

Breathing, Cinema and Other “Nobjects” in Camille Vidal-Naquet’s *Sauvage*

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Abstract:

This article examines the breathing and breathless body in Camille-Vidal Naquet’s *Sauvage* (2018). Respiration has been characterised by Peter Sloterdijk, in the first volume of his *Sphären* (*Spheres*) trilogy, as the first extension of the womb. The air we breathe is a “nobject” (a non-object) that escapes the subject-object relation, like the placenta before it. *Sauvage* engages the respiratory, alongside the placental and the acoustic, as three pre-oral “nobjects” for exploring what Leo Bersani has termed the body’s “somatic receptivity”. Duration, framing, lighting, and camera movements cultivate a spectator’s receptivity to these “nobjects” and participate in acts of sphere formation. This provides a framework for thinking about how cinema itself might function as a “nobject”: a connective medium or sphere that supports and augments a subject, providing a field of protection and attention. However, the film’s presentation of breathlessness also signals a blocked receptivity, an inability to take in, introducing friction and resistance to the discourse of immediacy and exchange that characterises philosophical reflections on breath. Breathlessness has implications for thinking about bodily autonomy and forms of freedom that speak to the queer politics of *Sauvage*, as well as questions about movement and stillness, animation and lifelessness, that reflect back on the medium of film itself.

Keywords: Leo Bersani; the body; breathing; intersubjectivity; queer cinema; receptivity; Peter Sloterdijk; Camille Vidal-Naquet.

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“Indeed, does all life that emerges and goes its separate way remain contained in an accompanying breath?”

Peter Sloterdijk (1998/2011, p. 19)

Sauvage (Camille Vidal-Naquet, 2018) could have begun with a close-up on a young man’s face, drenched in red light and sweat, panting, trembling, his lips parted and his eyes sensually downturned. It would have been an ambiguous shot, playing upon the sensuality of the breath and the eroticism of his convulsions. The viewer might have thought they were seeing the face of orgasm, that solipsistic moment whose exposure, Leo Bersani has argued, “violates the fundamental privacy of being” (2018, p. 88). But the camera would have then pulled back to reframe the young man’s body from a mid-shot. The viewer would have seen him holding his right side as if it were the location of some pain. The reflective surface of his face is just the limit for disclosing what is going on inside: he is struggling to breathe.

Vidal-Naquet (2019) has spoken in an interview about how he wanted to start his film with a longer version of this scene of breathlessness, one which would have begun immediately close to this distressed body that is lacking air. However, his editor, concerned for the storytelling arcs of the film, persuaded him to move the scene; if it had been placed here, the viewer would not yet have had a chance to develop any empathy for Léo (Félix Maritaud), the main character who occupies the heart of *Sauvage* like its gravitational core. They tried placing the scene at the end of the film, as well as eliminating it completely, before finally putting it in the film’s final third. By opening this article with my own description of Léo’s asthma attack, I reinstate the scene’s position as a beginning, using it as a starting point for thinking about the way the film attunes us to breath and the breathing body. In this article I show how throughout *Sauvage* many manifestations of breathing and breathlessness are foregrounded in ways that reflect on the body’s receptivity and resistance, as a body between birth and death, whose first breath marks its independence from the maternal womb and whose last marks the extinguishing of a life.

The locus of the breathing body in film and philosophy has been the focus of a number of recent academic enquiries. In film and film sound studies, this work has built on scholarship from the longer tradition of embodiment and corporeality in the filmic medium drawn from the work of Vivian Sobchack (1992; 2004) and Laura Marks (1999). Davina Quinlivan’s monograph *The Place of Breath in Film* (2012) has been foundational to developing enquiries into cinema’s capacities to attune us to breathing as a form of embodied

thought.¹ Through the philosophy of Luce Irigaray, Quinlivan discusses how the contemporary directors Atom Egoyan, David Cronenberg, and Lars von Trier foreground the breathing body in ways that reflect on cinematic space, corporeality, and intersubjectivity. Irigaray’s philosophy of breath and its intersubjective dimensions (its troubling of Hegelian distinctions between interior and exterior, self and other) allows Quinlivan to examine how the locale of the breathing body on screen might meet that of the spectators it affects through its mimetic and contagious qualities. My own inquiry takes forward much of Quinlivan’s work, particularly in terms of relating breathing to the elemental and filmic space to examine questions of community, sociality, and freedom. However, Quinlivan does not consider breathlessness itself in specific detail, and this may have implications for the way we imagine the immediacy of the relation between the self and the world, or our participation in an intersubjective community of breathing bodies.

For Irigaray, breathing constitutes a particularly feminine form of being, though one that is fundamental for both masculine and feminine subjects. Our sharing of air, in a community of breath, is a repetition of the original sharing between mother and foetus in the womb. I depart from Quinlivan and Irigaray’s feminist frameworks by drawing on another genealogy of breath found in Bersani’s recent writing on the body’s somatic receptivity and his engagement with the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk’s sphere theory (as developed across the latter’s celebrated and controversial *Spheres* trilogy: *Bubbles: Microspherology* [1998/2011], *Globes: Macrospherology* [1999/2014] and *Foams: Plural Spherology* [2004/2016]). Bersani finds in Sloterdijk’s sphere theory an attractive iteration of his own desire to cultivate what Foucault termed “new relational modes”; to be in a sphere is to cultivate ways of being with others that mimic the biune relationship of the placenta and foetus, relations which escape the bind of subject-object poles. Bersani and Sloterdijk place far less emphasis on sex than the Irigarayan biune relationship; Sloterdijk’s focus on the placenta as the first iteration of a life-giving “It” or “With” is conceived of more as a partner or twin, a paired structure that extends to many nonhuman others in its repetition beyond the womb.

1 Since the publication of Quinlivan’s monograph, there have been a number of journal special issues devoted to furthering breath as an object of enquiry in screen cultures. See, for example, the 2018 special issue “Breath: Image and Sound” in *The New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 16(2), and the Autumn 2016 issue of *Music, Sound, and the Moving Image*.

Sauvage is a queer film made by a queer filmmaker. To think about “new relational modes” through structures that recall and repeat the indistinct boundaries of the maternal womb might seem counterintuitive to what Maggie Nelson terms the “presumed opposition between queerness and procreation” (2015, p. 16), or to the way certain queer theorists, such as Lee Edelman (2004), have situated the politics of antisocial queer theory as against the “reproductive futurism” that the womb seems to embody. Yet while *Sauvage*’s explicit presentation of sex may seem more aligned with the loss of subject-object distinction Bersani theorised in some of his more overtly queer work (“Is the Rectum a Grave?” [1987]; *Homos* [1996]), the film does not foreground sexual acts as a kind of Bataillan experience of *jouissance*; rather, sex is very much tied to a subject-object relation. *Sauvage*’s cultivation of nonsexual intimacies through formal arrangements and geometries such as framing, lighting, and camerawork that mimic and create spherically-surrounding conditions of protection and attention resonates instead with an increasing shift in Bersani’s own work towards thinking about nonsexual forms of connectedness, as developed in *Thoughts and Things* (2015) and *Receptive Bodies* (2018).

By aligning *Sauvage* with Bersani and Sloterdijk and their discussion of “nobjects” and “the With” (two key concepts which I will go on to define), I argue that the film reflects on the body’s status of “being-in-media” and participates in its own acts of sphere formation. The sphere allows for an exploration of, as Marks puts it, “how cinema may reconfigure, rather than shatter, a subjectivity that may not be cast in stone in the first place” (1999, p. 151), thus providing a gentler account of cinema’s reconfiguration of subject-object relations than we find in Antonin Artaud or Georges Bataille. Bersani’s thoughts about breath in the context of somatic receptivity are particularly useful for examining breathlessness in *Sauvage* because he leaves space for thinking about resistance alongside receptivity, as well as negativity and nonrelation alongside connectedness and relation. This problematises Sloterdijk and undercuts his own (and Irigaray’s) utopian tendencies in a move that acknowledges what he articulates in the preface to *Thoughts and Things* as “the intractable destructiveness intrinsic to being human” (2015, p. xiii).

“Nobjects” and “the With”

Breathing, Bersani argues, is “the tiny human’s first experience of her body’s inescapable receptivity, a taking-in which is inseparable from a letting out” (2018, p. 85). This moment of respiratory independence marks the little human’s thrownness in the world after leaving the immersive, protective sphere of the womb. And yet, rather than signalling

a moment of exposure and “shelliness” (Sloterdijk, 1998/2011, p. 24), Bersani, following Sloterdijk, characterises the air we breathe as the first extension of the womb, the little infant’s first partner in the world that replicates the prior amorphous boundaries between the foetus, the placenta, and the umbilical cord. For both Bersani and Sloterdijk, who focus here on birth rather than the typical (Heideggerian) philosophical privileging of death, our pre-objective, uterine existence characterises the way we arrive in the world literally accompanied and augmented by others, disclosing our originary sociality with nonhuman others. The receptivity of respiration, which Bersani thinks about alongside other contrastive rhythms such as “the taking in of food and the excreting of nutritive waste” or “the movement, renewed every day, between waking life and sleep” (2018, p. 85) allows him to position the human subject as a “being-within”, a kind of floating being that ingests and expels, and whose receptivity to the external world reflects some of the womb’s all-enfolding interiority.

The rhythm of respiration therefore continues Bersani’s ambivalent relationship with psychoanalytic theory. Throughout much of his long career, as Mikko Tuhkanen summarises in an edited collection positioning Bersani as a queer theorist, Bersani has attempted to provide “an account of the subject’s desiring relation with the world that would revise the violently oppositional and incorporative assumptions and practices through which we posit ourselves and our others” (2014, p. 4). For Bersani, the air is a non-object, a “nobject”. Bersani writes that the:

psychic ravages of the subject-object relational prejudice can be avoided only if we revitalize our contact with at least three pre-oral stages in which we are surrounded by objects that “are not objects because they have no subject-like counterpart”. (Bersani, quoting Sloterdijk, 2018, p. 95)

For the cultural philosopher Thomas Macho, who first coined the term, these “nobjects” are the placental, the acoustic and the respiratory. However, Sloterdijk expands the concept to include all “things, media or persons that fulfil the function of the living genius or intimate augmentor for subjects” (1998/2011, p. 467). For Bersani, Sloterdijk’s call to ever recast the initial sphere of the womb represents how:

Our connections to an otherwise alien and indifferent outside can therefore be said to include opportunities for a sublimated repetition of our earliest experiences of being nourished and protected by the spherically encompassing nobjects of the placenta, the umbilical cord, intra- and extrauterine sonorous presences, and the air we breathe. (2018, p. 102)

Through cultivating our receptivity to such “nobjects”, we cultivate a relationship of “con-subjective intimacy” (1998/2011, p.96) that Sloterdijk, in a move to avoid reifying object relationships, later names “the With” (1998/2011, p. 356). The original organ which “the With” avoids naming is the placenta, but in its prepositional form “the With” reformulates the “nobject” to emphasise companionship and a form of free being-together. Sloterdijk writes that,

as far as the With is concerned, its quality of presence is neither that of a person nor that of a subject, but rather a living and life-giving *It* that remains yonder-close-by. (1998/2011, p. 356)

He further explains, “thus the With could, with good reason, also be termed the *With-me* – for it accompanies me, and me alone, like a nourishing shadow and anonymous sibling” (1998/2011, p. 356). This nourishing, he says, is “unassuming in itself, never demanding its own presence”, but instead “gives and lets things be” (1998/2011, p.357). I will later claim that it is exactly this “With” quality that Vidal-Naquet’s camera takes up in relation to Léo. Thus, this article demonstrates how *Sauvage* mobilises the placental, the acoustic, and the respiratory as “nobjects” for thinking about the body’s receptivity beyond subject-object relations, analysing the way the film does this cinematically by providing a framework for thinking about how film itself might function as a “nobject” or “With” as a new way of understanding cinematic inter-subjectivity. The sphere, as a form in *Sauvage*, foregrounds the potential of cinema as a performative and enactive medium which creates new ways of knowing and being in the world.

The Placental

Sauvage follows Léo, a male sex worker in his early twenties who is in a constant search for intimacy and makes little distinction between work and pleasure. Though we often see him engaged in overtly sexual acts, *Sauvage* presents a wide range of intimate gestures: kissing, sucking, and blowing are presented alongside cradling, stroking, and palpating. Léo holds a widower, too old for sex, throughout the night, or attempts to warm a fellow sex worker by breathing onto their back to transfer heat. *Sauvage* is as much a film about homelessness, about bodily vulnerability and receptivity in general, as it is about the vulnerability occasioned by Léo’s life as gay male sex worker. Significantly, in a film that foregrounds gay promiscuity, Léo’s body, though damaged and ill, is not presented as a body with AIDS, thus moving away from certain representational stereotypes, as well as playing upon the history of the actor Félix

Maritaud’s body in his previous role in *120 BPM* (*120 battements par minute*, Robin Campillo, 2017), a film about 1990s AIDS activism. Vidal-Naquet has commented on his interest in overturning the cliché of the young, fit male prostitute to focus instead on how the precarious conditions of homelessness – malnutrition, sleeplessness, and poor sanitation – damage the body. Yet, he also shows the ways in which this body is an object of desire, of exchange, or sale.

In interviews included in the DVD bonus material for *Sauvage*, Vidal-Naquet continually draws attention to the idea of protecting his characters: the film does not disclose the names of the other characters who appear as sex workers, as the director wished to protect their anonymity. The film features a significant ellipsis during a medical exam when Léo is asked if he is in contact with his parents, thus respecting Léo’s desire to live in the present, and to have no back story, protecting this piece of information through the scene’s editing. The language of protection in a sphere crucially translates to the cinematographic choices made for the film itself. This is one of the means by which the social geometry of a sphere marks the film visually and aurally in ways that this article will go on to discuss. For the lighting, Vidal-Naquet and his cinematographer, Jacques Girault, wished to avoid a gritty, realist aesthetic that would be too harsh and gloomy and position *Sauvage* as a social film. Instead, they wanted lighting that was beautiful without being aestheticising. *Sauvage*’s night scenes are bathed in orange hues of sodium vapour that act as a kind of warm cocoon. Vidal-Naquet has said that he appreciated the “englobant” (encompassing) quality of this lighting. Similarly, for the aspect ratio, Girault and Vidal-Naquet decided to avoid anything too rectangular, which would include too much environment around Léo, orienting him within a social backdrop. Vidal-Naquet and Girault searched for a format that would create an “*une espèce de bulle*” (a sort of bubble) around Léo. In the end, they opted for 1:66 (European wide format) which, while not allowing too much environment to exist in the frame, nonetheless still allowed them to bring two or three bodies into Léo’s sphere and film the intimacy of contacts and exchanges in a single frame. *Sauvage* thus thinks in spheres of protection and attention, spheres that open to include intimate others, at both the narrative and formal level. In this sense, the film constitutes its own enactment of the desire found in Sloterdijk to probe “the possibilities and boundaries of geometric vitalism” (1998/2011, p. 11) within the right-angles of the cinematic frame.

At two significant points in *Sauvage*, Léo takes up a foetal position. The first happens during a medical assessment (the second of three such examinations in the film), and the second occurs for the duration of the



Figure 1. The doctor cradles Léo's head in a gesture that recalls the support of a newborn's neck.

film's long final shot, a slow zoom towards Léo's body as he sleeps in the bucolic cradle of the "bois", a sheltering, sun-dappled grove of trees. The medical exam is conducted by a warm but firm, compassionate but professional, female doctor. She has just listened to Léo's chest and back using a stethoscope, and, as she is palpating his armpit, Léo dissolves into her arms for a long-held embrace (Fig. 1). The doctor, with a warmth already indicated by her manner, raises her hand first to Léo's arm to accept the contact and finally to cradle Léo's head, in a gesture that recalls the support of a newborn's neck. While their bodies are reframed several times by the camera, the final framing holds their position for a few seconds, registering the generosity of her lingering response in real-time. She slowly peels her hands away and asks Léo to lie down on the bed, and he curls into a foetal position. The doctor then asks him to lie on his back, re-establishing their roles and the boundary between them. In both this scene and the film's final shot (Fig. 2), duration plays an important role, as image and action are stilled. Both scenes offer their own form of holding; a holding still, but not completely, of Léo's body. Although the final shot of Léo sleeping is held far longer than the shot of the doctor's embrace, the shared aesthetic of holding and lingering suggests that, here, the camera is enacting a gesture analogous to the doctor's earlier embrace.

This moment with the female doctor is not *Sauvage's* first exploration of the transgression of the patient-doctor boundary. The film also begins with a medical examination: a male doctor wearing a white coat conducts a stethoscope auscultation, followed by an examination through



Figure 2. The camera lingers on Léo's body, holding it still.



Figure 3. Léo's reclining body references its own future as corpse.

palpation. Here, too, contact dissolves into a different kind of touch as the doctor begins to massage Léo's semi-erect penis. It gradually becomes clear that the viewer is witnessing a scene of sexual roleplay between Léo and a client. Léo lies on his back as the doctor massages him. Jean-Marc Lalanne (2019) has observed how Léo's position (Fig. 3) recalls scenes of sexual ritual, as well as anatomical examination of the body, claiming that the "morbid impression of this erotic scene evokes forensic medicine". This is one of several moments in *Sauvage* where Léo's reclining body references its own future as a corpse.

Yet *Sauvage* does not simply explore a Heideggerian being-towards-death through these bodily postures and the morbid intimations of Léo's interior. As already mentioned, the film's images turn towards birth. Through scenes of foetal positions, as well as formal filmic structures of foetal support, *Dasein* is reconceived as being between-birth-and-death. This is particularly distilled in the film's final image: Léo lying down to sleep in a foetal position. Lalanne (2019) argues that this image is marked by a morbid stillness, referencing other images of prone bodies carrying the weight of a corpse, such as Rimbaud's poem "Le Dormeur du Val" ("The Sleeper in the Valley", 1870/1989). However, Lalanne misses the animation in this image. The camera's slow approach to Léo's body gets close enough for us to see the slight rise and fall of his jacket, registering his living, breathing body. This recalls an earlier moment in *Sauvage* where Léo checks the body of an unconscious sex worker for signs of life and, finding he is still breathing, proclaims him alive. Thus, in this final shot, the breath marks the boundary between life and death, alongside the mobile essence of the cinematic medium itself. Just as the shot is marked by an incomplete stillness, Léo's body is also marked by a small degree of movement.

These literal foetal positions are only the beginning of the various images of the womb that the film creates. At one point, Léo and a friend visit the apartment of a new client who lives surrounded by his late mother's belongings. "I didn't see the need to change anything", the man says, as Léo and his friend look curiously around a room stuffed full of brown plump pillows, lace doilies, and unfashionable ornaments. This man has never left the womb, and these maternal objects offer a strange parody of Sloterdijk's call to extend the spheric security of the womb to new external realities, so that we may live each day surrounded by objects that "in friendly inconspicuousness [...] continue the function of the With" (1998/2011, p. 360). Léo and his friend drug the man into an unconscious state, an organic rhythm that returns him to what Bersani argues is the mother's all-enfolding interiority (2018, p.93). Likewise, Léo's jacket could be considered a "nobject" that augments and completes him as subject. Throughout the film, the jacket becomes invested with qualities of protection and support; it serves as pillow, and provides warmth. Léo has no possessions, but he is upset when the jacket is torn in a fight. His decision to repair it comes soon after the second doctor's request that he "take care of himself". Léo's attempt at self-care is directed not towards his own body, but is a form of receptiveness and care towards those "nobjects" in his life that support and let him be.

For Bersani, this question of care is an aspect he finds especially attractive in Sloterdijk's sphere theory. Bersani claims that "the question



Figure 4. Bodies are framed in ways that speak of their exchanges and relations.

for all of us would be to ‘seek pictorial projections in which the With-nobject can be brought to light at an appropriate level of sublimation’” (Bersani, quoting Soterdijk 2018, p. 98). *Sauvage* gives us such “pictorial projections” in its formal decision to film Léo’s body through persistent use of tracking shots. The camera therefore becomes an umbilical attachment to Léo’s body, a shadow presence that can be said to continue the function of “the With”. Léo is frequently filmed walking down the street by a handheld camera, from behind, in tracking shots that follow him at a close distance. The camera’s relation to Léo’s body is defined by a form of proximity, as though it is tethered to him or drawn in by his magnetic field.

Throughout the film, bodies are framed in ways that speak of their exchanges and relations. In the first doctor’s office, during a stethoscope auscultation, the camera presents Léo and the doctor across the depth of the frame in the position of a kiss (Fig. 4). Elsewhere, older men attempt to domesticate their young companions away from their wild existences – when Ahd (Éric Bernard) is captured walking down the street with his “petit vieux”, and Léo is shown walking along with Claude (Philippe Ohrel), the younger bodies (Ahd and Léo) are framed as if they are dogs on leads. If the distances between bodies always imply a relation, connected by a thread (the stethoscope, a dog lead), what is the thread connecting the physical body of the handheld camera to Léo?

Throughout the film, we are tethered to Léo’s body by a distance that implies the thread of an umbilical cord, and which reveals a desire to remain in direct contact. It suggests an investment in film as an

indexical, connective medium in a way that recalls Sloterdijk's desire to find structures that repeat the biune relationship as a form of immediacy without remainder. Because of the film's consistent presentation of Léo walking from this defined distance, the zone between the camera and his body is transformed into an animated sphere between eye and object, a spectator's body and onscreen image, spaced out by this familiar distance that, over the course of the film, becomes a form of embodied knowledge for the spectator, much like an arms-length or a footstep.

It is for this reason that, towards the end of the film, we feel the camera's detachment from Léo's body so acutely. After exiting the third medical examination, the camera remains stationary and Léo walks away to occupy the back of the frame. At this moment, Claude's biological control over Léo's body has been asserted. Léo has been put in the care of Claude's friend, an unfriendly doctor who examines and interrogates Léo mistrustfully, making sure that he is clean and healthy, but only out of concern for Claude. The camera's departure from Léo's body at this moment, rather than signalling release, instead suggests the disrupted embodiment Léo experiences in his clean and healthy body, as controlled by Claude. The camera's untethering from Léo at this point also suggests that he has been severed from the protective sphere he had built over the course of his "shellless" existence. We could read the slow zoom towards Léo's foetal sleeping body at the end of the film, after he runs away from Claude, as a supportive reconnection between two bodies; the camera (and, by extension, the spectator) and Léo, recalling Heidegger's description, later quoted by Sloterdijk, of *Dasein* as a form of de-severant, an act of "making the farness vanish [...] In *Dasein* there lies an essential tendency towards closeness" (1927/1978, p. 139f).²

In extending the idea of a placental structure of support between camera and body, does *Sauvage* successfully move away from a subject and object relation? Is Léo not tracked, and consistently stalked, appropriatively presented as the object of the camera's gaze? Ellis Hanson (2014) has discussed the sadistic and reparative potential of a cinema *a tergo* in relation to Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* (2003). He draws on Bersani's concept of "impersonal intimacy", as Bersani develops it through a reading of André Gide's *The Immoralist* (1921/1970), which

2 Sloterdijk's work is an explicit reformulation of Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927/1978). Sloterdijk describes his *Spheres* trilogy as an attempt to "recover – in one substantial aspect, at least – the project wedged sub-thematically into Heidegger's early work, namely *Being and Space*, from its state of entombment" (1998/2011, p. 342). For a full discussion of how Sloterdijk revises *Dasein* according to space and the local, see Thomas Sutherland (2017).

“proposes that we move irresponsibly among other bodies, somewhat indifferent to them, demanding nothing more than they be as available to contact as we are” (Bersani, 1996, p. 128). Hanson argues that *Elephant*’s use of tracking follow shots offers a queer erotics marked by such impersonal intimacy. For Hanson, the follow shot aesthetic in *Elephant*

may mean that it [the camera] is stalking you, but it may also mean that it is somehow *covering your back* and protecting you; or backing you up, in the sense of supporting your extension into the world by redoubling and reinforcing your perspective. (2014, p.96, emphasis in original)

As such, Hanson configures the impersonal intimacy of promiscuous follow shots as a form of supportive protection, and, crucially, one that extends the subject beyond its own borders, like Sloterdijk’s “With” double, as a twin or an anonymous sibling, in a move that augments and completes it.

However, the follow shot is not promiscuous in *Sauvage*. It does not move among forms but remains resolutely attached to Léo. Nonetheless, it offers a reparative departure from understanding cinema’s relation to the body as necessarily sadistic. Follow shots blur the distinction between subject and object because, as Jordan Schonig (2018) and Jennifer Barker and Adam Cattrel (2015) have pointed out, they position the viewer between first and third person. This indeterminacy makes Léo neither subject nor object of the gaze, but both. Vidal-Naquet’s camera looks and moves with Léo, without collapsing the difference between this looking and movement into a first-person point of view shot. The camera and Léo do not “kinesthetically cohabit” one body (Barker & Cottrel, 2015, p. 87), but remain resolutely divided, with indistinct boundaries. The camera in *Sauvage* could thus be positioned as a “nobject”, a shadow presence of “the With” that figures an alternative attachment to the appropriative relations of subject and object that we find threaded elsewhere in the film, such as the lead which transforms the body into property. The camera and Léo are a paired structure, two things that co-belong, mirroring the dyadic structuration of placenta and foetus.

In denying the face, the follow shot is typically understood as denying interiority, as it is the face that we read for signs of psychological interiority. However, as we have already seen, during Léo’s asthma attack in the tunnel, *Sauvage* is not so much interested in the psychological interiority implied by the face, but, rather, biological interiority, reinforced through the film’s repeated return to stethoscope examinations. The follow shots in *Sauvage* emphasise movement, distilling the

content of a shot to the forward pull of Léo's body as it moves us through the world of the film. However, this does not turn Léo's body into a vehicle for exploring this world. *Sauvage*'s reduced aspect ratio does not allow as much environment into the frame as is typically found in more recent uses of the follow shot in the Hollywood cinemascope format, such as *The Place Beyond the Pines* (Derek Cianfrance, 2012) and *The Wrestler* (Darren Aronofsky, 2008). Barker and Cottrell have examined the phenomenological nature and critical significance of tracking shots in these two films, arguing that they become a useful interpretive tool for investigating masculinity and gender in the 21st century. The follow shots in *Sauvage* are less deconstructive. The reduced aspect ratio means that the viewer is not encouraged to interpret the body as a social construct in relation to ideological forces of an external world, though Léo's body is certainly externally marked by his existence, but to reflect instead on his moving body itself, intimating its biological interiority.

The Respiratory

Sauvage reconfigures breath, aurally and visually, from something barely noticeable to something impossible to ignore, so that movement itself becomes redolent of the invisible, usually unnoticed, activity that supports us through life. At several moments of intense movement – playing football, having sex – Léo's affliction causes his body to fail. Likewise, towards the end of the film, when Léo's health is at its worst, there is a barely audible wheezing in the soundtrack as he stumbles down the street, a wheezing that is not visibly perceptible in the image itself. Viewers usually watch characters move through the filmic world without experiencing the sound of them breathing; whenever breath is amplified on screen, it is marked, a conscious choice to build tension, sensuality or something else.³ Sobchack argues that,

we could liken the intermittent passage of images into and out of the film's material body (through camera and projector) to human respiration or circulation, the primary bases upon which human animation and being are grounded. (1992, p. 207)

By foregrounding Léo's breathless body, *Sauvage* draws attention to the invisible labour and discrete units that support the seamless illusion of all movement in a parallel reflection on the essence of the moving image itself.

3 For an analysis of the combined labour of performer and sound designer to manifest the sound of breath on screen, see Liz Greene (2016).

The follow shots of Léo’s moving body, even when it appears lithe and healthy, seem to ask us to reflect on his interior. In this way, the film might be said to take on the properties of a stethoscope, echoing those diegetically present in the first two medical examinations. Rather than the stethoscope offering the interior as an object for the medical gaze, research into this instrument has explored the way in which it differs from other tools which register the interior visually. Instead of forcing the body into transparency, the stethoscope, as an instrument of listening, allows it to remain opaque. The sound anthropologist Tom Rice (2010) has shown how the stethoscope has come to lose favour as an instrument of investigation in comparison to visual technologies, as it retains too much of the intrusive subjectivity of the listening doctor. Moreover, in an explanation Bersani would appreciate, Rice has described how the stethoscope unsettles the security between subject and object, patient and listener, through its acoustic immersion: “Instead of the doctor penetrating the patient’s body with a kind of ‘auditory gaze’, the sensation is more one of the patient’s body penetrating that of the listener” (2010, p. S48). Thus, the stethoscope challenges the medical gaze with its own somatic receptivity.

Sauvage explores the body’s surface visually. While coming close to the interior at several moments, the film always turns away from the body’s viscera at the moment of its exposure. For example, when Léo is abused by two clients who force an extremely large butt plug into him, the scene cuts just as he starts to bleed. Similarly, there is an ellipsis when Léo gets into the car of the “piano man”, who it has been made known has a sexual interest in torture. In maintaining the opacity of Léo’s body while nonetheless intimating the interior, and drawing attention to the act of breathing, which is amplified in the soundtrack throughout the film, *Sauvage* mobilises cinema as an instrument for registering the living, moving body, a body positioned between birth and death, in ways that are closer to an acoustic exploration of the opaque body’s interior, attending to signals at its surface.

Like the unsettling acoustic immersion experienced when listening through a stethoscope, the experience of listening is elsewhere positioned in *Sauvage* as situating the body as a being-in. For Sloterdijk, music is the “continuum art *par excellence* [...] listening to music always means being-in-music” (1998/2011, p. 296). He argues that:

It is logical that acoustic events can only be given in the nobject mode – for sonorous presences have no tangible substrate that could be encountered in the attitude of standing opposite something. (1998/2011, p. 296)

These immersive, “nobject” properties of the acoustic are suggested in the numerous scenes of Léo dancing in the nightclub, where he appears covered in sweat and given over to the experience of moving his body with others. The nightclub scenes accentuate this visually through the strobing lights, encouraging both dancers and spectators to dissolve into auditory and visual rhythms. The stuttering lighting makes it impossible to plot clear trajectories of movement along distinct lines. As such, these scenes work to undo a stable Cartesian perspectival system that underpins the visual co-ordinates of subject-object relations. The film therefore reinforces the acoustic as another “nobject”. These scenes demonstrate “the lost acoustic umbilical connection” which Bersani, inspired by Sloterdijk, argues is “replaced by the subject’s listening to music and voices – that is, to auditory presences in which we participate through a kind of being-in” (2018, p. 96).

However, even more than the acoustic, the film makes clear that Léo is a being-in-the-air. Breath is everywhere: inhalations, exhalations, sighs; characters blow smoke rings, and drag on pipes; the sex workers blow dandelions playfully at each other as they kill time, pant their way to orgasm, or breathe into a body to transfer warmth, which captures in one gesture the sluice-like quality of the skin as an interface that regulates the body’s receptivity. These instances reflect what Tremblay has described as our need to grasp breath as “a phenomenon that is fully audiovisual, and then some: breath has a density, a grain, a warmth” (2018, p.95). They are also suggestive of the playful and intimate community in breath which informed so much of Irigaray’s interest in breath as a positive shared space in which to live.

Not only does breathing seem to suffuse all human movement in the film, but breathing pervades the world of the film itself, grafting the interior of Léo’s body onto images of the external world so that the location of the breathing body becomes unstable: pervasive and diffusely situated in the film experience. All of these movements and sounds – including the wind blowing through grasses, the rustling of leaves, and road noise – reveal an unstable boundary between Léo’s body and the air around him (Fig. 5).

When Léo escapes Claude at the airport just before they are due to fly to Canada, he runs back to the grove of trees. As he gradually becomes out of breath and slows, he takes in his environment, inhaling and exhaling, before removing his t-shirt to expose more of his body to the feel of the breeze and the sun. The moving grass in the foreground of the frame cuts across Léo’s chest where his lungs are, and its disturbance by the breeze inspires the entire frame with the expansion of Léo’s breathing body. It is an image of freedom, of relief, of breath – even though he is breathless,



Figure 5. Léo's receptivity transforms him into a desiring, ecstatic skin.

Léo is like a gasping fish returned to its pond – that speaks of the body as a surface of exchange between interior and exterior. The image emphasises the dissolve of subject-object relations through the medium of air. Léo's receptivity transforms him into a desiring, ecstatic skin, seeking to absorb heat, air, and sound, while also delivering more and more of its surface area to the world. Here, air and his body become another paired structure that mimics the biune relationship. Léo's obvious breathing and bodily pose of somatic receptivity emphasise the medial qualities of the air, making the blue space around him thick with content. He is presented as a being-in-air, in a way that unites the content of the frame with the question of media itself.

In this way, the film opens up what Sobchack and Quinlivan have discussed, referencing Maurice Merleau-Ponty, as the chiasmatic relation between body and film, where a spectator's body is understood as the reverse or counterpart to the image. As Sobchack explains,

the cinesthetic subject feels his or her literal body as only one side of *an irreducible and dynamic relational structure of reversability and reciprocity* that has as its other the figural objects of bodily provocation on the screen. (2004, p.79, emphasis in original)

Meanwhile, Quinlivan's work shows how the particularly contagious quality of seeing and hearing breath on screen elicits a mimetic reaction in a spectator, in an intensification of Sobchack's broader argument. Quinlivan draws on Irigaray's theory of breath as a relational interval

irreducible to any of its participants; a breathing body on screen is therefore already a subversive one, queering the very limits of this body. Through unsettling the boundaries of the body on screen through its attention to breath, *Sauvage* invites us into a paired structure with the image, a biune relation with cinema as a “nobject”.

Many critics have noted that there is an insidious politics to Sloterdijk's sphere theory, found in his desire for the sphere to be a space as sealed off as possible to alterity. These politics become particularly manifest in the second volume of his trilogy, *Globes*, where he extends the structure of the intimate bodily microspheres developed in *Bubbles* to the geopolitical concerns of globalisation. Bersani has signalled how Sloterdijk's desire to put forward “the fluidal communion in the medium of blood” as the basis for imagining community evokes the “most sinister moments of modern Western history” (2018, p. 103). Similarly, Sutherland argues that “what makes Sloterdijk's account somewhat problematic is the way it tacitly treats the encounter with alterity that grounds our Being-in-the-world as an *unfortunate* (albeit necessary) consequence of our existential facticity” (2017, p. 145). He writes that Sloterdijk treats,

all worldly communication as inadequate in relation to the ‘uterine immediacy’ [...] the biune relationship is thus in the end just another analogue for the divine communion – an immediacy without remainder. (2017, p.145)

For Sloterdijk, air can never be defined in object terms: “for the child, extra-maternal being-in-the-world first and last of all means being-in-the-air and participating without struggles – following an episode of initiatory breathing difficulty – in the wealth of this medium” (1998/2011, p. 298). Behind the appeal to universality here, there is a clear language of privilege, revealed by terms such as “wealth” or participation “without struggle”, which immediately make one think of some people's limited access to this medium. We are not all equal in breath: think of the last words of Eric Garner, who was put in a chokehold by New York Police in 2014 – “I can't breathe”. These words have since become a slogan for the Black Lives Matter movement. The Covid-19 pandemic, a disease characterised by respiratory failures and body systems starved of oxygen, has also illuminated health and social inequalities. These events speak to what Tremblay has described as the potential of breathing to “articulate embodied power relations” (2018, p. 96).

Breathlessness itself is a condition that is invisible. It is associated with precarity and social vulnerability, and the funding of research and

treatment is not unaffected by the politics of this stigmatisation (McLusky & Macnoughton, 2017). Therefore, I wish to break away from Sloterdijk’s argument to think about how breathlessness, a condition particularly associated with the “shellless” existence that Léo chooses, might interrupt the logic of immediacy that characterises our relation with “nobjects” (a relation often idealised for its seamless exchanges with our environment) and therefore the closedness of the sphere, opening it up to marginalised bodies and alterity.

Sauvage shows a symbiotic relation between Léo and his environment. The film positions him as a being-in-the-air, a being-in-media, but it also introduces friction to Sloterdijk’s characterisation of the immediate, seamless exchange between the breathing body and the air that surrounds it. Air is not an object we have a relationship with when our breathing comes easily and naturally. As soon as one is struggling to breathe, air becomes tangible. Such moments in *Sauvage* focus in on the body’s blocked receptivity, figuring a nonrelation to our environment. Léo’s breathlessness makes, as Bersani argues, “resistance a defining aspect of reception” (2018, p. 86). He further explains, “receptivity is inaccurately described if the description fails to include that which appears to contradict it” (2018, p.86). At this moment, Bersani’s text seems to pre-empt its later critique of Sloterdijk’s sphere theory by acknowledging and welcoming others that shift our receptive agency in the economy of space through which we move, rather than seeing alterity as necessary but unfortunate, as Sloterdijk does. Léo’s breathlessness introduces a painful intention and reflexivity to the breath, but also the question of mediation, rather than immediacy, as the film foregrounds instruments such as the stethoscope or the inhaler that Léo and his friend play with.

For Oriana Walker, a historian of medicine and the human body, the idea of breathing as a continuous and involuntary activity is a relatively recent idea born alongside late 19th century materialist and mechanistic conceptions of the body (Malpass et al., see section by Walker, 2019, p. 5). The Roman physician and philosopher Galen, for example, thought of muscles as the “instruments of will”, and positioned breathing as both automatic and volitional. These different ideas of the body reveal something, Walker argues, about how much freedom we imagine to be possible for a human body. While we do not exert volitional control over our breathing to the point of determining our own life or death – even if breath marks the border of this, at times, unstable boundary – we might nonetheless think of the agency of an angry child who holds their breath in acts of protest, or of free divers defying their reflexes. Jayne Wilton, an artist who explores breath visually as a unit of exchange between people

and their environments by registering it indexically, has suggested that “holding your breath is perhaps the most conscious rebellion one can incite” (McLusky & Wilton, 2017).

Vidal-Naquet (2019), speaking of *Sauvage*’s ending, says that the film asks us to think about what freedom means. According to him, most people have a very fluffy idea of freedom, *à la* American Declaration of Independence, and therefore find it hard to relate to Léo’s choice to return to his homeless existence and reject the path towards rehabilitation. In this way, *Sauvage* works against the sanitising logic of liberalism. When the second doctor asks Léo if he would like another life, he meets her suggestion with straightforward incomprehension: “Why would I want a different life?” Léo runs away from Claude and, in doing so, embraces “shelliness” and, as an indirect result, breathlessness too. Tremblay has argued that the presence of breath on screen has the capacity to “pose practical and existential questions regarding if and how one can or should keep living” (2018, p.93). Tremblay’s analysis takes place in relation to the trauma of loss thematised in the HBO TV series *The Leftovers* (2014-2017); the image of Léo panting in the open air by the road raises similar concerns. While it may be facetious to imply that Léo’s breathless condition becomes an expression of freedom, reflection on the multiple possibilities for breathing, as willed and as withheld, invited by the reflexivity and intention *Sauvage* lends to the breath, might be a necessary part of the film’s reconsideration of what freedom is.

Throughout the film, breathing becomes a way of thinking about intimacy and belonging, receptivity and relation. At times, *Sauvage* certainly presents a community in breath and the film often positions Léo as a being-in-air, through attention to the movement of Léo’s body as well as through images that present him as a receptive surface of exchange. Nonetheless, the film also explores breathing as a difficult or blocked relation to the world. Whereas Sloterdijk figures breathing as an immediacy without remainder, breathlessness in *Sauvage* shows resistance to be a defining aspect of reception, acknowledging that our receptive agency shifts as we move through the world. Léo’s breathlessness can therefore also be read as a form of non-relation that echoes his broader set of withdrawals. In his preferred choice of life, the film aligns itself with the more anti-communitarian and anti-social provocative strands of Bersani’s thought. And yet *Sauvage* does not only present negative freedom in its ending. Certainly, Léo’s escape from Claude’s carceral care is a form of “freedom-from” the familiar (and oppressive) forms of being together that Claude represents. However, the ending sees Léo’s de-severance, encapsulated in the camera’s slow zoom towards his

body, and his reconnection to “the With” of the air, the sun, the grove, and the camera, “nobjects” that support and sustain him. Thus, the ending reinstates Léo as a subject-“nobject” unity, or, as I discussed with reference to the image of Léo exposing the surface area of his skin to the elements around him, as a paired structure. As such, the film also presents a more positive form of “freedom-with” – a form of free being-together with that partner, “the With”, that “gives and lets things be” (Sloterdijk, 1998/2011, p. 356).

In conclusion, *Sauvage* foregrounds Léo’s somatic receptivity as a desiring relation with the world, as his vulnerability allows him to deliver himself, and his body, to others – both human and nonhuman. The film reveals these nonsexual intimacies as sensual forms of connectedness that represent positive forms of “freedom-with”. For Sloterdijk, “to the extent that existence [*Dasein*] demands to be interpreted as a being-there-inside [*Innen-da-sein*], it always means dwelling behind walls and borders” (1999/2014, p. 203). Yet receptivity in *Sauvage* unfolds the body into microspheres that expose the artificial nature of its conceptually shored-up boundaries. The film presents Léo as a floating being, a being-in-sound or a being-in-the-air, but it is these “liquids, soft bodies and cave boundaries” (Sloterdijk, 1998/2011, p. 293) that allow him to live as an ecstatic being, wildly, “shelllessly”, rather than sealed off behind a wall or border. Léo lives through “nobjects”, through forms of connectedness, and it is precisely this relation that allows him to reject more traditional spheres such as the family, a home, or the social connection offered by a mobile phone.

This exploration of the body’s somatic receptivity lends “nobject” properties to the medium of film itself, as the camera is used to create an animated sphere between eye and object, a spectator’s body and the image, that does not enter into subject-object relations but instead into intimate partnerships, supporting, protecting, and extending a body into the world. Zooms, framing, follow shots, and shots that hold Léo’s body still, function as formal arrangements that act as a kind of de-severant, reconnecting the body to structures that repeat the immediacy of the biune relationship. The film thinks in these spheres and paired structures to provide an answer to Bersani’s question of how we can “seek pictorial projections in which the With-nobject can be brought to light at an appropriate level of sublimation” (2018, p.98) and, in doing so, present alternative ways of being together.

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