AFFECTIVE AESTHETICS AND THE SOCIAL POLITICS OF NEOLIBERALISM
IN NEW EXTREMISM CINEMA

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ABSTRACT

AFFECTIVE AESTHETICS AND NEOLIBERAL SOCIAL POLITICS IN NEW
EXTREMISM CINEMA

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This thesis investigates the aesthetics of transgression in New Extremism cinema for the ways in which they inform, and are mutually informed by, neoliberal affect and social politics. Although negative affect and spectatorial embodiment are often central to critical discourse on New Extremism, this thesis instead attends to the interlocking aesthetic, narrative, and spatio-temporal expressions of affect as they correlate with neoliberal politics of respectability and reproduction. By deploying feminism and queer theory, this thesis locates positive, productive potentials within formal expressions of negative affect that mobilize a political critique of the violences within each film. In so doing, the selected film examples—Fabrice Du Welz's *Calvaire* (2004), Marina de Van's *Dans ma peu* (2002), Olivier Assayas's *Demonlover* (2002), Bruno Dumont's *Twentynine Palms* (2004), François Ozon's *Criminal Lovers* (2001), Alain Guiraudie's *Stranger by the Lake* (2014), to name a few—portray the shifting relations between politics, gender, and sexuality in the neoliberal present and offer critical alternatives for how such developments have impacted and impeded sociality.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Introduction: What's New About New Extremism?

> Bava as much as Bataille, Salò no less than Sade seem the determinants of a
> cinema suddenly determined to break every taboo, to wade in rivers of viscera and
> spumes of sperm, to fill each frame with flesh, nubile or gnarled, and subject it to
> all manner of penetration, mutilation, and defilement. (Quandt 18)

Following James Quandt's original national grouping "New French Extremity," film

scholars have since grappled with how to categorize the proliferation of graphic violence and

(often unsimulated) sex in contemporary art cinema. A few rubrics include post-porn,

artsploitation, the cinema of sensation, *cinéma du corps*, extreme realism, *cinéma brut,*

unwatchable cinema, and the feel-bad film.[1] Implicit in these taxonomic constructions are

generic considerations of pornography, exploitation, and horror; art cinema's typical aesthetic

cohesions of realism and modernism; and the difficulties this cinema poses for spectatorship in

practice and theory. Some critics maintain the national specificity of France, while others chart

the cultural distinctions of Asian or European Extremism.[2] Insofar as sex, violence, and sexual

violence abound in their art-house examples, many of these scholars address the role of "body

genres" (horror, pornography, and melodrama)[3] within aesthetic traditions of art cinema and the

complex interplay between corporeal and cerebral modes of spectatorship that such a generic

instability affords.

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[1] Listed in chronological order based on publication, see Lisa Downing ("post-porn"), Steve
Erickson ("artsploitation"), Martine Beugnet ("the cinema of sensation"), Tim Palmer ("*cinéma
du corps*"), James Williams ("extreme realism"), Dominque Russell ("*cinéma brut*"), Asbjørn
Grønstad ("unwatchable cinema"), and Nikolaj Lübecker ("the feel-bad film").

[2] For Asian Extremism, see Jinhee Choi and Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano, and for European
Extremism, see Horeck and Kendall, *The New Extremism in Cinema*.

[3] For "body genres," see Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess." *Film
Quarterly* 44.4 (1991): 2-13. *JSTOR*. Web. 10 Dec. 2015. Though Williams connects horror and
pornography earlier in *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible,"* in this
essay she more cogently links melodrama with these "genres of excess."

Although my approach is indebted to this scholarship, I define New Extremism foremost as a global practice that is a continuous undercurrent of cinema and a recent upsurge with novel expressions. I invoke Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall's term "New Extremism" precisely because it suggests filiations with avant-garde and transgressive cinemas of the past, while also underlining a specific wave of provocative art cinema leading up to the new millennium and continuing today.[4] My conceptualization of this cinema as a global archive is chiefly inspired by Mattias Frey. In his extensive research on the institutional networks of "production, reception, distribution, exhibition, and regulation" (13), Frey charts the rhetorics of extremism from its early-cinema origins to its contemporary global outreach. In so doing, he follows Amos Vogel's seminal analysis *Film as a Subversive Art* to chronicle how avant-garde, exploitation, horror, pornography, and art cinema have often been categorized together as subversive practices. Blending these genres together as "extreme cinema," leads Frey to then take up Steve Neale's institutional film theory and showcase how art-house cinema has often utilized publicity techniques from exploitation cinemas to entice and titillate viewers. For example, Roberto Rossellini's *Rome Open City* (1946), which is relatively tame by today's standards, was originally marketed to Anglophone audiences as "a savage orgy of lust!" (5). By mid-century, many exhibition venues also screened foreign art fare and domestic exploitation films alongside each other, leading film historian Peter Lev to assert that audiences began to expect edgy content

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[4] Despite their original focus on European extremism in their co-edited monograph, Horeck and Kendall expand (and pluralize) this canon as a global practice in the essay "The New Extremisms: Rethinking Extreme Cinema." The global nature of extremism is correlative to their collapse of "high" and "low" culture values, suggesting extremism may inflect various genres and even mainstream cinemas. (David Fincher's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* and *Gone Girl* come to mind here). Though I admire this recent expansion for its generic and aesthetic instability, which opens critical analysis to more varied extreme objects, my focus in this thesis sticks to art-house examples to forward what I view as an underdeveloped political critique in film scholarship on this cinema.

"to such an extent that 'foreign film,' 'art film,' 'adult film,' and 'sex film' were for several years almost synonymous" (qtd. in Frey 5). For Frey, these rhetorical tropes persist today in international film festivals, marketing publicity, home video distribution platforms, and critical reception. Collectively this discursive network frames extremism as controversial, disturbing, or arousing, and uses citational strategies that also link these films to transgressive cinemas of the past and fellow contemporary examples. Frey's account has been pivotal in forwarding extremism as a global canon for film scholars. However, in my estimation, his argument that distribution strategies merely recalibrate the same rhetorics of extremism into a given historical moment ultimately occludes how perceptions of transgression evolve and reconfigure over time.

To counter such a concern, I turn to Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover, who uphold the amorphous quality and categorical uncertainty of "art cinema" as a means to champion its fundamental instability, elasticity, and impurity across history (*Global Art Cinema* 6-9). The radical flexibility of this framework proposes that art cinema "holds the potential to open up spaces between and outside of mainstream/avant-garde, local/cosmopolitan, history/theory, and industrial/formal debates in film scholarship" (*Global Art Cinema* 9). Similarly, for New Extremism, as a subset of contemporary global art cinema, this pliability allows for the vast scrambling of genres into these films as well as the varied aesthetic styles of this canon. (After all, the cold austerity of Michael Haneke seems diametrically opposed to the brash bravado of Sion Sono, but both filmmakers are frequently cited as "extreme.") Despite a categorical ambiguity, however, Galt and Schoonover do centralize their definition of global art cinema by its mutually constitutive aesthetic and geopolitical concerns: "Art cinema is both an aesthetic category—involved in broadly constituted debates on realism, modernism, the image, and its implications—and a geopolitical category, bound up in modernity and the traumas of twentieth-

century history" (*Global Art Cinema* 20). Following Galt and Schoonover, this thesis rethinks New Extremism as a global art practice by attending to the interlocking aesthetic and geopolitical concerns of this canon.

From an art-historical continuum, we can best track the fits and spurts of extremism across cultural expressions in ways that are independent of national boundaries or auteur-driven critical tendencies. As an art practice, extremism extends from Sade, Grand Guignol Theater, and surrealism, as well as Freudian and Bataillean theories of the taboo as a simultaneously alluring and repulsive threat.[5] These global articulations rely on displaying the body in states of ecstasy, agony, and abjection; draining the human form of fluids and waste; violating social presuppositions of morality and decency; and catalyzing negative affect for pleasure, fatigue, boredom, or dismay. Despite thematic similarities, the formal flexibility of these representations requires a global lens to address how, according to Horeck and Kendall, "the extreme traverses cultures, periods, and styles" ("The New Extremisms" 9).

Given the historical lineage of these aesthetics and their global outreach and appropriations, extremism can further be viewed in a geopolitical context as the shadow of modernity—the very site to explore the plasticity of social orders and their slippages into what is constituted, albeit through erratic developments, as transgression. The long history of modernity denotes the rise of individualism, capitalism, industrialization, urbanization, all of which are maintained by the modern nation state through institutional hierarchies, bureaucracies, and surveillance procedures. Modernity often forwards a fundamental belief in technological progress as a liberatory praxis, primarily for global democracy and economic freedom; however,

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[5] For an illuminating study on the connections between Sade and modernity, see Hénaff. For links to Grand Guignol Theater and New Extremism, see Butler; for surrealism, see Quandt and Grønstad.

it also relies on these technological procedures to naturalize, socialize, and discursively map spaces, temporalities, and bodies. It is my contention that these specific factions of modernity are most directly taken up in extreme cinema, and they are addressed in the following chapters. Insofar as modernity's lingering colonial project installs binary divisions for valued and devalued subjects, or, as Hortense Spillers and Sylvia Wynter have argued in terms of racialization practices, devalued objects, the coterminous creations of racialized, gendered, and sexualized alterities relegate certain individuals as inherently deviant or transgressive. Yet these categorizations are always in flux, slowly and systematically being made newly modern. To claim that extremism is the shadow of modernity is thus to propose that it exposes the psychosexual fantasies that demarcate social orders, the modes of rationality that perpetuate capitalist exploitation, and the excesses of individualism that beget violence.

While aesthetics and geopolitics provide a broad platform for conceptualizing extremism, attention to the newness of its current iteration is predicated on how certain specific transgressions persist, mutate, or disappear. This requires reading the formulations of social, sexual, aesthetic, and political boundaries that emerge apart from transgressive cinemas of the past, only to either be maintained or jettisoned in this cinema. For the purposes of this thesis, neoliberalism as a global, imbalanced organizing principle serves to focalize how contemporaneous shifts in subjectivity and hierarchies of gender, race, class, and sexuality are imbricated in the aesthetics and narratives of transgression for New Extremism.

Neoliberalism delimits a period in late modernity, a postcolonial and often neocolonial historical phase reliant on exacerbated capitalist transformations of global orders and the

subject.[6] As an extension of modernity, neoliberalism furthers the loss of tradition evoked by

new technologies and the disembedding of spatio-temporal constraints for social interactions

through highly advanced electronic communications and transportation systems. In contrast to its

preceding phase of modernity, however, neoliberalism relies on a restructuring of relations in

favor of capital over industrial labor. This occurs through an expansive openness of capitalist

commodification via outsourcing and transnational corporations as well as post-industrial online

forms of labor that have rendered certain jobs, primarily for lower and working classes, as

outdated and unnecessary. The economic ideology of neoliberalism paradoxically deploys placid

liberal platitudes that free market capitalism and democracy are beneficial for uplifting all global

citizens, yet in practice, profits are frequently consolidated to a limited number of individuals

and monopolized corporations. Profit interests of the economically privileged have increased due

to various deregulation and privatization practices, the dismantling of social welfare services and

public goods, and the shrinkage of power for labor unions, which ostensibly allows owners of

neoliberal capital to be more "flexible" to market demands.[7] As Michael Hardt and Antonio

Negri argue, these new economic relations have further condensed the possibility of class

mobility, and the labile movements of capitalist reorganizations—the inherent instability of state,

banking, and corporate procedures due to their increasing accumulations of wealth and limited

distribution of resources—has installed a condition of insecurity for all workers across economic

and political factions (133-137).

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[6] For "late modernity," see Zygumunt Bauman and Anthony Giddens. For similar understandings
of this phase in modernity, which account for both the long trajectory of modernity and its
current recalibrations, see Beck for "second modernity" and Augé for "supermodernity." Despite
the taxonomic differences, each critic nevertheless provides similar understandings on the
technological reordering of social interactions and their effects on individualism.
[7] For a fuller characterization of the sweeping economic policies of neoliberalism, see Marxist
critics David Harvey and Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff.

In addition to these policy practices, many scholars have determined that the ideological framework for neoliberalism rests on a progressive imaginary of multiculturalism, in which the integration of previously devalued or minoritized discourses into public life and aesthetic representations often serves as a diversity checklist for market-based gains and a means of purporting state exceptionalism.[8] Jodi Melamed provides this assessment, for example, in her readings of U.S. state-sanctioned "race-liberal orders" that facilitate a liberal progressive narrative of citizen confirmation driven by politics of respectability and reproduction as a means of occluding ongoing injustices (x). For Melamed, subjugated or minoritized subjects are welcomed into the social fold due to interlocking academic, state, and economic rhetorics of sympathetic sentimentalization and aestheticization, and these expressions have now expanded onto a global scale to "rescue" supposedly backwards individuals, primarily Arab or Muslim subjects, that do not comport to western neoliberal progressivism. These tendencies also redound to market-based endeavors, as Melamed determines: "Concepts previously associated with 1980s and 1990s liberal multiculturalism, such as *openness, diversity*, and *freedom*, have been recycled and now *open societies* and *economic freedom* (shibboleths for neoliberal measures) and *consumerist diversity* signify multicultural rights for individuals and for corporations" (42-43, emphasis in original). In other words, pedagogies of tolerance and pluralism circulate within shared academic, state, and economic spheres to forward the ideological investments of neoliberal progressivism for a professional-managerial class in ways that suggest social inclusion for minoritized groups has already been met or is impending. At the same time, tolerance and sentimentality work to defuse any radical or oppositional critiques to neoliberalism.

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[8] In addition to Melamed, for further connections between the academy, state, and global economy, see Himani Bannerji, Piya Chatterjee and Sunaina Maira, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and Roderick Ferguson's *The Reorder of Things*.

Political philosophers following Michel Foucault have also maintained that neoliberalism entails more than just a set of economic policies or ideological practices, but it, in fact, has created a new form of subjectivity bound by economic rationality.[9] Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval argue that the neoliberal subject, in contrast to the self-disciplined subject of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, is conditioned by "the generalization of competition as a behavioral norm," in which rationality "tends to structure and organize not only the action of rulers, but also the conduct of the ruled" (4). Wendy Brown has recently extended this analysis further by arguing that neoliberalism is a "more generalized practice of 'economizing' spheres and activities heretofore governed by other tables of value" (21). Thus the competitive practices that Dardot and Laval locate are infused in all spheres of public life in Brown's account, making the social and political economized domains. While Dardot and Laval outline how neoliberal rationality promotes an entrepreneurial/enterprise subject, Brown considers how subjects are modeled by the "contemporary firm" (22). Each account nevertheless express the ways in which individuals have begun to see themselves as capital, whereby self-investment, self-regulation, and self-governance are all necessitated by, and mimic, the procedures of free market capitalism.

I read these collective critics, despite the variance of their methodological approaches, as expressing a fundamental uncertainty at the prospect of new modes of relationality or community that can move beyond the confines of neoliberal governmentality and its rampant individualism. This thesis thus addresses this concern for neoliberalism foremost, while gesturing when necessary to the web of entwined economic, cultural, social, and political experiences outlined

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[9] Rather than associate neoliberalism as emerging from the Reagan, Thatcher, and Deng administrations as many Marxist critics do, Foucault argues a shift from liberalism to neoliberalism begins in Germany in 1948 in *The Birth of Biopolitics* based on a steady reorganization of economic rationality and its effects on subjectivity.

above. Given that New Extremism emerges as a post-millennial art cinema practice, I consider

its positioning from both within neoliberalism and as a response to it. And, in contrast to

sentimental or tolerable accounts of neoliberal multiculturalism, I conceive of New Extremism as

a seminal site to procure more radical critiques on detrimental neoliberal developments. Where

extremism, broadly defined, often explores transgression along the lines of bourgeois and

familial morality or depictions of bodily abjection, New Extremism also attends to these

concerns and, more specifically, to deviations from expectations for neoliberal rationality and the

multicultural restructuring of socially normative race, gender, and sexual orders. Contemporary

transgression is thus made manifold in films that flout neoliberal protocols for consumption,

labor, efficiency, productivity, and risk aversion, especially as such socio-economic concerns

correlate with politics of respectability and reproduction.

Before elaborating further on my methodological approach, however, allow me to first

develop the critical genealogy of this canon and its scholarly reception. In so doing, I endeavor to

better elucidate what's at stake in rethinking this cinema as a global art practice that often

critiques neoliberalism. Many critical approaches to this cinema foreground questions of ethical

reflexivity for spectatorial relations. A belief in art's power to socially and spiritually nourish the

spectator compels James Quandt, for example, to invalidate extremity in his original field-

defining account: "The authentic, liberating outrage—political, social, sexual—that fueled such

apocalyptic visions as *Salò* and *Weekend* now seem impossible, replaced by an aggressiveness

that is really a grandiose form of passivity" (25). For Quandt, films like Francois Ozon's *See the*

Sea (1997), Philippe Grandrieux's *Sombre* (1998), and Claire Denis's *Trouble Every Day* (2001),

mix shock value with a flattened affect, thereby failing to confront audiences with genuinely

"uncomfortable truths" like the works of provocative pioneers Pasolini, Godard, Buñuel, and

Fassbinder (19).[10] Seemingly too jaded and indifferent, even while being intense, these films for

Quandt fail to live up to the progressive potentials of provocation. Furthering this presumption of

a postmodern waning of affect in these films, Richard Falcon likewise asserts that New

Extremism is "pastiche retro transgression" that is "naïve" in its supposed belief that "pushing

the boundaries of notional good taste, liberating sexual representation or declaring a modernist

disdain of bourgeois hypocrisy could rock the status quo" (12). This pejorative strain of criticism

is likewise deployed throughout many journalistic publications addressed in Mattias Frey's

institutional study of extreme cinema (38-42).

Another critical tendency, by contrast, embraces the aesthetic expressions of this cinema

and its spectatorial difficulties. In direct opposition to Quandt, Asbjørn Grønstad argues that

"unwatchable cinema" is "preoccupied with deeply humanist issues," and its ethical value is best

understood if this canon is "regarded as an antidote to the numbing complacencies and stock

humanity of much mainstream cinema" (10). Like Quandt, Grønstad views new extremism as

emerging out of avant-garde traditions to undermine the cinematic pleasure principle, but he sees

a renewed vitality in showcasing relatively "uncommodifiable" images that "allow more

complex, disenfranchised, and marginalized subjectivities to become images also" (10). Tom

Mes, Robert Hyland, and Tim Palmer similarly utilize empirical models based on commercial

media representations to assert that this cinema critiques violence while nevertheless

hyperbolically portraying it. These accounts all purport that the redemptive power of extremism

hinges on the spectator's thoughtful, reflexive participation with the screen.

Although I welcome such criticism that takes seriously the trials of this cinema—its way

of trying and testing its spectators, its evocation of displeasure as a vital alternative for catalyzing

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[10] For "flattened affect" and "postmodern waning of affect," see Jameson.

critiques of violence, rather than subsuming them as merely exercises of violence—I hesitate to read extremism or exploitation as always working against the grain. Finding subversion in the most abhorrent displays of rape and torture seems irresponsibly divested from the phobic intensities that circulate within this cinema and how they often consolidate around subjugated or minoritized subject positions. Moreover, such positions when viewed through the prism of neoliberal multiculturalism frequently depict perpetrators or victims of violence as socially and economically privileged in relation to neoliberalism's unfortunate others. This too deviates from how film scholars more broadly address neoliberalism and global cinema from the lens of the impoverished and dispossessed.[11] Though these downtrodden perspectives are crucial for developing the distinctive impacts of neoliberalism from various subjectivities, narratives of those that are complicit with, elevated by, or even administrative of international capital, also convey varied concerns for how neoliberalism impedes daily livelihoods, even for those that help the system function.

To propose that New Extremism invites a critique of neoliberalism entails analyzing these expressions as well as neoliberal reorganizations of space, time, and the body. This thesis turns to those moments in which these discursively mapped categories collapse or transform, and in so doing, expose the social constructions of such organizations as dire obstructions to relationality and community. In both chapters, I read aesthetic examples in which the human is de-centered from his or her spatial environment as a means of repudiating ego-driven individualism. The first chapter views the natural environment as productively non-reciprocal backdrop to the intensities of human violence, and the second chapter analyzes the built urban environment as destructively reciprocal to its human figures. Despite these variations, state and

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[11] See, for example, Sánchez Prado and Kapur and Wagner.

environmental violence against spatial relations are nevertheless condemned in each, and I locate

openings that reconceptualize ways of seeing and being in the world to contest such exercises of

power. For temporal relations, I turn to moments that forestall movement or futurity as it is

constituted by a politics of reproduction and what Steven Shaviro has called the temporal speeds

of capitalist accelerationism. The first chapter considers breaks in queer violence that suspend

into the gravity of the present, while the second chapter looks at the drift of female violence as a

persistent, looping movement forward in the face of hardship. Lastly, since the body has become

an object of self-capital under neoliberalism, each chapter inspects shifts between normativity

and abjection that render the body unintelligible to binary divisions for gender and sexuality as

they correlate to contemporary expectations for social respectability and economic productivity.

Each chapter deploys feminist and queer criticism for these concerns precisely because their

attention to what is exceptional or abject has consistently demystified what defines the dominant.

Following a long line of Foucauldian and psychoanalytic-informed critiques that have disjoined

biological determinism from sex, gender, and sexuality, the critics I invoke further defamiliarize

notions of gender and sexuality orders and denaturalize "nature" under neoliberal regimes of

power.

In addition to these theoretical practices, I also read the neoliberal present for its affective

conditions in conjunction with space, time, and the body. Rather than view this cinema as

vacuous of affect or immersive in negativity for no vital gains like the pejorative strain of

criticism does, I read negative affect here for its formal, historical, and geopolitical expressions.

Critical discourse on New Extremism typically analyzes affect in terms of spectatorial

embodiment instead of formal structures. Often conceived of as an arepresentational force,

affect—those pressures, intensities, rhythms that cultivate the experience of an emotion rather

than serve as the emotion itself—is said to impel in-between a subject's body and its social

existence, in-between thought and action.[12] As previously indicated, these affective currents are

exceptionally unsettling for the spectator of New Extremism. This disruptive charge to the

viewer's body and attentive engagement, according to Martine Beugnet, has the potential to

break down the very distinctions between the observer and the observed (16). Many film

scholars have since followed this line of thought, charting how visceral expressions of

corporeality, abstraction, and genre instability blur the boundaries between the spectator's

cerebral and corporeal participation with the screen.[13] These critiques have provided

considerable insights into how aesthetic and generic problematics impact viewing experiences;

however, like the ethical reflexivity critiques, they do not account for the political connotations

of these formal aesthetics in ways that are independent of the viewer.

Recent feminism and queer theory, following Raymond Williams's "structures of

feeling," has consistently diagnosed the neoliberal present through negative affect, whether it be

cruel optimism, depression, or melancholia, to name a few.[14] However, at the same time, these

critiques have forwarded careful considerations for how negative affects may unfold positive or

productive potentials. My approach to affect likewise considers such possibilities in *specific

aesthetic and narrative situations*, and I ultimately investigate the aesthetics of transgression in

New Extremism for the ways in which they inform, and are mutually informed by neoliberal

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[12] Two distinguishable, yet intertwined, threads of criticism on affect are the Deleuzian ontological vein and the sociocultural approach derived from feminism, critical race, and queer theory. For examples of the former that trace the particular in-betweeness quality, see Massumi. For the latter, see Sedgwick, Berlant, Cvetkovich, and Muñoz. Collectively, these sources address conditions of neoliberalism that are relevant to this project.
[13] See Tim Palmer, Asbjørn Grønstad, and Michael Kerner and Jonathan L. Knapp. The essays in edited volumes by Dominique Russell, Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall, and Chelsea Birks and Dana Keller also predominantly attend to these questions on spectatorship.
[14] Cited in order, see Berlant, Cvetkovich, and Eng.

affect and politics. My first chapter provides the foundational framework for this formal-

affective approach by taking up Eugenie Brinkema's self-proclaimed "radical formalism" of

affect, then troubling it with more political contexts. Here I read affective shifts of grief and guilt

that erupt from within moments of queer violence as a critique of neoliberal developments

pertaining to queer sociality for either assimilation or separatism. I further apply this

methodology in my second chapter and analyze an affective fusion of optimistic anxiety within

sequences of corporate female violence for its emphasis on the rigorous gendered demands of

neoliberal labor. Within spaces that hinge in-between the exacerbated flows of neoliberal

capitalism and its expectations for rationalized sociality, I ultimately seek to understand

contemporary affective iterations of queer and feminist politics in New Extremism for their

interpretations of the world-historical present. What's new about New Extremism, then? Quite a

lot, if only we direct ourselves to find it.

Queer Violence and the Tableau of Grievous Guilt

In Fabrice Du Welz's *Calvaire*, the protagonist, Marc Stevens (Laurent Lucas), is held captive by the deceptively affable, yet deluded, Bartel (Jackie Berroyer). Bartel "transforms" Marc into Gloria, his promiscuous ex-wife who has abandoned him and the community, by clothing him in her sundress and forcibly shaving his hair into a militaristic buzz-cut. In the striking final sequence, a group of male villagers, perceiving in Marc's presence a figural substitute for Gloria's absence, proceed to gang rape him in revenge for her desertion. The camera slowly swirls overhead as the villagers traverse the frame and scuffle over their positions in this ordeal. Amidst the confusion, gunshots are fired and Marc escapes, running into the adjacent forest and nearby wetlands. Then, a startling jump cut (1:20:43) alters the environment from dry woodlands to a snow-covered marsh. All of the men have given up on finding "Gloria" at this point, except for their leader Robert (Philippe Nahon). Slopping through the muck, he sluggishly trudges behind Marc and slips into a quagmire. While his body slowly descends into the earth—erasing him from the film—Robert implores, "Dites-moi que tu m'aimais" ("Tell me you loved me") (1:22:19-21). Kneeling down and hunched over in a rounded bend, Marc as Gloria complies," Je t'ai aimé" ("I loved you") (1:22:32). The camera remains still on this unlikely couple, eschewing the dynamic movements of preceding violence. This final act of tenderness, regardless of its probable insincerity, initiates an aporetic rift that radically alters the narrative action, affect, and aesthetic structure of the film. What this sequence expresses so vividly is how compassion may rupture the continuum of violence that generally characterizes New Extremism cinema. Indeed, it would not be a misstatement to say that compassion enacts an aesthetic violence to a field of narrative violence.

In addition to not often accounting for the formal structures of affect, critical discourse on New Extremism also does not consider the frequent eruptions of queerness within this canon. Yet the fact remains that New Extremism often catalyzes affective displeasure through queer violence—that is, violence instigated by homosexual or queer characters or violence discharged onto transgender or queered bodies. In addition to *Calvaire*, these narrative elements recur in films as varied as *Criminal Lovers* (François Ozon, 1999), *O Fantasma* (João Pedro Rodrigues, 2000), *Irréversible* (Gaspar Noé, 2001), *High Tension* (Alexandre Aja, 2003), *Tiresia* (Bertrand Bonello, 2003), *Twentynine Palms* (Bruno Dumont, 2004), *Strange Circus* (Sion Sono, 2007), *The Skin I Live In* (Pedro Almodóvar, 2011), *Stranger by the Lake* (Alain Guiraudie, 2013), *Nymphomaniac* (Lars Von Trier, 2014), and *The Neon Demon* (Nicolas Winding Refn, 2016), among others. In the following chapter, the constellation of female sexuality, female-driven violence, and brutality against women is viewed as an adjacent, often interlocking, narrative feature to queer violence here.[15] Taken together, these proclivities, I contend, are integral to understanding why critics label this cinema "extreme."

Juxtaposing normalized violence in mainstream commercial cinema with New Extremism, one can discern a categorical discrepancy grounded in their representations of gender and sexuality. While the former either present clear psychological motivations for violence or reduce female and queer protagonists to stock victims, the latter portray obscure characterizations within elliptical narrative structures.[16] Sexuality frames the complex subjectivities of New Extremism, but it frequently avoids arrest, thereby deflecting orientation in

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[15] These elements are taken up most notably in films by Catherine Breillat, Pascal Laugier, Olivier Assayas, Takashi Miike, Chan Wook Park, Sion Sono, and Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi.

[16] For a fuller discussion on the divide between art cinema and mainstream film narrative, see David Bordwell.

ways that *queer* narrative and formal features, even though these films may attempt to hold onto such directions for normativity. This elusive structural movement is constitutive of queerness, which Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick defines as "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances, resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically" (*Tendencies* 8). Central to her claim here is a productive potential for queerness to take advantage of formal indeterminacy as a means of exposing an indeterminacy within the reader or, in our case, the viewer. As Judith Roof and Linda Williams have likewise argued, queering narrative structures undermines heteropatriarchal conventions, whereby spectatorial pleasure consolidates around closure, climax is associated with meaning, and linear plot-based futurity mimics heterosexuality. The formal unruliness of queerness ultimately prompts the possibility to destabilize and estrange normalizing scripts of power within texts *and* the socio-political sphere.

The productive formal and narrative capabilities of queerness within New Extremism are underdeveloped in critiques that uphold the uncomfortable, agitated responses of the spectator's body or neglect the social identities of the subjects on screen. Accordingly, one claim of this thesis is that the under-examined bias of the taxonomic term "extremism" runs the risk of being complicit in neoliberal machinations that fetishize, devalue, and depoliticize specific minoritized and subjugated cultures. Although mainstream commercial cinema makes queer or female sexuality palatable through discipline or silence, New Extremism undoes these conditions of containment and absence with a vengeance—reformulating elision into excess for political import. Thus, I propose that we tarry with the political stakes of queer violence here, and in the next chapter, the potential feminist orientations of violence for this global art cinema canon. In

both chapters, the shifting relations of gender, sexuality, and power embedded in the aesthetics and narratives of these films serve to focalize a political critique on neoliberalism.

Turning to form and narrative, I argue, provides an entryway to contest the critical overinvestments in the spectator's embodied experience and their attendant preoccupations in film theory with social affects and psychoanalytic drives. This is not to discredit the bad feelings and charged aggressions that overwhelm New Extremism, or even to renounce these theoretical frameworks, but to say that critics have not fully attended to the ways in which this cinema may also challenge and reform—formally—these negative positions. Even while queerness is in excess in these films and violence is at the edge of representation, New Extremism still yields those very queer gaps and breaks that rupture into moments of uncertainty. It is in these formal and narrative slippages wherein which queerness mobilizes new possibilities for politics and spectatorship that do not counter negativity but rather reappraise it for alternative ways of seeing and being in the world.

Radical Formalism, Radical Politics

To first supplant the spectator's experience without jettisoning affect, I take up Eugenie Brinkema's call for "radical formalism." In her self-proclaimed polemic for contemporary film theory, Brinkema proposes to "dethrone the subject and the spectator" (36) by "reading affects as having forms" (37). Paying close attention to the double-bind etymological origin of affect, "derived from the Latin *affectus* (a completed action) and the verb *afficere* (to act upon)," she defines affect as a "force more than transmission, a force that does not have to move from subject to object but may fold back, rebound, recursively amplify" (24). Her conceptualization of affect as a fold or a folding process draws from Deleuze by way of Foucault, allowing Brinkema

to track the simultaneity of interiority and exteriority as a marker of subject formation within the discursive field. Reframed through this lens, affect, like discourse, thus disperses its own autonomy and direction in ways that challenge the privileged split between epistemology and ontology in Western metaphysics. Although affect has often been thought to wedge between these divides, Brinkema regards affect as a force untethered to the subject and the body. Compelled by Deleuzian "autonomous potentialities" to consider affect as a "self-folding exteriority" (25), Brinkema first theorizes affect as a force that is "non-intentional, indifferent, and resists the given-over attributes of a teleological spectatorship with acquirable gains" (33). She next discards the bodies that, for Deleuze, instantiate the locus for sensorial engagement, thereby making affect, first and foremost, an aesthetic problem of specific textual workings: "My argument is that *it is only because one must read for it that affect has any force at all*" (38, emphasis in original). If the spectator too frequently sees itself produced by and a receptor of affect (this image does this to *me*, for *me*), then Brinkema contends that a formal-affective approach "trouble[s] the very philosophical binaries that hold apart presence and absence, interiority and exteriority, self and other, excretion and reception" (46). Although conjoining these divisions into a formal close reading may suggest a latent political project, one that muddies systems of hierarchical difference, this is far from Brinkema's critical concern. By de-subjectifying the spectator and prioritizing the form, in and of itself, only as form, Brinkema in fact makes an apolitical move that closes off the world.

Throughout *The Forms of the Affects*, Brinkema anticipates this critique. Her dismissal of David L. Eng and David Kazanjian's anthology *Loss,* for example, admonishes affect theorists for redirecting melancholia into a foundation for "collective politics and remembrance" (66). Putting affects to ethical, political, and teleological work, according to Brinkema, denies the

intensity of an affective experience, thereby prohibiting critics from lingering on the specificity of an affective force and how it takes form *in form*. Though I admire Brinkema's conceptualization of affect as a force that structures and destructures form, I propose that her predominantly anti-narrative approach neglects the mobility of affect. Further, only by tracking through narrative how an affect disperses and endures, what links to or de-links from an affect, may the actual intensity of its force be fully engaged. The movement of narrative allows us to witness these affective rearrangements, and narrative's aesthetic and social organizations also bring us back into the field of politics.

My method here takes inspiration from Caroline Levine's unification of formalist and socio-political criticism. Following Jacques Rancière and Bruno Latour on the connection between form and politics, Levine discerns that "[…] if the political is a matter of imposing and enforcing boundaries, temporal patterns, and hierarchies on experience, then there is no politics without form" (3). Levine adds to this consideration "affordances," a term taken from design theory that underlines "the potential uses or actions latent in materials and designs" (6), which in turn allows us to view "the capacity [for forms] to endure across time and space" (12). For example, writing on the spatial forms of whole containers, Levine argues that they "[…] do not afford only imprisonment, exclusion, and the quelling of difference; they also afford centrality and inclusiveness" (39). Affordances demonstrate both generality and specificity for a form, allowing us to see how forms may potentially adjoin with, break off from, or circulate among other forms. And, in so doing, affordances direct us to the political power of a given form. Narrative, according to Levine, serves as the preeminent "experience of colliding forms" (19), which follows the work of politics insofar as a formal collision elicits "the strange encounter between two or more forms that sometimes reroutes intention and ideology" (18). I take this cue

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from Levine alongside Brinkema to explore how narrative collides with affect through their aesthetic arrangements in New Extremism and what political valences these expressions convey. Turning to the specificity of queerness within this global art cinema canon ultimately leads me to question: what are the queer politics of affective formalism in New Extremism, and what affordances of queerness within neoliberalism does this canon portray?

The Queer Tableau of Grief

Let's return now to the scene of suspended violence at the end of *Calvaire*. According to Brinkema's text, this affective form that alters preceding aesthetics, blocks narrative momentum, and stalls temporal rhythm most closely resembles grief. Brinkema formalizes grief by tracing St. Augustine's unbearable misery (*dolore*) of light, through Freud's "Trauer und Melancholie," to Laplanche's reconfiguration of Freudian mourning as *Daueraffekt* ("an affect with duration" that "occupies a *lapse* of time" [qtd. in Brinkema 57]). She next explicates grief from these concepts of illumination and temporality by further developing Roland Barthes's photographic theories in *Camera Lucida*. Regarding Barthes's suffering meditation over a photograph of his recently deceased mother, Brinkema proposes, "[…] we are offered the fullest picture of grief as something radically different from mourning, as non-relational, as a non-labor that does not profit, and as fundamentally undialectical" (76). In this model, grief is an affect solely bound up in the frozen temporality of the material photograph. The isometric tension of grief as a dwelling in-between lightness and darkness, presence and absence, is played out in her reading of the ten-minute, mostly static sequence following a child's death in Michel Haneke's *Funny Games*: "The

name for the structure that *is* the affect of grief in this film is the tableau" (99, original emphasis).[17]

Calvaire applies a tableau framing device that correlates with Brinkema's reading of *Funny Games*. In Haneke's film, a brief cut to the outside darkness of the countryside contrasts the skewed lightness of a knocked-over lamp inside the home, signaling a "visual inversion" that stages the durational drama for grief (105). This aesthetic switch also occurs in *Calvaire* when the foggy imperceptibility of the forest is made starkly bright after the jump-cut throws its characters into the snowy wetlands. The downward bend of the grieving mother in Haneke's film likewise mirrors Marc's slumped posture during, and after, Robert's incidental burial. And, the mise-en-scène in each film balances the frame with a rigid composition, approximating visual stillness that levels out violent intensities. The room in Hanke's film is demarcated by three windows and three seating areas that create a conversational harmony, and the wilderness in Du Welz's film is proportioned by equivalent sprouts of plants on each side of Robert and Gloria-Marc.[18] The lack of dialectical editing also seemingly compounds the heaviness of gravity into each image (109); the quagmire in *Calvaire* even literalizes the force of gravity's weight. Yet, regardless of these similarities, Brinkema's modifier, "in this film," begs a reading for the different formal valences of grief in *Calvaire*.

Although the child's death in *Funny Games* mobilizes the film's aesthetics toward an immobile tableau, Brinkema's anti-narrative and apolitical approach eludes the significance of this event; as such, she neglects a crucial element of this affective structure: the foreclosure of

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[17] It is worth noting that Haneke is also a frequently cited director of New Extremism. See Horeck and Kendall.

[18] When used in this essay, the hyphenated name Gloria-Marc denotes the tableau event of Marc performing as Gloria. Her name precedes his to prioritize her absented presence in this moment.

futurity. The temporal burden of this form halts narrative momentum by stalling on the sorrowful

loss of a bourgeois family's continuation. The child's death that atomizes this image also

rescinds broader political investments. As Lee Edelman determines, the neoliberal social and

political order is compelled by "reproductive futurism," whereby the figural force of the "Child"

propels the dreams of generational succession (2). As such, the tableau in *Funny Games* suggests

the elimination of both a familial line and an engrained social value. Where the killing of futurity

stops the heteronormative narrative in *Funny Games*, the delay of futurity in *Calvaire* creates a

new narrative, one that erupts from within the present and reorganizes the violent relations

therein. In further contrast, the artificial lighting of the knocked-over lamp that illuminates the

weighty presence of an absence, an empty space wiped clean by the child's death, opposes the

natural lighting of the wilderness in Calvaire and its environmental registers, which instead bring

to light a fleeting togetherness on the edge of death. More succinctly, the tableau in *Calvaire*

creates a queer form that challenges heteronormative principles and, as we shall see, mobilizes a

political critique on the role of queerness in both the social and external world.

The startling emergence and subsequent dismissal of an ambivalent relation generates the

tableau of grief for *Calvaire*. Nearing his escape from unremitting abuse and humiliation, Marc

turns back to Robert, provides solace in the face of death, and capitulates to his identity as

Gloria. In this moment, an improbable couple is formed, engendered by an inaccurate previous

romance—both say "I loved you"—and made present as a queer bond. Joshua J. Weiner and

Damon Young define queer bonds as ephemeral encounters "[…] where togetherness seems, for

the moment, not *only* scripted by hegemonic forms of power, or *determined* by the resistance to

that power" (231). In other words, the queer bond is a social linkage within a fragile interstitial

space, not eclipsed by nor fully reactionary against phobic interpellations. It registers as an

intersectional failure that is nonetheless tempered by nourishing sustainment. The final sequence of the film demonstrates this interplay, for the binary aggressions of gender are still intact, even while oppositionality is suspended for an injured recognition that flattens these forces. However, Marc's selfless reaction to provide comfort in death does not entirely suppress hostility; after all, he foregoes saving Robert from sinking. Why, then, does this tableau of grief take form and transform the film's aesthetic structure? What does the loss of a false lover and a queer bond entail? For Brinkema, this stalled, suffering representation holds no meaning outside of its own form: "This is what the undialectical image of grief brings forth: the heavy suspension of revelation in the frozen suspension of resolution" (111). This "revelation without revelation, a revelation that will never take place" (112) is a containment of sorrowful agony held in the cinematic form. The lapsed futurity of this tableau, however, insinuates that the queer bond, the interlocutor to this affective form, cannot persevere, cannot move beyond this moment. The fleeting connectedness of death manifests this couple form, then disentangles it, demystifying compassionate gestures as elegiac treachery. And, in that collapse into grievous stasis, in that submersion into a stagnant present, *Calvaire* casts queer sociality as violent and unviable.

The Antisocial Queer in Neoliberal Multiculturalism

This portrayal chafes against how neoliberal politics have generally reconceptualized LGBTQ subjects in contemporary cinema. As evinced by Bartel and Robert in *Calvaire*, one of the most noteworthy narrative elements of New Extremism is a resurgence of the antisocial queer figure: a hyper-sexual, homicidal, and suicidal menace. From the underground gay BDSM community ecstatically cheering over a near gang rape in *Irréversible,* to the queer cannibal hermit in the woods preying on teenage boys in *Criminal Lovers*, to the lesbian necrophiliac

assaulting young models in *The Neon Demon*, and so on, New Extremism consistently flouts the

convictions of positive minority representation. During the early years of the AIDS epidemic,

gay rights activists denounced these figures as homophobic stereotypes and rallied for

empowering portrayals to facilitate social progress.[19] The affirmative turn in gay, lesbian, and

queer criticism likewise uncovered and interrogated phobic fantasies embedded in this trope.[20]

Mainstream cinema since has generally avoided antagonistic portrayals of LGBTQ subjects, yet

right on the cusp of, and even within, neoliberal inclusion, the antisocial queer recurs across New

Extremism. Far from being merely a radical embodiment of a negative stereotype, however,

antisocial negation in this cinema is useful for navigating contemporary political dispositions of

queerness.

In their queer theory polemics, Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman disavow pleas for positive

minority representation and authorize the antisocial outlaw as a phobic position relevant for

challenging heteronormative institutions.[21] Bersani first promotes this critical turn in *Homos*,

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[19] *Cruising* (William Friedkin, 1980), *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991), and *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992) received the most vehement protests and backlash from LGBTQ critics at this time.

[20] For a brief sampling of film criticism on "monstrous" homosexuals published during the height of public discourse on the AIDS epidemic, see Harry M. Benshoff, Sue Ellen Case, Ellis Hanson, and Robin Wood.

[21] To note the political radicalism of their claims, it is useful to historically situate these publications. Bersani's *Homos* (1996) was released during the affirmative turn for gay, lesbian, and queer criticism, as AIDS began to shift from a sweeping death sentence toward a more livable condition. Edelman's *No Future* (2004) appeared as the progressive gay rights movement mobilized for gay marriage and adoption rights, repudiating these political investments. *No Future* is also considered an instigating text in queer theory's recent turn to negativity and antisociality, as evident in the MLA debate the year after its publication. For other theorists responding to this turn in a neoliberal context, see Heather Love (2007) and Jack Halberstam (2011), whom expand archives of queer negativity by recasting pain and failure as political projects that contest positive affirmation. For more sources on antisocial negativity or antireproductive temporalities, see Tim Dean, Jack Halberstam (2005), José Esteban Muñoz, and Judith Roof.

arguing, "There are more glorious precedents for thinking of homosexuality as truly disruptive—

as a *force* not limited to the modest goals of tolerance for diverse lifestyles, but in fact mandating

the politically unacceptable and politically indispensable choice of an outlaw existence" (76). To

further this claim, he locates antisocial models in novels by Gide, Proust, and Genet that foster

nonrelational and anticommunitarian values of intimacy, which in turn, renounce the social

order's fixation on difference and bourgeois monogamy.[22] These principles correlate with

Bersani's career-long project to track Foucauldian "new relational modes" that endorse bodily

pleasures to overturn "our heterosexual culture's reserving for the highest relational value for the

couple" in favor of a non-monogamous "communal mode of impersonal intimacy," one that is

"indifferent to personal identity altogether" (*Intimacies* 41).[23] The antisocial outlaw thus serves

as a pedagogical prototype to reconceptualize the social by breaking down its boundaries and

exposing the fault lines for assimilative integration. The movement for mainstream LGBTQ

visibility, Bersani argues, acquiesces too often to sentimental rhetoric and sexual sterilization,

social tendencies that inaugurate "surveillance, disciplinary intervention, and at the limit, gender-

cleansing" (*Homos* 11). Although Bersani tightly holds onto the homosexual as a category,

privileging it over the more illusory descriptor "queer," his anticipatory critiques have,

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[22] These values form the crux of what is now widely known as the "antisocial thesis." However, it is important to note that Bersani did not coin the term. It actually emerged from an MLA convention roundtable organized by Robert L. Caserio for the tenth anniversary of the publication of *Homos*. See Caserio, et al.
[23] Queer theory following Foucault has outlined several inventive relationalities for queerness. For the specific text Bersani draws from, see Foucault's "Friendship as a Way of Life." Here Foucault upholds homosexuality for "the formation of new alliances and the tying together of unforeseen lines of force" (136). In these "slantwise positions" that are part of, and in opposition to, social orders, Foucault envisions homosexuality as "a historic occasion to reopen affective and relational virtualities" within "the social fabric" (138). Most importantly, these new relationalities are envisioned as a way to circumnavigate oppressive power structures of binary difference.

nevertheless, redounded upon neoliberal absorption of minority difference today and catalyzed recent debates in queer theory for what role negativity may play in confronting engrained social orders.

In his unspoken addendum to Bersani's gay outlaw, Lee Edelman promotes queer villains that forsake social futurity as it has been cast by heteronormativity and homonormativity. The latter denotes how neoliberal legislation, cultural production, and social policing attempt to enforce "a depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" that mimics heteronormative lifestyles (Duggan 50). Edelman admonishes the institutionalized gay movement's drive toward homonormativity via marriage equality, reproductive kinship, and adoption rights for reappropriating reproductive futurism. Since nonreproductive queer sexuality is inherently antithetical to reproductive futurism, the uncontestable political project of reproductive futurism naturally occludes queer subjects from social integration in Edelman's account. Unlike Bersani's autonomous choice for outlaw existence, Edelman conceives of queerness as the shadowed negation of the social, making it *always already resistant* to normalization; therefore, he encourages queers to reject futurity and give credence to their intrinsic antisocial negativity (22). At the same time, however, he also locates antisocial energies charged within all sexuality. This concept derives from his analysis of queer villains—the unmarried, sadistic, and campy characters in works by Charles Dickens and Alfred Hitchcock, for example—that delight audiences with the "corrosive force of irony" (24) and viciously attack children, heterosexual couples, and families.[24] Irony's queer rhetorical strategy ultimately undermines and stalls heteropatriarchal narrative unities driven forward by climactic desire, and

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[24] Haneke's two murderers in *Funny Games* also utilize the ironic narrative device of direct address to subvert viewer expectations. Plus, they murder the child and even expressively flirt with homosexual desire in one of their deceitful games.

according to Edelman, the aberrant pleasures afforded by this technique present the "*presence* of jouissance, the insistence of the [death] drive, and the access, therefore, to the perverse satisfaction of which the drive is assured [...]" (89). From this Lacanian standpoint, the stress of abject queerness circumscribes *and* constitutes the symbolic order, obfuscating linear temporality and narrativity with volatile frequencies, but the peculiar pleasure it provides is acquirable, and even perhaps desirable, for all. Together, Bersani and Edelman commit gays or queers as fatal phobic figurations that may yield revolutionary potentials to reformulate the social.

Although these theorists support the force of queer negativity for its symbolic disruption apart from identitarian or collective categories, Jasbir Puar, Jin Haritaworn, David Eng, José Esteban Muñoz, and many others counter these claims, arguing that homonormativity has displaced the social abjection of queerness onto other sexualized, racialized, and religious subjects.[25] Despite neoliberalism's ostensible respect for minority difference, political legislation and cultural artifacts only legitimate upper-middle class, cisgender, white, and monogamous gay and lesbian couples as the most common and most acceptable affordances for queerness. The assimilation and commodification of selective identities into nationalist paradigms facilitates a significant historical shift, according to Jasbir Puar, transitioning gay subjects from "being figures of death (i.e., the AIDS epidemic) to becoming tied to ideas of life and productivity (i.e.,

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[25] Unlike Bersani and Edelman's psychoanalytic approaches, these queer-of-color critiques favor an intersectional framework from women of color feminism to analyze power grids for race, gender, sexuality, class, ability, and religion. Puar, for example, charts how Western (primarily U.S.) state exceptionalism folds the homonormative subject into nationalist discourse at the expense of abjecting and queering "backwards" Arab and Muslim subjects. And, Muñoz directly challenges the undisclosed white heteronormativity of Edelman's figural "Child," by arguing, "The future is only the stuff of some kids. Racialized kids, queer kids, are not the sovereign princes of futurity" (95). Collectively these accounts address the realities of queerness from a broader social lens, suggesting that antisociality or willful negation are privileges only afforded to some.

gay marriage and families)" (xii). Just as this shift toward mainstream visibility and livability

occurs for some citizens, however, the abjecting force of queerness recalibrates onto people of

color, nonmonogamous queers, or poverty-stricken individuals, further casting them as sites of

death or disregard.[26]

Queer violence in New Extremism often reverses and questions these neoliberal

developments. In this cinema, the abjection of queerness is returned to white subjects, sometimes

through the threat of AIDS or infection, but more predominantly, through the transgression of

(homo)normative gender and sexuality orders, thereby re-signaling the queer, more broadly, as a

site for torture and homicide.[27] The implications for this cultural turn are two-fold. First, New

Extremism is complicit in the erasure of specific minoritized groups from cultural representation.

Whiteness and affluent class status are the conditions for this cinema's victimized and villainized

subjects *in conjunction with* the elimination of neoliberalism's abjected others.[28] This move abets

what Grace Kyungwon Hong views as the restructuring process of neoliberal power, which

operates as "an epistemological structure of disavowal, a means of claiming that racial and

gendered violences are things of the past" through the affirmation of "certain modes of

racialized, gendered, and sexualized life, particularly through invitation into reproductive

respectability, so as to disavow its exacerbated production of premature death" (7). For Hong,

this dual procedure of power produces a "mutually constitutive relationship between protectable

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[26] This idea draws from Achille Mbembe's concept of "necropolitics," which is taken up by Puar, Haritaworn, and Eng, et al.

[27] To provide a few examples, the threat of AIDS is legible in the dialogue and visuals of *Stranger by the Lake* and *Irréversible,* while the phobic interpolations for nonnormative binaries may be seen in *High Tension, Strange Circus*, and *The Skin I Live In.*

[28] In European Extremism, Ozon's *Criminal Lovers* is the only film I have yet to come across that deploys violence against a non-white, queered body—in this case, an Arabic youth. Moreover, despite the racial invariability of Asian Extremism, elevated class position still yields violence across films by Chan Wook-Park, Takashi Miike, Sion Sono, and others.

life and ungrievable death" (12). Thus, on one level, New Extremism further purports the

racialized white neoliberal subject as that who is protectable and grievable while also obscuring

the social realities of disposability for others. However, for New Extremism to expand the social

markers of queerness as sites for death, to undo the progressions of homonormativity, and to

even be considered "extreme" suggests a more generally volatile nature for queerness than

neoliberal multiculturalism often consigns to it.

Contrasting the privileged, willful embodiments of social death espoused by Bersani and

Edelman, Hong's applications of women of color feminism and queer of color critique asserts

that death must be read against the grain of, rather than emboldened within, neoliberal

machinations. In her monograph, she turns to expressions of death from the most precarious

subject positions and locates instances of irony, farce, and communal joy that proffer a

continuum of history rather than a dejected finality. For Hong, a coalitional politics centered

around unsentimental figurations of death is crucial to countering the concomitant shifts of social

inclusion and disavowal. Her methodological practice to read "deathworlds" as spaces of

haunting vitality thus provides a corrective political model to undermine binaries of livability

and killability. Regarding death in this light also allows the past to be kept alive, rather than

memorialized and ossified under neoliberalism—a project similarly undertaken by queer

theorists Heather Love and Judith Halberstam, whom recast pain and failure as continuous

affective modalities for queerness that compromise neoliberal rhetorics of pride and positive

affirmation. By considering the "deathworlds" of New Extremism as a critical intervention

within contemporary political life, we may associate this cinema's emphasis on hyper-privileged,

regressive, and anticommunal queers as a caustic rejoinder to homonormativity and the

progressive imaginary of multiculturalism. As such, the expansion of queerness as a modality *of*

and *for* violence reverts the social integration of some at the crux of others, and in so doing, obliquely gestures to those that are jettisoned and devalued under neoliberalism. In this regard, queer violence in New Extremism highlights dominant race, class, gender, and sexuality orders and participates in Roderick Fergusons's proposal to make "manifold intersections that contradict the idea of the liberal nation-state and capital as sites of resolution, perfection, progress, and confirmation" (4). For this cinema to repeatedly renounce sociality and reproductive respectability from elevated positions suggests that what may be considered "extreme" is *only what actively defies* given-over social inclusion. The ambivalent suspension of the grievous present in the queer tableau of *Calvaire* frames this ordeal, eliciting a negative affective response to these conditions as it also inspects the extremities and liminalities of queerness within the socio-political order.

The Reparative Form of Guilt

The deathworld of the queer tableau of grief in Calvaire participates in antisocial negativity through its character developments and abides by hierarchical power structures in its narrative organization, even creating a false gender divide to normalize Robert and Gloria-Marc's relationship; however, like Hong's models, the tableau also expresses a desire for life in the face of death. As a sorrowful response at the loss of a queer bond, the tableau of grief suggests a wish for contentment, a moment in which queerness is neither fatal nor foregone. In reading the agency of grief as an affective force, Eugenie Brinkema writes, "[…] *Funny Games* is not about grief or grieving. Rather, it brings to light the force of the affect *as* its visual and temporal form. […] it is the form of Haneke's film above all that grieves" (100). In other words, the form emits grief, not for a spectator, but for the cinematic structure itself; the film grieves

over its own aesthetic transformation. In *Calvaire*, the illumination of a queer bond, a sociable visibility, is brought forth, subsequently withdrawn and weighted down, yet still charged within the immobile framing. The temporality of grief—that forestalling of futurity—suspends itself here as Marc seemingly laments the disbanding of an ephemeral moment of wounded recognition, a fugitive togetherness of (dis)affection. Since the film grieves over this loss, this suggests a mediation between social inscription and antisocial negation, a curious desire to inhabit both positions. This suspension unites both positions of life and death, visibility and erasure, to provide a space that questions the mobility of queerness across history and within cultural representation. Yet, the temporal burden of this form is yoked to a visual sameness that belies movement. As such, this image forfeits another form within itself that reroutes its intention: this tableau of grief is *also* a tableau of guilt.

Providing a more trenchant balance between queer assimilation and separatism, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick links grief and guilt together as reparative affect modes in her reading of the Kleinian depressive position.[29] Through tracing how knowledge may be performative, Sedgwick argues in *Touching Feeling* that queer theory has tended toward a paranoid position, a vigorous symptomatic approach to point out unsurprising systemic oppressions (126). She characterizes this critical position as "marked by hatred, envy, and anxiety" (128) and "a monopolistic strategy of anticipating negative affect" (136), insofar as it jettisons surprise for self-congratulatory, ego-driven exposure. The reparative-depressive position, on the other hand, "inaugurates ethical possibility—in the form of a *guilty*, empathetic view of the other as at once good, damaged, integral, and requiring and eliciting love and care" (137, my emphasis). Similar to the queer

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[29] For theorists responding to Sedgwick's reparative turn from a specifically neoliberal affective context, see Lauren Berlant and Ann Cvetkovich.

bond, this position is "an anxiety-mitigating achievement" that one "only sometimes, and often only briefly, succeeds in inhabiting," but which nonetheless provides "nourishment and comfort" (128). Guilt shares with grief an acknowledgment of a painful present stemming from an injurious past that momentarily alleviates the bitter conditions of difference. From Sedgwick's perspective, the act of compassion in *Calvaire* and its interlocking modalities of grief and guilt may suggest a reparative turn. In this reading, Gloria-Marc's tender approach to ameliorate Robert's pain functions as an ethical practice of care, in which guilt emerges through the refusal to rescue Robert, even after acknowledging a sorrowful connection.

To some degree, the form of guilt requires a soft reciprocation. This is represented in the tableau through the absence of shot-reverse shot conventions, suppressing typical power relations of differentiation for a leveled-out communication of character blocking. In *Calvaire,* the tableau of Robert's demise is framed from behind Gloria-Marc as s/he kneels down to his level. Sinking into the earth with his arm outstretched upward, Robert's positioning alongside Gloria-Marc's hunched over body creates a parenthetical couple form. The protagonist's face is unseen by the spectator as this couple exchanges admissions of love, further enveloping their relationship into a form away from the viewer. This almost enclosed whole is riven, however, by the unpredictable queer force of indeterminate bodies and desires. Robert's belligerent hyper-masculinity, driven to possess and subordinate Gloria's abstracted lack throughout the film, shifts toward a gentler affection of empathy during his impending death. Likewise, despite being refashioned by his captor with a militaristic buzz-cut and clothed in Gloria's sundress, Marc has until this tableau insisted on his maleness and personal identity. Yet in this frozen environment, he gives himself over to Robert's desires, becomes Gloria, and reorients their aggressive relation into a queer bond of mutual togetherness. The natural lighting reinforces this change by providing a sensual

sheen that evokes delicacy and passivity, aesthetic features in opposition to the preceding

sequences of rapid-cut violence with harsh reds and greens cast on the characters. Although these

soft elements flatten out the frame into bordered stillness, the mutability of the characters

destabilize boundaries, disturbing the perceived calmness of this encounter. As such, a fragment

of paranoid anxiety is maintained in this tableau, allowing guilt in this form to unsuspend the

violence that grief attempts to postpone.

For Leo Bersani, guilt is a violent drive that solicits a vector to rethink relationality. In

"Aggression, Gay Shame, and Almodóvar's Art," he criticizes Eve Sedgwick and Michael

Warner, among others, for prioritizing shame as an affective mode of queer intersubjectivity

stemming from a homophobic social-symbolic order:

> Unlike guilt, shame is in perfect symmetry with the external world. Shame has nothing to
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> do with my own drives, with my own secret pleasures; it is entirely what others make me
>
> feel. Shame therefore fully justifies an aggressiveness toward a hateful world intent on
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> destroying me, and the only question raised by shame is, as Sedgwick says, how it can be
>
> transformed into a sense of the subject's value, or dignity. (*IRG* 68)

Shame thus reiterates the norms of the dominant culture without accounting for the psychic

yearnings and anxieties that sustain phobic intensities against difference. Guilt, however, is more

interior to the subject and asymmetrical to the external world. Drawing from Freud's *Civilization*

and Its Discontents, Bersani proposes that guilt is crucial to the renunciation of desire as it is

compelled by a narcissistic pleasure for aggression (*IRG* 128-9). From this psychoanalytic

approach, guilt may be considered "an abject destructiveness irreducible to intersubjective power

plays, a destructive drive from which no human subject is entirely free" (*IRG* 69). Hence guilt's

expansiveness, its drive, its movement outward and elsewhere that works to unsuspend the compact, contained form of grief.

Although guilt may be initially hostile and ruinous, it can nevertheless take on reparative qualities after its dispersal through Bersanian *jouissance*, the destructively productive "self-shattering" of the ego's boundaries, which explodes the subject across and beyond psychic, sexual, and aesthetic dimensions. Contrary to Edelman's Lacanian model of *jouissance* as an evil, ironic demolition of the social, Bersanian *jouissance* is reinventive; it scatters repressive guilt to foster Foucauldian "new relational modes" outside of disciplinary power or identitarian categories. For Bersani, the awareness of an internalized guilt and its hateful drive may be reorganized after the searing pleasure of *jouissance*. Following this experience of willful lessness, the subject becomes cognizant of what it cannot know, master, or possess, providing a mode of limited intersubjectivity that disavows intimate relationality and difference as the social sphere predicates it. Not only does *jouissance* eliminate spatio-temporal restrictions, but it also breaks down heteronormative gender orders. Like Edelman's rhetorical strategy of irony, Bersani associates *jouissance* with queerness foremost in his original conceptualization of this psychic break, attaching it first to a fantasized notion of passivity for female sexuality, then tracing its phobic remapping onto the receptive male body, whereby a phobic condition of terror is spurred by the idea of inhabiting a state of non-climactic pleasure, a terror sustained by its potential for all subjects.[30] As queer narrative and visual devices, irony and *jouissance* effectively destabilize hegemonic frameworks of power and manifest an ecstatic release from such organizing

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[30] See Bersani's seminal essay "Is the Rectum a Grave?" for more on the social perceptions that link together misogyny and homophobia for *jouissance*.

principles, thereby exposing the liminal borders that constitute structure, linearity, and meaning for sociality.

Calvaire, of course, cannot portray that unpresentable *jouissance*, yet through sustaining the violent frenzy of guilt into a tableau, a violent frenzy of indeterminate sexuality, it does unfold an aesthetic structure that elicits its arrival. Despite the stalled futurity embedded in this image, the negative aesthetic structure itself fosters the potential to renegotiate relationality, and in turn, to move toward a new future. Crucially, this only occurs in the natural external world, in a space that is untethered to the flows of capital, the accelerationism of capitalist productivity, or the developments of neoliberal progress that often generate violence. In fact, the natural world provides a critical space of non-violence against and within a stunted field of narrative violence. Therefore, not only does the tableau express a fundamental uncertainty regarding either separatism or inclusion for queerness, an uncertainty that creates a form of grievous guilt, but the tableau also forwards questions for how the natural world may queerly and formally aid in collapsing hierarchical orders in the social sphere.

First, I will address how this occurs through a queer reconceptualization of spectatorial relations, in order to flip the script on how this cinema has been labeled as "extreme." In this case, the rigid expectations for unity, climax, and linearity are revealed as excesses of individualism and forms of social relationality that beget violence, and the stopgap of the tableau in nature stages these visual relations to pedagogically inform the viewer of different ways of seeing and being in the world. That is to say, what counts as "extreme" for this cinema need not always be considered in terms of representations of violence or sex, but also in the spectatorial investments for normative narrative models that aestheticize these expressions, for these principles effectually sanction violence against the other and the non-human by making such

portrayals authoritative and more desirable over others. Then in the next section, I will analyze

the positioning of queer violence in the natural world within a selection of New Extremism films

for what eco-critical and socio-political ideals are ultimately conveyed by these aesthetic

arrangements, concluding with these expressions as the answers to my central question on the

queer politics of affective formalism.

Negative Aesthetics and the External World

Shattering the spectator occurs, for Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, within formally reductive

aesthetics like the tableau that de-hierarchize and expand vision.[31] These negative aesthetic

features of jostled immobility and immersive passivity also correlate with Eugenie Brinkema's

formalist project. Turning arepresentational affects into readable forms, Brinkema argues, "[…]

involves interpreting form's waning and absence, and also attending to formlessness" (37). In

addition to their aesthetic similarities, Brinkema and Bersani also share affinities for dialectical

resistance within these formal modes. For Brinkema, the formal affect of grief is "impersonal"

and "delinked from individual experience and communal politics" (93). Similarly, Bersani

upholds an impersonal intimacy within anti-communicative art—that is, art that relies on

blankness as pure potential—as a resource to distend desire from current subject/object relations.

However, unlike Brinkema, Bersani and Dutoit still hold onto the spectator for political

significance in their aesthetic theories. They do so not to prioritize embodied experiences of the

viewer—like much critical discourse on New Extremism—but rather to chart how

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[31] A few examples of their visual art models include Assyrian tableaux, Mark Rothko, Ellsworth Kelly, Alain Resnais, Derek Jarman, and Terrence Malick, which collectively allow an unruly wandering of the spectator's vision. See *Arts of Impoverishment*, *Forms of Being*, and *The Forms of Violence*.

disembodiment via visual *jouissance* reorganizes itself thereafter. In so doing, they propose a solution to the problems Brinkema poses for spectatorship by suggesting how the spectator may alternatively exist alongside socialized affects and psychoanalytic drives.

The queer political potential for negative aesthetics lies in how they stimulate an eroto-ethical possibility to visualize the erratic mobility of desire in ways that simultaneously mirror and contest the dominant culture. Drawing from Freud's emphasis on aggression in sexuality, specifically how sexual intercourse can entail a failure to connect with another as much as it can create an alliance, Bersani discerns, "Negativity in art attacks the myths of the dominant culture—the pastoral myth, for example, of sexuality as inherently loving and nurturing, of sexuality as continuous with harmonious community" (*IRG* 34). The prevalence of sexual violence in New Extremism attests to these thematic concerns; however, the aesthetic structure of negativity—a virtual *jouissanc*e—points toward an aggression within the spectator that may be altered. By invalidating the comforting platitudes of directional vision and narrative climax, negative aesthetics perturb the gaze with freeing expansiveness amidst a visual field of sameness. This experience makes clear the selfish, invasive projection to find meaning, to grasp onto representational content, in a way that demands for the spectator to acknowledge "the bleakness, the love of power, even the violence perhaps inherent in human relations" (*IRG* 34). Provided this understanding, the spectator may engage in a curious wandering of the frame, a scopophilic movement that is more sensual than sexual. The eroto-ethical value here is compelled by a promiscuous vision that repudiates the principles of monogamous coupledom, which the tableau likewise fosters through its lack of dialectical editing, yet this tactic has even broader investments. As intimated by the "pastoral myth," negativity demystifies modernity's romantic nostalgia for a rural past. Thus, Bersani suggests that nature, like art, has been improperly

endowed with the values of the human subject.[32] The false security of a unified self is imbricated

in the disasters of neoliberal capitalism, consumerism, and individualism, which have

collectively engendered state violence and ravaged the global environment. To challenge these

deleterious consequences of selfhood, Bersani encourages the loss of the self through *jouissance,*

for only by shattering and ridding the ego of its formal structures that are currently constituted by

social relationality—the family and the couple, for example—may the subject be returned

omnidirectionally to the external world.[33]

That near visual sameness spurs into motion *jouissance* is crucial for furthering a political

correlation between the queer and the natural world. In his late-career shift from the

psychoanalytic subject to the aesthetic subject, Bersani reconceptualizes the ego as a pre-

constructed and de-anthropomorphized form from the aesthetics of the natural world,

independent of social relationality before its integration in the symbolic order. This leads Bersani

and Dutoit to trace in art and cinema "documents of a universe of inaccurate replications, of the

perpetual and imperfect recurrences of forms, volumes, colors, and gestures" (*IRG* 146).

However, the insistence on "inaccurate replications" here originates from Bersani's enigmatic

term "homo-ness," or the indeterminate sameness of homosexual desire, which attaches itself

onto a different identity that still mirrors its own (*Homos* 58-59). "Homo-ness" challenges the

Freudian principle of desire as lack, driven to fulfill itself through difference; instead, desire in

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[32] For Bersani's sharpest critique on the role of art in this vein, see *The Culture of Redemption*. In this text, Bersani renounces the modernist proclivity to misread art in the service of the human. Writing on the potential of this interpretive strategy, Bersani determines, "Art redeems the catastrophes of experience—of individual and collective histories—by the violence of its symbolic reconstructions of experience" (97). To suggest art may be a superior, more significant, version of life is to be complicit in securing identity as "authoritative selfhood," and for Bersani, this wielding of subjectivity sanctions violence against the other and the non-human (3-4).
[33] For more on the cosmic dimensions of Bersani's aesthetic subject, see Kaja Silverman.

homo-ness is more neutral to difference, viewing it as "the nonthreatening margin of, or supplement to, a seductive sameness" (*Homos* 150). In other words, homosexual desire paves the way for Bersani's alternative relationality, one founded on a nonviolent relation to difference, but he later locates this same formal principle of repetitive near-sameness in the natural environment, proposing that the external world already provides a model to evade current binary aggressions of relationality and, through which, the subject may relearn the pre-social ego's nonaggressive basis.

The backdrop of an impersonal nature, one indifferent to the intensities of human interaction occurring within it, forwards this perception, and it is a significant mise-en-scène element for some portrayals of queer violence in New Extremism cinema. This non-relational placement of nature follows the theories of Bersani-Dutoitian spectatorship, while from a more narrative standpoint, queer violence often erupts through phobic, ironic, or antisocial expressions that attack (homo)normativity within these spaces. As such, a tension between violence and non-violence is held within the tableau, and this expression of queer relationality presents a challenge for how many scholars have come to view the eco-critical connections between the queer and the natural environment.

Most recent queer eco-critical scholarship forwards an empathetic reading for how the queer is positioned within the natural world, which seems to function as a space of relief from neoliberalism and a space that critiques its faults. Nicole Seymour, for example, reads eco-friendly advertisements alongside Edelman's figural Child of reproductive futurism and Muñoz's revision, leading her to propose that "much environmentalist discourse *depends* on, or even *requires*, a white-centric heterosexism, if not homophobia" (viii). In other words, the fate of the planet hinges on the safety of future white, heterosexual children. In turn, Seymour argues for

queer politics to address how systems of oppression—classicism, racism, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia—correlate with the exploitation and degradation of the environment. She briefly suggests that Bersanian self-shattering could foster an eco-friendly queer outlet: "After all, a measure of self-renunciation and antisociality is central to many if not most forms of environmentalism, including ecocriticism; the renunciation of anthropocentricism and the adoption of biocentric or ecocentric viewpoints are veritable prerequisites for participation in either" (6). However, she ultimately—and, I would argue, incorrectly[34]—assumes a pitfall in this approach due to what she views as "ecological misanthropy" (6) in the relation between the human and the nonhuman, promoting instead the queer's link to the natural world through "an empathetic, ethical imagination" in art (1).

Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt follow this empathetic view in their analysis of the queer pastoral in recent global art cinema. According to them, the queer pastoral subtends the neoliberal notion of homonormative citizens as cosmopolitan consumers in urban enclaves (246). Instead, in these natural environments queers are reimagined as "environmental stewards," whereby they "upturn rhetorics of human dominance over nonhuman nature, often by refusing to take part in the nature-culture binary that has proved so destructive for both queer people and the world's ecology" (247). Throughout Schoonover and Galt's filmic examples, queers are often enabled through sensory, tactile, and communal engagements with the external world, fostering a queer disruptive mode in which, "[n]ature and culture are destabilized through a register that privileges sensual touch rather than one built on knowledge and visual mastery" (249-250). Schoonover and Galt avoid contemporary extremism in their archive of queer world cinema, but

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[34] Seymour, like many critics, reads Bersani's work for its ascetic self-abnegation, rather than charting how *jouissance*, especially as it corresponds to the external world, is regenerative.

I want to nevertheless suggest that the natural world operates in a similar ethical register here. Rather than hapticity, though, the de-mastery of visuality through Bersanian *jouissance* counters the violent desires that the human often casts on the other or non-human. This occurs through not only the tableau of grief/guilt, which solemnly opens up that radical field of vision, but also through jump-cuts that create a spatio-temporal disconnectedness for the subjects and spectator in the natural world.

Indifference of Nature

Perhaps the most exemplary example of an impersonal natural environment is Bruno Dumont's *Twentynine Palms*, the film that inspired James Quandt for his original, albeit derogatory, catalogue of New French Extremity. The film repeatedly emphasizes the smallness of its human figures by distant long shots, punctuating the stillness and emptiness of the California desert in contrast to the charged aggressions of doomed heterosexual couple, David and Katia. Writing on the overall style of the film, Lisa Coulthard discerns, […] the film does not partake in a discourse of difference (insiders and outsiders, man and nature, urban and rural, or even rich and poor) but of sameness—the parallel structure, the interchangeable actions, the undifferentiated attackers, the monochrome desert" (502-503). The sameness of these aesthetics make the film's disruptive expression of queer violence all the more shocking, in which a gang of antisocial queers suddenly and without context enter the narrative to brutally beat and rape David while Katia is stripped and forced to witness. The film's framing techniques up to this point are made more severe by contrast when this sequence narrows in on the characters, portraying close-ups of the assailant's face in orgasm and recording the trauma of this event from various viewpoints through dialectical editing. Following this act of violence, the film rests on a

two-minute tableau that, to some degree, abides by the intertwined modalities of grief and guilt as I have been sketching them. Although it lacks a jump cut or an environmental lighting differential, grief's curvature of the spine takes shape as David bends over and sobs, while the gravity of the image is compounded by Katia's slow crawl, dragging her body across the sand, to provide him comfort—an empathetic encounter like in *Calvaire* that contrasts how this couple has heretofore been depicted as physically and verbally abuse to each other. The tableau additionally wedges between narrative futurity for this couple. Where do they move forward together after this traumatic event? In the following sequence back at their hotel, David shaves his head bald, matching the look of his rapist, then stabs Katia to death. In the film's final shot, David has presumably committed suicide; his nude body lies in the desert, depicted from another high-angle long shot and rendered insignificant in comparison to the vastness of nature. As in this example, the natural world in much of New Extremism cinema resists being coded as romantic, sublime, or utopic, standing instead as stoic and uncaring to this cinema's centralized human figures.

Allow me to briefly provide two more examples before returning to *Calvaire*. In contrast to the stark seriousness and phobic intensities of *Twentynine Palms*, François Ozon's *Criminal Lovers* portrays a particularly subversive and campy take on framing queer violence within nature. In the film, high school lovers Alice and Luc evade legal authorities in a countryside forest after murdering their classmate Saïd, whom both appear erotically fixated on. Cut off from society, they are then captured by an unnamed male hermit and self-proclaimed cannibal, who proceeds to chain Alice up in the basement of his cabin and begin a sadomasochistic sexual relationship with Luc, which the film represents as a pleasurable awakening for the men. Eventually, and to the dissatisfaction of Luc, they escape the hermit's cabin and reenter the

forest. While still wearing a dog collar and leash, Luc makes love to Alice on a rock next to a river as nondiegetic orchestral music swells, a campy sonic interjection from the preceding scenes that suggests an impending satisfactory heterosexual narrative closure. First framed in high angle and long shot, the film then cuts to medium long shot on the two figures having sex, before showcasing a series of shot-reverse shot cuts that indicate a fox, deer, hedgehog, and dove have all gathered to watch the two lovers. This sequence yields the wry amusement of irony that Edelman evokes in his description of queer narrativity. The film breaks from this insincere romanticism and strange animal-human interaction with the interruption of the law; a jump cut silences the music and repositions the lovers, suddenly clothed, fleeing the scene away from the river. Alice is subsequently murdered by the police, and Luc is taken into custody. The camera lingers on forest shrubbery as the officers direct Luc back through the woods, allowing nature to supersede the visibility of the human figures.

While both *Twentynine Palms* and *Criminal Lovers* portray ill-fated heterosexual couples with revoked futurity, wracked by the after-effects of queerness and its illicit ruptures that break narrative and aesthetic conventions amidst the natural environment, Alain Guiraudie's *Stranger by the Lake* demonstrates similar ideals through its exploration of homonormative longing. The film depicts an all-white, gay cruising beach where the protagonist Franck seeks a romantic partner, someone with whom he can settle down. The film persistently creates a tension between homonormative romance and sexual freedom by screening barebacking, or unprotected anal intercourse, as both a dangerous practice that flouts the risk aversion expected of a rational neoliberal subject and an important practice for modes of gay intimacy. Frank's unprotected sex—or unlimited intimacy, in Tim Dean's terms—with his lover Michel leads him to desire a socially normative romantic relationship with Michel apart from the cruising culture of the

beach. As the film's antisocial outlaw, however, Michel rejects these advances and becomes increasingly violent.

Two sequences illustrate the connections for the queer in nature here. In the first act of violence, Michel drowns a lover, and the film frames this event from Franck's gaze, looking down from a hilltop in another high angle, long shot. The expansive stretch of the ocean water is juxtaposed against this tiny ordeal of death. Although this shot resembles a tableau, the film's later sequence of violence more closely follows the structure of the queer tableau of grievous guilt. Henri, a friend of Franck who the film suggests desires him, is stabbed by Michel after following him into the woods next to the beach. Henri's action is coded as a suicidal gesture of sacrifice—a means of protecting Franck from Michel—as well as an act of latent aggression directed toward Franck for not returning his affections or heeding his warnings against Franck's violent behaviors. As in *Calvaire,* this scene deploys stalled movement following a sequence of violence, temporal duration, grief's spinal curvature for Franck, and a lighting differential—in this case, Henri's death alters the environment from day to night. The shift to darkness in this tableau conveys that the film grieves for Henri and the loss of his queer bond with Franck, even while the narrative paradoxically longs for and attacks homonormative investments in coupledom over the course of the film.

Collectively, these examples demonstrate how queerness and its entanglements with violence upset narrative conventions and alter affective-aesthetic arrangements, as they are dependent on sociality and reproductive futurism. For human figures to frequently be framed as insignificant amongst the vast neutrality of the external world also suggests that by virtue of its visual organizations and in contrast to its incessant representations of violence, New Extremism may nevertheless cast a silent dismissal of the violence unfolding therein. Despite its disruptive

capacities, queer violence framed within the natural world does not link the queer to a figuration of carnal animality or portray a sense of modern alienation; rather, it further prompts questions on the politics of queer sociality and intimacy in neoliberalism.

Conclusion

What, then, are the productive and reformist stakes that *Calvaire* affords for the viewer? Writing on a Godardian jump cut of environmental displacement, similar to that which occurs in both *Criminal Lovers* and *Calvaire*, Bersani and Dutoit term this ontological movement "registers," defined as "parallel modes or lines of being, alternative unfoldings of events that don't 'communicate' with one another but inaccurately replicate one another" (*FB* 5). Remade as substituted versions of themselves, Robert and Marc resemble this readjustment. This alteration also occurs in a correlative locale. The wetlands appear to be correspondent to the woodlands, even though their mapped relation is dubious at best. After the tableau, the camera cuts to Marc alone in the snow (1:22:41), remains still for another twenty seconds, then ramps up into a series of quick cuts while moving left across the natural environment. The camera steadily tracks back into the foggy woods, and cuts twice on what appears to be the same forest. On the third cut, the camera is now handheld; it tilts from a dark row of trees to the blinding sky and back down to a plane of dirt. The shaky camerawork, stark lighting, and crowded forestry are then juxtaposed against the next cut, a more balanced framing of a nearly barren landscape, which appears entirely unrelated to the forest. Throughout the remainder of the cuts leading up to the credits, the framing consistently shifts between lightness and darkness, balanced and unbalanced camerawork, slow and rapid tempos with unruly frequencies. *Calvaire* thus demonstrates a spatial and temporal disconnectedness leading up to, during, and following the tableau not only

for its dissonant human figures but also for the spectator. This disorientation suggestively empties out the spectator into the aesthetics of the external world, activating Bersani-Dutoitian "registers" to question the spectator's very position. It is as if the film charges virtual *jouissance* through the tableau to provide that shattered loss, then encourages the disembodied vision of the singular universal spectator to scatter and refind itself through the various imperfect formal relations of the natural world.

This productive outlet for spectatorship challenges how critics of New Extremism have often considered this cinema to be only enveloped in negative affect and bodily perturbations. Queer narrativity and visuality, especially when connected to the natural world, utilize negativity to rethink relationality apart from political regimes, binary difference, and even identity writ large, all of which engender state and environmental violence. As I have proposed, by turning to those queer breaks within the excesses of violence, those peculiar moments of non-violence that emerge from within violence and momentarily suspend it, we may begin to reconsider alternative methods for addressing this cinema of brutality. This requires not avoiding the inherent negative affects or charged aggressions of New Extremism, but rather tracking the formal reorganizing principles of violence—its fits, spurts, and stops that collide with the social politics of narrative in ways that question the roots and routes of violence.

Returning now to my central question: what, then, does a tableau of grief and guilt convey about the queer politics of affective formalism in New Extremism and the affordances of queerness within neoliberalism? The tableau fuses together sociality and antisociality to portray the affordances of contemporary queerness, noting how generalizable phobic pressures still circulate despite some absorptive inclusion, and more specifically, how this inclusion abides by racialized, gendered, sexual, and capitalist hierarchies. Further relating to this idea is Grace

Kyungwon Hong's assertion that grief is a social privilege, and who counts as grievable and killable are necessitated by these hierarchies. Likewise, Amber Jamilla Musser reads guilt via Franz Fanon as a privilege of affluent whiteness due to its frequent associations with "sympathy, liberal subjectivity, and the pleasures of comparison" in relation to the racialized or colonized subject (105). Thus, to some degree, the queer tableau of grief and guilt comports with the machinations of neoliberalism and is complicit with modes of disavowal that marginalize and exclude. However, in the examples I have provided, the narratives of this cinema and their affective-aesthetic rearrangements also expose the rigid confines of (homo)normativity and identitarian difference that often catalyze violence. That these sequences occur in the natural environment is crucial for propelling a queer eco-critical corrective to violence precisely because the formal relations of the external world do not originate, or perpetuate, the violences of social relationality. At the same time, however, this non-violent visuality is crossed with antisocial energies that violate and puncture narratives of futurity, even those for the queer bond. By balancing these positions, the tableau ultimately expresses an incongruity of feeling and suggests an unexpected ambivalence regarding the position of queerness in contemporary politics.

The queer tableau of grief and guilt oscillates between bonded sociality and antisociality, livability and killability, reparative recovery and paranoid intensity, suspended and unsuspended violence, and forestalling and mobilizing futurity. Hinging in-between spaces of negation and becoming provides a surprising reprieve from disciplinary and affective power relations, putting the queer on a tangential line that pivots on assimilation and radical separatism. It is through the force of negation that new scenes of togetherness emerge, however momentary, illogical, or incidental, marking queerness as a site of both violation and belonging. In so doing, the multiplicitous tableau does not suggest a sharp disavowal of sociality or futurity, offer a

romanticized conceptualization of either, or cancel out the frenzy of sexuality; rather, the tableau

mediates an uncertainty as to what queerness may be disruptive of today.

Optimistic Anxiety and the Violent Corporate Woman's Film

So far, we have focused on aesthetic and narrative tendencies that express a queer politics of affective formalism within New Extremism cinema. Where the previous chapter located a recent influx of antisocial queer criminals, a recurrent trope across cinematic history whose newness is only conditional to neoliberalism's disinvestments in such characters, this chapter turns to the emergent figure of the transnational corporate female in this cinema. Regarding representations of female sexuality, female-driven violence, and brutality against women as adjacent, and often interlocking, narrative elements to the queer violence of New Extremism, this chapter extends my critical approach with more attention to the emotional lives of women.[35] I thus forward the aesthetic, narrative, and affective considerations of the previous chapter to track different spatio-temporal arrangements for elevated female positions in this canon. At the same time, I sustain questions about the ability to imagine modes of relationality or community that can challenge or move beyond the confines of neoliberal governmentality and its rationalized individualism. In contrast to queer violence in the natural environment, however, this chapter analyzes gendered violence in the built urban environment and its capitalist transformations. Whereas unrestrained nature and its expansiveness within form de-centralizes human figures, the built urban environment relies on grids, lines, and structures that ensnare the humans, closing in on them rather than proposing a spatial relief. In the specific subset of New Extremism films that I employ here, corporate women are primarily situated within occupation-based or transitory spaces that are wed to the flows of capitalist exchanges and their exploitations, and as we shall

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[35] Broadly speaking, these elements of female sexuality and violence are taken up by often-cited extreme filmmakers such as Catherine Breillat, Pascal Laugier, Olivier Assayas, Takashi Miike, Chan Wook Park, Sion Sono, and Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi.

see, the affective formalism of these arrangements elicit ulterior affiliations that may resist or challenge oppressive regimes of power.

Unlike the queer narrative structures of the previous chapter, the narrative trajectories for corporate women in this chapter attempt to hold onto heteropatriarchal conventions: those drives toward closure, climax, and linear futurity that abide by a politics of respectability and reproduction. However, this task is not easy, especially given the demands of neoliberal labor for the global managerial class. Caroline Levine notes this difficulty in her analysis of the formal restructurings of gender and bureaucratic hierarchies after the 1970s for neoliberalism. She addresses how the tempo for biological reproduction frequently clashes with institutional temporalities in detrimental ways for women, despite social expectations for childbearing (8). This paradoxical effect is further evident, according to Levine, in the reconstruction of gender binaries and hierarchies within the globally organizing form of the bureaucratic ladder (97-98). Whereas traditional gender divisions have often considered women as the "bearers of the internal (emotion, the home, the private" and men as the "bearers of the external (reason, the workplace, the public)," the inclusion of women into the workforce has troubled these categories.[36] Women are "highly visible, constantly noticed, gossiped about, and evaluated" as they simultaneously must conceal their inner feelings to project a rationalized public persona. (105, 104). This paradoxical predicament affords both harsh criticism and valued respect, and New Extremism cinema also depicts these perceptions. In Olivier Assayas's *Demonlover* (2002), for example,

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[36] Although feminism and queer theory has upended these traditional categories and exposed them for their faulty preconceptions of biological determinism, I maintain them here with Levine not to reify them, but precisely because these cinematic examples attempt to rigorously enforce and sustain such socially conceived categories. It is also worth noting that Levine's reading of corporate culture ignores the white heteropatriarchal structures of these institutions, and the films presented in this chapter additionally portray monochromatic raciality and strict gender distinctions in their representations.

business executive Hervé describes his relationship with his female superior Karen as follows, "She's cold, inhuman. But I respect her" (00:16:44). This perception is likewise conveyed in films such as *Audition* (Takasshi Miike, 1999), *Secret Things* (Jean-Claude Brisseau, 2002), *Martyrs* (Pascal Laugier, 2008), *Guilty of Romance* (Sion Sono, 2011), and *Bastards* (Claire Denis, 2013), among others, where women in positions of power are frequently described as being frigid, severe, and mechanical—mentalities that comport to the expectations of rigid corporatism yet also problematize engrained assumptions for gender roles.

Where Levine locates a resistance to this paradox for women is in their constant renegotiation of these hierarchies. On this process, she writes, "By understanding themselves structurally, as part of a subordinated group in a large-scale gender hierarchy, pairs of women could create and sustain their own antihiearchical form: an alliance of equals" (106). In her selected examples of social texts, Levine finds strategic alliances that "counter typical problems of tokenism" and renounce the constraining strictures of gendered expectations (106). However, in contrast to communal alliances, she also suggests that women may forge new hierarchies or competitions based on the brutal dictates of the bureaucratic ladder. Given the excesses of violent power and negative affect in New Extremism, it's not surprising to find thematic expressions of intense rivalry among women in this cinema as they struggle to acquire and maintain upward corporate mobility.

Moving up and down the bureaucratic ladder, a symbol infused with neoliberal job insecurity and often lacking in relational reciprocity, this chapter finds an affective form that I call *optimistic anxiety* in Marina de Van's *Dans ma peau* (2002). Just as the previous chapter located a specific affective form to generalize political perspectives across a range of selected films, this chapter follows suit by considering the aesthetic and narrative properties for corporate

female violence. Here I conceive of these aforementioned films as a particular sub-set of New Extremism that attends to the gendered demands of corporate labor within neoliberalism. Rather than begin *in media res* at the queer break of the tableau of grievous guilt, however, this chapter straggles forward, attempting to maintain the faulty linear progression of de Van's film. To also clarify the distinctions for each affective forms and their political expressions across these chapters, I present comparative and contrastive markers when necessary. But right now, I've anxiously moved too fast. Let's back up and begin again by formalizing anxiety via Brinkema, then open onto de Van's film.

In contrast to grief's attenuated movement—forward, then backward, then pause on a suspension of heavy stasis and temporal rest—anxiety, in Brinkema's account, is a buoyant movement that propels forward, even while stumbling over intermittent structural impediments. To formalize anxiety, Brinkema first rends it from its supposed interiority (its links to subjects and spectators), then exteriorizes and mobilizes it in her reading of Kierkegaard's distinctions of fear and anxiety. Whereas fear "take[s] as its object something definite"—manifest as horror's expected, momentary goosebumps on the skin, for example—anxiety, according to Kierkegaard, goes toward an indefinite "possibility of possibility," which "corresponds exactly to the future" (qtd. in Brinkema 184). This "not-yet-having-happened dimension of futurity" (198) is imagined as an infinite descent in Kierkegaard's account: "No matter how deep an individual has sunk, he can still sink deeper, and this 'can' is the object of anxiety" (qtd. in Brinkema 184). The modal verb "can" here incites future potential, while its adjacent adverb "still" invokes an ongoingness that is nevertheless attached to a present condition; hence, the peculiar movement that constitutes anxiety. For Kierkegaard, specifically in his figure of the *Heksebrev* (an optic toy), anxiety's mobility spurs "erratic, choppy, non-continuous, deceitful, and deceiving […] movement" (188).

Existentialist philosophers Heidegger and Sartre later attach more finitude to Kierkegaard's distressed fall, whereby anxiety's "something that is nothing" (184) becomes recast as "being's awareness of nonbeing" (184). In other words, anxiety's exterior mobility always sputters toward death, the supposed absence of meaning, an abstraction, a negation.

Following Kierkegaard's diving metaphor, Brinkema reads the American independent horror film *Open Water* (Chris Kentis, 2003) as an exemplar of anxiety's affective form. In the sparse plot, the couple Susan and Daniel are accidentally left behind on a scuba diving mission in shark-infested waters. They bicker back and forth, battle bouts of physical fatigue and hunger, float around, get bitten by sharks, then die. Because the film recycles opening and closing shots of its eponymous title, Brinkema discerns that "the film opens after the main figures have already died, or they have always already been dead, died in advance only to repeat those deaths again on loop" (212). From a bird's eye view, the overarching structure of the film is thus riddled with anxiety's deathly feedback, its belabored motion toward its own demise that is suggestively put in place at the film's very beginning.

Given that existentialism and psychoanalysis each situate anxiety as the modus operandi for ontological and psychic formation, Brinkema next turns to Freud and Lacan to further formalize anxiety's mobility in temporal and spatial structures. The early Freud theorizes libidinal repression in a field of latent guilt, in which the force of anxiety is generated by an interrupted progression toward a desired object. In the previous chapter, psychic interruptions yield breaks, stops, stalls, that correlate with grief's shirking of continuous futurity, which in my reading, is then unleashed by guilt's shared duplicitous structure within the tableau. To recap: in this web of negativity, guilt's expansive soft reciprocation agitates the visual field of grief's shrunken immobility and thereby releases the violent suspension of grief. And this movement,

too, is constituted by death. While grief/guilt halts on an illuminated presence that emerges from an absence, only to then restart anew, anxiety flips the script and moves from a shaky presence toward a dreadful absence. Anxiety's movement toward death does not give way to grief or capitulate to guilt's scattering through the expanded, abstract nothingness of *jouissance*, a Bersanian form of death and subsequent rebirth; rather, anxiety jars and darts while it also compresses *into* death. In effect, the end is death, always death, and that's that.

In another juxtaposition to the interruptive qualities of grief/guilt, the *intermittent* qualities of anxiety in Freud's later work allow Brinkema to theorize this affect's erratic and ever-mobile strike: "Instead of a rhythm of suspension, the revised form of anxiety […] revolves around the force of restriction: in place of halts or breaks or blockages, anxiety is linked to pressures squeezing time and choking the possibility for a forward progress that nevertheless persists." (194). The later exercise of intermittency opposes the early model of interruption by not foreclosing movement, but leaving it open even while it consistently strangles a temporal form. As such, the temporality of anxiety hinges on "undoing/repetition and interpolating an interval," in which the interval "puts a gap into continuity instead of breaking it off absolutely" (195), and through which anxiety emerges from "the *failure* or inability to interrupt a system" (196, emphasis in original). Although this may seem to mirror the queer tableau, anxiety's spatio-temporal investments are nevertheless different. Rather than a stop-gap of spatial suspension or fundamental ambivalence regarding temporal futurity, anxiety perpetuates a dangerous obligation to keep going forward in a constricting form, especially when such a movement may be undesirable or untenable.

In *Open Water*, Brinkema reads the temporal intermittency of anxiety in the film's time-stamps and sharks. For the former, on-screen captions fruitlessly mark the passage of time, and

the unnecessary punctuation of the clock, according to Brinkema, conveys "time's pressure on the text, […] suffocating the film form, recruiting real time to the logic of cinematic time" (217). The sharks provide another intermittent, repetitive visual form through a "pulsation of seeing and then not seeing, not seeing and then seeing," an action that further breaks up temporal linearity by charging the film form with illogical "fits and starts in a progression that does not, will not, end or pause" (219). The time-stamps thus make a mockery of the film's continuity, while the sharks guarantee Susan and Daniel's inevitable deaths, and when considered together, they each underline the impending finitude mobilized by anxiety.

Lastly, Brinkema pairs Freud's temporal form of intermittency with Lacan's spatial notion of anxiety. Where Freud locates a temporal disjuncture, Lacan adds embarrassment and dismay as the spatial framing devices for anxiety's temporal mobility in form. The containment that Freud finds is reframed as embarrassment by Lacan due to anxiety's compulsive movement within a space of entrapment. What is embarrassing is the stupid, humiliating, futile attempt to find release in an unrelenting form. Embarrassment as "a too-muchness of the signifier" conveys the difficulty of this experience, and at the same time, dismay shapes the movement within and around this space as an enervated "too-littleness" of power (206). As such, embarrassment and dismay co-sign the spatial limits of anxiety, whose temporal properties randomly rattle and reduce the cage, making anxiety a fundamental *not-enoughness* of any distribution of power as it condenses toward death.

Brinkema locates the spatial properties of anxiety in *Open Water* in the compositional division of the ocean's wavering horizontal line. The continuous horizon further compounds the distress of having nowhere else to go, nowhere to escape, and when matched with the taunting "stuckness in and to time" by the clock and sharks as well as the ocean's spatial embarrassment

and dismay of "how being is stuck in time" (219), then the affective form of anxiety begins to fully take shape. Anxiety's compressive movement draws closer to finitude once the horizon line is breached, not only by the sharks' darting jolts upward but also by Susan's later dip underwater, which moves the horizon line above the film's frame and submerges the film form into a state of abstraction, or "a voiding of figures in place of lines and blues" (231). On the interplay of this rearrangement, Brinkema writes, "The effect of the bar that is commuted from line to ceiling, put in place in order to be crossed and given depth in *Open Water*, is to give shape to the isolation and restriction of the stage on which the events of these deaths take place" (237). This visual move ultimately allows Brinkema to argue that "in the end, nothing but the place will have taken place" (241). In other words, the constricting temporal and spatial conditions eventually overshadow the film form and evacuate the human figures, but throughout this entire ordeal, temporal intermittency and spatial embarrassment and dismay have already rendered the humans as insignificant so that nothing matters but the mise-en-scène and its abstracting mise-n'en-scène. This latter lexically impossible term denotes the foundation for reading Brinkema's radical affective formalism, for which "in addition to reading what is put into the scene, one must also read for all of its permutations: what is *not* put into the scene; what is put into the *non-scene*; and what is *not enough* put into the scene" (46, emphasis in original). How negative affects exert violent pressures on film form, a predicament demonstrated by grief's grave suspension, is more important for Brinkema than how violence is rendered through narrative means. In her reading, the sharks do not kill Susan and David; anxiety drowns the entire film form.

Marina de Van's *Dans ma peau* shares similarities with Brinkema's conceptualization of anxiety's affective form, but in this case, the saturation of neoliberal capitalism engulfs the film. The spatial limitations of embarrassment ("too–muchness") and dismay ("too-littleness")

correlate to the unrelenting imbalance of neoliberalism's economic excess and reserve. As the abstract infinitude of capitalism eclipses the film's narrative, it also creates a tension in how anxiety is impelled through yet another staggered motion toward finitude: the deadline. This temporal structure is put in place by the first words spoken in the film. As the protagonist Esther (Marina de Van), a market researcher for a transnational corporation, diligently works at her laptop, her boyfriend Vincent (Laurent Lucas) pesters her: "At three words an hour, you'll never finish, Esther!" (00:01:16 - 00:01:18).[37] Although currently unemployed Vincent proposes they find an apartment together, to which Esther playfully expresses that she would prefer to live a life of luxury with a steady salary instead of merging their finances. Vincent leaves, and the film cuts to a close-up shot on Esther's bare leg, then tilts upward and scans her stationary body, providing an interconnection between it and her laptop. As Martine Beugnet astutely notes, "[…] the body-machine combination seems to have more to do with immobilization than creative metamorphosis […] less a 'becoming-computer' than a process of physical and identity formatting" (160). As such, Esther's introduction maps her body within a contained space of labor just as the deadline and Vincent's desire for cohabitation put into motion the pressures of linear progression. This brief introduction of the film's couple (00:01:03 – 00:01:54) is interposed between the film's three-minute title sequence, which further serve to put in place anxiety's spatial restraints.

Instead of the ocean's horizontal bar in *Open Water*, *Dans ma peau* installs vertical lines in its opening frame for anxiety to persistently attack and transgress throughout the film. This upright form is constituted by a split-screen in the title credits that align with dual images of

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[37] Throughout this chapter, English translations from French are transcribed from the DVD source.

high-rise skyscrapers and the business quarter of La Défense, a place Martine Beugnet describes as a "ruthless celebration of global architecture" (159), and whose sociocultural expressions likewise evoke the vertical bureaucratic ladder that Esther will attempt to climb throughout the film's narrative. By opening the film on what Marc Augé calls non-places, those historically insignificant locations such as train stations, airports, and hotels that demonstrate indistinguishable environments of "transport, transit, commerce, and leisure" (94), the film predominantly portrays indiscernible locations that effectuate a field of near visual sameness for anxiety to aggravate. In so doing, the spatial relations create a close homogenous equivalent to Brinkema's ocean and the natural environment of the last chapter. Where nature for the queer tableau framed an impersonal and indifferent relation to the violent intensities of human interactions occurring within it, the built urban environment here functions in a similar capacity. However, unlike nature, these spaces catalyze the very mechanisms of violence and negative affect through disseminations of neoliberal power—those demarcations of social orders, capitalist exploitations of spatio-temporal relations, and excesses of individualism. Moreover, rather than proffering a productively non-reciprocal space like nature for its protagonists and the spectator, these urban spaces prove destructively reciprocal to the female protagonists and do not provide any release for the viewer. Instead, anxiety keeps closing in on the film form and short-sighting any means for escape.

Anxiety begins at the very first shot with the split-screen of pristine, positive color images on the left juxtaposed against over-exposed negatives on the right side, putting in place a structure that erratically shifts from similitude to disjointedness. In the uneven rhythm of repetitive undoing, the images of inverted similarity (shots 1, 3, 4, 9, 10, 12, 15, and 16) depict traffic interstates, domed architecture, a computer keyboard, and office utensils including

scissors, pens, rulers, and paperclips. The images of disjuncture (shots 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11, 13, 14, 17, 18, 19), however, either portray different vantage points of the same interior—a train station from opposite sides of the room, for example—or the same objects slightly askew.[38] Further breaking the initial integrity of the vertical bar, the disconnected series of split-screen images contrasts the more straightforward reflective shots of skyscraper surfaces and workplace products by showcasing derelict scenes such as gated doorways with damaged wires, windows with broken glass, and desolate hallways with unkempt wallpaper peeling. These spaces of neglect level out the verticality of impeccable office buildings, crossing and collapsing the uprightness of authoritative architecture into lowly spaces wrecked by capitalist restructuring.

These simultaneously complimentary and contradictory spatial displays showcase the effects of neoliberal urbanism. Rather than *only* emphasize neoliberalism's detrimental transformations of space, urban design and policy scholars Jamie Peck, Nik Theodore, and Neil Brenner argue for more nuance in tracking the mutually constitutive relations of creative destruction for urban environments. Neoliberal urbanism, according to them, constitutes a period of transition following politico-economic policies of deregulation, privatization, and the dismantling of Keynesian welfare projects, whereby city space has become territorialized as "an arena both of market-oriented economic growth and for elite consumption practices, while at the same time securing order and control amongst marginalized populations" (58). Such developments are considered codependent and coevolving "*strategies of restructuring*" (56), in their account, and cities serve as the preeminent environments for the "reproduction, reconstitution, and mutation of neoliberalism itself" (50). By considering this dialectical give-

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[38] Please note that these shot counts do not correspond with the interposed introduction of Esther and Vincent; rather, they relay the number of shots for the title-cards themselves.

and-take of city planning, Peck, Theodore, and Brenner propose that not only does neoliberal

urbanism put in place politico-economic orders, but through ideological experiments within

urban reorganizations, cities also become "sites of serial policy failure as well as resistance to

neoliberal programs of urban restructuring" (49). In other words, viewing the creative destruction

of neoliberal urbanism attests to contradictions of neoliberalism, more broadly, and locates

potential oppositions to its supposed hegemonic power. They ultimately argue that moving

beyond neoliberalism, or at least rolling it back, relies on "new forms of urban solidarism,

between as well as within cities" (65). By shifting back and forth between global architecture and

its local entanglements, regulated and deregulated spaces, *Dans ma peau*, and other films I have

intimated, stage this expressive solidarity. Not only are the high-rises and non-places that peddle

economic inequality portrayed, but the defunded infrastructure projects in marginal regions of

the city where underclass populations live or frequent are also given representation. However,

like in the previous chapter, these spaces are once again absent of neoliberalism's precarious

subjects, providing an elision that critiques the progressive imaginary of multiculturalism

without further situating these subjects in traumatic or dejected scenarios. Some of the primary,

albeit underdeveloped, concerns in this cinema are thus the ways in which neoliberal corporate

culture perpetuates decay and desolation as well as how rationalized individualism and

privatization evade communal principles.

The title-card of *Dans ma peau* further attests to this idea, as it wedges another space of

neglect in-between two images of La Défense, fracturing the screen into three images: the

exterior of Esther's office complex, a slantwise view of quadrate windows with fraying electrical

wiring outside, and an inverted image of the far-left building that extends even further for a more

panoramic view of La Défense. Beneath the broken-up title-card of "Dan / s m / a Peau" reads

"visa d'exploitation n ° 99 662," which translates altogether as "In my skin / business license number 99 662," an expression that inscribes Esther's workplace within her before she is even present in the frame, while simultaneously suggesting "Visa exploitation" (00:00:36) to further compound the damages of capital. The film then resets its doubling organization, opens onto the brief interlude between Esther and Vincent, and subsequently reconvenes the split-screen images before once again opening onto the film's narrative. In this rhythmic move, *Dans ma peau* forwards Brinkema's argument on anxiety's looping structure, and indeed, the film returns several times to the suggested locales of this opening sequence, while the narrative nevertheless stumbles forward.

In fact, the plot really begins with a stumble. After the opening sequence puts in place the spatial immersion of neoliberal capitalism and its effects on the built urban environment, the sharp verticality of the bar (the skyscraper and the bureaucratic ladder) to be transgressed, and the temporal demands of linearity (the deadline and the implied heteropatriarchal futurism of Vincent's request to take their relationship to the next step), the following sequence commences with Esther and her coworker Sandrine (Léa Drucker) entering a party to network. In her first dialogue here, Esther conveys a desire to speed up her promotional opportunity at the agency by soliciting male clients, to which Sandrine replies, "Not now, please! I wish I hadn't got you in," a response that indicates Esther's corporate ladder-climbing impulses have been in place all along (00:03:15 – 00:03:24). After speaking with a few coworkers and clients, Esther inexplicably wanders outside of the house into an adjacent, neglected industrial yard where she trips over a piece of scrap metal and severely cuts open her calf. Before discovering her wound, however, Esther reenters the house, discusses housing prices with Sandrine, and schedules a lunch meeting with a client. When searching for the bathroom, she finally notices her trail of

blood on the carpet and seems to experience shock and intrigue at her body's unregistered pain from such a deep laceration. Over the course of the sparse plot for this film, Esther becomes increasingly interested in her own corporeality, leading to intermittent acts of self-mutilation and even self-cannibalism. These recurrent moments of self-abuse trouble Esther's capitalist productivity and impede her deadlines, while at the same time, progressing the narrative toward the possibility of an actual death. In this regard, the deadlines—like the time-stamps and sharks of *Open Water*—connect to the embarrassment and dismay of being stuck on a temporal line that is otherwise futile for Esther's potentially impending finitude. From a correlative aesthetic level, the film's intermittent displays of her wound, a representational form that never heals but only progressively decays and expands, provides an irregular rhythm to suggest another possibility of actual death that parallels the deadline.[39]

In addition to this temporal constraint, Esther's occasional explorations of her wound are mobilized within workplace settings of hermetic claustrophobia. In her first sequence of self-mutilation, Esther becomes seemingly distracted while typing a market research overview on organic foods. She pauses her work, goes to the storeroom basement, and carves open her stitches with an office utensil (another object already put in place by the film's title sequence). Diegetic sounds of low, buzzing electrical equipment and footsteps from the floor above her can be heard as Esther crouches down and probes her wound. The film does not depict the penetration of her flesh; instead, it portrays Esther's strained, dedicated face in close-up grimacing, an expression that suggests she can, in fact, feel pain before the tear of flesh is heard.

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[39] After Esther leaves the party, her wound is intermittently displayed throughout the film at these beginning time-stamps: 00:09:52; 00:12:16; 00:14:37; 00:18:44; 00:27:13; 00:33:24; 00:35:51; 00:40:43; 01:01:11. Please note that these temporal markers do not account for the business dinner sequence (00:41:36 – 00:51:58) or the two sequences in the Hotel Palma (00:51:59- 00:58:27; 01:11:51- 01:18:37). Duration may vary.

The film then cuts to three establishing shots of the building's exterior architecture, in which the composition of the second shot repositions another vertical line into the very center of the frame (00:22:52 - 00:23:07). Once again, the film loops back onto its opening aesthetic structure to insist on the spatial boundaries that keep catalyzing Esther's unraveling.

After her experience in the office basement, Esther seems to procure a newfound sense of comfort, depicted at her desk smiling, content with both her self-mutilation and consumer report. With renewed enthusiasm, Esther confirms this ecstatic release to Sandrine and affirms the spatio-temporal conditions of anxiety as a precursor for her behavior. After Sandrine rejects her invitation for coffee and fresh air, Esther leans in and whispers, "I've been cooped up all day. Not even a lunch break. In my office. Then I cut myself in the storeroom. The storeroom, my office. The air conditioning, no windows open, can't breathe" (00:25:03 – 00:25:22). This inarticulate moment may suggest that Esther does not genuinely know why she is compelled to harm herself; however, she recycles the same pneumatic excuse in a later business dinner.

Due to her knowledge of the Middle East, Esther eventually clinches a promotion as junior marketing manager for luxury products, a project that underlines the local discretions of the unassailable expanses of global capitalism.[40] Though she has expressed desire for this upward corporate move from the very beginning of the film, anxiety's contemptuous intermittency springs forth, preventing Esther from keeping up with the conversation of her colleagues. With muted embarrassment, she perceives her arm as detached from her torso and resting next to her dinner plate, which compels her to clandestinely stab herself underneath the

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[40] This local discretion is likewise conveyed by Esther's male superior in this dinner sequence: "A few years ago, we issued a worldwide press package. We had to withdraw it from Japan because one detail upset them. The postures of the people in the ad. There was a hand gesture which we saw as being very elegant. It deeply shocked the Japanese. It was like a gesture of disdain. For the reader, it signified refusal" (00:42:53- 00:43:19).

table in an attempt to confirm her embodiment. Esther then claims, "The air conditioning is strong" (00:49:43) before abruptly leaving the meeting to slice and gnaw at her flesh in solitude. By positioning the air conditioning again as a primary motivator for her violent acts, even if this is simply an ineluctable social excuse for her behavior, Esther relays the formal-affective movements of anxiety from the infrastructural relations of the built environment, thereby stimulating a political critique of the severity of these spaces.

Providing a cogent political critique on the connections between infrastructure and affect, Brian Larkin writes: "They [commodities, buildings, streets] form us as subjects not just on a technopolitical level but also through this mobilization of affect and the sense of desire, pride, and frustration, feelings which can be deeply political" (333). For Larkin, a politics of infrastructure depends on localized attachments to a built environment, whereby communal livelihood may be fostered. He further proposes that "we rearrange the hierarchy of functions so that the aesthetic dimension of infrastructure (rather than its technical one) is dominant" (336). In so doing, relations with the built environment become more discernible through modes of sensation: "Softness, hardness, the noise of a city, its brightness, the feeling of being hot or cold are all sensorial experiences regulated by infrastructures […]" (337). These tactile and ambient experiences contribute to an intimate attachment with a place and its culturally inscribed meaning. However, the global indiscernibility of La Défense, the formidable starkness of its modern buildings and transient non-places, prevent such a positive attachment from being nourished for Esther. Anxiety keeps caving in. Yet, at the same time, a peculiar form of optimism wraps around this affect as it pertains to spaces of decay, environments that expose the disastrous practices of neoliberal reordering.

Before mobilizing optimism, at this point it may be useful to puncture our progress here and clarify how critics often read Esther's self-mutilation, for it has indeed been the central question for scholarship on the film. From a more ideological analysis, Adam Lowenstein argues that Esther "perceives quite accurately that the price of 'having it all' is a sort of self-denial […]," whereby her rejection of social expectations disavows the "unseen pressures that often circumscribe a late capitalist Western woman's personal and professional experience" (473-474). Martine Beugnet echoes this assertion in her perception of Esther's growing refusal to regulate her body, especially as it relates to her boyfriend's desire for kinship. Beugnet argues that through her self-abuse, "Esther commits the ultimate transgression—she mutilates, disfigures, and thus renders dysfunctional a body that had been shaped to fit, represent, and efficiently contribute to the perpetuation of a specific socioeconomic system" (161). In other words, Esther foregoes the predetermined social codes of bodily integrity and risk aversion that necessitate her placement in both public and private spheres. Her self-mutilation ultimately engenders "a process of self-reappropriation" (161) that critiques "the mundane horror of 'normal life'" and invites the viewer to experience "the mix of fascination with revulsion" afforded by such a rearrangement (Beugnet 160). Additionally, De Bruyn, Tarr, Palmer, and Haige all insist on the spectator's bodily relation to the screen in their accounts and forward readings that Esther's mutilation impacts the film form by means of the split-screen, in which her cutting enacts the split into the screen. In her typical iconoclastic nature, Brinkema provides her own reading of the split as "a non-space of meaning, a non-sense of the image" caused by the "radical otherness" of female masochism. ("To Cut" 141). Such readings, I would argue, ultimately neglect the rigidity of the bar when, in fact, Esther's self-wounding is more sporadic, scattered, and less structurally organized; nor do these critics account for the ways in which the bar keeps suggestively

reappearing due to sharp edges of skyscrapers or doorframes that, like the split, are situated directly in the center of the frame. For all of these critics, whether or not they perform an ideology critique, spectatorial study, or purely formal analysis, Esther's anxious desire for self-harm stems from her psychic disposition and/or the pressures of everyday life, rather than the spatio-temporal relations of anxiety motivated by atmospheric energies of the built urban environment that I am forwarding here.

Furthermore, it is important to note, and in contrast to readings that assert workplace dissatisfaction, the narrative does not provide any indication that Esther is genuinely unhappy with her occupation or its socioeconomic investments. As a staunch perfectionist and assiduous employee, Esther seems to take pride in her work, even though she does often admit fatigue at the deadlines (see for example, 00:22:44 and 00:29:11). She also persistently exhibits boisterous delight when bragging to Sandrine about her superior's acclaim for her market analyses. Indeed, based on her devaluation of personal ties in favor of her own self-investment, Esther is a model of neoliberal rationality, but in contrast to how critics often read this contemporary shift in subjectivity, Esther does not demonstrate at all that such a mindset bothers her.[41] Where personal insecurity may lie is in her relationship with Vincent, given her initial rejection at living together, but this too takes a turn when he acquires a job in public relations for a bank. Vincent reveals his new employment after chastising her over her seeming bodily disconnect and its impact on their sexual relationship ("When you rip up your leg, you don't feel anything. When I touch you, you jump and scratch." [00:15:59 – 00:16:05]). Following this admission, they kiss passionately, and Esther purrs, "You'll wear a suit" (00:17:56). Throughout the remainder of the film, they

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[41] Similar narrative and thematic connections can be seen in *Demonlover* and *Secret Things*.

proceed with their plans for cohabitation and aspire toward normativity, yet Esther's intermittent self-abuse keeps getting in the way of the couple's reciprocal happiness.

Although deadlines and hermetic office environments provide the increasing affective enclosures of anxiety, Esther does achieve rewarding, optimistic sustainment from spaces wrecked by neoliberal restructuring and failed publicness. Following her failed business dinner, Esther enters the Hotel Palma, a site she will later visit once more, to consume her flesh and blood. Like the dingy setting of the storeroom basement, this hotel room, with shoddy floors and damaged wallpaper, allows Esther to fully access her carnal desires. In contrast to the pristineness of the office setting or posh restaurant, Esther thus seems most comfortable, most alive, in environments of filth and degeneration, suggesting a remapping of her embodiment, and the formal representations of her body, with the space around her. The alleyway at the beginning of the film where the dangerous scrap metal originates Esther's self-transformation likewise attests to how spaces of public neglect generate alarming intimacy for Esther. In contrast to, and in reaction against, the sterile built environment that perpetuates inhuman market expanses, Esther appears to initiate a more vital relationship with her body over the course of the film.

In her formal-materialist approach to affect, Lauren Berlant associates such a destructive relation as a mode of "cruel optimism," in which "something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (1). Unlike Brinkema's universalizing notion of affective form, Berlant argues that the formalization of affect provides specific artifacts of historical processes (16), and for her, "cruel optimism" expresses how the neoliberal present animates and maintains fraying fantasies such as "upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively, durable intimacy" (3). Berlant describes the affective form of optimism as follows: "Whatever the *experience* of optimism is in particular, then, the *affective structure* of an optimistic attachment

involves a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that *this* time, nearness to *this* thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way" (2, emphasis in original). Attachments point toward structures of relationality, which may be either positive or negative, yet in their cruelly optimistic registers, they are coevally both. As Berlant discerns, optimism becomes cruel when "a person or a world finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming." (2). Both Esther and the world of the film, its aesthetic and narrative structures, correspond to such an arrangement. Although her self-mutilation draws her closer to death, a move that abets Brinkema's conceptualization of anxiety, this is also represented as an act of self-love. Treating her body as a secret lover in the Hotel Palma, Esther tenderly gnaws at her flesh, tongues her wound, sucks the blood out, allows it to even drip and smear over her face. She crashes her car afterwards as if to cover up an affair, to excuse her new wounds, before returning home to her boyfriend. Although the persistent pleasures of self-mutilation impede her work, sociality, and "aspirational normativity" (Berlant 164), Esther keeps returning to her corporeal experimentations throughout the film because they seem to elicit new discoveries, new potentials, even though they are actually framed as acts of similar continuity. At the same time, her sustained attachment to her body is configured as a recursive attachment to dilapidated spaces, suggesting that both her body and the space around it are ongoing processes of creative destruction.

While cruel optimism may enervate the pressures of anxiety, to some degree, each affect nevertheless shares similar formal traits. Like anxiety's feedback loop of unremitting abuse in a field of reducing visual sameness and its straggling forward movement, cruel optimism is formalized by Berlant as a cul-de-sac movement around an impasse. "An impasse," she writes,

"is a holding station that doesn't hold securely but *opens out into anxiety*, that dogpaddling around a space whose contours remain obscure" (199, my emphasis). Where the spatial limitations of embarrassment and dismay rattle the finicky movements of anxiety into abstraction, the spatial enclosure of cruel optimism does not constrict; rather, it maintains formal integrity, while also being permeable. Such a possibility invites the ability to open outward into anxiety, according to Berlant, suggesting that, in fact, cruel optimism may be more desirable, or at least more tolerable, than its alternative beyond the cul-de-sac. We may assume that such a rearrangement outward would once again catalyze anxiety's cramping confinement and its temporal jeering at the assumption for release, but this is not the case in *Dans ma peau*. Unlike Susan and Daniel in *Open Water*, Esther does not die, nor is she erased from the film form in the concluding sequence; rather, the film unfolds into a state of *optimistic anxiety*.[42]

This is not to say that optimism and anxiety are always interlocking. Anxiety, as I have argued, originates in the very opening of the film through the linear temporal structures—the deadline, the implicit directions toward a politics of respectability and reproductive futurism, the desires to move up the bureaucratic ladder—which juxtapose the infinitude of global capitalism against Esther's suggested finitude, a suggestion already elicited by the decrepit urban spaces of the split-screen before her actual wound, spaces that further correlate to social death and disposability. The spatial organization of the title sequence also installs the vertical bar of anxiety—the split-screen, the skyscraper, the bureaucratic ladder— putting into place the transgressive potential for aesthetic abstraction, a visual correspondent to death and negation. The affective-aesthetic arrangements for optimism, however, are necessitated by a relational attachment. Although these cruelly optimistic attachments for Esther's body and urban space are

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[42] We can now drop the adjective "cruel" in this formulation, since anxiety is inherently cruel.

evoked in the title sequence, they are not fully legible until the narrative progresses its cyclical structure. In this regard, both affects begin at different times, yet they often chafe up against each other throughout the film.

Both optimism and anxiety may loop around an aesthetic form and convey spatial stuckness in their cruel iterations, but they each take on different temporal properties in doing so. Anxiety for Brinkema constitutes the difficult movements of "choking, strangling […] treading water," which eventually give way to death (209), but cruel optimism for Berlant entails more lively sustainment: "In the impasse induced by crisis, being treads water; mainly, it does not drown" (10). Unlike how anxiety's future-oriented stuckness is constituted by intermittency, the impasse of cruel optimism creates a present-oriented stuckness, whereby "in the unbound temporality of the stretch of time, it marks a delay that demands an activity" (199). In this event, anxiety's futurist temporality brings the film's aesthetics closer to death, but cruel optimism's presentist duration produces a possible recalibration, or at least, it calls into formal consciousness such a possibility, thereby creating a more productive potential than the radical negation that anxiety affords. When conjoined together, optimism and anxiety ultimately stage an irregular motor discharge that rims the inner- and outer-edges of death without slipping into the quagmire or freezing on a suspension; in fact, it keeps spiraling. In optimistic anxiety, the nearness of death is what makes life bearable.

The aesthetic-affective collision of optimistic anxiety fully takes form in the final split-screen montage at the Hotel Palma before the film's conclusion. Prior to this sequence, anxiety begins to wrack the film form as Esther enters a shopping center to purchase objects for her self-mutilation and personal sustainment. The shopping center's sliding doors create another vertical bar in the very center of the frame (01:10:16), which then open up into an abstracting experience.

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The film cuts wantonly on blurred close-ups of ceiling spotlights and scattered litter on the ground; artificial and aggressive neon lighting; fuzzy silhouettes of shoppers in accelerated motion, which the camera erratically pans left and right on. Esther has trouble seeing; she touches a wall to brace herself from falling. The sudden shifts in speed and attention finally give way to an extreme close-up of Esther's Visa card in her hand, then quick-cuts across a series of market transactions where Esther purchases a camera, knives, and Diet Coke before leaving. The overstimulation of this non-place is then reframed into the split-screen at the Hotel Palma by a nearly invisible cut, in which the shopping center's door panels once again put in place the vertical line before the split-screen emerges (1:11:43- 1:11:45). It appears as if anxiety torments the film form in this modernized non-place, and only reinstalls order with the bar to further ridicule any structure whatsoever.

Rather than portray objective establishing shots like the first split-screen, this montage activates splintered subjective and objective perspectives of Esther's disembodied mutilation. In both frames, the camera roams and moves through more sporadic means, instead of abiding by even-handed cuts of the title-card sequence. In another contrast to the still images of the first split-screen—sheen surfaces of skyscrapers, metal office utensils, dwindling spaces of destruction—this sequence portrays more textured and tactile objects such as fabric, hardwood floors, bloody weapons, all provoking more sensuous attachments for Esther. When she picks up her camera, the left frame portrays an objective point of view, while the right showcases a subjective perspective; neither proportionally add up (1:12:48 – 1:12:59). Anxiety next swallows the frame in a cut to black, an abstraction, leaving Esther to gasp and choke alone in the darkness as the camera lens shutters (1:12:59 – 1:13:06). The split-screen reemerges and diegetic sounds of an elevator, a child crying, footsteps, laugher, and discussions in the hallway, all flood the

mobile frames in a louder register than Esther's breathing, providing a sonic interjection of the public within the private that blurs such distinctions. Once again, anxiety cuts into a field of darkness; this time, Esther pleasurably moans (1:14:04 – 1:14:09), before the split-screen remerges with a camera on the left frame and her blood-soaked feet on the right. Throughout the rest of this sequence, Esther will continue to document her acts of abuse. This action conveys a correlation with how Berlant describes the mobility of cruel optimism in the impasse, in which "one moves around with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic, such that the activity of living demands both a wandering absorptive awareness and a hypervigilance that collects material that might help to clarify things" (4). Here Esther is shoring up proof of her existence and its unraveling, carving and documenting her new sense of vitality, recording the present to later make sense of it, to even perhaps take pride in it. After the split-screen dissipates (1:14:46), the film opens onto a series of Esther breaking the fourth wall—smiling, groaning, and crying while looking directly at the apparatus. It may seem as if she is appealing for spectatorial empathy, but these varied emotions make such a direct reading untenable. In considering the affective rearrangements of this entire sequence, however, optimistic anxiety can be seen in constant motion here, reverberating around a life-sustaining practice of flirting with death, a practice that both the cyclical narrative and aesthetic restructurings of the film represent.

The vertical bar of anxiety is further transgressed in the film's concluding shots, and optimism, once again, prevents the total abstraction of death. After Esther acquires information from a pharmacist on how to tan and preserve a piece of her flesh, a trophy of her self-mutilation, she then returns to the Hotel Palma and makes a few phone calls. First, she calls Vincent and leaves a message saying that she won't be coming home this evening. Her voice is calm, assured, and in contrast to how she has often spoken to him throughout the film. Next, she phones her

office to apologize for not coming into work and assure her superior, "I'll be in at 9 sharp tomorrow," (01:21:41- 01:21:45). The temporality of labor is thus reset after the sequence of self-mutilation interpolates her productivity. Given that such productivity is constituted by the verticality of upright sociality, a verticality put in place by the film's opening sequence through its representations of skyscrapers and their evocation of the bureaucratic ladder, the film ends by staging and breaking this structure. Esther wakes up, caresses the tanned piece of flesh and slips it into her bra, before putting on her blazer and leaving for work (01:22:37- 01:25:13). The film then cuts to an extreme close-up of Esther's face, devoid of expression and slightly out of focus in a vertical plane. Next, the camera simultaneously tracks back and rotates counter-clockwise, sharpening its focus as it repositions Esther in a horizontal plane resting on the hotel bed. This shot is repeated another two times, creating a rhythm of close blurry verticality, withdrawing and counter-clockwise movement, and distant focused horizontality. In the stationary long shot before the credits, Esther is portrayed in odalisque pose, lying horizontally on the bed yet with her left leg raised upward and aligning with the vertical stripes of the tattered wallpaper behind her. This visual cross-cutting of verticality and horizontality and the shifts in temporality—forward to work, cut back to leisure, and again, and again, and again—portray the encircling structure of optimistic anxiety (01:25:14- 01:27:28), whereby Esther's nearness to death becomes connected to her everyday work routine. In this regard, optimistic anxiety swivels around a critique of the laborious demands of neoliberalism, portraying the peculiar optimism for upward mobility within anxiety's deflection of such an achievement.

That Esther secures a sense of contentment within optimistic anxiety by a turn toward horizontality is significant, for only in sequences of isolated self-mutilation does she achieve this pleasurable state. Whereas her upright vertical body corresponds to the pressures of corporatism

and sociality, her horizontal body is also often further subject to phallocentric logic that either reduces her inclinations as illogical and unsustainable or eliminates her own autonomy. In the former, for example, Esther is critiqued while lying down on the doctor's table ("That's not normal" [00:10:42]), surveilled by Sandrine to prevent any further self-harm (00:30:42-00:30:52), massaged by Vincent in bed to return feeling into her hand (00:36- 37:55), and further disallowed by him from tending to her own wound ("Leave it to me, I said" [00:40:35-00:40:37]). In examples of absent autonomy, Esther's horizontal body is imperiled by insomnia that causes her to work during the night (00:12:47- 00:13:08), and in another moment, she is jeopardized by men at the office pool, whom hoist her up, flip her body to be parallel with the floor, and attempt to throw her into the water (00:32:35- 00:33:10). These horizontal bodily arrangements contrast the eroticized releases afforded to Esther's isolated, and often horizontal, figure in sequences of self-mutilation, suggesting that the looping affective structure of optimistic anxiety ultimately foregrounds more productive potentials, which are only accessible at the edge of willful abjection via the denial of respectable sociability and its gendered demands.

Since the installation of a literal bar to be recurrently crossed in film form is so rare, I propose that tracking these renegotiations of the vertical and horizontal female body as they pertain to the bureaucratic ladder and its gendered roles further redound upon the spatio-temporal relations of optimistic anxiety in neoliberalism. Given their often-cyclical narratives that underline social and psychosexual fantasies of the neoliberal order, in terms of its rigorous individualism and lack of human reciprocity, New Extremism films are especially apt for such a task. Moreover, in this specific subset of the violent corporate woman's film, the incongruities of neoliberalism are made starkly and valuably transparent. Though I am forwarding *Dans ma peu* as an exemplar of optimistic anxiety in this canon, I want to nevertheless argue that these formal

attributes can be traced as follows in other films.[43] First, the spatial immersion of neoliberal

capitalism and the violences generated by modernized non-places serve to saturate film form

with the commercial flows of international capital in ways that riddle these films with anxiety, an

affect that is likewise mobilized by temporal rhythms of intermittent deadlines, which are

parallel to potential deaths that never actually occur. Second, the ways in which characters keep

optimistically returning to sites of capitalist expanse and exploitation, despite the unremitting

abuses such spaces engender against them, forward futile attempts to better their situations. That

these films often alternate between high-rise, non-places and leveled-out spaces of urban neglect

further stage a capitalist division and suggest, by contrast, that downtrodden environments may

be more viable than their hermetic alternatives. By considering these elements altogether, we can

track how female employees often climb up and fall down the bureaucratic ladder, faltering and

stumbling amidst the demands of capitalist productivity and where their potential spaces for

relief are situated. Given that such workplace demands often result in undesired physical abuse

or sexual enslavement—a trend evident in *Demonlover*, *Martyrs*, *Secret Things*, and *Bastards*—

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[43] Exploring these conditions in other films is beyond the scope of this chapter, but I will quickly provide a reading of Olivier Assayas's *Demonlover* here to further support my claim. Like *Dans ma peu*, the narrative of *Demonlover* is inflamed with acts of corporate subterfuge, as executives of the Volf Corporation attempt to procure rights from TokyoAnime to distribute violent anime pornography of prepubescent girls to American consumers. Due to a botched robbery attempt to steal data from a competitor, the protagonist Diane de Monx (Connie Nielsen) loses her promotion and is circulated back to a lower position. Throughout the film, Diane and her female colleagues keep shifting up and down the bureaucratic ladder and optimistically returning to interchangeable non-places that prove harmful to them. By the end of the film, Diane achieves a horizontal bodily release by submitting herself as a participant in the Hellfire Club's torture chamber, an off-the-grid website in which users submit their fantasies to be performed. The derelict torture chamber is presented in sharp contrast to the pristine corporate settings and non-places elsewhere in the film. Like Esther in *Dans ma peu*, the potential nearness of death for Diane—a potential put in place by the erasure of her identity and her lack of protection in this space—proves to be strangely sustainable for her, insofar as it seems to offer a space of reprieve from the constant mobility of her daily workflow and its incessant detriments to her livelihood.

the reorganizations of the female body through vertical upright sociality and horizontal dejection present a formal correlation to the bar that is put in place to be transgressed and encircled by optimism. In its barest articulation, the shifts between verticality and horizontality for the female body denote changes from sociality to abjection, authority to subjugation, power to victimization, and vice versa, and careful attention to such reorganizations are central to developing a political project for affective formalism here.

Recall that for Brinkema the transgression of the bar ruptures the surface of the image and brings formal depth into the visual space of the film, a depth that drowns the film form into abstraction, in which "nothing but the place will have taken place" for death (241). Unlike *Open Water*, these New Extremism films rid themselves of the surface while circling the depth, highlighting its contours without falling in. By doing so, the films unmask the depths of neoliberal capitalism—those spatial and temporal constraints, mechanisms of urban devastation, forms of (ir)rationality, and perpetuations of inequality, all of which the surface seeks to omit. Writing on the temporality of anxiety, Brinekma argues, "although anxiety involves the futurity of the future, it is a future humiliated by its insufficiency, exposed in the horror that what its form brings forth is not enough" (241). Though anxiety expresses a *not-enoughness* for any distribution of power, when paired with optimism—the assumption that things are going well— this affective form ultimately conveys an experience of *just enough*, an alter-accomplishment, to quote Massumi, predicated on ongoing sustainment provided by the nearness to death and, by extension, the nearness to neoliberal destruction.

As I proposed in the previous chapter, there is a queer politics to affective formalism in New Extremism, and in this case, optimistic anxiety also provides a mutually interlocking feminist political project. In both cases, capitalist accelerationism and systems of oppression—

classism, racism, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia—correlate with the exploitations and degradations of natural and built urban environments, even though the films may not stage neoliberalism's more precarious subjects to condemn such scenarios. Moreover, the violent impediments of individualism—self-investment, self-regulation, and self-governance—as constituted by neoliberalism stimulate questions in these films on the possibilities for intimacy, community, belonging, and relationality in each affective form. In this specific sub-set of New Extremism, the urban solidarity that women express for spaces of decay attests to the ways in which rationalized and privatized individualism shirks the responsibilities of communal vitality, generating a critique by representational contrast. Although the queer tableau of grief and guilt hinges in-between a space of negation and becoming, eliciting a fundamental uncertainty for either disruption or inclusion within a sudden eruption of togetherness, the feminist loop of optimistic anxiety uses the force of negation to mobilize pleasurable isolation, and it keeps going forward despite immense stresses. In fact, within these pressures and within instances of urban solidarity, these films nevertheless manage the potential for contentment, whereby the closeness to finitude, to social death, to disposability, bring into focus the directions for negation without stopping on it or acquiescing to it. By doing so, the feminist loop of optimistic anxiety exposes the instability of neoliberalism, swirling around its unrepentant spatio-temporal relations to showcase and undermine how such strictures catalyze violence. Both the queer tableau of grievous guilt and the feminist loop of optimistic anxiety ultimately present the debilitating socio-political conditions of neoliberalism, and through disorganizing deviations from these rigorous demands, they each nevertheless express attempts to rewrite the system from within as well as the difficulties in doing so.

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