrong places, like Barthes, Sartre and the Tibetan monks.[230]

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[227] Virginie Sélavy, 'Uncle Boonmee: Interview with Apichatpong Weerasethakul', *Electric Sheep*, 13 November 2010.
[228] James Quandt, ed., *Apichatpong Weerasethakul* (Vienna: Synema, 2009), p. 89.
[229] Peranson and Kong Rithdee, 'Ghost in the Machine'.
[230] Apichatpong credits Andy Warhol—another figure who could fit into Mavor's lineage of 'boyish men'—with changing his manner of conceiving cinematic time.

This is an enjoyment that is indifferent to diegetic boundaries, activating the doubled or 'troubled erotic body' evoked by Barthes in *En sortant du cinéma*. When asked to expand on his interest in 'Buddhism and quantum physics' and 'filmmaking as self-awareness' in an interview, Apichatpong virtually re-states Barthes' and Sartre's cinema-going scenario: 'Film is able to increase the self-awareness of the audience—to become aware of the other people sitting in the dark, to see the activities on the screen as illusion, and to realize that this is an animal behavior.'[231] Here we find the process of *double fascination*: coming unglued from 'the screen as illusion', Apichatpong is instead fascinated by the sensual space of the theater. As demonstrated by Sartre, this adhesion of bodies comes with an exposure to death. Apichatpong's theater is therefore also 'maternal' in a double sense—a womb-like retreat that prefigures and instantiates a political vision of collectivity:

> Just as we like to look at ghosts, we seem instinctively to want to enter dark halls; we are excited by the prospect of hearing stories that emanate from that light in the darkness. It is like returning to our mother's womb, fleeing there for safety, like the time during the war in Laos, when people living on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the trail created by the communists to send supplies to the Vietcong in southern Vietnam, were attacked by phosphorous bombs during an air raid and took refuge in a cave; hundreds of them were killed there by poisonous gases. The cave is probably still full of bones, ranging from small children to adults. If you went to see it now you might see real ghosts there – you wouldn't need a film.[232]

To return to the womb, for Apichatpong, is not a simple consolatory process, but a painful, even tragic one, in which one risks their mortal embodiment. Yet the pleasure-pain of this embodied drive engenders its own form of sensing, one that is community forming: a diffuse democracy of attention. If he once again refers to cinema as being superfluous to a process of meditation, it is

[231] Ji-Hoon Kim, 'Learning About Time: An Interview with Apichatpong Weerasethakul', *Film Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (Summer 2011): 48–52, 52.
[232] Quandt, *Apichatpong Weerasethakul* (Vienna: Synema, 2009), p. 114.

only in the sense that cinema should be *subordinated* to meditation: a cinema that acknowledges our mortal, animal embodiment as the source of vision.

A Bed is a Boat

Uncle Boonmee is a story of people learning how to look with their body. This process of learning how to 'properly operate' the apparatus of the body, is a difficult one. This is partially due to the fact that the story is told from the perspective of one of the perpetrators of Thailand's communist purge: Boonmee (Thanapat Saisaymar), a successful farmer dying of kidney failure, attended to by his sister-in-law, Jen (Jenjira Pongpas) and nephew Tong (Sakda Kaewbuadee). In order to re-learn how to operate his mind, Boonmee thus requires the collective adhesion of precarious, transient subjectivities: the migrant workers he employs, his own son, the 'monkey ghost' Boonsong (Jeerasak Kulhong), the ghost of his dead wife Huay (Natthakarn Aphaiwong), as well as one of his past lives, as a princess who copulates with a catfish. Through his interactions with these characters, Boonmee's militarized and masculine identity unravels. We watch this process unfold as Boonmee and the family follow the monkey ghosts into the jungle and then a cave, as Boonmee believes he was born there in a past life. Surrounded by his family as the life literally and figuratively drains out of him, Boonmee is ravished, becoming himself through his wound and the dependency it engenders in him.

Apichatpong bookends the film with spectatorial journeys, as the film's opening, introducing the family—Boonmee, Jen and Tong—also functions as a quietly enigmatic meditation on looking. We find them driving in a car, via three isolated shots of extended duration concentrating on each character. We eventually learn Jen and Tong are travelling to Boonmee's estate to assist in his medical care, yet it is unclear where they are coming from;

given some of the later dialogue and Apichatpong's longstanding interest in the Thai rural-urban divide, it is probable they have travelled from a larger urban center such as Khon Khaen or Bangkok. What is more important is where they are travelling *to*: with the socio-historical context of Isaan in mind, the car ride becomes a fairy-tale like initiation, for these dislocated outsiders, into the subtly 'exotic' environment of the region. The car functions in a similar manner to the time-machine/space-pod contained in some photographs of the *Primitive* project, ferrying human subjectivity between worlds. The family's vision is passive, even soporific, carried along by its material transport—the car functioning as the bed or boat from Mavor's fairy tales. Devoid of dialogue, the scene gives a fragmented impression of the family, as Apichatpong frames each shot around a car window, Jen and then Tong gazing out distractedly at the passing landscape. Eventually Jen opens the window and basks in the flickering light through the trees. The family, here, is gathered together only in order to look outwards, at the world. Apichatpong introduces us to the characters not for who they are, but how they look—and what they become.

As the family arrives at Boonmee's estate, we see them immediately engaged in a process of setting up a new 'pod' or spectatorial arena, allowing Boonmee to accede to his wounded form of subjectivity. The first shot shows the darkened upstairs hall, illuminated by a patch of light entering through the window. This shot is followed by Tong and Boonmee's nurse Jaai (Samud Kugasang) cleaning up Boonmee's bedroom, again illuminated by a single window before Tong opens a second, drastically altering the exposure of the shot. This room, which serves as a makeshift hospice for Boonmee, intertwines the fairy-tale bed with Apichatpong's twin passions for medicine and cinema. The son of two doctors, Apichatpong remains fascinated by the medical profession, specifically the way residues of folk practice and even religious perspectives on death remain present in an otherwise clinical setting. Boonmee's illness thereby

becomes a form of meditation, acceding to a different form of vision as his body slips towards a new existential state. As Boonmee lies prostrate in bed, Jaai manages a tube inserted into his stomach to drain fluid from his kidney; repeated throughout the film, this routine foregrounds the way in which Boonmee literally drains out of himself. Boonmee meanwhile gazes out of the window, evoking Deleuze's 'cinema of the seer' inaugurated by figures like James Stewart in *Rear Window* (1954): protagonists who have become spectators of their own lives due to the breakdown of the sensory-motor schema. Jaai's maintenance of Boonmee's apparatus of tubes gives the impression of hooking him up to a virtual reality device, as the care he gives Boonmee is the ability to use his brain correctly, as a camera and projector.

The figure of Jaai, a migrant worker from Laos, brings together the political and existential dimensions of itinerancy in the film. Some of Jen's first lines of dialogue reveal her prejudice towards migrant workers. Whispering behind Jaai's back, she asks Boonmee, 'Aren't you afraid of illegal immigrants? They can rob you, kill you and disappear', while Tong states, 'I tried to talk to him, but I can't understand the Isaan dialect'. Jen 'corrects' him by stating 'Not Isaan, Lao', thereby collapsing Jaai's interstitial position into a neat nationalist category. More than a marginalized group, the migrant workers seem to be beyond the pale of human interaction; this perspective is made explicit when Jen later asks Boonmee, 'How can you expect me to live here with all the ghosts and migrant workers?' Indeed, Jaai's role maintaining Boonmee's health—sitting with him in his hospice room, adjusting his catheter—will later be taken over by the ghost of Huay. By virtue of their transience and precarity, the migrant workers foreground the fact that, like ghosts, they are already dead and going-to-die. Apichatpong thus situates Jaai not just as a precarious laborer, but also as one of many transitional figures in the film, who, like the monkey ghosts, shepherd Boonmee between existential states. This disavowed dynamic

becomes clear when Boonmee, in front of Jen and Tong, shouts at Jaai, 'my kidney needs you', simultaneously playing the role of demanding boss and emotional and physical dependent. In the privacy of his bedroom, Boonmee reveals that Jaai's vulnerability as a transient migrant worker is intertwined with his own mortal vulnerability, asking him 'will you stay with me to the very end?'

Animal Lures

Boonmee's relationship with Jaai anticipates the network of care he receives once the ghost of his wife, Huay, and Boonsong as a monkey ghost, enter the film. All of these characters point to the impossibility of total disappearance: they remain present as images, traces of themselves, the past insisting in the present. In this scene, Apichatpong draws on both the tradition of Thai genre films, replete with highly artificial, costumed ghosts and monsters, as well as animist belief systems. Boonmee and Jen ask matter-of-fact questions about whether Huay has enough food, clothes, and water, treating her as if she's just arrived from a conventional trip, such as the family's car-ride in the opening of the film. By incarnating the figure of Huay's ghost, Apichatpong also renders the living bodies ghostly and de-animated: they too are wounded, separated from themselves. As Boonmee follows Huay, the rest of the family will eventually follow Boonmee: the living and the dead exist on a spectrum, a difference of degree rather than of kind.

Seeming to exist in the middle of this spectrum is the monkey ghost Boonsong. We learn from Boonsong that he 'disappeared' six years after Huay's death, the mother and son's trajectories evoking Barthes' morbid contagion via his mother's image. Photography, for Boonsong, is also a practice of meditation, appreciating the Bardo or 'death' that inheres in life:

he tells Boonmee that, before joining the monkey ghosts in the jungle, he 'practiced with your Pentax camera'. He continues, 'I tried to understand that thing… what do you call it? The art of photography', while turning to look directly into the camera, thereby consolidating photography's association with documentary immediacy and diegetic instability. We then cut to a flashback sequence of Boonsong—in human form—developing photographic negatives in a red-room, discovering that his images have unwittingly captured the flight of a monkey through the tree canopy. Marching into the jungle with his camera, he 'searched for that thing in the photo,' evoking the elusive quality of Barthes' punctum. As Natalie Boehler notes, the scene, in which Boonsong hovers over the developing photos with a magnifying glass, invokes the plot and imagery of Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966).[233] Both films feature a photographer protagonist who stumbles upon a punctum-like detail in a scene of nature—an English park in Antonioni's film, the jungle in *Uncle Boonmee*—that prompts an obsessive quest into ratifying the referential truth of the image. The end of *Blow-Up*, in which the photographer protagonist 'learns to see' alongside a motley crew of counter-cultural revelers, anticipates Boonsong's own initiation into the dilated visions of the jungle-dwelling monkey ghosts.[234]

Apichatpong's trust in the real of the image, however, relies more on Chris Marker than Antonioni: as in *La Jetée*, Boonsong's desired image does return in a kind of confirmation of the image's indexical power. Marker's film, like Apichatpong's, foregrounds spectatorship as an apprenticeship in operating a quasi-spiritual apparatus: a scientist, wearing elaborate protruding spectacles that anticipate the beady red eyes of the monkey ghosts, hovers over the protagonist,

[233] Natalie Boehler, 'Haunted Time, Still Photography and Cinema as Memory: The Dream Sequence in Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives', *Journal of Modern Literature in Chinese* 12, no. 1 (2014): 62–72.
[234] Yet the two films part ways over the larger implications of this dynamic, as *Blow-Up*'s thesis roughly amounts to 'seeing is believing', foregrounding the way images mediate an ultimately unknowable reality, whereas Apichatpong's photograph seems to be a direct emanation of the real with which the observer may gain contact.

prostrate in a hammock. The scientist (alongside the people from the future shown to have a third eye) thus mirrors the monkey ghosts teaching Boonsong, and later Boonmee, *how to see*, as well as Jaai tending to Boonmee in his hospice bed. Aligning with the adult women in *Innocence*, Boonsong and Boonmee are also people 'given to very strong mental images', attempting to dream and live in another time.

In this wounding by the image, Marker's protagonist is returned to the source of his subjectivity. Both films relish the cavernous intimacy that comes with the projection of images—the pulsing heartbeat soundtrack playing over the underground Chatelain cavern have led critics like Mavor and Sarah Cooper to compare the film's audio-visual environs to a womb. Boonmee laying in his hospice bed, tended to by Jaai and later Huay, and Boonsong's flashback, featuring a pulsing chime played over the red interior of the photo darkroom and the cavernous forest, creates a similar intra-uterine effect. Comparing *La Jetée*'s 'womb' to Plato's allegory of the cave—in which the illusory realm of images must be renounced in order to access reality—Cooper argues that 'the scrambled chronology and oedipal bond of *La Jetée* suggests that the mother is the permanent travelling companion of our protagonist, rather than being disregarded.'[235] Indeed, the photographic temporality in the film is not posed as an obstacle to overcome, but as the source of movement—the scientists teach the man how to maximize his use of the subterranean, womb-like reverie, to 'operate it properly'.

The 'climax' of the film occurs in the 'Museum of Ageless Animals' sequence, in which Marker's protagonist communes with the unnamed woman amongst taxidermied animals in the Natural History Museum. As the couple arrives at the museum, the narrator announces, 'Now they had hit the bullseye. They may stay there and move without trouble', again recalling the

[235] Sarah Cooper, *Chris Marker* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), p. 52.

ideality of the fetishist and their attempt to regain lost time. Anticipating *Uncle Boonmee*, here the narrator is united not only with the woman from his past, but also with a more archaic, nonhuman past: on a visual level, the human is indistinguishable from the animal. As the couple observe a glass case full of birds, Marker's framing creates an uncanny mimesis, problematizing our ability to discern if the humans or animals are the figures on display. Nonetheless, the dramatic orchestral score and montage reminds us that the film is still moving: this cadaverous animality is the source, rather than terminus, of the film's motion, a sensation confirmed in the equally striking sequence of the frame-rate speeding up to reveal the woman smiling.

Aided by his camera, Boonsong also pursues a hunt through time that 'hits the bullseye'. As he traipses through the jungle with his camera, Boonsong's narration states, 'I was obsessed with this new creature. I tried to chase it down, while it leapt from branch to branch', evoking a series of temporal vertigoes: Marker's protagonist chasing the unnamed woman through time, the animalistic, erotic hunt of *Tropical Malady*, and the hysterical reversal of predator-prey relationships in Barthes' 'modern myth' of psychoanalysis. Here we might also think of Marker's remark on *Vertigo* in *Sans Soleil*: 'He is the hunter and she is the prey—or is it the other way around?' This reversal becomes apparent as Boonmee crouches amidst the jungle flora, frantically taking pictures while we hear, off-screen, the rustling of the monkeys hopping from the trees (figure 16).



Figure 16: Boonsong—hunter or hunted?

He thereby already appears quasi-animal—hunter, hunted and *haunted*. In resonance with Barthes's modern reversal of archaic myth, Boonsong's desire scrambles his sense of subjectivity and objectivity: he sets out on a hunt only to find himself captured, ravished, hystericized. He is a subjective object acceding to a new form of vision: as a result of his 'mating with a monkey ghost', Boonsong recounts how 'his hair grew longer and his pupils dilated', over a shot of the sun shining through the tree canopy, resembling a makeshift 'iris' or aperture. He has become a heightened, perceiving subject by virtue of his intertwining with a nonhuman ecology.

The character who seems to be most affected by Boonsong's tale is his father, Boonmee. As much as this sequence—and the film as a whole—is concerned with the maternal imago,

Apichatpong is also interested in exploring a transformative father-son dynamic. Boonmee's transformation and repentance for participating in the military purges of communists thus follows from Boonsong's transformation into an animal. In this regard, Apichatpong's admiration for the *Avatar* franchise—and its story of a human military commander who transforms into the object of his prey, an extra-terrestrial Na'avi—takes on added resonance.[236] In both cases, we find characters who discover their humanity by becoming something other than human. This process is a shift in perspective, as Apichatpong's characterization of the Na'avi evokes seeing the world through new eyes: 'the characters have those very big eyes, they're like babies,' he remarks.[237] Boonmee's transformation also begins as a process of looking. Immediately after Boonsong's recollection ends, Boonmee brings out a photo album, prompting Boonsong to respond, clearly affected, 'I see you started taking photos again.'

Boonsong's recollection thus prompts Boonmee to undertake a broader reappraisal of vision, one that includes a seer-like rumination on his past lives. Although Apichatpong refers to the episode of the princess and the catfish as one of Boonmee's 'past lives', it is not clear which character, if any, is supposed to be Boonmee. The transition into and out of the sequence also destabilizes any one agent of memory. We cut from Boonmee, laying down to sleep in his small hut, to a shot of the darkened house with light streaming through the window 'aperture', to Tong, reclining *La Jetée*-like in a hammock on the veranda. The strains of Thai classical music from the flashback begin over the shot of the window; Boonmee's memory or past life seems collective, as if all the characters, and even the house itself, are drifting into reverie. The end of the sequence also contributes to this sensation: after the princess' copulation with the catfish, we

[236] Apichatpong's magical realism is nourished by the mainstream as much as the avant-garde, as he cites Steven Spielberg films like *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) as formative influences. See Quandt, 2009.
[237] Giovanni Marchini Camia, 'The Metrograph Interview: Apichatpong Weerasethakul', *Metrograph*, February 2023.

cut back to Jen, sitting by herself at the dinner table, absent-mindedly swatting flies. As in the tree-canopy serving as Boonsong's 'dilated pupil', here Boonmee's heightened vision is a product of a wider ecology of sense.

The catfish episode continues Boonsong's lesson from the monkey ghosts, exploring the manner in which wounded embodiment becomes a source of subjective transformation. Moreover, this embrace of woundedness carries a political valence. Apichatpong himself underlines this connection between the subversive dimension of the two characters: 'Like Boonsong, the princess wasn't comfortable with what she was. They reflect the history of Communism during the 1970s. The Communists were driven out into the jungle, especially around Esarn — where my films are made — because they didn't belong.'[238] Apichatpong condenses the princess' lack of belonging in the scars upon her face: like Barthes, Marker and Boonsong, she has her own wound from the past. As she gazes onto her reflection in the water, her scars miraculously disappear in the reflection, the transformation later revealed to be carried out by the catfish. What is paramount here is that the princess discovers who she is for the other. Rather than 'fixing' anything about her wound, the catfish allowed her to see it *other*-wise, from the perspective of the nonhuman. The princess' reflection, with her face framed by the canopy of trees, itself 'mirrors' Boonsong's photograph of the monkey flying across the treetops, with the blue sky behind her face directly contrasting with the red tint of the photo darkroom. Like Boonsong, she has also been captured, ravished by the animal. She 'becomes herself' via this objectivity: 'Most women don't have what you have', the catfish tells her, revealing that her scarred face, for him, is beautiful. As she steps into the water and allows the catfish to pleasure her, her royal garments and jewels drop to the floor of the pond. Like Boonsong, she has

[238] Chomwan Weeraworawit, 'Apichatpong Weerasethakul', *Purple*, 2011, https://purple.fr/magazine/ss-2011-issue-15/apichatpong-weerasethakul/.

abdicated from her symbolic position in order to reach her subjective singularity, re-emerging as a ravished, amorous subject.

United by a Catastrophe

Boonmee therefore learns, like the princess, to find peace with his wound through embracing it. As the family departs for the caves, Boonmee allows his body to draw him towards a realm of ineradicable appearances and material traces: an absence that is never absent enough. In the cave, this very inability to disappear itself becomes productive and life-giving. We see cave paintings on the walls, records of human habitation, and then, in an echo of the catfish, a small pool full of small fish. Containing signs of both recollection and renewal, the cave functions as both a tomb and a womb, a zero degree in which the ashen cinders of life mix with life-giving waters. Boonmee remarks: 'This cave is like a womb, isn't it? I was born here, in a life I can't recall. I only know that I was born here. I don't know if I was a human, or an animal, a woman or a man.' Like Barthes or the Tibetan monks, Boonmee's exposure to death is revivifying, heightening his senses.

Boonmee's trajectory into the cave is not that of the hunt, but rather one of voluntary objectification and capture. Over a shot of the moon shining into an opening in the roof of the cave, Boonmee asks, 'What's wrong with my eyes? They are open but I can't see a thing. Or maybe they're closed' to which Jen responds, 'Maybe you need time for your eyes to adjust to the dark.' As the cave opening forms an aperture—in a visual rhyme with the makeshift tree-canopy aperture from Boonsong's photographic negative—we get the sensation that Boonmee, too, is transitioning from the perspective of active voyeur to a more enigmatic intertwining of subjectivity and objectivity, humanity and animality. Corresponding to this move away from the

purely human realm, the cave seems to paradoxically brighten the further they progress: at its narrow entrance, it lets in a hazy blue light; further in, gemstones in the walls begin to flicker, giving off an iridescent display. Soon after, in the pitch-black darkness, we see the hovering eyes of monkey ghosts, the lucidity of night that looks back. Like Boonsong and the princess, as well as Hadzhihalilovic's environmental irises, Boonmee has become the object of a nonhuman gaze.

This inwards trajectory culminates in the photographs of the *Primitive* project. Here Apichatpong literalizes the photographic dimension of the bones of the communists sitting in the caves, or the corpses meditated upon by Tibetan Buddhists: these images insist as remainders, dead and going-to-die. These photographs, again referencing *La Jetée*, also literalize that film's photographic 'skeleton' structure. This slowing down, in which Boonmee embraces his wounded objectivity, comprises an attempt to use his brain as camera and projector, learning how to 'operate it properly'. The photos, relative to the hazy day-for-night shooting of the jungle and low-exposure shots of the cave, are striking in their clarity—in some images, we see a shallow depth of field emphasizing small details such as leaves on a tree branch (figure 17.) Boonmee's reverie does not become more diffuse, but rather more lucid and exacting: it is only in this womb-like remove of the cave that the truth of political history can come to light. Here we find Apichatpong's Buddhist interest in the body replacing the scientific measuring apparatus: these truths are wounding appearances only available to subjectivity.



Figure 2: Clarity of Boonmee's dying reverie

In this regard, they mirror the hallucinatory quality of the punctum for Barthes, which constitutes a veritable scandal in modernity. It is for this reason that the 'truth' these images depict does not lend itself to any narrative explication: the punctum will vary according to each viewer. Boonmee's vaguely mournful and harrowing narration, describing how 'past people' or 'time travelers' were hunted down by the authorities in the future, relates obliquely to the visual contents (or 'studium') of the images themselves, often depicting seemingly carefree local boys playing in the fields. In one shot, soldiers are posed, smiling alongside the monkey they have 'captured', the image parodying the logic of the hunt and predator-prey scenarios. For the entire sequence, Boonmee's voice is untethered from his body, remaining in voice-over: he *wanders* like Barthes, exiled from the realm of human or common sense.

Boonmee's last line of narration, 'and then I disappeared', is followed by an abrupt cut back to him laying prostrate in the cave, held by Jen and Huay: his cadaverous presence stubbornly persists. As Huay unbuttons his shirt, draining fluid from his catheter, he instantiates Barthes' wounded subject, constituted in the act of draining out of himself. Huay, already a ghost, tending to Boonmee as he approaches death, foregrounds the fact that all of the family are dead and going to die. In a painterly wide-shot, we watch in real time as the fluid trickles along the sandy floor of the cave. The very moment we are most cognizant of Boonmee and the group's impending mortality, time literally slows to a crawl, even engendering its own form of deadpan comedy as Tong begins to hesitantly inch away as the fluid nears him. Tending towards the minutia of everyday life makes death seem both inevitable and impossible. As Boonmee slips away towards death, the family seems on the verge of following him, partaking of a cadaverous materiality.

Apichatpong foregrounds the manner in which these wounded subjects 'drain out' into a wider ecology of sense. As we saw in *Evolution*, with Nicolas' communion with marine life inside the hospital, the body's vulnerability intertwines us with other life-forms. As the sound of Boonmee's trickling fluid continues on the soundtrack, it merges with a dense collage of nocturnal insect noises as we cut to an image of monkey ghosts in the forest, staring into the camera. Life, Apichatpong seems to say, is always looking, listening, and feeling around us, a fact that becomes clear once we attend to our own and others' wounded embodiment. The sensual arena of the cave—exploring the tenderness of touch between men and women, the hesitancy of youth in front of a dying body—is relayed, via the dense sensorial thicket of the jungle spectators, to our own viewing arena, hopefully imbuing it with a renewed sense of intimacy.

Implicating us in a trans-species network of visible viewers, Apichatpong prompts us to use our active sensing to reflect on our passive sensibility. We have just watched Boonmee, the seer or visionary, give way to Boonmee the passive, dying, material body. Such is Apichatpong's vision of cinematic spectatorship: as we watch ourselves watching, we come to the uncanny realization that this visible, cadaverous body will outlast our viewing subjectivity. The irreversible moment, when the objective body definitively takes the reins from subjectivity, arrives in the last image we see of Boonmee. As daybreak illuminates the cave, he is laying alongside Jen: the upper half of both bodies are submerged in darkness, the bottom half exposed to the light. While Jen is sleeping and Boonmee is presumably dead, in this juxtaposition Apichatpong troubles the distinction between them. While Jen will soon sit up and reawaken into consciousness, and Boonmee will not, by inhabiting this anonymous realm of the image, death can, for a short duration, become shared and communal (figure 18). The group's communal spectatorship in the cave is thus a preparation for death: a death-in-life that we can access as a preparation for when the moment finally comes, a body that is dead and going-to-die.



Figure 3: Jen and Boonmee as dead and going-to-die.

In the final scene of the film, Apichatpong presents us with another forking of time that comes closer to substantializing the 'after-life' Boonmee may have arrived at. Tong, now a monk, is unable to sleep at the monastery, so he comes to visit Jen and her friend Roong (Kanokporn Thongaram) in their hotel room. Appearing in orange robe and with a shaved head, Tong's new station in life functions as a quasi-reincarnation. This dynamic is confirmed when Jen tells Tong, 'You are a monk, not a man', evoking the transformation of Boonsong. Yet this rebirth is again eroticized and subjected to hysterical reversal: as they sit on opposite sides of the room, Jen and Roong playfully tease him about being near the 'temptation' of women. As he goes to shower, re-emerging in jeans and a t-shirt, Apichatpong foregrounds the fluidity of 'incarnations' one takes on within a life. The monk seems to have now become a man, moving back towards worldliness.

As Tong and Jen prepare to leave for dinner, Tong is shocked to see doubled versions of themselves still sitting in front of the television, 'glued' to the screen.[239] Tong's gaze drifts back and forth, between his doppelganger and his own body: a *double fascination*. Jen gradually pulls Tong away to leave, as we cut to them sitting in a restaurant booth. As in the cave, we see two bodies, one that recedes into the image, another one that wakes up (and goes to eat dinner.) Yet now Apichatpong dares to ask: what if the objective, cadaverous body continues to look? Just as sleep is not the negation of consciousness but rather an altered form of it, with heightened receptivity to bodily drives, Apichatpong imagines that death may contain its own form of vision: the ultimate nonhuman gaze. Cutting between Jen sitting in the restaurant and her

[239] Apichatpong achieved this effect through double exposure, presumably as an homage to one of his major influences, Maya Deren, who used the technique to multiply her own image in her film *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943).

doppelganger staring at the TV, it is difficult to say which one is more 'awake' or even 'alive'. The restaurant, another womb-like enclosure—curtains drawn over the windows, a painting of flowers the only allusion to the outside world—seems to lull Jen into a relaxed, soporific state as she hypnotically stares at the twinkling colored lights. The chasm separating Boonmee from Jen is ameliorated by Jen's separation from herself: plural bodies, living and dead, continue to look, together and separate in the realm of the image.

In bringing Barthes and Apichatpong into dialogue, I have argued that both of them view the body as a boat, able to lead into all sorts of surprising and fantastical dimensions. While Barthes has not traditionally been known as a thinker interested in dreams, visions and the supernatural (even in his late work), I have attempted to demonstrate that the ravishing and wounding power of the Barthesian image takes subjectivity to a place that broaches the oneiric ecology of Apichatpong. In positioning Apichatpong as a thinker of wounded subjectivity, in dialogue with Barthes and Mavor's corpus (Marker, Hitchcock, Proust), we have seen how his work opens onto more psychoanalytic questions of desire without losing the historical and cultural specificity of Thailand and the Isaan region. Both Barthes and Apichatpong problematize attempts to draw a clean dividing line between East and West: the wounded subject belongs equally to Parsifal and Chogyam Trungpa, Marker and Apichatpong's monk. Apichatpong, like Barthes, imagines the pleasure of picking at a bruise not as a subjective withdrawal, but as a shared vulnerability, evidenced throughout history, wherever there are dark caves.

Others Are Present to Us as Dreams

Cemetary of Splendour is the film in which Apichatpong engages most directly with one of his longstanding interests: sleep. Far from being a private withdrawal, sleep, for Apichatpong, is pervaded by collective and environmental history. In this regard, sleep functions in a similar manner to the wounding I have foregrounded in *Uncle Boonmee*: rather than something to be cured, the subjective withdrawal instantiated by sleep also constitutes us as social beings. To elucidate the film's vision of somnolescent and ecological enmeshment, I will turn to the thought of Freud and Merleau-Ponty, who both demonstrate that fantasies and dreams are a necessary ingredient of our social and ecological being. Like Barthes, Merleau-Ponty brings out Freud's appreciation for the ambiguous dimensions of lived experience, hovering in between subjectivity and objectivity. By revealing a nonhuman, even animist dimension of psychoanalysis, Merleau-Ponty, like Apichatpong, problematizes neat categorizations of east and west. He thereby allows us to see the continuity between Apichatpong's interest in Thai animism and the thoroughly rationalist thinking of Freud, suggesting that ecological thinking need not be considered an obstacle towards the relationality prized by psychoanalysis, but is instead a necessity.

If Freud is a thinker of the flesh, for Merleau-Ponty, this is due to his assertion that libido inextricably tethers us to other beings. This perspective becomes clear with the publication of 'On Narcissism' (1914), inaugurating a second phase of his career in which the dualism of ego-instincts and sexual instincts is replaced by a libidinal monism. That is to say, our means of withdrawal are also our means of accessing the world and others, as libido becomes a hinge between inside and outside. One consequence of this perspective, already evident in clinical cases like Dora, is that there is always a latent sociality even in the most extreme cases of narcissistic withdrawal: sexuality is always expressive. Freud's shibboleth that the seemingly

irrational phenomena of dreams, neurotic symptoms, and psychotic delusions are intelligible, and, moreover, explicable in terms of sexuality, is another way of saying we never lose contact with the sensible world. If the purpose of dreams, for Freud, is to protect the narcissism of sleep through keeping external stimuli at bay, this experience is also strangely alienating, as we become objectified by the dramaturgy of the other within ourselves, the unconscious.

In an inverse fashion, Freud reveals how waking life is equally mediated by the unconscious, asserting that we are always dreaming even in the most seemingly 'normal' states of social interaction. As he outlines in 'The Unconscious' essay, this oneiric quality of reality is due to the fact that the Other's subjectivity is an unverifiable hypothesis, that 'Consciousness makes each of us aware only of his own states of mind'.[240] Yet Freud sidesteps this apparent impasse by embracing the manner in which we must resort to the unconscious to reach the Other's subjectivity: 'It would probably be psychologically more correct to put it thus: that without any special reflection we impute to everyone else our own constitution and therefore also our consciousness, and that this identification is a necessary condition of understanding in us'.[241] In other words, we must dream the Other and reality into existence, compensating for consciousness' shortcoming. He goes on to make the startling assertion that the Other's subjectivity, as well as the unconscious—itself an unverifiable hypothesis—form an irreducible residue of psychic life *in which we remain animist*.[242] Freud writes: 'The psychoanalytic assumption of unconscious mental activity appears to us… a further development of that

[240] Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, Repr, vol. XIV (London: Hogarth Press, 1999), p. 169.
[241] Freud, *The Standard Edition* vol. XIV, p. 169.
[242] Monique David-Ménard and Pierre Fédida are some of the few psychoanalysts who have drawn attention to this more positive valence of animism in Freud. See Monique David-Ménard, *La vie sociale des choses: L'animisme et les objets* (Paris: Le bord de l'eau, 2020) and Pierre Fédida, *Par où commence le corps humain? Retour sur la régression* (Presses Universitaires de France, 2000).

primitive animism which caused our own consciousness to be reflected in all around us'.[243] The unconscious is therefore on the side of life, extending outwards, to use one of Freud's favorite metaphors, like an amoeba's pseudopods. If interior fantasy was colored by the exterior, he now shows how the external world is an elaboration of the inside.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, fantasy does not withdraw us from social life, but is instead a necessary precondition of it. In his Collège de France lecture course on passivity, Merleau-Ponty develops Freud's suggestion that the unknowability of the Other lends an oneiric quality to waking reality: 'Nos relations de la veille avec les choses et surtout avec les autres ont par principe un caractère onirique: les autres nous sont présents comme des rêves, comme des mythes, et ceci suffit à contester le clivage du réel et de l'imaginaire.'[244] The inaccessibility of other minds is ultimately not a cause for concern for Merleau-Ponty, just as it was not for Freud: the unconscious comes to the rescue of subjectivity, intertwining us with the world and others at a more immediate and embodied level. The real and the imaginary are inextricable from one another, another example of the respirational rhythm of the flesh.

Freud's critique of the isolated *cogito* thus bolsters the arguments Merleau-Ponty will level at Cartesian subjectivity, principally its latter-day avatar in Sartre's philosophy. Where Sartre views imagination as a purely interiorized, subjective act of negating the perceived world, Freud's notion of primary process thinking, which undergirds the full spectrum of waking life, fantasy, and dreams, allows Merleau-Ponty to destabilize the binary between imagination and perception. He writes, 'Il y a donc un oneirisme de la veille, et inversement un caractère quasi

[243] Freud, *The Standard Edition* vol. XIV, p. 171.
[244] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L'institution, la passivité: Notes de cours au Collège de France (1954-1955)* (Paris: Belin, 2015), 137.

perceptif du rêve – Le mythique.'[245] As we saw in Dora's dream of the Alpine lakes, the experience of the dream is one of ecstatic communion with the perceived world. The dreamer does not simply withdraw into their mind, but also extends into their body and the world's flesh: 'Donc le corps, comme mise au point perceptive, en général, comme rapport à des situations de drame, est le sujet du rêve, et non pas la 'conscience imageante'.'[246] The body, for Merleau-Ponty, is a hinge between self and other, waking life and dream.

Merleau-Ponty's reference to 'Le mythique' points to the ineradicably social quality of dreams and fantasies. As I outlined in the introduction, there is a mythic time which 'digs into' lived time, rendering subject and object, perception and imagination indistinguishable. *Cemetary of Splendour* explores the potential and pitfalls of this process, one that is arguably already present in Dora's spectatorship in front of the Madonna: she begins with a process of mute stupefaction, unable to account for her attraction to the painting other than by simply repeating 'The Madonna'. It is only through the process of analysis that her attraction to the painting reveals its ambiguous depths, the private dream implicating an outside.

Cemetary of Splendour explores these two modes of spectatorship. The film follows soldiers suffering from a mysterious 'sleeping sickness': they exist in a coma-like state while warring ancient kings use their dreams to continue their battles, as the hospital is built over an ancient burial ground. In this manner, the soldiers appear to display the isolation of subjectivity, ensconced within an imaging consciousness. Yet the film, in a parallel manner to Freud and Merleau-Ponty, explores the manner in which this subjective isolation paradoxically becomes intersubjective once we realize the way in which waking life is intertwined with dreaming. The

[245] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L'institution, la passivité: Notes de cours au Collège de France (1954-1955)* (Paris: Belin, 2015), p. 207.
[246] Merleau-Ponty, *L'institution, la passivité*, p. 208.

soldiers' dreams are perceptual, opening onto the sensible world, just as the rhythms of daily life in Apichatpong's Khon Khaen are suffused witth dreams. This shift in perspective is prompted by the nurse Jenjira (Jenjira Pongpas), who comes to the makeshift hospital (the school she attended as a child) to volunteer with caring for the soldiers. When the soldiers start to intermittently awaken, Jenjira develops an oblique courtship with one of them, Itt (Banlop Lomnoi). Jenjira and Itt's relationship, however, does not transpire in total lucidity but rather through a sharing of dreams. Through the help of Jenjira, Itt traverses the two modes of spectatorship experienced by Dora: what was previously a captive fascination by mythic and ideological forces becomes an ambiguous and shareable dream. *Cemetary of Splendour* is thus an exploration of Apichatpong's ambivalence towards the mediating power of fantasy and dreams, arduously disentangling fantasies that can be lived and shared—and thus modified—from those that consign us to passive, isolated spectatorship.

In interviews around the film, Apichatpong frequently references his pessimism around Thailand's military dictatorship and the increasing censorship artists are subjected to; in this sense, the production of the film mirrors the production of the Freudian dream-work, required to resort to an allusive symbolism in order to evade the 'censorship' of the secondary process. Apichatpong himself reveals that the film's references to a mythic past of warring kings is itself an oblique portrayal of the current military dictatorship; thus the sleeping soldiers, unconsciously used and drained of their vital forces by these specters of the past, stage the contemporary reality of Thai citizens conscripted into passive submission towards a militaristic and nationalist state. It is therefore easy to read a militant Freudo-Marxian politics into the film, a perspective that Apichatpong's statements occasionally encourage: 'I think for me, [the film] talks a lot about the sorrow of the whole place, a country that is going down, and again feeling the suffocation of 'not

knowing' and of wanting to wake up but not being able to'.[247] The 'cure' for this political situation—a sort of oneiric doubt and uncertainty— would thus be to 'wake up' and move towards lucidity, an eradication of the fantasy altogether.

On the one hand, it seems as if Apichatpong has become more pessimistic about the role of fantasy and myth in collective life in the six years since *Uncle Boonmee* was released. It is tempting to regard *Cemetary of Splendour* as his version of *The Matrix* (1999), a film that injected new life into Freudo-Marxian film theory's suspicion towards the ostensible passivity of spectatorship. Particularly relevant is Slavoj Žižek's claim that that film 'renders the ultimate perverse fantasy, the notion that we are ultimately instruments of the Other's (the matrix's) jouissance, sucked of our life substance like batteries.'[248] In Žižek's implicitly Sartrean reading, being 'passive prisoners in the prenatal fluid exploited by the Matrix'[249] is not a nightmare, but rather the comforting fantasy of *mauvaise foi*: it allows us to abdicate from the abyssal freedom of subjectivity in order to take refuge in a fixed identity. In a parallel manner, Apichatpong's sleeping soldiers could be viewed as equally pathological, subjects sapped of their will and vitality by a pacifying nationalistic ideology.

In *Cemetary of Splendour*, we find the same oneiric mise-en-scene as *Uncle Boonmee*, now tinged with a more menacing aura. The darkened schoolroom full of neon lamps lends a paranoid dimension to the scientific laboratory of *La Jetée* (1962) (figure 19). The configuration of neon lamps, the main component of the 'treatment' the soldiers are receiving, is itself based on an MIT study that successfully implanted artificial memories in mice by exposing their

[247] Amir Ganjavie, 'A Homeland Swansong: Apichatpong Weerasethakul on Cemetery of Splendor', *Senses of Cinema*, December 2015.
[248] Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), 262.
[249] Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom*, 264.

neurons to flashes of light. The explanation given in the film contains similarly dubious ethics: one of the doctors states that the lamps were used by the U.S. Military in Afghanistan in order to induce peaceful dreams in soldiers. As Apichatpong offers, 'The possibility of characters being hypnotized by some machine works in a parallel way with the audience being hypnotized by movies.'[250] More specifically, the lamps function as a kind of radically formalist (and Sadean) cinema, in which the image operates directly upon the brain of the spectator. Here we might think of the flashing, subliminal frames of color in the avant-garde films of Paul Sharits, or even Hitchcock's dream of an ideal cinema in which he could produce any desired effect in the audience by simply playing the keys of an organ, ending in electrodes attached to the audience's brain: 'we won't even have to make a movie… we'll just press different buttons and they'll go 'ooh' and 'aah' and we'll frighten them, and make them laugh. Won't that be wonderful?'[251] In this sense, the passive soldiers have become the plaything of someone, or something's, jouissance.



Figure 19: The schoolroom turned hospital turned art installation.

[250] Nicolas Rapold, 'Cannes Interview: Apichatpong Weerasethakul', *Film Comment*, 1 June 2015.

[251] Donald Spoto, *The Dark Side of Genius: The Life of Alfred Hitchcock* (New York: Ballantine 1984), 440.

This iconoclastic, non-visual cinema could also suggest a more recent media ecology: the internet and social media. In operating directly at the level of affect and sensation, the lamp installation concretizes the stimulating and addictive quality of social media, as well as its recent mutation into a hotbed for conspiracy theories. When asked by an interviewer about Jen finding her American husband through online dating, Apichatpong offers that the increased digitalization of Thailand is the film's condition of possibility:

> Everyone has Facebook now. You learn so much about our own history, actually, by the availability of different narratives of the country. I think it's part of the real reason that I can make this movie, because of the awakening of history and stories. So the movie reflects that, to have Jenjira confused or not sure if she's dreaming or how the soldier's life is being dictated by these spirits underneath. That's another narrative that could be true or not. We don't know. Or what's going on with trying to dig up the earth: what they see or whether they're making fiber optics for communications.[252]

Social media users are intertwined with algorithms that deliver us certainty and immediate gratification, thereby foreclosing the unconscious. Hunched over computer screens, able to curate a never-ending stream of stimulation, the alterity of intersubjective embodiment withers away.

Apichatpong, however, displaces the dream by foregrounding the body doing the dreaming. He thus demonstrates that the activity of spectatorship happens in the sensible world, and is cautiously optimistic about the ability of intersubjective embodiment to alter the dream. Rather than waking up, which *The Matrix* offers as the only form of resistance, Apichatpong suggests we can dream differently, together. Apichatpong's subsequent admission that: 'This is a movie of resistance but it can simultaneously be something of an escapist movie, too'[253] is not an

[252] Rapold, 'Cannes Interview: Apichatpong Weerasethakul'.
[253] Ganjavie, 'A Homeland Swansong: Apichatpong Weerasethakul on Cemetery of Splendor'.

apolitical capitulation as much as a destabilization of this opposition, in keeping with the vision of spectatorship elaborated in *Uncle Boonmee*, as well as Hadžihalilović's respirational move in and out of the enclosure of the dream in *Innocence*. Apichatpong is clearly still interested in film as an embodied arena that *creates* experience rather than representing it. As Sartre himself realized with his vision of the cinema hall as POW camp—'ce rêve éveillé'—there is something resistant about escapism once we appreciate our embodied adhesion as flesh.

The Body as Enclosure

Apichatpong therefore retains a focus on intersubjectivity and embodiment in order to explore how dreaming can still function in an increasingly paranoid world. Thus, the physical arena of the hospital is the object of the film's attention, to the exclusion of any image of the soldiers' dream (which is only alluded to at the very end of the film.) By airdropping this military-industrial technology into his film, Apichatpong appropriates it as a perverse art installation. The interaction between the sleeping soldiers and the machines, ostensibly a closed, smoothly functioning cybernetic feedback loop, is instead interrupted by the lived experience and desires of the hospital staff. In keeping with his past explorations of medical institutions in *Syndromes and a Century*, Apichatpong is interested in how an irreducible residue of human warmth remains in ostensibly cold and clinical medical settings. The sleeping soldiers, hooked up to catheters and tended to by the staff, invoke the image of Boonmee reclining in his room, cared for by Jaai and later his family, too enmeshed in the sensorial world to ever fully disappear.

The film's rootedness in space and time paradoxically allows it to drift. As the school is located in Khon Khaen, Apichatpong's hometown in Isaan, the film follows *Uncle Boonmee*'s exploration of the supernatural and animist beliefs of the region. Through the figure of Jen, who

attended the school as a child, we gain access to the recent past through embodied memory: upon entering the room, she reminisces that she used to sit where Itt is now sleeping, unable to read the blackboard at the other end of the room. She remembers staring out of the window at the mango and jackfruit trees, and her teacher who had glasses like 'Clark Kent as Superman', now resembling the sleeping figure of Itt underneath her. We therefore find an intertwining of memory, perception and imagination, Merleau-Ponty's 'oneirisme de la veille'.

It is as if the dream of the soldiers pulls the waking characters into reverie: just as there is an oneiric quality to Jen's musings, there is an animacy to the sleeping soldiers' embodiment. The body is the subject of the dream, a hinge turned towards the outside just as much as the inside. The first time we see Itt, he is sleeping facing an open window, blurring the distinction between perception and dream. Later, upon waking, he tells her 'I heard you in my sleep', while also sensing the warmth of the lamps and the smell of flowers. Like Jen, his dream is not in an otherworldly realm, but intertwined with the jackfruit and mango trees outside the window: it is determined by his orientation in space, infused with the landscape that supports him. Jen even remarks to Keng that, 'since I've come here, I'm sleeping a lot better, as if I'm synchronizing myself with that soldier. Or maybe he sleeps for me.' In this confusion of inter and intra-subjectivity, Jen and Itt reach an oblique communion via the fleshy embodiment of the unconscious.

Both characters, and the milieu around them, instantiate Merleau-Ponty's fleshy respiration of being. Jen confesses to Keng, 'This town bores me to death. Lucikly there's some sleeping soldiers here, I find it rather exciting.' Apichatpong claims that he 'tried to flow with the rhythm of the town', a sensation arguably present in all of his films' neo-realist attention to the small rituals of life in rural Thailand. Yet in this film, the 'rhythm' seems to be of a body

drifting in and out of sleep, or more simply, the hinge-like movement of inhalation and exhalation. The very structure of the school building seems to operate like a camera obscura or perceptual apparatus, as the staff repeatedly shuttering and opening the windows gives the impression of the building opening and closing its 'eyes'. The frequent shots of the spinning ceiling fans are sometimes coupled with a graphic match of water wheels on the lake outside, commingling hypnotic interiority with the pragmatic exteriority of daily life.

Touching Cure

This blurring of imagination and perception also destabilizes the relation between spirituality and science in the film. In the abovementioned scene, Apichatpong shows us Jen seeking advice from Keng due to her telepathic powers, which the latter answers with relatively mundane advice, talking about diet and telling her to take melatonin. This scene is then followed by a doctor's appointment, in which the doctor feels a man's stomach and tells him to take some vitamins, while another patient waits behind him and small chickens and ducks scurry behind the door. The scene with Keng is more bashful and hesitant, even clinical, whereas the doctor feels more like an earthy folk practitioner.

The spiritually transformative power of doctor/patient relationships that the film will explore is helpfully illuminated in a short comic scene in *Syndromes and a Century*. Captured in a long take, we find a dentist working on his patient, a monk, in what seems closer to a therapy or psychoanalytic session. In a manner evocative of the soldiers trapped in a dream, the monk describes how he feels 'beholden to a mysterious force' that 'keeps him in these saffron robes'. When he seeks out a local DJ in an attempt to get a job, he turns it down when the DJ offers, driven by what a psychoanalyst would identify as an unconscious enjoyment of his symptom.

The dentist then reveals that he moonlights as a pop singer, proceeding to give an impromptu rendition of his songs while proceeding with the teeth cleaning—'Is this a checkup or a concert?' the monk asks, embarrassedly. While the scene is played as comedy, following *Uncle Boonmee*, we could also view it as another example of contagious ravishment: immediately afterwards, we see the monk walk out and pick up a guitar, another one of Apichatpong's monks 'becoming a man'. The dentist's hinge-like movement from scientist to artist enables the monk's own release from ascetic spirituality towards embodied being-in-the-world, the monk affected by the transformative power of sharing Other's dream.

This dynamic is present as we observe Keng reading the mind of one of the sleeping soldiers, while his wife watches. As she touches his arm, she explains, 'He doesn't know where he is,' hinting at the disconnect between mind and body that sustains this problematic fantasy. While the wife gives insistent orders, telling her to 'concentrate on the present' or reveal who his mistress is, Keng—like a psychoanalyst following the free associations of the analysand—simply follows the dreamer's thoughts, here through the embodied immediacy of touch. Significantly, in an earlier scene of mind-reading, the soldier's wife herself puts her hand on Keng while Keng touches the soldier, displaying a greater poise compared to the insistent demands of the wife here. It is clear that Apichatpong does not view Keng as a charlatan, or at least not any more so than the doctor—Apichatpong ends the scene by cutting to the doorway to again show the ducks running by, thereby solidifying the link between telepathy and medecine. Both are resolutely in-the-world.

The following scene confirms this 'cure', as Apichatpong shows us a session with a meditation teacher. The teacher states that 'Our problem is that we think too much, during the day and in our dreams'. He then goes on to explain that this is inevitable, and rather than stop

thinking, we can instead become aware of it, in a kind of 'exercise' for our minds. In keeping with the thematic of the film as a whole, I think we can interpret these remarks to mean that fantasy is inevitable, and usually harmless—so long as it retains its grounding in the body. This criterion is evident as the teacher leads them in directing their consciousness in a deliberate way: he tells them to 'move their attention' to their own sense organs—their ears, their nose, their face, etc. even asking, 'what does [your face] resemble?' In other words, he asks them to sense their own sensible embodiment, experiencing themselves as other. He then tells them to move this energy down to the bottom of the body, before letting it expand into the room around them, the field outside, the sky, and finally the moon and stars. He invokes a fleshly continuity between the sensory-motor schema and the nonhuman world, and Apichatpong signals that this continuity also exists between the sleeping and waking bodies. As the teacher's voiceover describes this field of energy, the camera remains on the volunteers sitting and meditating, interspersed among the sleeping soldiers. When he tells them to retract the energy back into their bodies, in order to 'heal' whatever is ailing them, we then cut to a sleeping soldier whose finger begins to twitch. It is then clear that he has been talking to the soldiers as much as the volunteers: both are trying to find a way back to the flesh.

These instances of fleshly cures culminate in the pivotal scene in which Itt wakes up while Jen massages him with cream. The scene references a similarly climactic moment in *Blissfully Yours* (2002), when Orn (again played by Jenjira Pongpaas) rubs a mysterious vegetable cream on the rash-covered body of Roong (Kanokporn Tongaram), a refugee from Burma, while swimming in a hot spring. The parallel with Roong allows us to view Itt as equally 'wounded', in a productive sense, as his sleeping sickness also opens him up to new forms of kinship and care. Both films reverse medical and psychoanalytic hierarchies, in that

Apichatpong's traumatized patients are usually young men tended to by older women—here we could also include the homosexual male couple's trip into the cave with the older woman in *Tropical Malady*. In these arenas, we find forms of care akin to Winnicott's maternal 'holding environments', in which mothers enable a pre-linguistic communion between the child and the world. This arena takes on an almost inter-uterine quality with Jen and Itt; as previously noted, Itt had perceptual awareness of Jen in his sleep: 'So you already know me,' she responds. Having had a dim presentiment of her person from 'the inside' of the oneiric state, he now encounters her anew from the outside, in a manner akin to the first encounter between a newborn infant and their mother: indeed, Jen will later refer to him as her 'new son'. After he wakes up, she immediately begins to teach him how to move his limbs anew, as we then see him at the school's playground, swinging his arms like a child.

Spiritual Media

Itt's miraculous awakening is juxtaposed alongside a miracle of another sort: her meeting her American husband, Richard (her real-life husband Richard Widmark) on an online dating site. As Jen thanks the princess statues at the shrine for bringing Itt and Richard into her life, it seems as if social media and the magic cream are equally magical forms of mediation. Jen seems to get more than she bargained for, however, when two princesses appear before her at the school. The princesses, who reveal that they are dead, incarnate the oneiric quality of relation to the Other: in sharp contrast with the monkeys of *Uncle Boonmee*, there is nothing supernatural about the two women. Instead, they foreground the epistemological indeterminacy of all intersubjective relations, a fact that can become uncanny when it is experienced in isolation. Jen feels the vertigo of her dream-life short-circuiting: is she stuck in a bad movie?

Apichatpong raises this question literally when Jen and Itt watch the trailer for a kitschy horror movie in a theater. Yet this example is also ambiguous, as Apichatpong seems to have a sentimental attachment to the film's quasi-personal vision: 'I found out it's made by a very old guy who tried to make a film after a long time, and maybe he lost touch with the contemporary movie style. For me, this is very unique and sad at the same time, and it brought back memories of these kinds of films when I grew up.'[254] The nostalgia of the scene, with its attention to the physical arena of the movie theater, invokes one of Apichatpong's favorite films, *Goodbye Dragon Inn* (2003), Tsai Ming-liang's ode to 1970's martial arts cinema and the slow disappearance of repertory movie theaters. In *Cemetary of Splendour*, this situation has become even more dire, as Jen and Itt leave the virtually empty movie theater for a more bewildering and ungraspable dream happening outside. Apichatpong therefore seems to lament the waning of the communal, embodied arena of spectatorship as newer technologies of control take their place. As Jen and Itt descend into the bright lights of the shopping mall, different gradations of color wash over the screen: Apichatpong seems to be putting us in the same position as the sleeping soldiers, hypnotized by the lamps. The association of the stimulating color with hypnotic control is hinted at by a shot of nationalistic mural in town, as well as an advertisement for 'EU Wedding', ambivalently evoking Jen's own marriage.

The seductive glow of consumerism takes on its own spiritualist aura, as the enigmatic significance of the cream is explicated more fully in a scene towards the end of the film. A corporate saleswoman, apparently well-known from TV and radio advertisements, comes to Khon Khaen to demonstrate the efficacy of the cream and give out free samples to a gathering of local housewives. Here we find a concrete staging of the metaphysical tension between

[254] Lucca, 'Dream State', *Film Comment*, April 2016.

globalized media and local culture that has been hovering around the film, as this advertising star's arrival in Khon Khaen is treated as miraculously as the apparition of the princesses from the shrine. The figure of this woman, equal parts charismatic new-age preacher and snake-oil sales(wo)man, seems to condense Apichatpong's ambivalence towards mediation and the forms of fantasy it can engender. Her sales pitch, designed to help housewives overcome loneliness, shows how the promise of connectivity can easily curdle into a mind(-and-body) numbing sleep: 'I know how the women of Isaan want to feel, what they want to look like. We have an emotional link. What do I mean by that? That we can understand each other.' Here she exploits that most primal, 'animist' function of which Freud and Merleau-Ponty speak: our pre-reflective identification with the Other.

Walkabout

In an additional twist, Apichatpong does not simply lampoon the appeal of this product, but comes ambiguously close to endorsing its seemingly 'magic' power. As with previous forms of media in the film—the cheap horror film, social media—his problem is not with mediation as such, but rather the uses to which it is put. This cream can both put us to sleep and wake us up, depending upon the surrounding environment, and Apichatpong implies that both of these functions are necessary. Just as the cream enabled Jen to wake Itt up, it now enables her to join him in his dream. Invoking the cream and rash from *Blissfully Yours*, a young man's wounded subjectivity is not healed as much as it is shared, intertwining two bodies, generations and sexes. Rubbing it on her chest and laying down, Jen seems to relax into an altered state. Her hand on Itt, Keng asks Jen if she wants to 'see what he [Itt] sees.' When Jen asks how, she responds,

'Through my body,' thereby further corporealizing her role as medium. 'Goodbye,' Keng says, before then saying 'Hello,' now presumably Itt.

As Keng/Itt leads Jen through the sculpture park, they allude to the invisible structuring Jen's visible, its underside or lining. The existence or non-existence of the elaborate palace structure is less important than the fact that Itt sees or 'dreams' the world into existence in a divergent (but not opposed) manner. It seems as if this 'walkabout' is a fictional recapitulation of Apichatpong's own location scouting process, the germ of his films often beginning by travelling to locations with a handheld digital camera. Accompanied by his close friends and collaborators (such as Jenjira), he dreams into existence the stories that could take place there.

For Apichatpong, like Itt, this landscape is pervaded by historical trauma. The heightened stakes are evident in the fact that the sculpture park was the setting of his previous short film *Fireworks (Archive)*. Featuring intense, strobe-like flickering of fireworks illuminating the park's animal sculptures, the short functions in a parallel manner to *Primitive*'s anticipation of *Uncle Boonmee*, referring to the communist purges of the region. Apichatpong describes the history alluded to in the short:

> I talked with an old woman in the village who told me about green lights that used to be seen at night. They were flares sent up by soldiers to help them spot 'communist farmers' who hid in the forest. For her, no matter how beautiful and unusual they were, they were lights of fear. They inspired resistance in her and her friends, and she spoke proudly of the night when the villagers shot down a helicopter and took pieces of the engine to sell by the kilo.[255]

The lights, simultaneously 'beautiful' and 'lights of fear', invoke the neon lamps of the hospital as an instrument that straddles military-industrial and aesthetic practices. While Apichatpong is celebrating 'resistance' in this anecdote, he goes on to counterbalance it with a kind of

[255] http://www.kickthemachine.com/page80/page22/page33/index.html

'escapism', or re-appropriation of the trauma. This is how he describes the work of the park's sculptor, Bunleua Sulilat, who chose to build on this politically charged location: 'The founder was an outcast who escaped to Laos and came back to build the temple... the fact that it was not recognised or supported by the state reflects the man's independence. He was free to commission unconventional sculptures. Free, but at the same time forced to struggle, and to dream.'[256] An eccentric mystic and outsider-artist, Sulilat drew on the enthusiasm of the local population to help create idiosyncratic sculptures, from local stone, of various Buddhist and Hindu deities without any institutional support.

It is easy to see why this park appeals to Apichatpong: an artist taking a collective (even ideological) vision and warping it according to his own personalized, but nonetheless collaborative, idiom. A private dream was materialized for all to see and express anew. Iggy Cortez highlights this altered form of dreaming when he argues that 'the park's setting does not displace hallucinogenic dreams with critical wakefulness but rather supplants it with an appeal to a more capacious relation to fantasy, one that is not escapist or dissociative but rather responsive to the historical verities of Isan.'[257] In this regard, Apichatpong follows Sulilat in turning a site of historical trauma into a park of ludic and collaborative meaning-making. The wounds of the past and the Other's dream both encroach upon the subject while remaining unknowable.

After walking through the park with Jen, Itt begins to re-evaluate their own dream. The palace pales in comparison to the vista of the lake by the temple: 'You know Jen, of all the places I've seen, this is by far the most opulent. It doesn't have any need of ornaments.' 'Even gold?' She responds. 'No. From here we can see the most fertile land, verdant paddy fields,

[256] http://www.kickthemachine.com/page80/page22/page33/index.html
[257] Iggy Cortez, 'Licking for the Nation: Auntie Genealogies in Apichatpong Weerasethakul's Rak Ti Khon Kaen', *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 60, no. 3 (2021): 37–61, p. 56.

rivers full of fish.' The fantasy seems to have given ground to the shared, visible world, although we cannot definitively confirm that it is not still a dream: perception is lined with imagination. As they sit on a park bench, they ruminate on the possibility of 'waking up', as Jen shows Itt a liquid mixture that she uses to stabilize her husband's orientation due to his arthritis and alzheimers. The two have switched roles, as Keng/Itt now applies the stimulating substance to Jen's flesh. The 'microbes' that Jen references in the liquid are perhaps an allusion to the inexplicable, amoeba-like creature that crawled across the shot of the luminous sky soon before. Similar to the 'tracers' that appear in one's eyes after staring into the sun (a phenomenon akin to the optical aberrations that fascinated the early Merleau-Ponty) the image suggests a perspective of total lucidity that tips over into disorientation. So, too, does the 'consummation' of Jen and Itt's romance, ostensibly a gesture of healing as Itt begins to lick her deformed leg, seem to invite a welling up of pain as Jen begins to weep. Invoking the dilated pupils of Boonsong and the watery irises of *Evolution*, in sharing her wound, Jen comes to see with new, moistened eyes.

We cut back to the hospital, where both Jen and Itt are sleeping. Was the whole second half of the film Jen's dream? As hinted above, Apichatpong is less interested in whether an experience was real or dreamed than whether it was shared or solitary: 'I saw your dream,' Itt tells her. 'And I saw yours,' he responds. With the image of Jen awakening into tears, Apichatpong finds his ideal form of oneiric reality: a blurred vision, eyes both open and closed, rooted in the body and overwhelmed by alterity. It is this precarious feeling that the couple seems determined to preserve. When Jen reveals the dig is a secret government project, and that it will soon displace the hospital, Itt responds, 'I'd rather sleep here.' 'You're right,' she says. 'It's a good place to sleep.' Finding a place to dream—and a person to dream with—is thus a form of both resistance and escape.

Conclusion

Far from causing Apichatpong to renounce his reliance on fantasy, the worsening political conditions in his country have led him to fine-tune it. His sentimental nostalgia or ambivalence towards many of the clichéd forms of fantasy in the film hint that they are merely an amplification of human need for connection. Like the meditation teacher in the film, Apichatpong merely wants us to 'exercise' our minds more, fine-tuning our powers of fantasy to ensure they function more smoothly. At times he even seems to imply that there could be a provisional benefit to this dilemma. Like his account of Sulilat—'Free, but at the same time forced to struggle, and to dream'—Apichatpong views this 'struggle' as a precondition for continued dreaming. In acknowledging a conflictual basis to the human mind, he converges with a psychoanalytic perspective: unable to fully know others or ourselves, we must compensate via processes that are fantastical, and this conclusion need not be considered a tragedy.

Apichatpong, Barthes, Merleau-Ponty, and Freud thus all agree there is no 'cure' to the existential dilemmas confronting human subjectivity. While this position has often led to Freud being seen as a thinker of disenchantment, these other thinkers view our woundedness and unknowability to each other as the precondition for a different kind of enchantment. It is precisely this perspective that Apichatpong elaborates, intertwining modernity and magical thinking as he explores the wild vagaries of desire. If *Uncle Boonmee* showed how the wounded subject is a paradoxical 'modern myth', *Cemetary of Splendour* reveals how the problem of other minds also renders animism surprisingly modern. For Apichatpong, like Freud, these so-called "primitive" phenomena return us not to fantasmatic pasts, but to the immediacy of an intersubjective present. Both posit that desire necessarily contains its own form of magical

thinking. It is a magic of ambiguity and uncertainty, one that nonetheless makes contact with something real.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Awakening of an Intractable Reality: The Nocturnal Poetics of *Atlantique*

Mati Diop's debut film *Atlantics* (2019) puts a provocative reversal on the notions of ravished and wounded subjectivity we have looked at in relation to Apichatpong. It is now the men who function as the ravishing object, engendering the emergence of the female subject: *l'hystérique fait la femme*. Encapsulated in the nighttime arson attack of the ghost Souleiman (Ibrahima Traoré), at the arranged wedding of his beloved Ada (Mame Bineta Sane), this is a film which explores how the wounding power of appearances can wreck personal and political scandal from a decidedly feminist perspective. Discussing her research for the film in Dakar, Diop evokes a Barthesian scenario of haunting in describing the film's supernatural story of spirit possession by Islamic djinn: 'The atmosphere of the city was very dark because all these boys were obsessed with leaving. When one of them told me, "When you leave, you're already dead," I started to envision Dakar as a ghost city, a city of the living dead.'[258] As we have seen in Barthes, this living death reveals a hallucinatory yet real form of communion between subject and object. For Diop, then, the supernatural element of the men's haunting is not just a metaphor, but rather an attempt to make palpable the lived presence of fantasy in Senegalese culture.[259] In a not dissimilar manner from Apichatpong, she fashions a model of desiring subjectivity that leaves room for an ambiguous agency on the part of the object. Reading the film alongside Barthes, Merleau-Ponty and Jean Baudrillard's theorization of the agency of objects, I will show how

[258] Mati Diop et al., 'Spirit Riders: A Conversation with Mati Diop and Fatima Al Qadiri', *Bidoun*, March 15th.
[259] Jordan Ruimy, 'Director Mati Diop Talks About Her Oscar-Contender 'Atlantics'', *World of Reel*, 15 November 2019.

Ada's emergence as a woman relies on this reciprocal dualism: a reality that includes fantasy, a life that includes death, and subjectivity that includes objectivity.

The film opens with a crew of construction workers at the site of the Burj Mejiza (Arabic for 'miracle tower'), looming over the dusty landscape of Dakar's outskirts. In a charged altercation in the construction offices, we learn that the construction workers have had their wages withheld by their corrupt boss Mr. Ndiaye (Diankou Sembene). As the men drive back from the construction site, the camera focuses on their apparent spokesperson Souleiman, whom we soon learn is in a relationship with Ada. In their only scene together, the couple wanders through another evacuated construction site while Souleiman's gaze seems magnetized by the Atlantic Ocean. After Ada arrives at the beachside bar run by her friend Dior (Nicole Sougou) later that night, we realize Souleiman and the other 'boys', having no other means to earn a livelihood, have made the risky decision to sail to Spain in order to seek work, a decision that seems to imply a near-certain death. Even though Ada is engaged to the wealthy international businessman Omar (Babacar Sylla), she breaks with the arranged marriage, after an arson attack on the wedding night is rumored to have been started by Souleiman's ghost. As the attack draws the suspicion of the local police detective Issa (Amadou Mbow), Ada comes to rely on the support of the women gathered in the beach bar while distancing herself from the patriarchal biases of the local community. Their form of resistance is decidedly supernatural: the spirits of the men emerge at dusk to possess the women, who, walking in a zombie-like trance with whitened eyes, break into the home of Mr. Ndiaye and force him to dig graves for the men and pay their wages. The film concludes with Ada losing her virginity to Souleyman via the possessed body of Issa in the beach bar, as she chooses the fantasmatic alternative futurity

envisioned by the women in the bar over the neoliberal and patriarchal future represented by Omar.

Diop is explicit that the zombies in the film are meant to evoke superimposed historical traumas: trans-Atlantic slavery, the slave rebellions of the Caribbean, and the current ongoing migration to Europe.[260] Suzanne Enzerink argues the haunting of the middle-passage evokes continued American imperialist hegemony, as the visibility of off-brand American clothing and consumer goods in Diop's Dakar portrays Senegal as a 'consumer landfill for the excess of American capitalism' and 'lays bare the idealization of American consumer products across global markets and the ideational geography of globalization.'[261] This perspective may aptly characterize the oppressive present conditions in Dakar, but it is at a loss to explain the characters' singular form of resistance and its roots in non-western cultural traditions. Enzerink reads the end of the film as 'suggesting that love is a reparative to all the exploitation and restriction, and is the only model of futurity.'[262] While partially true, this perspective ignores the idiosyncratic dimensions of Ada and Souleiman's relationship that exceed the framework of a universalizing humanism.

The film's distinct futurity becomes clear in comparison with both European and earlier African films. Unlike many other films on the migrant crisis which follow the visual spectacle of migration as it displays itself on Europe's shores and its maritime environs,[263] Diop makes the deliberate decision to fasten her gaze to the home country and the women left behind. While she invokes the influence of her uncle Djibril Diop Mambety's seminal film *Touki Bouki* (1973),

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[260] Mati Diop et al., 'Spirit Riders: A Conversation with Mati Diop and Fatima Al Qadiri', *Bidoun*, March 15th, 2019.
[261] Suzanne Christine Enzerink, 'Black Atlantic Currents: Mati Diop's Atlantique and the Field of Transnational American Studies', *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 12, no. 1 (28 September 2021), 57.
[262] Enzerink, 'Black Atlantic Currents', 69.
[263] This perspective is typified by Gianfranco Rosi's *Fire at Sea* (2013).

focused on a Senegalese couple dreaming of a better life in Paris, her own film diverges in its attitude towards Europe. Diop does not lend Europe any romantic allure in her film; rather, she treats it with complete disinterest. As Gigi Adair argues, 'The spirit of migrancy that drives the men toward Europe is not a desire for Europe nor for Europe's modernity, but a drive towards the unknown in preference to the unlivable neoliberal present.'[264] The beguiling Parisian metropole of *Touki Bouki* is here displaced in favor of Spain, and it seems likely that the characters are referring to the more proximate Canary Islands rather than continental Spain (the protagonist of Diop's short film *Atlantique* (2009) made it to the island chain and was re-patriated to Senegal.) We also learn that Omar is a migrant in a more privileged sense, spending most of the year in Italy: the links to Europe are thus founded less on inherited colonial language or culture and more by the deterritorializing movements of capital.

Most commentators on the film highlight Diop's connection to Claire Denis (a link embraced by Diop herself), yet it is striking to note her many divergences from Denis's work. While the film certainly shares many formal elements with the films of Denis—such as long takes, the use of long-lens close-ups and a stylized original score—its attitude towards African culture is entirely opposed. Denis's films deliberately avoid any engagement with African cultural traditions or religion: in this regard, she keeps to the universalizing impulses of her post-colonial theoretical inspirations Jean-Paul Sartre and Frantz Fanon. Diop, on the other hand, attempts to make the magical and supernatural beliefs of the citizens of Dakar sensually palpable, a tendency that pushes her closer to the surrealism of Apichatpong, another one of her contemporary inspirations.

[264] Gigi Adair, 'The Spirit of Migrancy: Mati Diop's Atlantique', *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature* 46, no. 1 (27 January 2022), https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.2208, 177.

Indeed, magic distances Diop's film from another of Denis's treasured interests: the family. Where Denis's Ozu-inspired films treat the family and their quasi-arranged marriages as almost sacrosanct, Diop castigates this pre-ordained narrative in *Atlantique*, as the family and Omar's global post-modernity are complicit in the same patriarchal prejudice and hypocrisy. Figures like Omar, who triangulate an 'impossible' couple in order to expose them to a wider socius, are always viewed as a necessary de-territorializing force in Denis. Here we could look to Vincent Gallo's American G.I. in *U.S. Go Home* (1994) or Diop's own character Jo in *35 Rhums* (2008), who rejects the largely black student radicals in favor of the white suitor Noé (Grégoire Colin). In a certain sense, Diop's return to Senegal to make *Atlantique* reverses the assimilatory trajectory of her character in *35 Rhums*, as she also gives her protagonist an option that Denis did not grant to Jo: *Atlantique* ends with Ada choosing an ideal love over a pragmatic and realistic one.

In dwelling on Diop's negotiation of her filial influences, I hope to make clear the manner in which she cleaves to an aesthetic and political position distinct from these older filmmakers with whom she is usually associated. While Diop, Paris born and Harvard educated, is clearly a European or western filmmaker, she also feels the need to distance herself from this perspective, asserting that 'I went to Dakar to make films to reconquer my Africanness. *Atlantics* is really my victory over the Western jinn.'[265] While commentators like Adair and Katrin Pesch are willing to acknowledge this intention,[266] what this alternative entails is left largely implicit and inchoate. I contend that her film critiques European modernity from within, a position that aligns her with thinkers like Baudrillard, Barthes, and Merleau-Ponty. The supernatural vision

[265] Mati Diop et al., 'Spirit Riders'.
[266] Katrin Pesch, 'Realism as Ontological Unrest: Digital Aesthetics and Reparative Dynamics in Mati Diop's 'Atlantics'', *Necsus*, 8 December 2022.

the film elaborates is not one rooted in a pre-modern past, but is rather a post-modern mélange in which modern subjectivity is retained and altered through recuperating the repressed figures of objectivity, death, and illusion.

Death's Borders

As we have seen in the discussion of *Cemetary of Splendour*, for Apichatpong, magic does not disappear but rather transforms in modernity, and I will argue that Diop harbors a similar perspective. In *Le visible et l'invisible*, Merleau-Ponty makes this point explicitly, arguing that in modernity magical thinking migrates into the subject: 'nous avons refoulé le magique dans la subjectivité, mais rien ne nous garantit que le rapport entre les hommes ne comporte pas inévitablement des composantes magiques et oniriques.'[267] Despite his frequent criticisms of the Cartesian subject, Merleau-Ponty does not want to dispense with it altogether as much as acknowledge the supporting role of the object. His notion of modern subjectivity is therefore one in which these two terms interact in a more ambiguous and reciprocal manner. This sensation of reciprocity—experienced by every perceiving subject even though it cannot be represented scientifically—implicates a sense of haunting, as he writes: 'non pas voir dans le dehors, comme les autres le voient, le contour d'un corps qu'on habite, mais surtout être vu par lui, exister en lui, émigrer en lui, être séduit, capté, aliené par le fantôme, de sorte que voyant et visible se réciproquent et qu'on ne sait plus qui voit et qui est vu.'[268] Here Merleau-Ponty elaborates a strange sense of activity on the part of the object; it is not passively waiting for my gaze, but itself catches or solicits my gaze: the subject is 'séduit, capté, aliené par le fantôme'. Evocative of the Dakar of *Atlantique*, this experience evokes the tropes of a horror movie, yet is also

[267] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l'invisible* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), p. 43.
[268] Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l'invisible*, p. 181.

entirely quotidian, present any time we slow down to appreciate our embodied intertwining with the world.

Baudrillard, while not a thinker often mentioned alongside Merleau-Ponty,[269] is also explicitly interested in how the object approaches, or even *seduces* the subject. In *Le crime parfait* (1995), Baudrillard writes: 'On s'est toujours préoccupé des conditions dans lesquelles le sujet découvre l'objet, sans du tout explorer celles dans lesquelles l'objet découvre le sujet.'[270] In asserting that we are passive in the face of objects, Baudrillard comes remarkably close to Merleau-Ponty. This context helps contextualize Baudrillard's seemingly speculative thought experiment which follows: 'Mais le plus rusé n'est peut-être pas celui qu'on pense, et si c'était lui, l'objet, qui nous découvrait dans toute cette histoire? Si c'était lui qui nous inventait?'[271] With Merleau-Ponty in mind, Baudrillard's scenario of objects inventing subjects becomes decidedly ecological: an appreciation of the flesh and what Merleau-Ponty will call 'ses pouvoirs poétiques et oniriques.'[272] For both thinkers, objectivity is the ineradicable condition for subjectivity.

Seduction emerges as a key concept for Baudrillard during the 1970's, alongside his related notions of reversibility, exchange, and the duel, all of which posit a fundamental duality disrupting the world of the seemingly sovereign subject of modern capitalism. These strategies thus play a more subversive role in relation to contemporary life than they did for Merleau-Ponty, a thinker who did not live to see the disappointment of the post-1968 left that informs Baudrillard's thought during this period. Seduction is therefore practiced 'en termes de jeu, de

[269] Baudrillard began publishing during the late 1960's, a period in which phenomenology had largely fallen out of fashion amongst French intellectuals. However, due to his reliance on Foucault, who was himself taught by Merleau-Ponty, it is nonetheless possible to trace a line of influence between the two thinkers.
[270] Jean Baudrillard, *Le crime parfait*, Collection L'espace critique (Paris: Galilée, 1995), p. 84.
[271] Baudrillard, *Le crime parfait*, p. 84.
[272] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Résumés de cours Collège de France, 1952-1960* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982), p. 193.

défi, de relations duelles et de stratégie des apparences'.[273] In these scenarios, duality is acknowledged as necessary, as opposed to the unitary value enshrined within contemporary capitalism. The dual (and duel) framework preserves a radical alterity unable to be subsumed with the homogenizing logic of capital, a source of the capitalist order's own undoing.

For Baudrillard, the paradigmatic example of this duality and radical alterity is the relationship between life and death. The Enlightenment's linear conception of progress represses what he sees as a healthy acknowledgment of humanity's lack of control over the vicissitudes of life and loss, which various cultures have expressed under the signs of poetic justice, karma, or the turning of the wheel of fortune. These perspectives acknowledged that we are at the mercy of death, and therefore made death a part of life:

> Des sociétés sauvages aux sociétés modernes, l'évolution est irréversible : peu à peu les morts cessent d'exister. Ils sont rejetés hors de la circulation symbolique du groupe. Ce ne sont plus des êtres à part entière, des partenaires dignes de l'échange, et on le leur fait bien voir en les proscrivant de plus en plus loin du groupe des vivants.[274]

Baudrillard is here drawing inspiration from Foucault's analysis of the confinement of the mad and other non-productive subjects during the early modern period, arguing that the paradigm for this principle of confinement is the exclusion of the dead. This exclusion results in the loss of the subject's 'partenaire': a foreclosure of the object and its seductive, fantasmatic power evoked by Merleau-Ponty.

Baudrillard argues this situation is in stark contrast to the exchange with the dead entertained by pre-modern and non-western cultures, in which death is maintained as a value by the collective. He describes this arrangement as 'un théâtre collectif de la mort, elle n'est pas

[273] Jean Baudrillard, *De la séduction* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 18.
[274] Baudrillard, *L'échange symbolique et la mort*, p. 147.

enfouie dans la conscience individuelle'.[275] He argues that the modern individualized relation to death, and the existential anguish it brings, is nonetheless still a form of *relation* to the dead; in fact, it is the impoverished residue of this joyous collective theater: 'nous marchandons avec nos morts sous les espèces de la mélancolie, les primitifs vivent avec les leurs sous les auspices du rituel et de la fête.'[276] In the festive mode death does not merely lie at the end of life, but accompanies us throughout life, as the two terms embolden one another, while in modernity both terms are impoverished through their lack of communication.

For Baudrillard, this de-valuation of death and suppression of reversibility is the central tenet of the capitalist economy. Baudrillard subsumes this tendency under seduction's opposed term of production, as he shows how the capitalist logic of infinite accumulation is predicated upon the preservation of life as absolute value. Baudrillard draws on Marcel Mauss's and Georges Bataille's writings on the Native American custom of potlatch, in which they argue that our most deep-seated relation to the natural world is not one of use and production, but rather waste, excess, and loss. In these non-capitalist societies, life is exchanged with death, and profit with expenditure, in a festive circuit; with the onset of capitalism, man clings to the first of these terms at the expense of the second: 'C'est, à partir de là, l'obsession de la mort et la volonté d'abolir la mort par l'accumulation qui devient le moteur fondamental de la rationalité de l'économie politique.'[277] In bourgeois political economy, all that remains is the will towards production, in which the isolated human subject stands as lord over nature. In line with the melancholy Baudrillard invoked above, there is something lost in this rationality of production:

[275] Baudrillard, *L'échange symbolique et la mort*, p. 166.
[276] Baudrillard, *L'échange symbolique et la mort*, p. 155.
[277] Baudrillard, *L'échange symbolique et la mort*, p. 167.

the enigmatic and animating force of objects, of Merleau-Ponty's flesh, is reduced to a scientifically quantifiable reality.

This will towards reality becomes problematic, however, as there is another turn of the screw in Baudrillard's historical analysis. Modernity's attempt to eradicate death backfires, and Baudrillard once again uses Foucault's history of confinement as his paradigmatic example of this contortion:

> Il y a résorption de l'asile au sein du champ social, parce que la normalité a atteint le point parfait où elle rejoint les caractéristiques de l'asile, parce que le virus de l'enfermement est passé dans toutes les fibres de l'existence « normale ». Ainsi de la mort. La mort n'est rien finalement que cette ligne de démarcation sociale qui sépare les « morts » des « vivants » : elle affecte donc également les uns et les autres.[278]

Just as madness, according to Foucault, is contained in the asylum only to seep backwards into the fissures of 'normal' society, the same process is at work in life's contamination by death. For Baudrillard, this results in an impoverishment of both, as life takes the form of mere survival, or living death. Here we can recognize the origin of his more famous 1980's pronouncements on the hyper-real, often delivered with a gleeful schadenfreude: modernity's attempt to force all of life into reality has resulted in reality's disappearance, due to the innate tendency towards reversibility in all phenomena. We are thus left with the melancholy realm of an artificial reality and a deathly life, in which commodified objects come alive at the expense of inert human subjects.

[278] Baudrillard, *L'échange symbolique et la mort*, p. 148.

Intractable Reality

Baudrillard turns to photography as one of the few domains where seduction is able to flourish in contemporary life. Beneath the photograph's apparent obviousness is a reversibility, as he argues the effect of photography is 'exhumer son altérité enfouie sous sa prétendue réalité'.[279] Baudrillard draws on his friend and colleague Roland Barthes' celebrated account of photography in *La chambre claire* (1980), and in particular Barthes' assertion of the technological, rather than aesthetic, dimensions of the medium. This lack of (human) artistic intentionality reveals a seductive duality inherent to the world of appearances: Baudrillard writes that photography delivers 'l'apparence' and 'l'évidence du monde' to us, but it is at the same time 'une évidence trompeuse' in that it is through 'sa reduction phénomenologique du mouvement, et de la couleur éventuellement, que la photo s'impose comme l'image la plus pure et la plus artificielle.'[280] In its submission to the object, photography thus reveals the non-objective quality of the world, its mischievous freedom from identity and resemblance: it brings us to 'l'illusion radicale du monde.'[281] Outside the control of the artist or agent of representation, the photograph reveals a reversibility inherent to the world itself, a non-anthropocentric and inhuman realm indifferent to meaning and rational discourse.

Photography is a profoundly seductive medium in that it invites the human subject to give in to this tendency towards reversibility: it is a domain in which *the object approaches us*. At the heart of reality there is a dehiscence and doubling, as the photographed subject becomes image, a spectral and cadaverous object that will outlast their subjectivity. As I recounted in the previous chapter, Barthes' 'micro-expérience de la mort' upon viewing his mother's photograph

[279] Jean Baudrillard, *Car l'illusion ne s'oppose pas à la réalité* (Paris: Descartes & Cie, 1998), unpaginated.
[280] Baudrillard, *Car l'illusion ne s'oppose pas à la réalité*.
[281] Baudrillard, *Car l'illusion ne s'oppose pas à la réalité*.

introduces an animation of the cadaverous object. Moreover, this animation challenges the living subject, as it 'vient interpeller chacun de nous, un par un, hors de toute généralité'.[282] Barthes' argument here aligns with a Baudrillardian scenario of doubling, challenges and reversibility that foils the homogenizing logic of capitalism. The deathly object comes to meet us halfway, as the subject brushes against death. It is an irreducible ambiguity unable to be subsumed under life and accumulation.

Photography is thus scandalous for Barthes not just in a personal sense, but in a broader political-historical sense. Through a periodization that aligns with Baudrillard's own, Barthes suggests that death has been suppressed in modernity only to reemerge in the photograph: 'Contemporaine du recul des rites, la Photographie correspondrait peut-être à l'intrusion, dans notre société moderne, d'une Mort asymoblique, hors religion, hors rituel, sorte de plongée brusque dans la Mort littérale.'[283] Just as Merleau-Ponty saw magic reemerging via the subjective experience of the flesh, here the subject's confrontation with death in the photograph is similarly revivifying, as photography introduces an ontological destabilization of reality. The dead are not reanimated, turned once again into productive subjects, as much as living, productive subjects are 'animated' as objects. It is for this reason that Barthes insists that the lack of artistry in the photograph renders it 'folle', a 'movement proprement révulsif, qui retourne le cours de la chose, et que j'appelerai pour finir l'*extase* photographique.'[284] The technological complicity between object and lens reveals a process (or 'ecstasy') transpiring outside human agency, as Baudrillard states 'La magie de la photo, c'est que c'est l'objet qui fait tout le travail.'[285]

[282] Barthes, *La chambre claire*, p. 97.
[283] Barthes, *La chambre claire*, p. 144.
[284] Barthes, *La chambre claire*, p. 183.
[285] Baudrillard, *Car l'illusion ne s'oppose pas à la réalité*.

Modernity, for Barthes, nonetheless attempts to tame (*à assagir*) the madness of the photograph, employing two strategies: either by making it an art, and thereby reintroducing human agency, or by generalizing the proliferation of images to the point of banality. It is in this second choice (which Barthes associates with the United States) that we encounter Baudrillard's hyper-real, in which 'l'image, s'universalisant, produisait un monde sans différences (indifférent)'.[286] In an entirely mediatized world, the radical alterity and duality introduced by the photograph is once again cancelled out. The Baudrillardian imagery persists as Barthes describes how the wounding photograph is nonetheless able to 'advene' out of the monotony of the hyper-real: 'Dans ce désert morose, telle photo, tout d'un coup, m'arrive; elle m'anime et je l'anime.'[287] Here there is a seduction, in which the object approaches the subject. Yet this approach is reciprocal, a paradoxical sensation which is confirmed in the text's enigmatic concluding lines. There Barthes is explicit that it is also up to the spectator whether or not to let themselves be seduced by images: 'A moi de choisir, de soumettre son spectacle au code civilisé des illusions parfaites, ou d'affronter en elle le réveil de l'intraitable réalité.'[288] Barthes is less pessimistic than Baudrillard in granting this paradoxical form of agency to the post-modern subject: like Merleau-Ponty, he finds this inhuman reality always in the process of awakening, if only we stopped to see it.

Magic and Modernity

We are now in a better position to see that the 'western jinn' that Diop is rejecting is this hyper-real world of production. Diop's film portrays Dakar under assault by the forces of racial

[286] Barthes, *La chambre claire*, p. 183.
[287] Barthes, *La chambre claire*, p. 39.
[288] Barthes, *La chambre claire*, p. 184.

capitalism and patriarchy, as seen in the frenzied construction of a futuristic high-rise tower, and in the elder generation's suspicious monitoring of young women's sexuality. Both of these tendencies reveal the manner in which power reduces the ambiguity of appearances to a reality that can be definitively known and controlled. This power insists on accumulation—of profit and knowledge—as the only value, driving away the obscure and invisible dimensions of lived experience. The marginalized young men and women in the film do not oppose these systems at the level of production, attempting to legislate over a homogenous and knowable reality, but rather through seduction, embracing the 'intractable reality' which awakens at night. Here Baudrillard and Barthes' notions dovetail with Diop's exploration of the imaginative virtualities inherent in Afro-futurist electronic music and digital photography. In this nocturnal aesthetic, the living exchange with the dead, and reality with illusion, unleashing a force that *seduces* the world of production—inviting capital, patriarchy, and the law to collapse into their own reversibility.

Diop, like Barthes, gives the subject room to choose which of these paths to follow: the hyper-real world of production or the nocturnal illusion of seduction. The stakes of Ada's decision, and the film's relationship to modernity and feminism, are most dramatically heightened during the afterparty of her wedding to Omar. As the women step outside to the balcony to confront the distraught Ada, it becomes clear that leaving Omar would be a sacrifice of the entire capitalist logic of accumulation and patriarchal logic of security. Against the backdrop of Dakar's twinkling lights, we see both the possibility of isolation from her traditional community and the tenuous new form of kinship forming around her. The women debate the merits of staying with Omar—'if it was me, I'd gobble up his cash without any scruples', says Fanta, while Dior begrudgingly agrees to support Ada in her rupture with Omar. Diop ultimately

endorses Ada's risky decision to forego the world of security offered by Omar, yet she does not moralize regarding Fanta's perspective. The various perspectives in the film—religious, Fanta's cynical pragmatism, and Ada's more recognizably feminist rejection of Omar—are all shown to have their place. In this regard, there is no one proper feminist essence in the film.

Here the theme of the djinn[289] comes to the fore, functioning as a both epistemological and ontological confusion. The women's possession by djinn merely underscores their lack of intelligibility to the prevailing regimes of patriarchal and capitalist knowledge production, intent on unveiling an essence behind their shifting appearances. In both the Islamic and pre-Islamic cosmology of the Arabian Peninsula, the djinn are shape-shifting spirits able to possess human and non-human bodies. Importantly, they are neither divine nor diabolical, but possess a neutral valence. While the religiously observant characters are some of the few witnesses able to acknowledge the presence of the djinn, Diop underscores that both scientific *and* religious discourses are ultimately at a loss over how to explain the phenomenon of possession. She juxtaposes a scene of Mariama's mother getting a consultation from a female doctor regarding her daughter's condition—'She just fainted. When she wakes up, give her two pills…' and then later a male marabout: 'If your daughter is a good Muslim, says her prayers five times a day and wears a veil, there's no reason for the spirits to come back to torment her.' Diop films both scenes in a long take, as silk curtains billow across the doorway, focusing on the mother's face as the doctor and marabout sit with their back toward us (figure 20).

[289] Where Diop's interviewers vary in their orthographic rendering of the term, I am keeping to the uncapitalized 'dj' spelling common amongst Francophone commentators.



Figure 20: Mariama's mother consults the marabout.

Here the style recalls Apichatpong's detached portrayal of the intermingling of magical thinking and modernity in the rural hospital of *Cemetary of Splendour*: the seemingly opposed perspectives are both part of the fabric of quotidian existence. Religious moralism and scientific knowledge are again intertwined after Ada receives a virginity test at the request of Omar's parents. As a virginity test is less an index of sexual activity than the *production* of truth, this practice is itself not free from superstition. This attitude is confirmed when the nurse tells Ada's mother, 'Congratulations, madam, your daughter is a virgin,' the ostensible neutrality of the medical institution revealing its investment in maintaining the elder generation's patriarchal biases.

Diop does not condemn either science or religion categorically, but rather shows that in these specific instances they are ineffectual. Both perspectives are invested in a moral dimension of making truth intelligible and accessible to a third party. In other instances, scientific/technological and supernatural perspectives are conflated in a more hallucinatory manner. This phenomenon can be seen in the fact that Souleiman's ghost communicates with Ada via text messages, and Ada's parents punish her by confiscating her cell phone: here technology enables a resistance to oppressive patriarchy. The difference lies in the fact that in this case technology gives access to truth not in its productive utility, but in its seductive absence. In this regard, the use of technology in the film aligns with Eugene Thacker's discussion of 'haunted' media in Japanese Horror films. In these narratives featuring supernatural beings emerging out of television or computer screens, mediation itself begins to function in the hallucinatory manner of Baudrillard and Barthes' photographs:

> The function of media is no longer to render the inaccessible accessible, or to connect what is separated. Instead, media reveal inaccessibility in and of itself—they make accessible the inaccessible—in its inaccessibility. To reveal the manifestation of that which does not exist—this is not simply a matter of data visualization or the construction of augmented realities. *This is a religious impulse* [italics in original].[290]

Here we find the 'intractable reality' of Barthes, in which a hallucinatory reality appears but without being accessible. It is a religious impulse based on appreciating absence and uselessness, affecting the believer without necessarily 'acting' on them. As Merleau-Ponty described, we are captivated and seduced by a phantom.

[290] Eugene Thacker, Alexander R. Galloway, and McKenzie Wark, 'Excommunication: Three Inquiries in Media and Mediation', in *Excommunication: Three Inquiries in Media and Mediation* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 96.

Her Music is a Djinn

Perhaps the most striking use of 'haunted media' in the film is al-Qadiri's electronic score. Devised in close collaboration with Diop, the music condenses the film's supernatural, geo-political, and feminist concerns. Diop states that she contacted al-Qadiri because of their 'similar hybrid culture', as the musician, the daughter of Kuwaiti diplomats, was born in Dakar and raised in Kuwait: 'Fatima comes from the Middle East, and Arab and Muslim culture are very important in Senegal and to the film, also all of the mythology around djinns is something that Fatima knows by heart. Her music is a Djinn itself.'[291] *Atlantique* is not al-Qadiri's first cinematic collaboration—she has had a long partnership with Qatari/Saudi feminist filmmaker Sophia al-Maria. Dubbing their shared aesthetic 'Gulf Futurism', the duo is fond of citing Baudrillard alongside Afro-futurist, science-fiction and cyberpunk authors in order to make sense of the strange cross-pollinations between hyper-modernity and Islam arising in the Arabian Gulf.

In certain respects, the supernatural quality of media that al-Qadiri puts into practice with Diop is inherited from al-Maria's theorizations of Gulf Futurism. She argues that 'what Jean Baudrillard called an "obscene rage" to unveil truth' takes an unexpected course in the development of the Gulf states: 'The volatile forces of a regressive Islam, foolhardy futurism and sudden wealth jettisoned the oil-states through a fresh temporal portal into a prophetic unreality,' al-Maria writes in a poetic description that applies equally well to the Dakar of *Atlantique*.[292] She suggests that the compressed, accelerated timeline of the Gulf's modernization means that the supernatural exists alongside, and is even inflamed by, technological advances, an unstable

[291] Carlos Aguilar, 'Mati Diop on Atlantics', *Roger Ebert.Com*.
[292] Sophia al-Maria, 'Sci-Fi Wahabi', *The Gaze of Sci-Fi Wahabi* (blog), 7 September 2008, http://scifiwahabi.blogspot.com/.

concoction that was not present in the west's more protracted evolution from a religious to scientific worldview:

> the boundaries between the real and unreal already exist seamlessly there, ungraspable but mediated through various types of screen (tinted window, niqab, LCD)… outside the abstracting hothouse of the Gulf these same boundaries are cast under bright analytical lights and resultantly cannot attain such unchecked fluidity.[293]

Al-Maria, like Baudrillard, has a fascination with the revenge of illusion being carried out within the hyper-real, a process that is happening with greater intensity in places like the Gulf states, Japan (a fact evidenced by Baudrillard's interest in Japanese culture, as well as Thacker's writing on J-Horror mentioned above), and now West Africa. Diop underscores this fact by taking the unfinished Burj Mejiza tower and rendering it digitally in the film (figure 21): it is a virtual realization of the real-life Diamniado project conceived by Lebanese Dubai-based architect Hussein Bakri, which was approved for construction by president Macky Sall in 2014 but has since stalled. The project is typical of a growing trend of Arabian Gulf inspired 'mega-city' complexes proposed across West Africa, financed by international property development companies with the co-operation of African governments. In her CGI rendering, Diop mocks the productive ambitions of this 'foolhardy futurism' and the zeal to secure the future, showing how the tower has slipped back into an 'ungraspable reality'.

[293] al-Maria, 'Sci-Fi Wahabi'.



Figure 21: Diop's digitally rendered version of the Burj Mejiza.

Al-Maria goes into greater detail about this 'ungraspable' quality in her own experimental videos, writing 'the nocturnal poetics hidden in these grainy videos hate to be exposed and shrink from examination but for the sake of our story they will be probed into opening up.'[294] This probing seems more a matter of seducing, rather than producing, appearance. Moreover, music seems to be the ideal medium of this ungraspable reality, as she invokes the manner in which 'Sun Ra (a mythical threshold figure in his own right) suggested transporting all black people on earth to his paradisiacal planet of resonant sound bubbles and champagne flute flowers via teleportation and music'.[295] As one of the forefathers of the Afro-futurist aesthetic, Sun Ra's music developed links between black music and surrealism that had

[294] al-Maria, 'Sci-Fi Wahabi'.
[295] al-Maria, 'Sci-Fi Wahabi'.

been forged by exiled European surrealists' engagement with jazz, and in particular Thelonious Monk, in New York in the 1940's.[296]

al-Qadiri's score intervenes politically through drawing on the cosmological legacy of black diasporic music—ranging from ambient techno to the African 'world music' of Diop's own father Wasis Diop—and its singular questioning of the human figure. Summarizing the African-American musical tradition's evolution from jazz to funk to techno, Afro-futurist scholar Kodwo Eshun writes that 'it's in the music that you get the sense that most African-Americans owe nothing to the status of the human'.[297] In the 1970's, the 'human-machine interface' of electronic music 'began to scramble the ability to assign identity' while also allowing producers 'to alienate themselves from sonic identity and to feel at home in alienation.'[298] Black techno musicians such as Drexciya were not interested in reclaiming a true human identity, but rather in resisting the call to human identity in the first place, as they imagined an alternative 'Black Atlantean' reality created by slaves who jumped overboard and drowned during the Middle Passage. The electronic sounds of synthesizers allowed them to move beyond the human sensory-motor schema into what Deleuze terms the virtual: an inhuman experience that is real without being graspable or representable. Diop acknowledges this fantastical or 'sci-fi' dimension of the music when she states that, 'Since it's a fantasy film, for me, the music often takes charge. Fantasy films are mostly sound pieces.'[299] Music and fantasy are both forms of transport, in an immaterial rather than physical form.

[296] See Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 2002).
[297] Kodwo Eshun, 'Further Considerations on Afrofuturism', *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 2 (2003): 287–302, p. 296.
[298] Eshun, 'Further Considerations on Afrofuturism', p. 296.
[299] Carlos Aguilar, 'Mati Diop on Atlantics', *Roger Ebert.Com*.

The electronic score brings out an Afro-futurist or 'interplanetary' dimension already present in the film's storyline and imagery: the hallucinatory properties of the Atlantic Ocean. Often swelling in seeming syncopation with the sea as silvered light sparkles off the waves, the music suggests an ungraspable reality, heightened through its use of dissonance and chromatism. The film's cinematographer, Claire Mathon, associates the sea with fantasy in much the same manner as Diop does with the music: 'The ocean is the fantastic. We tried to film it as though it were a planet unto itself, an inhuman planet (going there means dying). The viewer had to feel the importance of the heavenly bodies and the characters caught up in something bigger, in the cosmos.'[300] Mathon's description aligns with al-Maria's invocation of Sun Ra and an all-black planet,[301] while emphasizing that this planet is both real and unlivable. If black subjectivity has had a special purchase on this virtual domain through musical traditions dating from blues up through jazz and electronic music, Diop reveals how this 'black planet' is also mediated by the sea. With light glinting off the crests of waves, the ocean functions like a vast mirror. It accompanies and doubles the realm of appearance, but in the mischievous manner of the djinn or Barthes' photograph: it is a haunting reminder and harbinger of death. In resonance with the discussion of Glissant and Moten in Chapter 1, Diop mobilizes the connection that many Africans and members of the black diaspora feel for the Atlantic Ocean and the Middle Passage: it is both a binding force, in its persistence as cultural memory, and unbinding in its invocation of trauma.

[300] Claire Mathon, « Claire Mathon, AFC, discusses her work on Mati Diop's film 'Atlantics' », *Association Française des directrices et directeurs de la photographie Cinématographique*, 21 mai 2019.
[301] Both al-Maria and Diop cite Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972) as an influence on their 'interplanetary' aesthetic, although al-Maria compares it unfavorably with Sun Ra, denigrating the film's 'cerebral sci-fi parlor games'. See Jones, 'Mati Diop on Atlantics' and al-Maria, 'Sci-Fi Wahabi'.

The 'mirroring' effect of the music and the ocean thus informs the men's haunted mediation through mirrors throughout the film. For Diop, death is not simply a terminating event at the end of life, but something that doubles and accompanies us throughout life—it is in this sense that the men are 'already dead' even before leaving for Spain. In Ada and Souleiman's only scene together before his departure, they sit together on the beach, as Ada laments, 'You're not even looking at me, you're looking at the sea'. While here the ocean seems to be pulling Souleiman away from his lover, by the end of the film we realize that Souleiman is not consigned to a solitary death drive as much as a collectively maintained symbolic network that Ada is also implicated in. Souleiman's ghost tells her, 'I saw you in the wave that consumed us. All I saw was your eyes and your tears. I felt your weeping dragging me to the shore. Your eyes never left me. They were there within me. Pouring their light into the depths.' Written in collaboration with the poet Violaine Huisman and inspired by Derek Walcott's poem 'The Sea is History',[302] his words imply that the sea belongs to Ada and Souleiman equally: it is the 'black planet' that unites them in its wounding and fantasmatic power. Walcott's poem, describing 'colonnades of coral' and 'gothic windows of sea fans', evokes the creativity of the Africans who, barred access to the category of the human, looked beyond to the 'intractable reality' awakening outside its borders. It is this same reality that Souleiman and the other men insist on despite being 'dead' in the eyes of the productive regime of capitalism. In continuing to exchange with the dead in this reality, Ada and the other women create a new form of life and living, one that values more than just productive utility.

[302] Ellen E. Jones, 'Mati Diop on Atlantics', Barbican ScreenTalks Archive, Nov. 16, 2021.

Luminous Events

As the women follow the men into this intractable reality, Diop explores digital photography, and its heightened attunement to the darkness of night, as a means of alluding to this virtual domain without objectifying or representing it. In this manner, it functions as a visual equivalent to al-Qadiri's electronic score: the 'clarity' offered by electronic or digital manipulation reveals a reality that is not livable or graspable by the human. With her DP Mathon, Diop discussed the films of Michael Mann, and in particular the 'nuits numériques' of *Collateral* (2004) and *Miami Vice* (2006). Regarding Mann, Diop states, 'C'est l'idée d'une clairvoyance nocturne : on y voit mieux la nuit que le jour.'[303] We see better, but a distinct or recognizable object of vision is not necessarily clarified. David Panagia offers a reading of Mann's idiosyncratic use of lighting that is instructive in this regard, drawing on the lineage of Foucault and Barthes that I have outlined.[304] Panagia suggests that light, in Mann's films, functions not as illumination—which he associates with the objectifying forms of surveillance outlined by Foucault—but rather as 'events of luminosity', citing both Baudelaire's description, in *Le peintre de la vie moderne* (1862), of Constantin Guys' 'luminous explosion in space' and Barthes' evocation, in *La chambre claire*, of the punctum's *aventure* and *animation*.[305] Recalling the punctum 'advening' out of the desert of the hyper-real, in Mann's Los Angeles cityscapes, nocturnal luminosity emerges out of the haze-filled confrontation between desert and sea.

Just as electronic synthesizers allowed black techno producers to hide and scramble their racialized identities, these luminous events suspend the intelligibility of human subjects. Panagia

[303] Corentin Lê, 'Entretien Avec La Réalisatrice Mati Diop Pour Le Film « Atlantique »', *Trois Couleurs*, 30 September 2019.
[304] It is worth noting that Mann himself, who spent time in Paris documenting the May '68 events, references Foucault and Baudrillard in his most recent film *Blackhat* (2015).
[305] David Panagia, 'Films Blancs: Luminosity in the Films of Michael Mann', *Film-Philosophy* 19, no. 1 (2015): 33–54, p. 34.

highlights that these nighttime scenes lack any one direct source of illumination, as both human characters and the surrounding environment become 'objects of luminescent advenience whose appearance glistens as does the radiance of the nightscape.'[306] (Figures 22 and 23.) Pointing to the comparison made by Neil McCauley (Robert DeNiro) in *Heat* (1995) of the nighttime grid of Los Angeles with bioluminescent algae in Fiji, Panagia portrays the city as an 'iridescent urban sea' informing a different kind of sociality: 'It is as if the singularity of luminous entities… is unintelligible and thus not relatable in the way that, say, a metaphor relates two terms whose identity is intelligible.'[307] We do not have knowledge *of* objects (both people and things), in this scenario. In Barthesian fashion, their immediacy renders them more enigmatic, as '[Mann's] camera defeats the objecthood of the city so that the iridescence of the night light makes the city feel at once vivid and like an object that does not exist in the world.'[308] Like the object in Baudrillard's photograph, released from its objectivity and thereby rediscovering its 'magic', the world challenges us towards adventure and the formation of new relational modes.



[306] Panagia, 'Luminosity in the Films of Michael Mann', p. 43.
[307] Panagia, 'Luminosity in the Films of Michael Mann', p. 48.
[308] Panagia, 'Luminosity in the Films of Michael Mann', p. 46.



Figures 22 and 23: Luminous advenience in *Miami Vice* (2006) and *Atlantique.*

In *Atlantique*, nighttime luminosity becomes an event, an adventurous rupture with the daytime world of production. The sea-side desert of Dakar also transforms into an iridescent urban sea, as the young women reconfigure their relationality outside the intelligibility demanded by their patriarchal community. As in Mann's films, this dynamic can be seen most forcefully in the shots of the nighttime city punctuating the film. Rather than functioning as establishing shots, these images have an arbitrary quality, aligning with the atmospheric cityscapes of Denis's *35 Rhums* and *Vendredi Soir* (2002) and the 'pillow shots' of her inspiration Yasujiro Ozu. Yet with the accompaniment of al-Qadiri's minor-key, almost macabre score, these shots feel far removed from the serene pillow shots of Denis and Ozu. Where those filmmakers' images link together inter-generational communities, Diop's luminous cityscapes announce unintelligible moments of rupture between the generations. In Diop's pillow shots, our attention is often drawn to the isolated amber glow of streetlights or an illuminated apartment, contrasting with the matte-grey and teal tones of the darkened edifices, sky and sea. After a

pillow shot of the nighttime Dakar seascape (figure 25), we watch Ada preparing to sneak out of her bedroom window to meet her friends at the beach bar. The curtained window is bathed in an amber light, presumably from a street lamp, that renders Ada a ghostly shadow as she exits the frame. This light is not the light of illumination but of advenience and adventure, irrupting within darkness.

In the following sequence, we see how the women in the film are themselves luminous events, as their nighttime festivity weaves together a new form of connection between their singular appearances. We pass from a moment of rupture, as Ada exits her family home, to a tenuous form of communal belonging. As Ada joins the procession of other women, she seems to be hesitant, walking slightly behind the group, clothed in unassuming jeans and a sweatshirt while the others are clad in tight-fitting short dresses. Stumbling along the seashore in high heels, there is no visible source of illumination, but the women nonetheless seem to emit their own radiance via their iridescent and neon colored clothing and purses (figure 24). Ada's isolation in the previous scene, as a solitary luminous event, gives way to her joining the iridescent urban sea of Dakar.



Figures 24 and 25: The Iridescent Urban Sea and Diop's 'Pillow Shot'.

The scenes at Dior's beach bar reveal the unstable intermingling of death and festivity in this urban sea, as the bar approaches Baudrillard's 'collective theater of death'. As the sound of

the crashing waves resounds inside the bar alongside al-Qadiri's haunting synthesizer melody, Diop reveals the true male form of the zombies reflected in the mirror. There is a melancholy and *wounded* air to the scene, as the men, simultaneously present and absent, recount their drowning at sea and Souleiman's dying words of love for Ada. In their limp posture, splayed out across mirrors with their voices untethered from their bodies, they invoke the image of the hysterical seductress Anne-Marie Stretter (Delphine Seyrig) from Marguerite Duras' *India Song* (1976). Following from our discussion of Barthes and Duras from the last chapter, I would suggest these men are male hysterics, ravishing objects engendering their women partners as ravished subjects. As in Duras's film, consisting of elaborately choreographed yet glacial dance sequences, there is something revivifying, community forming, and even *festive* about this mutual exposure to finitude.[309] This sensation becomes clear as a rotating cluster of neon green lights 'dances' across the various bodies in the bar, plunging them into the iridescent sea, now understood as a source of both black trauma and fantasy. With its criss-crossed mirror, the bar also invokes the nightclub from *Beau Travail*, a fantasmatic space that is implied, in the film's final scene of quasi-teleportation, to be both suicidal and ecstatic. In the crystalline grid of the mirror, the men are not reflected as much as they are refracted, revealing a dehiscence from themselves that aligns with Barthes' 'extase photographique' (figure 26).

[309] It is thus possible to extend the filiation between Diop and Denis back another generation to Duras. For a discussion of the latter's influence on Denis, and links between their respective notions of community, see Laura McMahon, *Cinema and Contact: The Withdrawal of Touch in Nancy, Bresson, Duras and Denis* (Oxford: Legenda, 2012).



Figure 26: Hystericized men relaxing in a collective theater of death.

The men are unintelligible, from a traditional humanist perspective, but that does not remove them from the sphere of relationality. In this regard, it is worth briefly returning to Barthes' recounting of his alienation in front of his photograph, as it evocatively renders the affective power of this photographic ecstasy. In place of the more studied or cultured photographs which produce him as a representable object—'un individu pénal, guetté par la police'—Barthes longs for an image that could do justice to his self which is 'léger, divisé, disperse et qui, tel un ludion, ne tiens pas en place, tout en m'agitant dans mon bocal'.[310] In this image of the 'true' self as fluid and mobile—which Richard Howard's English translation evocatively renders as 'bottle-imp'—we find the mischievous evanescence of the djinn. Barthes

[310] Barthes, *La chambre claire*, p. 27.

asserts that this fluid self, though persecuted by society, is nonetheless destined to an alternative sociality: 'Car ce n'est pas l'indifférence qui enlève le poids de l'image… c'est l'amour, l'amour extrême.'[311] This dynamic explains the duality present in *Atlantique*, in which the objectifying gaze of the police is lifted not through self-evacuation, but through intersubjectivity: the subject discovering a partner in the ambiguous but nonetheless real agency of the object.

Reversibility and Power

Diop explores the alternative of indifference through the characters associated with the productive regime of hyper-reality. The festive luminosity of the beach bar contrasts with a more sterile form of illumination during Ada's wedding to Omar. In the recently built apartment that he seems to have bought for them to live in, the wedding ceremony is filmed on a DSLR camera with a light mounted on top, throwing its objects into sharp relief in a manner akin to a police flashlight. In this regard it foreshadows the detective investigation that will be opened after the imminent arson attack, prematurely turning the wedding guests into suspects. When Ada and her friends enter her new bedroom, the light flickers on with an ominous shudder, suffusing the sterile white-walled room with a uniform harsh glow. Ada looks pained while her friends are enamored by the spectacle: 'Everything is so new!' they exclaim. 'I've been seduced by this bedroom!' In other words, everything is submitted to the production of reality, leaving no room for shadow, mystery, or ambiguity.

This culture of production nonetheless reveals its fragility in Ada and Omar's scene together at a chic beach club. The crashing waves of the beach bar give way to the artificial calm of an infinity pool, as the couple drink brightly colored cocktails and Omar orders in French

[311] Barthes, *La chambre claire*, 27.

from the waitstaff. The scene transpires in the amber light of late afternoon or early evening, suggesting the twilight of this relationship, over before it even started. The accoutrements of global hyper-reality are rendered impotent, as Ada appears nonplussed when Omar gifts her with an iPhone. Situated between the pool and ocean sunset is a garish sculpture of a face with perforated holes, the human visage seeming to dissolve into air. The image evokes the melancholy, pyrrhic victory of humanism evoked by Baudrillard, or by Foucault in the famous closing lines of *Les mots et les choses* (1966): 'on peut bien parier que l'homme s'effacerait, comme à la limite de la mer un visage de sable.'[312] (figure 27). Here, too, Omar seems to efface himself, as his 'relationship' with Ada is predicated upon commodity fetishism, as well as his own absence for most of the year in Italy. He is as ghostly as Souleiman, but his is a ghostliness of indifference rather than love.



Figure 27: A face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.

Just as the capitalist principle of accumulation collapses into reversibility, so too does the law, in the form of the detective Isa's possession by Souleiman's ghost. Isa falls prey to

[312] Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses: une archéologie des sciences humaines* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), 398.

possession as the sun sets, breaking into a feverish sweat while driving. As the detective's identity fractures, Diop once again cuts to the hallucinatory image of the sun setting over the ocean. Like the dissolving human face overlooking the infinity pool, here the face of the law also exhausts its drive towards illumination. While the decision to have Souleiman possess a male character—thereby avoiding a same-sex love scene between Ada and another woman—was viewed as a disappointing capitulation by some critics,[313] Diop justifies the choice on psychological and narrative grounds: 'it was interesting that it was this man who will be possessed by Souleiman, for many, many reasons. And for me, it was the most exciting character of the film at the end. For a long time, there was a kind of rivalry between Ada and Isa, because I almost had Isa become the first character of the film.'[314] Here Diop conceives the relationship between Ada and Isa as a kind of seductive challenge or duel in the sense described by Baudrillard: a perspective in which duality is necessary, rather than production's attempt to enshrine 'the good' as the sole term of value.

A similar dynamic is also evidenced in the relationship between Isa and Souleiman. Their rivalry draws on a long tradition of crime films in which police detective and culprit 'mirror' one another, two recent examples including the homologous cop-criminal rivalries animating Mann's *Heat* (1995) and *Manhunter* (1986). Just as the latter film's FBI detective studies video cassettes in order to understand the motivation of the serial killer he is tracking, Isa watches a video recording of the wedding only to discover his own white-eyed, zombie-fied visage staring back at him, revealing he is the perpetrator of the arson attack. In both cases, the law is implicated in the crime it seeks to objectify and distance itself from through representation. Like Barthes becoming a subjective object in the photograph, Isa also realizes he is dead and going to die.

[313] See Enzerink, 'Black Atlantic Currents'.
[314] Jones, 'Mati Diop on Atlantics'.

It is this confrontation with death that the women weaponize in their revenge on Mr. Ndiaye. In their first nocturnal possession, the women intrude into his home, which resembles Omar's apartment in its sterile and minimalist design. A gold Buddha statue sits prominently in the entryway, as Diop underscores its incongruity relative to the local culture as well as the hypocrisy in relation to Ndiaye's own greed. The home invasion is nonetheless striking in its lack of violence and even desire, as the zombified women are not tempted by the trappings of Ndiaye's luxury lifestyle. Unlike their 'living' fascination by Omar's apartment, in their 'dead' form the fetishism of property has no purchase on them. Sitting and crouching on the couches and stairwells, their body language 'mirrors' the relaxed posture of the men as seen in the mirrors of the beach bar: they have transformed the space's hyper-reality into a festive collective theater of death (figure 28).



Figure 28: Collective theater of death, part two.

As the women succeed in their vengeance on Ndiaye in the film's penultimate scene, Diop crystallizes their indifference to the capitalist logic he represents. The women force Ndiaye to dig graves for them, yet this action does not exalt their productive labor power according to a

Marxist framework, in which the laborers would seize control of the capitalist's position in order to better manage the modes of production. Rather, it underscores the fact that his control over production is meaningless in the first place. Instead of the zombies assuming a fuller subjectivity, Ndiaye is reduced to their objectivity, as the act of poetic justice confronts him with the fact that he too is dead and going to die. The logic of infinite accumulation tips over into death and dispersal: 'Every time you look up at the tower, you'll think of our unburied bodies at the bottom of the ocean.' The line again underscores the fact that their action is purely symbolic—the 'burial' does not change the fact that the men's true bodies will remain unburied. In a seductive reversal of appearances, the zombies affect, rather than act, on Ndiaye's subjectivity. It is here, in the realm of appearance, that the system is most fragile.

Conclusion

Diop shares Baudrillard's critique of modernity and its repression of the productive subject's non-productive, non-living partners in the object: the men who are 'already dead'. Yet like Barthes and Merleau-Ponty, she is interested in how modern subjectivity is still able to shelter these non-productive, illusory, and fantasmatic objects. Magic has been repressed but is still active in the ambiguous experience of images, mirrors, and other reciprocal forms of exchange. Her film thus demonstrates that the scandal or madness of Barthes' photograph is political in addition to being personal: what initially seems to be Ada's subjective hallucination upends an entire community. The new form of kinship Ada forms with the other women and their ghostly partners therefore suggests a magic that is confined to subjectivity without being repressed. As instantiated in the film's electronic score and digital images, their fugitive sociality continues the legacy of the black diaspora who created musical communities outside the category of the

human. It partakes of the ambiguity of the flesh, persistent even underneath the glass and concrete of Baudrillard's hyper-real dystopia.

C O N C L U S I O N

This thesis has brought together the works of Denis, Hadžihalilović, Apichatpong and Diop as a corpus that is curious about where desire and ecology intersect. These filmmakers all locate this point in the porosity of the human figure that has been rediscovered during the Anthropocene. They view this situation as a crisis, in which technological alienation and isolation has thrown the very desirability of human intimacy and connection into question, as well as an opportunity, outlining sites where desire can be reborn in less egocentric and patriarchal forms. Moreover, they show these two perspectives to be mutually reinforcing. They comprise a respirational rhythm of withdrawal and expression, allowing us to question the status of the human only to better re-emerge as relational subjects. This questioning is only a danger, they suggest, as long as we don't find a way to impart meaning and livability on this environment—a meaning that is only ambiguously ours, and a life that is shared with other organisms.

I have put this corpus in dialogue with the 'eco-psychoanalytic' work of Deleuze, Merleau-Ponty, and Freud because these filmmakers view desire and ecology as intersecting without fusing: the molar desiring subject persists within and beyond the molecular fluxes and flows. The filmmakers of my corpus remain interested in the family, coming of age narratives and the couple, alongside their novel explorations of nonhuman sentience. Nonetheless, psychoanalysis and nonhuman theory are both transformed through this cinematic encounter. Freud's thought is shown to draw on a much richer and dense undergrowth of pre-human and pre-verbal sentience. Nature, meanwhile, is shown to anticipate the complex vicissitudes of human cognition, the two domains remaining in perpetual contact and withdrawal.

Denis demonstrates how this separation is necessary to create a sustainable form of ecological subjectivity. In *Beau Travail*, we have seen how the desire for fusion can all too easily segue into a desire for territorial possession and control. The legionnaires inhabit an ecological form of subjectivity that, like Robinson in *Vendredi*, prevents them from living alongside human others. It is only by embracing their lack of belonging to the land that they are able to form a sustainable relation both to the environment and their human neighbor. *High Life* demonstrated that the desire for fusion is always already contradictory: exhaustion becomes a fecund ground for the re-emergence of the subject and the Other. The cold women of Deleuze come alive, literally and figuratively, as subjects of desire, just as the necessity of the masochistic contract takes on unpredictability and possibility. Perversion, here, is not a 'mistake'—these fantasies are only dangerous as long as their socializing core is not recognized. Denis thereby suggests that when it comes to desire, there is nothing beyond redemption: even the most sterile enjoyments can become (re-)productive. If *High Life* appears somewhat limited by a heterosexual imaginary in this regard, I would suggest that this narrative movement exceeds its contents. Reading the film in tandem with *Beau Travail* underscores that Denis is not advocating for the inevitability of the heterosexual couple as much as for the necessary emergence of a transformational alterity.

In the discussion of Hadžihalilović, this dynamic becomes a respiration-image that scrambles our ability to definitively separate perversion from normality. In a more explicit manner than Denis, she reveals the inherent queerness of a psychoanalysis of nature. In the discussion of *Innocence*, we have seen how linear time is an over-simplistic and neurotic perspective that limits our ability to desire. A functioning adult sexuality requires time-travel: a constant recuperation of childhood polymorphous perversion in present-day adult sexuality. In *Evolution*, we saw how this time-travel implicates more distant nonhuman pasts, as Lanzarote's

marine ecology is full of primordial yet enigmatic symbols unfurling human desire towards the future. In charting the hypocrisies and delusions of normative sexual education, both films, like Freud, demonstrate that sexuality cannot be controlled, rationalized and definitively pinpointed in time and space. If women, in *Innocence*, and men, in *Evolution*, are not destined towards the reproductive function, this is because the animal is not either. The nonhuman world is already alive with the stirrings of singular fantasies.

My analysis of Apichatpong develops this investigation into male subjectivity through its interrogation of nationalistic narratives of progress and invulnerability. *Uncle Boonmee* explored notions of visual fascination and wounding by images of the past together with Mavor's corpus of 'boyish men'. Via the late work of Barthes, we saw how this wounding produces a unique form of subjectivity, 'un sujet blessé' or 'un sujet amoureux' that is predicated upon cadaverous objectivity. Insisting on this unique form of subjective objectivity allows us to see how the film's exploration of desire opens onto larger questions of mourning, collective trauma and politics. The amorous subject is not simply fixated on an image from the past, but instead wanders, returns, and retraces his steps in the present. The political dimension of wounding is further elaborated in *Cemetary of Splendour* and its hospital full of soldiers with a mysterious 'sleeping sickness'. The relationship between Jenjira and Itt explores the way illness and wounds are not simply 'cured', but rather become a mode of being-in-the-world. Itt is lived by immemorial or mythic images with dubious ideological content, but this does not stop him from sharing and transforming them with his partner, rendering them ambiguous and livable.

Atlantique explores how a nocturnal aesthetic of ambiguity becomes the basis of renewed relations between men and women. Like the monkey ghosts in *Uncle Boonmee*, the 'boyfriend ghosts' inhabit a mad or hallucinatory ontological register, but one that is also social: they return

to their community, engendering their partners' emergence as female subjects. Against the technological warping of desiring relations instantiated by neoliberalism, Diop commits to an aesthetic of ambiguity and unknowing. The black trauma symbolized by the Atlantic Ocean is simultaneously unbinding and binding, as the young men and women learn to live with loss, pain and suffering. It is a 'black planet' that unites them through its wounding power, as Ada and Souleiman learn to commune through absence and distance.

All of these films allow us to understand the psychoanalytic narrative not as a coercive developmental teleology, but as a narrative of wandering, of erring, of 'mistakes' turned into opportunities, of steps retraced, a process of interminable ambiguity. I have argued that the shocking endings of Denis and Hadžihalilović's films—the nightclub in *Beau Travail*, the white screen in *High Life*, the modern metropolis of *Innocence*, the illuminated nighttime factory of *Evolution*—are not definitive ruptures, but rather shot through with ambiguous reminders of the past. As Nicolas drifts through the night towards the industrial shoreline in a row-boat, his journey converges (perhaps literally, in the Atlantic waters off the Canary Islands) with that of the men in *Atlantique*: it is simultaneously a departure and a return. So, too, does Boonsong leave to join the monkey ghosts, with his newly dilated pupils, only to come back and linger with his family. Enhanced vision, in these films, allow us to wander.

The psychoanalysis I have outlined here reveals how we are never done with our origins—the ambiguous origins of childhood memories, and the childhood of humanity, the pre-human. They are the continually recuperated source of our singularly human intellectual activity. To sense is to be human, as Merleau-Ponty's Freud reminds us. If we are thus dealing with a psychoanalysis of regression, then we are also dealing with an ecology of anticipation. It is therefore fitting that Merleau-Ponty reads Freud alongside process philosophers like Henri

Bergson, Gilbert Simondon, and Raymond Ruyer. I believe there is much more work to be done exploring these affinities, opening Freud up to the time-travel of Bergson and the spiraling, embryonic development of Simondon and Ruyer. Although we are beginning to witness a resurgence in psychoanalytic practice and criticism in the public sphere,[315] it is unclear what effect this will have on academic scholarship, and whether psychoanalytic theorists will be willing to incorporate the lessons of the nonhuman turn.

In attempting to sketch out a psychoanalysis of nature, I am also envisioning a psychoanalysis that is less resistant to the natural sciences. There have been several encouraging developments in this regard recently. François Laruelle has reflected on the future relationship of philosophy and psychoanalysis in a provocative manner, using his method of non-philosophie to fashion a 'non-analyse'. Laruelle provocatively suggests that the longstanding 20th century quarrel between philosophy and psychoanalysis should give way to a psychoanalysis that understands itself not as a competitor of philosophy, but as a science.[316] Similar arguments have also been made recently by Adrian Johnston and Catherine Malabou.[317] I believe the Merleau-Ponty-Freud axis I have developed here could be a key contribution to these efforts. Merleau-Ponty's influence in the fields of cognitive science, clinical psychology, and even biology[318] could serve as a welcome bridge between the seemingly constructivist dimensions of psychoanalysis and the hard sciences.

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[315] Joseph Bernstein, 'Not Your Daddy's Freud', *The New York Times*, 22 March 2023.

[316] François Laruelle, 'La concept d'analyse generalisée ou de 'non-analyse'', *Revue internationale de philosophie,* vol. 43, no. 171, issue 4 (1989), p. 506-524.

[317] Adrian Johnston and Catherine Malabou, *Self and Emotional Life: Philosophy, Psychoanalysis, and Neuroscience*, Insurrections (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

[318] See Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*, revised edition (Cambridge, Massachusetts ; London England: MIT Press, 2016).

Nonhuman theory, emblematized by Deleuze, also transforms in this encounter. The masochistic desire to unravel the human subject and rejoin the buzzing and blooming molecules reveals itself as just that: a human desire. If Oedipus was 'un rêve de Freud', according to the later Lacan,[319] then I would like to suggest that the masochistic scenario of *Présentation de Sacher-Masoch* is 'un rêve de Deleuze'. With this claim, I mean that, like the Oedipus myth, it is plastic and re-interpretable, even disposable, if need be. If psychoanalytic theorists have spent decades engaged in this process, weighing how much importance they continue to lend the Oedipal model, this re-evaluation has not yet begun amongst Deleuzians. I have suggested that the Dark Deleuze trend could serve as an occasion for this self-reflection, and as *High Life* has shown, Deleuze's 'dream' is interpretable. Nonetheless, in our current era of sexual crisis post-#metoo, Deleuze's question of 'Que signifie 'devenir un homme'?'[320] is a valuable one, one which is less explicit in Freud and Merleau-Ponty. These latter two thinkers, however, ensure that the answers to this question remain legible and communal. Deleuze can test the elasticity of the flesh, but the flesh also transforms due to his questioning.

This corpus, too, shows us families that can welcome back a monkey ghost into their fold, and women who embrace spectral men. These are characters who go the way of all flesh, but a flesh that is moving and ambiguous, able to accommodate the most imaginative and singular forms of subjectivity. It is therefore unsurprising that this eco-psychoanalytic thematic I have outlined is evidenced among a younger generation of French filmmakers. Some have a direct filiation with my corpus, such as Alice Diop, a friend and collaborator of Denis and Mati Diop, both of whose influence is seen in *Saint Omer* (2022) with its exploration of the supernatural, post-colonialism, and matrilineal kinship. Others, such as Yann Gonzalez and

[319] Jacques Lacan, *L'envers de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 1991), p. 135.
[320] Gilles Deleuze, *Présentation de Sacher-Masoch: Le froid et le cruel* (Paris: Minuit, 2007), p. 86.

Bertrand Mandico, draw more from Apichatpong. In films like *Les îles* (2017) and *Les garçons sauvages* (2017), both filmmakers utilize fantasy, magical realism, and pastoral settings to explore questions of sexuality and queer desire. Beyond specific filmmakers, I hope this eco-psychoanalytic perspective can be applied to the medium as a whole, once we remember that film is simultaneously a dream-screen and a window onto the world.

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