

January 2013

## Spectatorial Shock and Carnal Consumption: (Re)envisaging Historical Trauma in New French Extremity

Christopher Butler  
*University of South Florida*, [butlercj78@gmail.com](mailto:butlercj78@gmail.com)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/etd>



Part of the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

---

### Scholar Commons Citation

Butler, Christopher, "Spectatorial Shock and Carnal Consumption: (Re)envisaging Historical Trauma in New French Extremity" (2013). *USF Tampa Graduate Theses and Dissertations*.  
<https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/etd/4648>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the USF Graduate Theses and Dissertations at Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. It has been accepted for inclusion in USF Tampa Graduate Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@usf.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@usf.edu).

Spectatorial Shock and Carnal Consumption: (Re)envisaging Historical Trauma in New  
French Extremity

by

Christopher Jason Butler

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Liberal Arts in Film Studies  
Department of Humanities and Cultural Studies  
College of Arts and Sciences  
University of South Florida

Major Professor: Amy Rust, Ph. D.  
Scott Ferguson, Ph. D.  
Silvio Gaggi, Ph. D.

Date of Approval:  
July 2, 2013

Keywords: Film, Violence, France, Transgression, Memory

Copyright © 2013, Christopher Jason Butler

## Table of Contents

List of Figures	ii
Abstract	iii
Chapter One: Introduction	1
Recognizing Influence in Transgressive Cinema	5
The Return of History Through Violence	7
Shock and Violence: Thinking Critically About History	9
Chapter Two: Racism and Revolution: The Resonance of Vichy and May '68 in Contemporary France	18
Shocking Narrative: Accessing History in the Diegesis of Frontiere(s)	23
Shocking Style: Film Form Used to Unite Past and Present	33
Successful Revolt: Reintegrating History with the Present to Understand the Past	39
Chapter 3: Flayed Flesh: Torture and Tension in Postcolonial French Politics	48
Algerian War for Independence: France's Violent Colonial History	54
Material Suffering of Anna and Joan: Spectatorial Shock of Victim Trauma	58
Reconciling with the Victimizer: Identifying with Historical Torturers	61
Witnessing: Constructing the Allegorical Relationship with History	65
Chapter 4: Cannibalism and Commodity: Capitalism's Influence in Post-War France	69
Deregulation and Distance: Product-less Consumptions Bad Habits	70
Separation in Late Stage Capitalism: Revealing Division in In My Skin	74
An Answer to Isolation: Reintegrating the Past with Abject Self-Consumption	81
Amelioration of History: Spectatorial Continuation of the In My Skin Critique	87
Epilogue: Brutality and Memory: Reincorporating the Historical Taboo	89
Bibliography	93

## List of Figures

Figure 1: Karl von Geisler	34
Figure 2: The von Geisler Toast	41
Figure 3: Sally's Point of view	41
Figure 4: Anna Transcended	52
Figure 5: Unknown Algerian Man 1960's	52
Figure 6: Fou Tchou-Li 1905	52
Figure 7: Anna's Confinement	58
Figure 8: Joan at the start of her trial	58
Figure 9: Anna being prepped for surgery	64
Figure 10: Anna Flayed	64
Figure 11: Anna in sacrificial ecstasy/transcending	65
Figure 12: Title card of In My Skin	74
Figure 13: Esther hallucinating at dinner	76
Figure 14: Esther's caress	78
Figure 15: Skin Removal	78
Figure 16: Trying to connect	78
Figure 17: End of Esther's journey	87

## **Abstract**

New French Extremity films are violent, transgressive, and break many social taboos in their narratives. However, this genre's directors are intelligent and construct these films with clues to France's past and how it still has implications in the present. This thesis was written to point out how New French Extremity films offer spectators the potential to reincorporate traumatic moments in French history by juxtaposing them against present day social, political, and economic ideologies. The purpose for this course of study was to investigate historical encounters that are present in New French Extremity filmmaking, something that has yet to be addressed by other scholars in any great detail. The general approach taken was to use Walter Benjamin's theory of allegory to secure connections between the past and present and illustrate how they could be interpreted by the film's spectators. The outcome of this research indicates how a spectator can potentially change his or her relationship with history and work towards reassessing his or her relationship with the present under certain social, political, or economic structures.

## **Introduction**

“Bava as much as Bataille, Salo 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.”

- James Quandt, Feb. 2004, ArtForum

This quote from critic James Quandt offers a summation of popular critics' responses to the perceived excesses employed by New French Extremity filmmaking. However, Quandt's invocation of Bataille, Pasolini, and Sade reads as a simple accusation that films in this genre are just sadistic and visceral. He fails to recognize these artists' highly reflective, socially significant approaches to violent limit experiences. Quandt and other critics say there is a lack of attention to the rich tradition of French cinema in New French Extremity. What critics and scholars generally agree upon is that this transgressive genre first emerged in the late nineties. Much of the work that falls under this moniker shares an affinity with ideas or notions that are considered dark and taboo; incest, cannibalism, and rape are just some of these violations. The New French Extremity lineage of influences on its directors can be traced back to the writings of the Marquis de Sade, as Quandt points out, up through paintings by Gustave Courbet, the philosophy of Georges Bataille, and the films of Jean-Luc Godard to name a few. Yet, the established, and more often than not celebrated, artists and thinkers who have left

their indelible mark on the films in this genre do not temper many of the critics' ire towards the new directors' works.

Challenging this popular response, my thesis explores how Xavier Gens' 2007 film, *Frontière(s)*, Pascal Laugier's 2008 work, *Martyrs*, and Marina de Van's 2002 effort, *Dans ma Peau (In My Skin)* engender historical encounters through spectatorial shock to (re)envisage French history. There are political and stylistic encounters in these films that bring to light unfinished moments in the annals of French culture. Political links between current president Nicolas Sarkozy and the Vichy regime of World War II, Americanization, torture during the Algerian war, and the lingering tensions of May '68 figure prominently in the narratives of these three films. The past events are traumatic, especially with regards to war and violence. There are also stylistic connections, present in the films' forms, to the efforts of French New Wave director Jean-Luc Godard and American horror director Tobe Hooper. These films not only look like Godard's and Hooper's, with long tracking shots, handheld camerawork, or discontinuous cuts, but they *feel* similar, too. The films' narratives are repeatedly interrupted by images of extreme violence and shocking formal disruptions. As a result, viewers are pushed and pulled between the film worlds and the external historical realities they recall. Shock is not just corporeal with regards to these events, either. It arises from the fact that these events can be returned to and (re)engaged repeatedly through this body of cinema. Such constant fluctuation allows the traumatic memories of historical pasts to remain fresh for spectators for the duration of these films. In other words, cinema produces an original way of remembering, even reconfiguring, history. Rather than just engaging in dead

repetitions of past traumas, spectatorial shock opens the continuum of history to potential rearrangement, not unlike Walter Benjamin's allegorical theories of history suggests.

Contemporary scholarly and popular work fails to recognize the links between the shocks of spectatorial experience and historical trauma, however. Instead, it remains split by polemic approaches that focus on New French Extremity's sensational narratives and graphic content. Most popular critics either decry these films as unnecessarily aggressive and forgetting the leftist tradition of French cinema, like James Quandt and Will Higbee, or they do not go far enough in exploring shock's engagement with the past, such as René Prédal and Jean-Pierre Dufreigne. Some academic research, especially by Tim Palmer and Martine Beugnet, has been devoted to the subject of shock but does not explore its relationship to cinematic form with regards to historical registers. For instance, Palmer's interest lies in gauging the impact of New French Extremity's frank and graphic handling of the human body in its narratives. He writes the films' "basic agenda is an on-screen interrogation of physicality in brutally intimate terms" (57). While I agree that this is certainly taking place, there are stylistic and historical registers he does not mention that equally contribute to the genre's shocks. In fact, both Palmer and Beugnet are content to limit the scope of their studies to the action on screen. The films' explorations of the human body through violence and the viewer's visceral reaction to this type of cinema are their main foci. The majority of their work revolves around the spectatorial experience, but they do not indicate what may come out of the engagements with these films that they describe. Palmer does this in order to set New French Extremity apart as its own genre. He writes, "To characterize contemporary French cinema . . . we will study it on its own terms, without recourse to reviving preexisting templates for their own sake



–updating the résumés of famous auteurs, say, or plugging new films into breakdowns of historical genres or putative movements” (3). This statement summarizes why when either scholar does mention film form it’s done only to highlight what is happening in the diegesis, rather than something to be linked to the past.

For this reason, I unite Palmer’s and Beugnet’s research on the bodily sensation of contemporary French horror with that of historian Kristin Ross. She deepens post – World War II French history and culture by illustrating how May ’68 and an industrialized, post-colonial national identity resonate in contemporary perspectives of the past and the problems, such as continued strained relations with ethnic groups, it creates. Still, because Ross’s writing takes an exclusively historical approach to French society and culture after WWII, it does not explore contemporary cinema’s relationship to spectators or collective French traumas as I do.

My contention is that the three films by Gens, Laugier, and de Van ground historical encounters with international, national, and individual traumas by way of their spectatorial shocks. In my thesis, I show how these films recall the great filmmakers that critics such as Quandt cherish and not only borrow from, but also continue in the very same vein of political critique. Rather than engage in the debate over the validity of this type of film, which Palmer and Beugnet have done to great effect, I am focused on how this cinema uses sensation to connect to history. Specifically, I illustrate how these films engage historical moments such as World War II, Algerian torture, May ’68, and French Americanization through shock and construct relationships to the past that have the possibility to transformatively (re)visualize French history. I see this realignment as a

disintegration of “official” collective memory through shocks to the subjective spectator that reintegrate individual experiences of the past into a “new” collective history.

### **Recognizing Influence in Transgressive Cinema**

As I have suggested, New French Extremity divides both scholars and popular critics with its visceral depictions of corporeal indiscretion and graphic sexuality. Popular critics are satisfied with debating one another over the merits of New French Extremity and its blood-spattered content while only making loose connections to history. They fall either into supportive or opposed camps. Critics who find significance in the movement, or who at least view it with mild constructive criticism, argue for the artistic value of pioneering a new genre of film. For example, film critic Phillippe Azoury has suggested the genre is made for and by “cinophile purists. . . . Cinema and contemporary modern art are bound together” (6). Still, those like Azoury devote much of their writing to New French Extremity’s vivid depictions of sex and violence, while ignoring the historical implications of its narratives and styles. René Prédal, for instance, sees these films as moving explicit sex out of the sphere of the taboo and not much more. He is content with focusing on the intolerance for these works by critics and the cry for censure from some, calling it a “systematic hatred for culture, intelligence, and all freedom of artistic expression” (34). On the other side, opponents like Philippe Muray argue that the genre is hypocritical and more akin to pastiche. He writes, “There is nothing to [New French Extremity] save from aping everything that became known as ‘rebellious’ or ‘disturbing’ in the previous decades” (Beugnet 35). Higbee agrees, condemning the genre’s shocks for lacking any leftist political engagement, a sentiment with which I disagree.

Rather than praise or condemn the shocks of New French Extremity as ends in themselves, my argument views shock as the means by which spectators critically engage

with the past. For this reason, I draw upon the work of scholars Palmer and Beugnet, who deviate from popular critics in their discussions of the genre's narrative content and the sensations it produces. For instance, Palmer, in his recent work *Brutal Intimacy: Analyzing Contemporary French Cinema*, writes that these films "overhaul the role of the film viewer, rejecting the traditionally passive, entertained onlooker to demand instead a viscerally engaged experiential participant" (60). Due to the graphic nature of this type of cinema, a spectator is more inclined to experience a pained physical reaction to some element of the film rather than remaining in an unreceptive state. As an example of New French Extremity demanding an active spectator, Gaspar Noe included a specific tonal track in his 2002 film *Irreversible* that was meant to induce nausea. For Palmer, however, this engagement is largely content-based. The narrative actions of New French Extremity films are important to Palmer because they are explicit examples of bodily sensation at work. Bodies are mutilated, tortured, raped, and/or devoured, incidents which are all difficult to watch and potentially turn the stomach of a viewer. Yet, all of these occurrences emerge from within the film world, a place that is the main focus for Palmer. He betrays his attention to content when he writes, "The tactics for such studied disorientation are often bravura, especially in regards to narrative design" (Palmer 71). I, too, agree that there is an interaction between the spectators and narratives, but I also see the engagements happening simultaneously in the films' forms and historical registers.

Beugnet's research into the physical sensations of New French Extremity in *Cinema and Sensation: French Film and the Art of Transgression* also highlights how sensation grounds significance, though she, like Palmer, does not pursue this significance itself. She writes, "Horror operates as a gateway; it grows in the interstices, creating

connections between the plane of sensation and that of interpretation” (40). She insists, in other words, that films of this nature are felt physically in the body before an understanding of them can begin. As with Palmer, Beugnet wants film interpretation to begin with corporeal transgression. I, too, view sensation as the foundation for interpretation but apply Beugnet’s argument to the spectator’s engagement with the often turbulent history of France. While she and Palmer are largely concerned with bodily shock and narrative content to save the films from degradation, I look past physicality alone and delve into New French Extremity’s historical consequences.

### **The Return of History Through Violence**

To get at these consequences, I turn to the work of Ross, whose *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* explores the traumas of post – WWII France and the national malaise fostered by Americanization, Algerian occupation, the conservative, authoritarianism of Charles de Gaulle’s government, and the May ’68 uprising that responded to them. Ross’s title alludes to the reconstruction of France after the war and its participation in an ever-increasing globalization. Her follow-up work, *May ’68 and its Afterlives*, goes on to suggest how the traumas of Algeria and May ’68, which remain unfinished in the history of France, are echoed in contemporary social politics and attitudes, evidenced by how the revolution is remembered not for ideas it fostered, which Ross calls “the union of intellectual contestation and the workers’ struggle”, but that no one died (11). Ross’s scholarship is important for my own appeals to a French history that has been collectively altered or repressed, particularly in remembrance ceremonies for May ’68, torture during the Algerian war, and the internal division of the French government during WWII. Ross writes, “A dominant

contemporary French perspective holds its colonial past to be an ‘exterior’ experience, added on but not essential to French historical identity” (*Fast Cars* 196). This quote begins to illustrate the duality of history present in French culture. Though certainly not forgotten, traumatic moments are pushed away and deemed not worthy, they are viewed as too taboo to be included in the character of France as a participant in a global community. These are precisely the moments, I argue, that reemerge in New French Extremity’s political and stylistic encounters and those which spectatorial shock has the possibility to reintegrate in a collective way.

For this reason, my pairing of Ross’s research with the work of Beugnet and Palmer is meant to illustrate the undercurrents of French history that are present in the violent sensations of contemporary French films such as *Frontiere(s)*, *Martyrs*, and *Dans ma Peau*. Gens, Laugier, and de Van use film form and content to critique the lingering vestiges of post-colonial France and its violent racism and how they fit into the French national identity. Spectatorial shock allows for the possibility of disintegrating then reincorporating the dark moments of France’s history into its character.

My research highlights how the collective cultural memory, as opposed to the individual, subjective experiences, of these events has withered with the passage of time. My idea is not just the reprising of the past for present-tense encounters, but permitting the subjective experience to first disintegrate collective *memory* and then reintegrate it as collective *history*. In order to discuss this I turn to Andreas Huyssen’s work in *Presents Past*. In this work, he discusses the parallel relationship between memory and history, and how they reflect one another. Although they have a shared relationship, history and memory are not synonymous with one another. Memory is the subjective view of history,

whereas history is the objective unification of memory. Due to their unique existence, Huyssen believes that at any moment one of them can be in a state of growth while the other is stuck in a moment of decline. Huyssen, borrowing from Nietzsche states, “Today we suffer from a hypertrophy of memory, not history” (3). This is evidenced by the rise of a certain kind of memory industry that arose after World War II. In France, for example, there is a preference for remembering the Holocaust and loss of Franco-Jews under the Nazi Occupation. Yet the national trauma of the Occupation itself is overlooked in favor of attaching it to a globalized tragedy. Vichy collaboration is pushed aside in favor of a globalized remembrance of Holocaust victims. This is the type of collective memory that has replaced collective history. Using Huyssen’s terminology, I can describe French History as dictated by subjective memory rather than the objective collection of those memories.

### **Shock and Violence: Thinking Critically About History**

New French Extremity employs visceral images and disruptive styles that shock the spectator and offer possibilities for (re)envisaging French history as a collective history. As I have suggested, the corporeal sensations that Palmer and Beugnet focus on in their works initiate encounters with history, though neither scholar pursues their consequences. Ross’s research points to the historical traumas that Palmer and Beugnet ignore, but her work explores French cultural history, not contemporary film practices. For this reason, my methodology extends beyond these thinkers to embrace theories that put spectatorial shock and historical trauma in dialogue.

One way that I see for French historical traumas to be reincorporated into the national identity and collective cultural history is through the trauma theories discussed

by Jeffrey Alexander. Alexander's ideas take the individual and collective memories as the means by which to heal the subjective and social psyche. In order for France to rethink its history the individual will have to be exposed to the past traumas. Alexander's studies indicate that the way "to restore collective psychological health [is] by lifting societal repression and restoring memory" (7). His ideas are reliant on the ability to let go of emotion/distress at the individual/subjective level in order to heal the collective/social psyche. Assimilation of the individual's memory into the collective aids in the process of his or her recovery, a conception that mirrors Huyssen's notion of objective reintegration. I view New French Extremity films' doing this through the shock they provide for the spectator. Shock disintegrates repression by exposing the viewer to historical trauma. In turn this exposure allows the possibility for healing and restoring memory and eventual reintegration into the social psyche. Alexander warns of the dangers of any exclusivity given to trauma alone when he states, "But to collapse memory into trauma, I think, would unduly confine our understanding of memory, marking it too exclusively in terms of pain, suffering, and loss. It would deny human agency and lock us into compulsive repetition" (8). People aren't defined by their traumatic events. They are a small part of what makes them up as a whole. Yet, the subjective experiences of individuals together do characterize the collective social memory in its entirety.

Benjamin's theories of shock imagine a similar relationship between individual and collective experience. By uniting Benjamin with Alexander, I see the spectator's repeated exposure to traumatic moments in French history through film as a means to help (re)envisage that history through film's shocks. For Benjamin, modern life and cinematic shocks are formal occurrences. Shock arises from sudden changes, or extreme

moments, in a given situation. However, according to Benjamin, shock is both a response to hyperstimulation and its cure. In “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility” he writes, “The film is the art form that is in keeping with the increased threat to his life which modern man has to face. Man's need to expose himself to shock effects is his adjustment to the dangers threatening him” (Benjamin 250). Repeated exposure to the shock of film conditions the spectator to unite that shock with memory and experience as a way to counteract hyperstimulation. He uses an example of architecture as a means to illustrate what he calls the tactile and optical reception. Optical reception is thoughtful and deliberate, while tactile is instinctual and habit forming. The habitual nature of tactile response is what allows the conditioning to take place. It also affects optical reception due to the habits it forms. Benjamin writes, “For the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at historical turning points cannot be performed solely by optical means-that is, by way of contemplation. They are mastered gradually-taking their cue from tactile reception through habit” (258). Benjamin’s belief is that just as architecture is tactile so too is cinema. He goes on to argue “Reception in distraction-the sort of reception which is increasingly noticeable in all areas of art and is a symptom of profound changes in apperception-finds in film its true training ground. Film, by virtue of its shock effects, is predisposed to this form of reception” (Benjamin 259). New French Extremity films provide plenty of shocks for the viewer that can be seen as distraction, but their tactile nature allows habits to be formed. Given that New French Extremity films are visceral –from their graphic content to stylistic shocks, such as rapid, disorienting cuts –I see its spectators undergoing a training process similar to what Benjamin describes. This process fragments the viewer’s subjective memory of the past



then, with these pieces, forges a new image of history. This is how I see reintegration taking places, by fitting together these fragments into a new collective vision of the past.

I, like Benjamin, see continuous engagement with violent forms as a means to train the viewer to incorporate spectatorial shock and experience into new historical encounters. After all, according to Benjamin, shock is also what allows for the breaking open of time. The result is what he calls allegory. These fragments point outward, beyond the work, and permit new organizations rather than as symbols that are directed inward as self-reinforcing wholes. His theory of allegory offers a way to further look at encounters between past and present as events that become untethered from their moments in time and potentially create a new understanding of the past. Benjamin states in *The Arcades Project*, “It’s not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation” (462). If a constellation is a grouping of stars that form a specific shape, then bringing past and present together for a brief moment allows for an opportunity of new patterns emerging.

With this in mind, I demonstrate how Gens’, Laugier’s, and de Van’s films offer possibilities for French history to be (re)visited by the spectator through their resuscitation of France’s Americanization and consumerism, violent, post-colonial racism, and May ’68’s uprising. Understanding the relationship between past and present as a constellation to be realigned is important to my line of inquiry. My research draws together multiple moments from the past, but I am not simply trying to tell a story that would flatten history. Rather, I want to create a dynamic approach that actively engages the past via present films and their spectators.

To better illustrate how Benjamin's theory can be applied to New French Extremity filmmaking, I turn to Peter Bürger, who explores how this idea works in aesthetics. Although the contemporary genre is not avant-garde in the way that Bürger describes, something similar is definitely taking place. In discussing avant-garde style in his book *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Bürger illustrates how Benjamin's "constellation" is created by the artist. He writes, "The allegorist pulls one element out of the totality of the life context, isolating it, depriving it of its function. Allegory is therefore essentially fragment and thus the opposite of the organic symbol" (69). His writings refer to the avant-garde artist as the allegorist, while I see this notion applying to contemporary filmmakers, as well. The directors I have chosen collect historical fragments, relinquishing them from their period of history and defying any singular reading of their juxtaposition with the present. This union is made possible through the shocks in film form that jolt the viewer in and out of the diegesis and its time, as well as out of historical time. Bürger points to cubist collage work and "the insertion of material that has been left unchanged by the artist" (77). He further argues that the artists "refusal to provide meaning [for the insertion] is experienced as shock by the recipient" (80). I extend his argument with my belief that New French Extremity filmmakers' inclusions of unfinished historical moments are exposed by shock. The application of allegorical theories of history to aesthetics is important for my contention that the contemporary films' forms are just as important as their content.

In his book *Shocking Representation*, Adam Lowenstein defines the allegorical moment as "a shocking collision of film, spectator and history where registers of bodily space and historical time are disrupted, confronted and intertwined" (2). Here he is

establishing what takes place when spectators experience the shock of film and historical registers and how they come together to form a new way of viewing the past. He primarily focuses on the atrocities of the Holocaust and the Vietnam War and how they are represented in horror films and uses a global approach in his film choices, such as *Deathdream*, 1972 and *Blood of the Beasts*, 1949. I am diverging from his work in my pursuit of parallel encounters happening in contemporary French cinema with regards to their own traumas of Vichy, post-WWII Americanization, the Algerian war, and May '68.

Historical and cinematic shock theories are important to my work because they highlight how spectators interact with the past. My unification of the theories by Benjamin, Bürger, and Lowenstein illustrates how the historical registers in Gens' *Frontiere(s)*, Laugier's *Martyrs*, and de Van's *In My Skin* are engaged by the films' viewers through shock. They are responsible for my understanding of the fragmenting of the historical timeline and creation of new images of history via the notion of a constellation. Possibilities that arise from these encounters center on seeing violent moments in France's history being brought back into the French national identity. I envision this through a combined mode of Huyssen's and Alexander's exploration of memory and trauma and the contemporary theories they suggest, which aid in establishing my claim that subjective memory is disintegrated by formal shocks, as well. Shock is the necessary component that disintegrates and reintegrates both the past with the present and the subjective memory of the spectator with the collective of history.

My three chapters each look at a different film in the New French Extremity genre in order to point to unfinished moments in France's history that have the

potential to be reincorporated into the French national identity. Organized into international, national, and individual spheres, each chapter deals with a political historical encounter motivated by the shocks of a stylistic one. My first chapter, “Racism and Revolution: The Resonance of Vichy and May ’68 in Contemporary France,” explores Gens’ *Frontiere(s)* as an examination of racial tensions in contemporary France through its explicit comparison of the Vichy and Nicolas Sarkozy governments. I also look at the more implicit commentary on May ’68 by way of its opening on a Paris-wide riot that mirrors the unrest among Arab youth in the fall of 2005 and the potential return of those unified intellectual/worker ideals, such as social equality. Moments like May ’68 and Vichy collaboration with the Nazis are unfinished periods of French history. May ’68 went incomplete as a revolution socially and politically; the government, led by Charles de Gaulle, remained largely intact, except for the dissolution of the National Assembly. Nazi collaboration is often treated as never having happened, due to Vichy not being viewed as a French government but rather as a part of Germany. Yet, in *Frontiere(s)*, these moments return not only through narrative references, but also via historical encounters that its stylistic shocks make possible. This engagement is facilitated by the film’s encounters with Godard’s and Hooper’s respective styles. For example, Hooper’s use of discontinuous cuts jars the spectator’s awareness and destabilizes the integrity of the film’s timeline in shocking ways. The abruptnesses of the cuts enable the spectator to move back and forth between the film’s diegesis and the historical realities it depicts through my notion of disintegration. This meeting of past and present, both stylistically and politically, has the potential to transform understandings of the history of France by

allowing spectators to repeatedly (re)envisage the relationships between these historical moments and to reintegrate them into a collective history.

In my second chapter, “Flayed Flesh: Torture and Tension in Postcolonial French Politics,” I delve into Pascal Laugier’s work to explore a similar encounter at the national level. *Martyrs* uses a shadow council of wealthy elite that brutalize young women to open a dialogue about torture during the Algerian war. This discussion is conceived through spiritual transcendence via materiality in both the diegesis, in both the bodies of the women and the film. Also, I see a historical transcendence, as allegory, through materiality, or shock, for the spectator. The treatment of the girls, who are ambiguously raced, also recalls the handling of Muslims and other minority populations under the current French government. Gens formal handling of his female leads is reminiscent of Godard’s intimate use of close-ups in *Le Petit Soldat* (1963) and *Vivre se vie* (1962), particularly during the former’s torture sequences, and the latter’s abuse of Nana. Furthermore, this film also recalls the work of Carl Theodor Dreyer, specifically his 1928 film *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, to explore the notion of material and immaterial in Laugier’s work as an expression of past and contemporary relations with those viewed as “others.” The director unflinchingly exposes the spectator to the suffering of colonial, imperialistic atrocities so that these moments can be reincorporated into an objective historical collective.

My final chapter, “Cannibalism and Commodity: Capitalism’s Influence in Post-War France,” addresses the continued effects of postwar consumerism in French culture through de Van’s portrayal of a young woman, who quite literally consumes herself, in *In My Skin*. De Van is not only critiquing the individual’s participation in their own

consumption in commodity culture, but also seeks to reconcile the self with the internal “other.” The film attempts to do something similar with the present and internal past, especially with regards to post-war and late-stage Capitalism. De Van does this by bringing the ugliness of the internal out in such a way that it can be reintroduced into the self and the present. I will get at this through a comparison to Brian De Palma’s 1973 thriller *Sisters*, particularly through the notion of identity as self and “other” and how they might be reintegrated with one another in terms of French history via the spectator. Stylistically I will look at how the two directors employ split-screens and mirroring as a shocking formal technique.

My conclusion, “Brutality and Memory: Reincorporating the Historical Taboo”, reveals the significance of my research and potential possibilities for future academic explorations. The avenues I develop for approaching the visceral cinema of New French Extremity can be used to explore other national cinemas that engage history in a similarly transgressive manner, such as Hungary’s *Taxidermia* (György Pálfi, 2006) and Serbia’s *A Serbian Film* (Srđan Spasojević, 2010). It can be used to look past their narratives, often times even more brutal than New French Extremity’s, and point to their attempts to engage their own historical traumas through political and stylistic encounters.

## **Racism and Revolution: The Resonance of Vichy and May'68 in Contemporary France**

Xavier Gens' 2007 film *Frontiere(s)* uses narrative and stylistic shocks as a way to disintegrate the official French history concerning the displacement of the Vichy Regime to Germany, Nazi collaboration, and May '68 and engage the spectator in an allegorical re-envisioning of the past. The result has the potential to reincorporate a new vision of both subjugation and revolt into the collective, cultural history of contemporary France. Gens work implicitly critiques the 2007 conservative government of French president Nicolas Sarkozy through direct references to Nazis, as members of the Vichy Regime, and their suppression of the French population during World War II. He does this in order to make a comparison to contemporaneous policies enacted by Sarkozy that subjugated Muslim and Roma populations in France. In fact, the level of violence depicted during the riots at the start of the film during the riots mirrors the action of several Arab uprisings in France from 2005 to 2007. The stock footage used at the start of the film, of police subduing and arresting rioters, was pulled from the 2005 and 2006 riots that happened before the release of the film.<sup>1</sup> During this time Sarkozy, then Interior Minister, had a role in putting the riots down. Arabs have been in a near constant state of duress over being treated as second-class citizens. This class antagonism has been exacerbated by the neoliberal policies that Sarkozy enacted as Interior Minister and

---

<sup>1</sup> Matt McAllister, "Frontiers", 2008, Total Sci-Fi Online, 16 July 2012, <<http://totalscifionline.com/reviews/2223-frontiers>>

continued as President. Furthermore, May '68 is implicitly referenced through the Paris-wide riots that open the film and the images of police that reoccur throughout the film. I contend Gens does this in order to redeem the possibilities of that unsuccessful movement for the Muslim revolts under Sarkozy that occurred at the time of the film's release.

I also see Gens engaging in a historical dialogue by adopting the narratives and styles of American director Tobe Hooper's work in his 1974 film *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and French New Wave auteur Jean Luc Godard's efforts in his 1967 classic *Week End*. Gens understands how powerful *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Week End* were in terms of their observations about economics and class struggle. Both directors explored subjugation in their own right, especially capitalist oppression, retaliatory violence, and the idea of revolution. These two filmmakers employed narrative shocks, such as cannibalism, bloodshed, and death, and stylistic shocks, such as handheld cameras, rapid editing, and revelatory tracking shots, both of which examined subjugation and revolt that contemporaneous films of their eras repressed.

Gens' choice of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Week End* serves a dual purpose of acknowledging film history while recognizing France's political past and present. The levels of brutality in the films reinforce their negative observations on classism and economics, such as the divisions between socioeconomic statuses and disenfranchisement. *Week End* centers on a couple with plans to murder each other for money and shows a near total collapse of the social and moral fiber of a society that is more concerned with material possessions than the ideals of unification among socioeconomic classes that were prevalent when the film was released. The main



characters traverse a landscape of death and bloodshed while remaining indifferent to the carnage in favor of focusing on personal gain and brand-name clothing. Historically, Godard's work speaks to economic inequalities between classes and how the middle class preys on the poor, a circumstance that is reversed in *Week End* and plays out as cannibalism late in the film. Furthermore, the film questions the revolution of the Sixties and a failure to adopt its message of peace and love by depicting Hippies as cannibalistic revolutionaries. Hooper's work, meanwhile, focuses on the violence inflicted on five middle-class teenagers at the hands of a destitute family that has been ousted from the slaughter industry by technological improvements. His film critiques capitalism's frequent disenfranchisement of workers and families. Similar to Godard, cannibalism is present in Hooper's work and is indicative of class struggle, as evidenced by the lower class eating the middle class, and economic crisis.

Gens' film nods to both by opening with a collapsed social order and by using grotesque imagery of butchering people. In his film five friends rob a bank amidst the chaos of riots in Paris and make plans to flee to Amsterdam. They never make it and are subjected to violent deaths at the hands of a cruel family with Nazi ideologies who eat their victims. Stylistically Godard and Hooper employ comparable tactics to reveal their narrative shocks. Both directors offer a frightening reveal, in both narrative and stylistic terms, at the ends of their scenes that produce shock for the spectator. Godard uses a slow tracking shot that reveals a brutal traffic accident, juxtaposing the idyllic countryside with bloodshed, a move that abruptly ends the shot. Hooper uses cross-cutting in a chase scene, ending in the violent death of a protagonist, which also jars the spectator with an immediate halt to the sense of movement through the diegesis. Gens opens his film with

hand-held camera work which is alarming for the viewer because it situates them immediately in the action of the diegesis. This technique is equally as upsetting as the earlier directors' efforts because the move is sudden and purposeful. Moreover, as I shall demonstrate, Gens' narrative and style return both social and film histories in order to disintegrate France's "official" past and critically engage and re-imagine the present.

The opening sequence of *Frontiere(s)* is an example that illustrates my claim about how the disintegration of temporality takes place, both in terms of the fiction and France's history. Numerous images of police in riot gear flash across the screen in untitled news stories. While some have the police stationary others show them actively clashing with and arresting demonstrators. These images are captured in a documentary style with a hand-held camera that is positioned very close to the action, and their status as live news footage of actual events contributes to their authenticity. The police presence also bridges the gap between three historical moments. Historically the police are the front line of the Vichy government harassing minorities, responsible for quelling the May '68 riots, and a direct cause of the 2005 riots by their involvement with the death of two Arab youths they had chased and who were electrocuted while hiding from them.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the images of police are a unifying theme throughout the film, appearing at the beginning with the aforementioned riots; in the middle, with Karl von Geisler, an antagonist, police officer, and Nazi; and at the end when Yasmine, the protagonist, surrenders.

The repeated images of police and violence are interspersed with opening credits which are mostly black screens with white lettering. Inserting the credits like this allows

---

<sup>2</sup> Vikki Valentine, "Economic Despair, Racism Drive French Riots", 2005, NPR.org, 17, July 2012, <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5004897>>

a transition between the stock footage and the opening action of the fictional film that destabilizes the film's temporality and momentarily disorients the viewer. The instability present in Gens' narrative begins to disintegrate the diegesis and linear time through the shock provided by the disorientation of the opening. Shock situates the viewer immediately in a full scale riot and his or her point of view is now as a member of Gens' young group being chased by the police. There are two shocks at work here, first there is historical shock at the realization of these two histories being linked together simultaneously by the film. Secondly, the narrative/stylistic shock results from the spectatorial experience of the coupling in the film which is similar to the reveals at the end of Godard's tracking shots and Hooper's cross-cuts. Shock allows him or her to be transported, through disorientation and linear time disruption, to a recent past, the 2005-2006 riots in Paris, and a distant past, the demonstrations of May '68.

In the end, I view the historical events and the narrative / stylistic homages in Gens' film as "returns of the repressed," unfinished periods in France's past that linger in the contemporary social and political unconscious. Gens' film exposes the viewer to shock to disintegrate the fictional and nonfictional linear histories of France and pull the fragments of Vichy, May '68, Sarkozy, Hooper, Godard, and Gens himself into a constellation that critiques and re-envision the Sarkozy government for its racialized and classed abuses. Rather than be displaced like Vichy was to Germany, as is the current mode of thinking about the collaboration, the present-day violence under Sarkozy is united to the past subjugation under Vichy and the violent revolts of May '68 as means to critically look at the present and re-envision revolution as a possibility for today.

### **Shocking Narrative: Accessing History in the Diegesis of *Frontiere(s)***

In order to begin a reinterpretation of the past it is crucial that the viewer be situated in the periods being looked at, something that is accomplished through the *Week End*'s, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*'s, and *Frontiere(s)*' narratives. To uncover the history being critiqued in *Frontiere(s)* I will begin by looking at the film's narrative and move to compare its themes with those of Godard's *Week End* and Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. The potential to understand subjugation and revolt in France's history begins at the level of Gens' diegesis and through the relationship it shares with the earlier directors' works. I see Gens' violent, racial narrative concerning Muslims treatment at the hands of the French government being influenced by Hooper's and Godard's violent, class narratives. Subjugation in Hooper's film is seen in the economic disenfranchisement of the Sawyer family, the antagonists, and the treatment of their middle-class victims. The idea of revolution is also seen in the Sawyer's violent attack on the middle class and the protagonist Sally's eventual escape from them. I see Godard being present in the attention Gens gives to recent violent revolts and how they compare to earlier moments like May '68. This is important for advancing my argument about an exploration of suppressed French history and how Gens' work re-constellates this troubled past. The shocks provided by the violence of the film situate the viewer within an historical context and allow for the juxtaposition of the present and past.

*Frontiere(s)* opens to images of a sonogram being conducted. A developing fetus at the start of a film in a genre known for its transgressive style may seem odd at first but is indicative of a growing potential. A woman named Yasmine narrates that she is three months pregnant and that everyone is born equal according to the law. She further

elaborates by stating that this is not what happens in her world and questions who would want to be born between chaos and hatred. She announces that she has decided to protect her child from evil, presumably by having an abortion. The accusations she makes are backed up by evidence in the form of brief videos of police and protesters, first gathering peacefully and escalating into violent clashes. A news anchor voiceover explains the unrest in Paris is due to a conservative government being elected. This instability foreshadows the notions of subjugation and revolt, recurring themes throughout the film, between Muslims, the present-day government, and Nazi aggressors from the past. The unborn child represents potential development of revolution in the face of oppression for both Yasmine and the spectator. I say potential, because as I will demonstrate later, Yasmine's fate remains ambiguous at the end of the film and the spectator may not be influenced to change their own perspective of the world.

The narrative continues with contemporary France, and more importantly its racially "other" citizens, being subjected to violence and brutality by figures from its past. Shortly after the riot footage, the viewer is introduced to the main protagonists. Five friends, Alex, Tom, Farid, Sami, and Yasmine, take advantage of the confusion caused by the riots to rob a bank with plans to flee to Amsterdam. They are representatives of the young, racially "other" group in contemporary France who are experiencing suppression under the Sarkozy government. During their return to the prearranged meeting point, Sami is shot by police. Due to his injury, the friends are forced to split up with Tom and Farid leaving early for Holland and Alex and Yasmine taking Sami to the hospital. Tom and Farid, having found a hostel, entertain themselves with the patrons of the establishment while waiting for their friends to arrive. However, unbeknownst to the two

men, the patrons are a cannibalistic, Nazi family, remnant of the Vichy regime, who preys on travelers in their lonely stretch of the countryside. Their patriarch, Von Geisler, has been systematically grooming his children, Karl, Hans, Gilberte and Goetz, to continue his legacy of maintaining Nazi ideology. The family is the embodiment of France's role in the violent subjugation of its racially "other" citizens. The von Geislars are indicative of both governments because they continue the sociopolitical ideology of the Third Reich, with regards to racial superiority, and remain an oppressive force in France, like Vichy is still considered.

Gens uses the Hooper narrative about the poor attacking the middle class to great effect by pointing out a similarly violent racial and class struggle happening between Muslims and the French government. However, he chooses to invert certain themes to better tell his story. Hooper's work highlights a class conflict, showing a poor, disenfranchised family brutalizing teenagers from the middle class. In a reversal of fortune, perhaps, the poor are preying on the middle class in the form of cannibalism. Cannibalism is also indicative of Robin Wood's notion of horror as a "return of the repressed," which he argues is "the specific notion of present and future (the younger generation) being devoured by the past" (Nichols 213). Wood is alluding to what returns, sexual desire, feminine other, or the past, is in tension with the present. My interest lies in how Gens' film visually juxtaposes the tension between past and present, with regards to French and film history. Hooper's approach to tension with the past is the return of a marginalized family replaced by machinery in an evolving cattle slaughter industry. Gens reverses the roles by showing a Nazi family, a group who once wielded considerable political power and influence attacking working-class teenagers. This family's loss of

authority came not at the hands of economic change but through military and political action. The family's choice in victims is also different from those in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. They choose to attack a group of Muslim friends, carrying on the Third Reich's ideology of ethnic cleansing. The class struggle and critique of capitalism that was present in Hooper's film, has now been coupled with racial tension in Gens' work with a critical eye towards Sarkozy's policies regarding ethnic groups.

Gens' turn to *Week End*, meanwhile, really highlights his attention to the history of revolution in France. Godard's narrative of inequality in a collapsed social order in *Week End* is echoed in Gens' opening through the violence of the riots, the brutality of police, and Yasmine's dialogue about her own inequality in the world, stuck between chaos and hatred. Gens' narrative is also indicative of revolution aimed at addressing the inequalities among social classes that was an integral part of the May '68 movement. Although Godard's film predates May '68 his narrative addresses similar concerns. By referencing *Week End* and its own violent narrative, Gens is able to highlight May '68 in terms of being unfinished because the revolutions idea of equality has failed to materialize. Gens has the hindsight of knowing the May '68 failed, socially little changed amongst the classes while politically de Gaulle was re-elected. This knowledge for Gens is important because it allows him to juxtapose May '68 to the more recent Muslim rebellions that did not bring meaningful social changes for their own equality. In doing so, Gens mirrors the earlier work of Godard and his critical eye towards social movements. His borrowing from Godard also illustrates how he is using horror to revisit the now diminished transgressions of the French New Wave, namely its critique of popular cultures politics, economics, and social equality. Gens pushes for an

understanding of May '68 as an uncompleted uprising that still resonates today, by specifically using a film that came out just before it. The point, I argue, is that what returns by the end of Gens' film is the idea of social equality that was such a central tenet of the May '68 movement.

Dynamic participation from the spectator begins at these narrative and historical moments and is further enhanced by the formal shocks of the film that I describe in greater detail below. For instance, this film was released only eight months after the election of French President Nicolas Sarkozy, which marked a sharp turn to the right for French politics. Gens re-enacts Sarkozy's rise to power through mock news stories and uses an actor with strikingly similar features to the French president. The stories include a far-right government being elected, riots being condemned by the Interior Minister, which Sarkozy did as Minister in 2005, and the zero-tolerance stance of the police. Sarkozy's election as a controversial politician, who some voters felt was "not for the freedom of all people," indicates how tense the political landscape in France had become.<sup>3</sup> Contemporaneous decrees by his government targeted certain ethnic groups, mainly the Roma and Muslim populations. In 2010, more than one thousand Roma, more commonly known as Gypsies, were systematically expelled from France. This process begins to mirror the treatment of minority groups under Vichy, most notably the Jews and the Roma themselves. In July 2010, CBS News reported that the language used in contemporary laws had chilling undertones in a country where authorities once rounded up Gypsies and sent them to concentration camps during the Nazi occupation of World War II. Former President Jacques Chirac, the first French leader to acknowledge the

---

<sup>3</sup> Robert Marquand, "Conservative, controversial Sarkozy wins French election" 2007, The Christian Science Monitor, 19 Nov. 2010 <<http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/0507/p25s01-woeu.html>>



state's role in the Holocaust, condemned “the Nazi madness that wanted to eliminate the Gypsies.”<sup>4</sup> Muslims have been targeted by French authorities, as well. Proposed laws would ban burqas, the traditional face coverings that are worn by Muslim women, in public spaces. Although these actions taken by the French government happened after the release of Gens’ film, they are indicative of the director’s attention to the suppression of minorities that not only preceded, but also continued under Sarkozy’s government. Gens’ critical engagement with France’s policies regarding ethnic groups illustrates a counter argument to critics, such as James Quandt, who believe that there is a lack of acknowledging the political tradition of French cinema in *New French Extremity*.

*Frontiere(s)* marks clear links to contemporary history by opening with images of riots, which are also revolts. However, these visions immediately begin to recall other historical moments. Kristin Ross’s extensive research into French history from 1945 through the early 1980s pays particular attention to the role of the police. Specifically, her focus is on the phrase, “Move along, nothing to see here,” a common stance police take to maintain social order. She writes, “They [the police] are another name for the symbolic constitution of the social: the social as made up of groups. These groups, when counted, make up the social whole—nothing is missing; nothing is in excess; nothing or no one is left uncounted” (*May ’68* 23). What she means is that if everything is accounted for there is nothing left for which to look. When Ross examines May ’68, she argues the movement is accounted for in “official” French history because de Gaulle was successful in quelling the revolution and retaining power, thus providing closure of the event from the State’s point of view.

---

<sup>4</sup> CBSNews, “France's Sarkozy Orders Illegal Gypsies Expelled,” 2010, CBS News/AP, 20 Nov. 2010 <<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2010/07/28/world/main6722137.shtml>>

Ross discusses the “triumph” of the police in her work by outlining the aggressive handling of the protests of May ’68 by de Gaulle’s government. Riot police occupied schools and universities as a form of martial law. The brutality at the hands of police escalated the strikers’ response and full-scale violence followed. Although de Gaulle’s government retained power after these events, he was seen as an authoritarian and tyrant by the French due to the treatment of the public during the riots. Furthermore, a person cannot “just move along” as the police would like them to, because there is still plenty to see. The subjugation of French citizens during this period still resonates in the contemporary rhetoric of France’s government. For Ross, May’68 remains unfinished, and as such, it continues to reenter social and political discourse. She writes, “The political subjectivity that emerged in May was a *relational* one, built around a polemics of equality: a day-to-day experience of identifications, aspirations, and encounters” (*May ’68* 11). She is specifically referencing the unity between the workers and intellectuals during May ’68. Gens’ film seeks to unite two movements in history, both of which center on groups seeking parity for themselves and those like them.

This union of the two groups, happening across economic and racial statuses, is how I see Gens making a connection between Yasmine and the spectator. Gens’ use of actual riot footage coupled with Yasmine’s brief monologue engages with political subjectivity through building a relationship of equality between Yasmine and the viewer. The spectator is asked to take up Yasmine’s oppression as their own through identifying with her as a young person, oppressed Muslim, or scared soon to be mother, to name a few. Yasmine’s words about the hatred in the world, the actions of the police, and being immediately placed in the midst of a violent uprising situate the viewer’s POV as a

member of her group. As such, I argue Gens' film explores equality through revolution against subjugation by specifically focusing on the violence of police against French citizens and the treatment of Yasmine and her friends as racial "others."

The violent actions by the police at the behest of the government are where I see a relationship between Sarkozy and Vichy developing the political subjectivity of subjugation. The police are the first level of government that deal with the public directly and on a daily basis. Also, under Vichy, they helped round up the various groups that were targeted by Nazi persecution including Muslims and Gypsies. Similarly, under Sarkozy, police have harassed Muslims for identification and legal status, which had a direct effect on the start of the 2005 riots. Gens points to the role of police as oppressors, under Sarkozy, in the first few minutes of his film highlighting their treatment of protesters, many of whom are Muslim. Both moments of political subjectivity, subjugation and revolution, build a foundation for the viewer to later take up Yasmine's position in a violent revolt against her subjugation at the hands of the von Geisler family later in the film.

*Frontiere(s)* is a leading example of the depth and scope of New French Extremity with regards to shock, sensation, and historical encounters within the spectatorial experience of cinema. Within the first few minutes of the film, Gens uses news footage with which French spectators would likely be familiar in order to shock the viewer. The level of violence in the riots pushes spectator awareness away. Conversely, the camera pulls him or her into the work in a point of view of the action with a focus on Yasmine and her brother Sami. These actions momentarily disrupts the film's linear temporality through the shock of the push and pull effect which situates the spectator

simultaneously in two historical moments, May '68 and the 2007 riots in France. Gens borrows this disruptive style, although done with different techniques, from Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and Godard's *Week End*. Yet he goes beyond simple odes to Hooper's and Godard's originals or simple stylistic adaptations of them. Much like many modern horror films *Frontiere(s)* is self aware, in touch with its roots, and socially conscious.<sup>5</sup> The film represents a struggle that focuses on racial tensions through its depiction of four twenty-somethings and their encounter with a cannibalistic Nazi family. The family of Nazis chooses to brutalize a certain ethnic group, in this case Arab-Muslims, and shows a formerly powerful group attacking French citizens who are treated as second class by police. Gens' borrowing from Hooper and Godard allows him to develop a critical eye about socioeconomic policies that his government has put in place or of which it has been a part.

Gens employs a secluded family of Nazis, a group that is still heavily scorned in Europe, as the antagonist in his work. On the other hand Hooper and Godard use an "other" to fill that same role. This is an important distinction because the patriarch von Geisler would not be considered a French citizen, but rather a despised member of the Third Reich who happens to live on their soil. He would be displaced similar to how Vichy was not considered French but rather a part of Nazi Germany. However, at the very least von Geisler's children are all French natives who were born and raised in the country. In acknowledging their mixed heritage Gens' work speaks to the lingering racial tensions in France and is how I see a linkage between Vichy and Nazi Germany. For

---

<sup>5</sup> Brophy, Philip, "Horrority," *Art & Text* No.3, Melbourne, 1983 and Clover, Carol J., "The Eye of Horror," *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, Princeton University Press, 1992: These articles address the points in horror films that cause spectator interaction with them; instances of shock that jar the viewer's awareness are the moments of value in horror films

Hooper and Godard, their characters' otherness sets them apart from society, while still allowing fringe participation, and also references what exiled them in the first place.

Hooper uses a poor outcast family to reassure the audience that "normal" people wouldn't go to these lengths, but that "otherness" also speaks to the disenfranchisement of the Sawyer family. Godard uses fringe, American-style counterrevolutionaries that also stray far outside the norm, yet his group once represented a movement centered on peace and love. Gens knew what he was doing when he chose to borrow from Hooper's and Godard's films. Still, as I shall illustrate his adaptations of narrative and style from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Week End* allow him the chance to critique French politics and offer possibilities for reintegrating the past.

The three films shared similarities in narratives transport the spectator between them and, more importantly, he or she is also moved back and forth through time, often existing in two moments simultaneously. The fragments provided by the three narratives, which move between violent subjugation and violent revolt, are repeatedly realigned to form new constellations. The images created by these realignments are the catalyst for new perspectives on past and present historical events. Gens inscribes a political message onto the hurt bodies of his characters, which in turn, critiques the Sarkozy government for its own violence and suppression. I see Gens' film offering a political critique about actual events in a similar manner to how Susan Sontag discusses wartime photography in her text *Regarding the Pain of Others*. Her research is initially concerned with propaganda attached to historical images of war and how they are constructed to incite a feeling of pity. She states, "The concern [by propagandists] is that the images to be devised won't be sufficiently upsetting: not concrete, not detailed enough" (74).

However, this notion of constructing death to send a message about past events to the viewer applies to Gens and other filmmakers' work in New French Extremity. The violence of *Frontiere(s)* is being attacked by popular culture, such as critics like Quandt, as unnecessary. Sontag writes "It has become cliché of the cosmopolitan discussion of images of atrocity to assume that they have little effect and that there is something cynical about their diffusion" (111). Yet, it is precisely the grotesque imagery in these films that incites discussion about their meaning. I do understand that Sontag is speaking about non-fiction images, while I am discussing fictional films, however, a similar case can be made about Gens' work through his reference to factual people and events. My suggestion is that by adding non-fiction and fiction to my notion of constellations, which include past and present histories, narratives, and styles, it constructs a reading of Gens' film and helps further piece together the fragments in his work.

### **Shocking Style: Film Form Used to Unite Past and Present**

In addition to narrative content, my interests lie in exploring the relationship of style between *Frontiere(s)* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. Godard's *Week End* also figures here through representations of shock in narrative associations, particularly in his famous tracking shot, but my primary focus will be on Hooper's film. This attention is mainly due to the how I see Gens employing a 70's American horror sensibility, like a frenetic, journalistic feel, which Godard did not do in his later work. My contention is that Gens critically looks at Sarkozy's government by linking it with Vichy and '68, not just through content, but also through the stylistic shocks provided by his film.

Stylistically, Gens employs the journalistic, hand-held camera and quick, jarring cuts that Hooper uses in his film, in order to shock spectators, dissolve diegetic and linear

temporalities, and get at Vichy and May '68. Hooper was among the first directors to bring an art cinema awareness to mainstream horror filmmaking, a sentiment that Gens continues in his work.<sup>6</sup> I would like to mention that although Godard employed a similar hand-held style in his earlier works it had become less apparent in his films by the time *Week End* was released in 1967. Gens uses shot-reverse shot and a hand-held camera to create shock similar to how Hooper does with cross-cutting and Godard does with revelation of shock at the end of his tracking shot. The shock produced by these techniques also begins to construct allegorical constellations as a way to reinterpret the past.

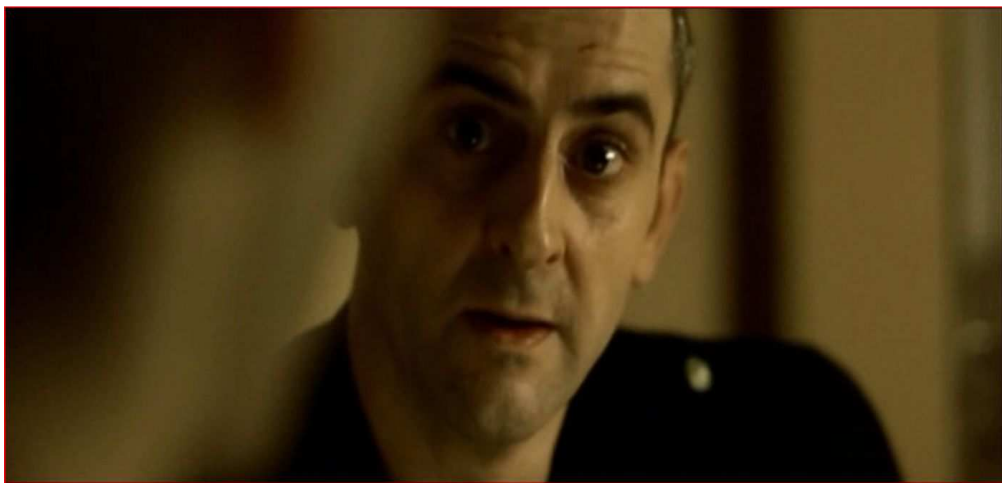


Fig. 1 Karl von Geisler

The initial meeting of Karl, Tom, and Farid in the von Geisler hostel illustrates Gens' blending of Hooper's cross-cutting and Godard's revelatory shocks. Tom and Farid have finished an awkward meal with the von Geisler family and are now watching television in their room. The cramped space they occupy is surrounded by dingy walls making it uninviting and more akin to jail cell than a hostel room. This scene introduces the spectator to Karl, a police officer, whose presence and ensuing dialogue are the first

---

<sup>6</sup> Modleski, Tania. "The Terror of Pleasure," *The Horror Reader*, Taylor & Francis Group, 2000 : Her article discusses the adaptation of art cinema's style and sensibilities into 70's horror.

signs that something is amiss. Racism and classism are made blatantly obvious in Karl's questions, centering on the Paris riots and the "scum" that caused them, and hint at a Nazi ideology by him calling Farid a "half-breed." There is a sequence of shots-reverse shots, with a hand-held camera, between Tom and Karl that highlights the control and influence of Vichy as Karl is placed in a position of power in the frame. His attire, which consists of all-black combat fatigues, adds to his appearance as a person of command. Stylistically, Gens uses subtle low-angle shots when looking at Karl that highlight his authority and instill a sense of fear of him. When looking directly at Karl, the shots increase his overbearing nature, causing his upper body to loom slightly over the spectator's view, which, coupled with close ups, makes him an imposing figure. Similar low angles are used that move behind Tom's head to partially block Karl in the frame (Fig. 1). These shots are also looking slightly up at Karl but the movement behind Tom's head creates a feeling of being afraid of Karl, for both the characters and the spectator. After a couple of minutes, Tom and Farid try to make their escape. The two men only make it a short distance before Goetz attacks Tom with a heavy pipe and mercilessly beats him to the ground. The camera is placed in a similar position as previously noted, but is now behind Karl and in a slightly elevated high-angle position, peering over his shoulder and down at Tom. This reinforces his authority and superiority over Tom and is indicative of the role the Vichy regime played in the subjugation of French citizens with violence.

The fear associated with the previous shots is heightened by the use of a hand-held camera and places the viewer in a direct confrontation with France's violent past. The lens of the camera provides a POV shot of Karl, a representation of France's ties



with Nazis through Vichy. The camera also reacts for the spectator in the face of bloodshed. The camera moves slightly behind Karl's head cutting off parts of Tom being brutalized, an indication of the viewer hiding his or her face or wishing not to be seen by the attackers. This movement also indicates the difficulty confronting France's violent past for the viewer and the camera reacts accordingly to the fear associated with doing so.

The shots-reverse shots employed by Gens are a source of shock for the viewer, but can also be viewed as a back and forth between past and present. These historical moments are why I employ Walter Benjamin's idea of a constellation, his notion that periods in time can briefly flash up, due to crisis, and come together to form new interpretations. As mentioned earlier, Muslim and Roma populations are receiving treatment from the Sarkozy-led government similar to that experienced by the Jews under the Vichy regime. They are getting harassed by police at ID checkpoints, rounded up and kicked out of France, or laws are being passed that infringe upon their cultural values, beliefs and practices. The Jews also experienced revocation of citizenship or expulsion and were harassed for papers stating legal immigration status by the police and Vichy regime. The harassment of Jews under Vichy and contemporary Muslims under Sarkozy is stressed through Karl's role as both a Nazi and police officer and his behavior exemplifies the harsh, oppressive treatment of both groups. I argue the shots-reverse shots between Karl and Tom are the brief moments of time, past and present, that flash up for a moment and are juxtaposed for an interpretation by the spectator. This sequence illustrates the harassment experienced by contemporary Muslims and historical Jews by the police. Gens' film allows the viewer to confront France's latent racism, and ties to Vichy, while experiencing the fear of those prejudiced against by police. My contention

is that this meeting will bring a renewed understanding of this violent past into a contemporary dialogue about treatment of ethnic groups.

Hooper achieves similar shocks in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* through a documentary, hand-held camera style, but rather than lull the viewer, he keeps a palpable tension throughout most of the film with crosscuts that leaves the spectator in a heightened state of anticipation, waiting for a death to occur. His employment of quick crosscuts, moments that I view as similar to Gens' shots-reverse shots, particularly during the chase scene near the end of the film, intensifies anxiety for spectators and reminds them of the deadly class conflict being depicted.

I view Gens hostel scene as being influenced by Hooper's chase scene of young Sally, by the antagonist Leatherface, which is preceded by the violent death of her brother Franklin. His demise immediately instills panic in the spectator with how suddenly it occurs; that suddenness is echoed in the attack on Tom. As she pushes him in his wheelchair through a heavily wooded area Franklin stops her, saying he hears something. He turns his flashlight in the direction of the sound with Leatherface immediately appearing and attacking Franklin with his chainsaw. Leatherface is fully illuminated by Franklin's flashlight, a move that allows the spectator to see the killer in all his violent glory. Repeated cuts move between Leatherface plunging his chainsaw again and again into a screaming Franklin and the horrified reaction of Sally watching her brother die. This sequence represents a direct, violent confrontation between the poor and middle-class. The time between cuts also illustrates the growing fear of the viewer as they rapidly move between each character which Gens achieved with how Karl fit in the frame during the shots-reverse shots. Sally turns and runs with Leatherface in pursuit; the whine of his

chainsaw is the only indication of his proximity to her at first and, coupled with Sally's screams, provides an ominous soundtrack to the chase. Hooper's crosscuts move between various angles of Sally running which gives the sense of the camera stalking her, just like *Leatherface*, and indicate the fear of the past returning to attack the present.

Godard's notable eight minute tracking shot before the car crash in *Week End* is a prime example of the revelatory, shocking style that influences Gens' work with an abrupt turn towards violence. While it may seem the track itself is the focal point here, what matters for my argument is the anticipation it builds for the final shock. Conversely, with Gens sequence, the shots-reverse shots are equally important as the sudden attack on Tom. The shot tracks to the right and seems unremarkable, at first. The slow movement of the camera across the various faces of people stuck in a traffic jam does not prepare the viewer for what comes at the front of that line of cars. The reveal at the end of the shot shows a family that has been killed in a car wreck with their bodies littered across the road. The casual feeling of the slow moving camera seems out of place with the broken bodies of the victims. There is a juxtaposition of an idyllic afternoon with the violent deaths of the family that is shocking because of the slow build up to it. For the viewer there is a feeling of aggravation that comes from being stuck in the traffic jam for so long. Gens hostel sequence is similarly aggravating because of the latent racism being presented. Once the crash is revealed there is an immediate change to a sense of sympathy, something that is not expressed by the characters of the film. This lack of empathy on the part of the protagonists Corrine and Roland, who are too focused on getting rich to care about the dead and are peeved at being held, up is an indication of Godard's critique of capitalism and a source of shock for the viewer. Enda Duffy

discusses the shocks of *Week End*, in terms of a critique on capitalism, in his book *The Speed Handbook: Velocity, Pleasure, Modernism*. He writes, “It is to *shock* us out of the assumptions and consumerist dreams underlying these [capitalist] conventions that Godard stages his famous tracking shot in the film *Week End*” (250). Duffy is speaking about the alienating effects of capitalist conventions; there isn’t time to care about the dead because the passerby has someplace to be. I view Gens’ use of stylistic shocks similarly but in addition to an evaluation of capitalism like Godard he uses them to reassess France’s view of its history. I argue there is a similar feeling of apathy with regards to history happening in France, something Gens’ film shocks the viewer out of.

### **Successful Revolt: Reintegrating History with the Present to Understand the Past**

In a final turn in his work Gens shifts from historical subjugation to revolution through Yasmine, the sole survivor of the Muslim friends, pairing with Eva, the von Geisler’s handicapped daughter, to fight against the family. This sequence demonstrates how I see Benjamin’s notion of the constellation being constructed by the film. I view Eva as representing the past due to her treatment by the family as a less than desirable. She also chooses to remain behind at the hostel and not return with Yasmine. On the other hand, Yasmine represents the present because she is a young Muslim woman suffering under the oppression of policies enacted by Sarkozy. When combined the women successfully revolt against past and present subjugation. This move also illustrates how Gens adds ethnicity to Hooper’s narrative and successful unity in revolting to Godard’s narrative. Hooper’s antagonists are a poor family who represent a manifestation of anger at lost power in a capitalist world. Their revolt is against the middle class who they see as having a part in their current economic state. Gens alters

this by having his protagonists as the poor who are revolting against subjugation from not just the economic but also the sociopolitical policies of government. Godard's narrative is full of alienated characters more concerned with individual gains than any kind of meaningful unity. Even his revolutionaries at the end consume others for their own needs. Gens changes this by showing a revolt that doesn't change the structure of subjugation but how relationships work within that structure. The more unified relationships are important because they underscore France's historical treatment of ethnic minorities and unsuccessful attempts to provide change through revolution. These ideas about unity are the opportunities for discussion within the framework of a constellation provided by Gens' film.

To uncover the revolt against subjugation I will look at moments from the final twenty minutes of Gens' film. During this sequence Yasmine is involved in four separate confrontations with the family, including Von Geisler, Karl, Klaudia, and Gilberte. Eva assists her during the conflict with Karl, a moment I will attend to separate from Yasmine. I look at how both women fill the role of Clover's Final Girl in horror/revenge films. Clover describes the Final Girl as "the one who encounters the mutilated bodies of her friends and perceives the full extent of the preceding horror and of her own peril; who is chased, cornered, wounded; whom we see scream, stagger, fall, rise, and scream again. She is abject terror personified" (35). More importantly for my argument, Clover writes the Final Girl "alone looks death in the face, but she alone also finds the strength either to stay the killer long enough to be rescued or to kill him herself" (35). Yasmine is the one who discovers not only her friends' bodies, but also those of the numerous other victims. Furthermore, she is the one pursued and must fight for her survival. Eva understands her

own position as a lesser member, because she is crippled and therefore inferior, of the family who is still considered an outsider and has presumably been with the family long enough to gauge the degree of the violence carried out by the von Geislers.<sup>7</sup> Both women scream at the horrors committed by the family, Yasmine for the violence directed at her and Eva for the violence she witnesses. Through this doubling of the Final Girl I see further fragmentation of temporality, with Eva as past and Yasmine as present, that provides more pieces to be incorporated into the constellation and adds another layer that is open for interpretation.



Fig. 2 von Geisler toast



Fig. 3 Sally's POV

The sequence begins with the von Geislers sitting down to dinner to celebrate Karl being chosen to assume leadership of the family. A wide-angle shot showing the entire table cuts to a close up of Yasmine whose face subtly changes from terror to determination. This shot is reminiscent of the dinner sequence in Hooper's film, both of which hide the female protagonists, Yasmine is hidden behind Karl, Eva's face is turned away (Fig. 2), and it is Sally's POV (Fig. 3), as a way to focus on the oppressors. Composing the shot this way is important, because it illustrates Clover's Final Girl experiencing terror, but also because this is the moment before the women get their vengeance. More importantly the POV allows the spectator to identify with these

---

<sup>7</sup> I view Eva's disability as being influenced by Franklin in Hooper's work. However because Eva is a woman it allows Gens to double his Final Girl, adding a further complexity to his work.

feelings. These shots repeat as von Geisler makes his announcement about Karl, and each close up of Yasmine shows more determination as she searches for a way to fight. During a toast to the “pure blood” of the family Yasmine finally grabs a carving knife and holds it to von Geisler’s throat. Chaos erupts at the table as the family reaches for various guns, except for Eva and the matriarch. Yasmine’s attack on von Geisler is a juxtaposition of the present confronting the past and creates an allegorical relationship between both the characters and the periods of time they represent. She is an ethnic minority from the present who stands up to a member of a group who murdered millions of ethnic minorities in the past. After a tense standoff, von Geisler is purposely killed by Eva’s husband Hans after the patriarch unleashes a tirade of insults at him; Hans is in turn shot and killed quickly by Karl. Yasmine uses the confusion of von Geisler’s death to run away and the family quickly pursues her. She runs outside to the barn and takes an elevator down to underground tunnels.

Because the women are now separated Gens focuses on Yasmine’s terror further heightening her role as the Final Girl. The camera switches to Yasmine’s POV which peeks around a pillar as the family searches for her in the darkness. The slight movement of the camera indicates Yasmine’s rapid breathing and fear. This situates the viewer in her position as the embodiment of the oppressed and the camera peeking around corners and pillars simulates the fear that is associated with that status. Yasmine eventually finds a lit room where she discovers the family’s cold storage unit filled with bodies on meat hooks. Goetz finds her and viciously attacks her, repeatedly kicking her. Yasmine crawls away as Goetz turns on a table saw; she is able to grab an axe and support herself on it, which hides it from Goetz. When he approaches Yasmine the camera moves in to a close

up of her face. The close up reveals that revenge has replaced her fear. Her attack is shot with quick cuts that speed up as she pushes him towards the running. When she kills Goetz it illustrates a violent revolt against her own oppression in the present as a Muslim minority and that of ethnic groups in the past. She embodies two historical moments, Vichy and Sarkozy simultaneously and expresses the anger of groups who experienced violent subjugation during those periods. More importantly Yasmine has confronted demons from France's history and triumphed and is now able to bring the knowledge of revolt and success against oppression with her to the present.

The help Yasmine receives from Eva in the death of Karl is how I see the past confronting the present. Eva is a member of the Nazi family, although through marriage only and not of the "pure blood" that was toasted to. This distinction is important because she is oppressed as well. When Yasmine takes the elevator back to the surface Karl finds her and savagely beats her. Just as the elevator reaches the surface, and Karl is about to kill her, Eva shoots and kills Karl. His head violently explodes in a shower of blood and gore and is indicative of all the blood he and the family have spilt. Eva's confrontation with Karl can be viewed on the surface as retaliation for the death of her husband Hans. However, by her killing Karl she has aided those oppressed in the present, Muslims, by killing an embodiment of their oppressors, the police. Conversely it also illustrates the past successfully overcoming the subjugation of the police in history, such as Vichy and May '68. Past and present have united momentarily to overcome violent subjugation through violent revolt. The success of this brief union is evident in Yasmine's ability to escape only with Eva's help. The women who were looked at as "others" by the von



Geislars, Yasmine as impure and Eva as inferior, succeed in ending the family's reign of terror.

The ambiguous end to the film is indicative of the tension that still remains between past and present, but also brings potential with it. The final moments of *Frontiere(s)* show Yasmine as she leaves the hostel by car. Not long after she comes to a police roadblock and the car slows and stops a few feet from the group of officers. Yasmine slowly exits the vehicle and is visibly shaking at this point, but tentatively approaches the group to presumably turn herself in for the robbery and to make the police aware of the family's property. This short sequence in the film returns the spectator to the present but brings the past with it because Yasmine is still potentially subjected to oppression. Her surrender to the police can possibly be seen as the triumph of the state, both after WWII and May '68. Yet Yasmine has also triumphed in the face of extreme oppression at the hands of the von Geislars, who personify Vichy France and Nazi Germany, as well as the police under Sarkozy. Her personal revolt, although violent, succeeded where May '68 did not in the past, but there is still tension with the structure in the present. She has had success over historical oppression which provides the possibility for a reintegration of past subjugation and revolt with the same conditions in the present. It should be noted that she is still pregnant at this point, as well; it was her sonogram that opened the film after all. The digital black and white images that began the film are indicative of the not yet fully realized potential of constellating past and present growing within the viewer. Yasmine's surrender reminds the spectator of the tension with present circumstances for Muslims. This ambiguity is the final shock of the film and whether or not the spectator realizes the potential remains equally ambiguous. Still, obstacles must

be overcome in order for a reintroduction of history to occur. Andreas Huyssen points out what some of them are in his book *Present Pasts*. Cultural identity can collapse under the weight of a global one, especially with relations to past traumas. He writes “Memory used to be associated either with canonical traditions or with structures of rhetoric that were considered absolutely essential to make social and cultural memory possible” (3). Huyssen’s argument here stems from the notion of preserving a principle to the point that it becomes untouchable. My argument suggested that French history surrounding Vichy as a part of Germany, the way May’ 68 is remembered, and the Sarkozy government’s continued subjugation of Muslims are all examples of preserved principle. However, I argue Gens’ film engages each of these “untouchable” moments by illustrating revolution against violent subjugation.

The concept of Benjamin’s allegory preserves the possibility for continuous (re)envisaging of France’s violent past because nothing is ever finite within the arrangement of the fragments. Moments of time are repeatedly released from the continuum through the shocks provided by Gens’ film. These fragments are continuously juxtaposed against one another and form a new constellation each time. The violent oppression/subjugation and the response of violent revolt that occurred during Vichy, May ’68, and Sarkozy come together temporarily in Gens’ film and begin to illustrate the momentary meeting of past and present, no matter how brief they are. *Frontiere(s)* constructs juxtapositions that Benjamin’s notion of the constellation aptly describes. Each moment of time flashes up for the spectator to make the connections between them and, more importantly, offers a chance to rearrange these fragments into something new. From his narrative and choice of camera style to his characters, there are clear lines drawn

between the past and present politically and stylistically. These moments can be reacquired for the French national identity, but it requires the participation of the viewer, what Tim Palmer calls the “engaged spectator,” to happen (60). His idea is that the spectator is actively responding to the film in some way through visceral experiences. Gens supplies the shocks that create the bodily experience for the spectator that Palmer describes. These same shocks also fragment linear history that the viewer can shape into new constellations formed between historical periods.

Historical moments can become removed or out of sync because they don’t fit into an ideal vision of society. They are no longer “essential,” as Huyssen describes, to the formation of a cultural identity. As such, I argue shock and allegory have consequences for film history, as well. In the case of *Frontiere(s)* its references to the canon of French New Wave filmmaking are overlooked by contemporary critics. Their sentiment is this period of cinema is so enshrined that the movement is above reproach and its purpose cannot be achieved again. Although New French Extremity is more violent than French New Wave, my argument illustrates how Gens is able to engage in thoughtful political critique similar to what Godard did in the 1960’s. “Torture porn,” a subgenre of contemporary horror, which shares many similarities, narratives, and visceral violence with New French Extremity, is also denied access by popular culture and critics to 1970’s American horror, like Hooper’s *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. The act of placing these past filmmakers on such a high pedestal has disrupted the present’s ability to interact with it. The rich film tradition of France should be compared to works that mirror them in spirit; instead New French Extremity film is denied this cultural history. As such, I argue that New French Extremity is being subjugated in its own right by

popular culture and the level of violence in the films is the genre's engagement in violent revolution.

## **Flayed Flesh: Torture and Tension in Postcolonial French Politics**

Pascal Laugier's 2008 film *Martyrs* uses form- and content-based shocks to explore French national guilt over its troubled past with regards to Algerian torture and engage the spectator in a transcendent re-imagining of that history. The result potentially allows for a renewed understanding of this past, one that incorporates the voices of the various groups engaging in contemporary considerations about the war, and addresses the stigma of discussing torture carried about by both sides of the conflict. I contend this is important because the taboo surrounding this discussion has been lessening since 2000, and *Martyrs* offers insight into the various roles of people involved with torture. Laugier's film implicitly critiques the torture conducted during the Algerian war for independence, by both sides, through a story about young, French-Arab women who are tortured until the point just before death. The practice is carried out by a secretive, all-white, bourgeois sect with the intention of creating martyrs to achieve transcendent experiences and question them afterwards about what they saw.

The purpose of my argument is to illustrate how the links between bodily suffering and the ethereal idea of transcendence that the characters experience in *Martyrs* is likewise offered to the spectators through a visceral narrative, stylistic shocks, and allegory, in the form of dialectical imagery. This material suffering of the characters leads to transcendence for the spectators, because it conjures the colonial and post-colonial history of the Algerian conflict. Furthermore, the corporeal feeling of shock is what transcends Laugier's work and produces a potential dialogue about torture. The implicit references to Algerian torture are also a bodily experience for the viewer because

the violence in the narrative evokes physical responses from him or her, such as tensing up or turning the head. The stylistic shocks are just as visceral because the camera, during close-ups, registers the pain of the victim for the spectator so he or she can get a better sense of the young women's fear and agony. Laugier's close-ups and low angle shots of Anna, the main protagonist, situate the spectator in the role of victim by allowing the viewer to experience nearly all of her emotions. Conversely, the close-ups and high angle shots are a form of interrogation that allows the spectator to experience the role of victimizer. *Martyrs* does this in order to allow spectators the possibility of exploring torture, bodily and psychologically, through both sides of victim and victimizer.

There is a unique third position reserved for the spectator, that only he or she can fill, called witness. This role remains central to the notion of transcendence, despite the viewers' identification with victim and victimizer, because it is the mediated relationship between self and other. This is to say that the spectator can take the material experience of the other two roles into witnessing in order to transcend both to form a new way of understanding what they have just endured. For this reason I cite Walter Benjamin's notion of allegory, his idea that shock can fragment history so that pieces can be rearranged to form new understandings of the past in what he calls the dialectical image. By juxtaposing history, Algeria and torture, with different points of view, victim and victimizer, the viewer is given an allegorical reimagining of history by the film that encompasses his or her role as witness.

*Martyrs* also has links to film history with Carl Theodor Dreyer's 1928 work, *The Passion of Joan of Arc*. Dreyer's handling of the story of Joan of Arc is thematically and stylistically similar to Laugier's work in *Martyrs*. Tortured female protagonists as the

embodiments of a socially outcast “others” and their mistreatment, and martyrdom, at the hands of the wealthy elite are strong parallels between both films. Joan is a lonely, scared young woman who inspires empathy from the viewer, just as Anna does. Both women are sacrificed by powers beyond their control, and both women’s suffering leads to transcendence for the viewer. Dreyer’s use of close-ups, low-angle shots, and high-angle shots, which mirror those of Laugier, express Joan’s fear and anxiety and facilitate transference of these emotions to the spectator.

Laugier deepens the relationship between Anna and the viewer by creating an empathetic character who suffers tremendously at the hands of her captors. She is someone that the spectator can connect with on a physical level through her treatment on screen. The character of Anna is played by Morjana Alaoui, who is Moroccan, and embodies the contemporary and historical, colonial and postcolonial, problems faced by Muslims at the hands of the French. In the film, she is an oppressed Muslim woman suffering at the hands of a rich, powerful group of whites. Contemporary, postcolonial French-Muslim citizens, although not tortured, have experienced violent oppression at the hands of the French government, which I pointed to in the previous chapter. Muslims in Algeria, when it was a colony, were not afforded equal rights under French rule, and some were physically tortured during the war for independence.

Laugier explores this oppression and trauma in the final forty-five minutes of *Martyrs*, moments, I argue, that point towards Algeria. This portion of the film centers on Anna and her methodical treatment at the hands of her captors. The experience of her captivity is offered to the spectator through the sights and sounds of the film, as well. The set design of cold metal walls and chains are tactile in nature and the spectator can likely

guess how they feel through sensory recall. Further adding to this physicality is the dull thud of a fist on soft flesh, which might make a viewer cringe or the broken bodies of those suffering from illness or torture may result in a gasp or sucked in breath. The point I am making is that these are physical responses to the film that are the sites of transference and the beginnings of transcendence. Repeated exposure to these visceral moments strengthens my notion of a link between the materiality in suffering of both the characters and spectators of *Martyrs* as a means to engage with Algerian history. In light of this I see Anna as a martyr for the Algerian conflict who embodies not only the Muslims, but also the victims of torture on both sides of the war. Algeria's fight for independence saw extensive torture carried out by both sides on combatants and noncombatants alike, a topic that still sharply divides many of the groups involved in the contemporary rhetoric. I see *Martyrs* adding to the discussion through its direct address of the roles, victim, victimizer, and witness, involved with torture.

Shock in the narrative begins with Anna witnessing several people killed in front of her, including her childhood friend Lucie's suicide, followed by a meeting with a woman simply called Mademoiselle. The corridor in which the meeting takes place is cold, metallic, and sterile and seemingly far removed from the contemporary middle-class home that sits on top of it. Mademoiselle informs Anna that she represents a group that is exploring the afterlife, while showing her photos of people in various stages of torture and terminal illness. The group seeks to cleanse the world, which is viewed as full of victims of suffering, with martyrs; she remains vague about what the world has had to endure, but the implication is an indifference towards the violence and bloodshed



humanity has inflicted on itself. Anna's suffering in the narrative is meant to physically expose the spectator to the self-abuse of mankind.

Shock begins for the spectator begins with graphic photos Mademoiselle shows Anna because they are of actual places and people, even though they are given fictitious names. This allows the spectator to connect with numerous spaces and times.

Mademoiselle pays particular attention to the eyes revealing they indicate when a martyr has transcended, something I will describe in greater detail later in this chapter for both the character and viewer. While not readily apparent to most spectators that the images are in fact real, I do believe that some viewers would recognize them to be authentic.

More importantly this blend of fiction and non-fiction, as I pointed out in the last chapter, further fragments history allowing the spectators' shock to engage the past being presented. One photo titled "Long Sheng Province 1912" is one of the last state-authorized Chinese Lingchi (slow slicing, death by a thousand cuts) executions carried out in 1905 on a prisoner named Fou Tchou-Li.<sup>8</sup> The reason I single this particular photo out is because it was taken by a French soldier, and what I see as another link between France and torture. What matters most to me is the fact that the images I have chosen juxtapose various points in France's history against one another and the viewer, so that he or she can gain a new perspective of that past.



Fig. 4 Anna transcended Fig. 5 Unk. Algerian Man 1960's Fig. 6 Fou Tchou-Li 1905

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.charonboat.com/item/149>

The above images illustrate Mademoiselle's attention to the eyes of victims suffering indicating they are no longer a part of the world and permit an overview of my notion regarding transcendence as historical allegory. The three shots are, from left to right, Anna's final moments in the film, an unknown man tortured during the Algerian war, and Fou Tchou-Li. The victims have all suffered from extreme trauma, such as flaying and dismemberment, but more importantly they do not register their immediate surroundings. Anna's image has her positioned in a similar pose to the Algerian man, which offers a clear visual link to the Algerian war. The third image is notable because it mirrors a form of religious, or sacrificial, ecstasy which links back to Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* and, ultimately, Laugier's film. My particular interest here lies in the links to Georges Bataille's ideas about discontinuity and continuity. He writes "Between one being and another, there is a gulf, a discontinuity" (12). He further suggests that "death means continuity of being" (13). The gulf he describes is what I see as transgression, an integral part of torture, and continuity is the taboo of death. There is tension between discontinuity and continuity, my example is the group's treatment of Anna. They continually transgress against her discontinuity seeking to break through to continuity, but the group's sole focus is Anna's torture. The victims in both films, Anna and Joan, share a relationship, what I call witnessing, with the viewer through the tension of the women's suffering—something which allows the spectator to transcend their own time.

Transcendent experience is further evolved by the spectator's dialectical relationship with history, further situating them in the position I call witness. Witnessing is unique to the spectator because neither the victims nor victimizers are allowed this

perspective due to their roles being stuck in the contemporaneous timeframe in which they occur. What I mean is that a witness to torture or religious sacrifice is more open to the connections between all participants, because they are not focused on a task at hand, like the victimizer, or under severe duress, like the victim. Bataille discussed the idea of sacrifice as the shared experience, the momentary revelation of continuity, between a person sacrificed and the onlookers of that death (82). Laugier's film title is also appropriate for situating the spectator in this role, as the word martyr is derived from the Greek word for witness. My notion of witness, with regards to *Martyrs*, furthers my argument of materiality/shock and transcendence/allegory because it permits spectators to engage with history through their own individual experiences. This is a privileged position for viewers due to their subjective memories of the past, moments that may have been lived through or read about, something the film's characters do not have. The subjective connection to history is a relationship that is fragmented, ever-changing, and dynamic, which Benjamin's dialectical image—an idea that the material of experience can bring meaning of the past to the present—illustrates. Patterns form and reform with each exposure to the past, an experience that is also unique to the viewer. *Martyrs* offers spectators the potential to mend France's colonial past with Algeria and to reevaluate the painful memory of violence through the spectator's position as witness.

### **Algerian War for Independence: France's Violent Colonial History**

The reestablishment of French identity after Nazi occupation was a difficult period for France and saw the country try to shed its prewar colonial status. However, the Algerian war for independence challenged this notion of France as a progressive nation only a few years removed from occupation. The war is recognized as having begun on

November 1, 1954 with actions taken by the National Liberation Front of Algeria (FLN) on what is now referred to as *Toussaint Rouge* (Red All Saints' Day) against French targets. The FLN was comprised of the Muslim population of Algeria that had become angered at the repeated lack of social reform by France's government regarding their rights as citizens, even after valiant fighting by Muslim units during WWII. These returning soldiers would eventually take up places of leadership in the FLN and provide the fighting skills needed to engage France in the war for independence.

The hard-lined approach by France concerning torture has come from the stance taken by those who carried out the practice for the military and how they viewed their mission in Algeria. In her book *Torture: The Role of Ideology in the French-Algerian War*, Rita Maran states, "[General] Massau justified the torture as regrettably necessary, bolstering his views with those of regiment's priest who also considered torture a temporary but necessary measure if France, in terms of its civilizing mission, was to retain Algeria" (25). The sacrifice of civilians was made justifiable by the French government as a means of keeping the Algerian population under the protection and control of France. These individuals were martyred in their own right for a cause that although theirs with regards to seeking equal rights was brought to them by violent means. The mistreatment of innocents begins to mirror what happens with Anna at the hands of Mademoiselle's group.

Collective French memory has been influenced by the military's control over how information surrounding Algeria is disseminated. "Official" French history held the belief that the Algerian conflict was a civil insurrection and not a war for independence until 1999 (McCormack 11-12). By maintaining this stance it allowed for these senior

positions of influence to be provided with immunity thereby cementing their places in roles of authority. Because of their privileged positions in the upper echelons of government they were able to firmly keep control of any and all information with regards to their conduct. Ultimately this control of information alludes to the amnesties of many French generals, like Massau, who were never tried for their roles as torturers.<sup>9</sup> This is an apt description of the role Mademoiselle's group plays in *Martyrs*. Their positions as affluent members of society allow them to carry out their experiments with little risk of discovery.

In *May '68 and Its Afterlives*, Kristin Ross discusses how the French remember turbulent periods. She writes, "The way in which political dimensions of the event [May '68] have been, for the most part, dissolved or dissipated by commentary and interpretations—is now at the center of the historical problem" (1). The problem she is referring to is the memory surrounding May '68 and its material representations, such as televised remembrance ceremonies. She addresses the issue of how these demonstrations lack the full weight of the event's impact on French society's "afterlives." Her discussion of the May '68 revolt is applicable to the Algerian war, as well. As Ross suggests with information regarding May '68, "political dimensions" of Algeria and torture conducted there have been suppressed for nearly forty years by the French military. This suppression, which has been lessening since 2000, is what Laugier's film continues to dissolve in the "official" history.

The extent to which each side engaged in brutal torture has had considerable influence on scholarly studies and films in recent years and has begun to be investigated in terms of collective memory and acknowledgement. The former colony's fight and

---

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.socialistreview.org.uk/article.php?articlenumber=10269>

eventual success in attaining independence is a sensitive subjective for both colonizer and formerly colonized—neither side wanting to admit their roles in torture. Atrocities were carried out by France's military and members of the FLN on each other and non-combatant civilians with impunity. The repressed memories surrounding the Algerian conflict have been characterized by substantial divisions and tensions, such as Algerians who sided with the French, and vice versa, and the lack of any form of punishment for those who conducted the torture. This has, at times, hindered the recuperative process in discussing the war in recent years and largely has to do with the amount of people that remember the war and the “afterlives” they are living. Professor of French Studies Jo McCormack has done extensive research on the subject of memories surrounding Algeria. He writes, “The divisive nature of the war itself, pitting various groups against one another in a latent civil war, as well as the unresolved nature of elements of the past and the stakes involved, explain why various groups are currently engaged in such fierce memory battles—including debates on when and how to commemorate, the extent of torture, treatment of *hakris* (Algerians loyal to France), and the French who supported the Algerians” (2). The current narrative in France regarding the war is still under development as all the different groups begin to outline their own subjective memories of what took place then. The collective history will not be known until much of the divisiveness regarding the period has dissipated and subjective memory displaces collective memory. Laugier's fictional narrative in *Martyrs* permits a dialogue about torture through a dialectical engagement with history, which potentially lessens the stigma of discussing the war, and is important to the continued efforts of recuperating repressed memories surrounding the conflict.

## Material Suffering of Anna and Joan: Spectatorial Shock of Victim Trauma



Fig. 7 Anna's confinement



Fig. 8 Joan at the start of her trial

*Martyrs* induces spectatorial shock at the material suffering of Anna when she awakens chained to a chair in a large, dimly lit room, a space which outwardly manifests her fear and isolation. There is harmonious geometric continuity on the metallic walls with rigid lines of vents and evenly spaced bolts, while the floor is highly polished concrete and very smooth. It is a sterilized industrial space that is nothing short of efficient in its construction. The entire space gives a sense of being cool to the touch, like the surface of a mirror. The appearance of the room, no matter how ordered, is ambiguous, uninviting, and menacing. It is the epitome of isolation because it is underground, secluded from everything associated with the world above. The feeling of total removal and isolation from the world is a disorienting experience for the viewer and a sense of fear creeps in.

The opening sequence of *The Passion of Joan of Arc* sets the tone for the rest of the film by mapping a space as a reflection of Joan's senses and emotions that are then transferred to the spectator. Dreyer's discontinuous editing and strange geometric set design are comparable to Laugier's and achieves a similar effect. It is the physical manifestation of the interior of Joan's mind, much like what was done with Anna. Emotions Joan may have experienced are given tactility by the mise-en-scène. The floor

is composed of uneven, rough hewn stones that are indicative of cold, wet, and grainy feeling to any spectator who has touched a similar surface. The room's blanched appearance mirrors Joan's stark white complexion of fear. The white-washed, drab appearance blurs the space together while the groups of soldiers and priests are haphazardly composed and in no discernible order which is confusing.

Dreyer's film uses spectatorial disorientation through film form to permit the viewer to share in Joan's position similar to the way Laugier does with Anna. Joan's confusion and fear is felt by the spectator, because the mind of the viewer is never truly sure where he or she "is" in the room and remains surrounded by indifferent or hostile figures. When the camera tracks it reveals more members of the clergy and military, but this movement does not define the space in its totality because it never reaches the far side of the room. Wall adornments, such as windows and sconces, have an asymmetrical placement and the disharmonious design is echoed in the unevenly tiered seating of the religious figures. Walls appear to abruptly end, slope, or jut out without any cause to do so; it's as if the room is alive and moving or in a perpetual state of being incomplete.

Both directors' film forms continue my notion of spectatorial shock between Anna/Joan and the spectator especially during the tightly framed shots of the faces of the women. The character's vulnerability is simultaneously experienced by the viewer as an interrogation and recognition of the fear the women's experience. The close-up is what allows the spectator to begin to take up the position of victim. Spectators are repeatedly given close-ups of cracked, cragged, scowling or smirking faces of the members of the church or Joan's own smooth, bewildered visage. Her anxiety registers for the viewer, but the camera does not pull away immediately. Instead it remains transfixed on Joan's face



as a form of interrogation, just like Laugier does with Anna during her initial confinement (Fig, 7).

The extreme element of Anna's and Joan's anguish is more readily transferred onto the viewer due to the ability of the close-up to map out their pain in great detail. Both women are given substance by the attention of the close-up, as well. Bela Balázs writes, "When the film close-up strips the veil of our imperceptiveness and insensitivity from the hidden little things and shows us the face of objects, it still shows us man, for what makes objects expressive are the human expressions projected onto them. The objects only reflect our own selves" (60). What Balázs is talking about is the intimacy of the close-up and how it asks the spectator to take up residence in a character, if only for a moment, in order to offer greater understanding of them.

The realization of Anna's predicament causes her to attempt to remove the heavy chains on her wrists, first by the shackles and then by tugging on the wall attachment. Repeated cuts simulate her growing apprehension as they move from close-ups to medium shots from various angles around the room. The tension mounts for both Anna and the spectator as she becomes more frantic in her efforts until the eventual realization is that she will not be freed. Anna's torture begins psychologically with dread about what exactly is going to transpire. This feeling is physical and felt equally by her and the spectator because both have the knowledge of what her captors' intentions are, even if their methods remain unclear. I would like to point out that this scene also has the earliest indications of the second position of victimizer, a position that becomes more apparent later in the film. This position develops through multiple angled shots from shadows in the corner while others are from skewed angles overhead, similar to security cameras.

The dizzying rate of the cuts between them is meant to disorient the viewer and illustrates that multiple people are responsible for Anna's captivity even if they are never seen directly. The spectator's relationship with Anna only intensifies as the narrative becomes more violent with regards to her treatment. When Anna hides herself in the shadows in the corner of the room, alone and unable to escape, it parallels the viewing experience for the spectator watching the film in a darkened theater, who can do nothing but accept what is about to befall the young girl. The back-and-forth between character and spectator happening in the film illustrates Martine Beugnet's and Tim Palmer's notions of cinematic synaesthesia. This is their idea that stimulation of one sense causes perception in another, and is represented by Laugier constructing a duality between Anna/Joan and the viewer.

### **Reconciling With the Victimizer: Identifying With Historical Torturers**

The scene in *Martyrs* which offers the greatest chance for engagement with torture and the role of victimizer is the sequence of Anna surrendering and being stripped of her flesh. Anna has ceased fighting her captors and diligently eats and drinks what is offered to her. There is a cut to her last beating which shows her lying prone on a bed not resisting the onslaught of punches as the camera tracks by the action. For the spectator there is a resignation to the tortures because they have become familiar due to their frequency. He or she expects Anna to suffer, and while not looking forward to it, the viewer accepts it. The spectator is complicit with the torturers in this respect, having resigned him or herself to view Anna's body being broken. There is also a shared relief between spectator and victimizer over Anna's surrender—signaling to her captors she is ready for her final transformation into martyr but to the spectator, an end to her suffering.

The shared relief aligns the spectator with the victimizer, if only briefly, and is important for the spectators because he or she is about to engage with Anna's transcendence. The camera pauses briefly and then fades to black, likely indicating Anna's fade into unconsciousness. As the camera fades in to a once again prone Anna, Lucie's disembodied voice tells her she is not afraid anymore indicating to Anna that she need not fear what comes after this life. I see this moment as part of what the torturers seek but, more importantly, what the viewer is about to experience. These repeated fades can be read as moments of reconciliation within Anna, her development of an understanding about what awaits her. She is transcending the world she currently lives in, something her captors do not experience but, as I will demonstrate later, the spectator does.

Engaging torture in Algeria figures more prominently the closer Anna gets to her transcendence and gaining the perspective of the victimizers need to martyr her is important in that understanding for the viewer. Another fade out and fade in and Anna's female captor descends the ladder to check on her. She has a dialogue with Anna and tells her she need not fight anymore and that she is now ready for her final transition into martyrdom, a notion the viewer is already starting to understand. The camera pans to a set of double doors and stops as light suddenly comes through the small windows. Her male captor, now dressed as a surgeon, removes her clothes and proceeds to operate on her. The surgery, only implied at first, is revealed to have removed Anna's flesh. The subtlety of the procedure is paralleled by Laugier's own faint allusions to Algeria, both in the "otherness" of the female protagonists and their harsh treatment. The camera focuses on Anna's pained face during the procedure and is reflective of the pained realization of the spectator's awareness of torture trauma. Laugier's use of the close-up in this sequence

acts as the gateway for the spectator and has the potential to reveal history. Mary Ann Doane, citing Walter Benjamin, states, “The close-up was one of the significant entrance points to the optical unconscious, making visible in daily life what went unseen” (90). For my argument, the “optical unconscious” is the subjective memory of the spectator which Laugier taps into through his close-ups. At this point in her torture, Anna has been reduced to an object to be put on a pedestal as a martyr, questioned by Mademoiselle about the afterlife, but allowing the spectator to “interrogate” torture in Algeria through the close-up. Her body has become irrelevant and used only as a medium for transcendence in both character and spectator.

Immateriality is given substance through Anna’s sacrifice for both the character and spectator. The inability to describe the pain of the self allows for the substantiation of an immaterial idea that can be transcribed onto the hurt body. Elaine Scarry describes how this occurs in her introduction to *The Body in Pain* where she writes, “A person experiencing pain cannot fully express the feeling to a person who is not suffering in a similar manner” (4). What Scarry means is that pain is relevant to the person who has to endure it and that person can only begin to articulate that feeling to someone else who is experiencing similar pain, but it is a unique occurrence to the individual. However, the victimizers goal is rooted in Anna’s suffering; she must endure the suffering of the world as Mademoiselle said at their initial meeting. Moreover, Anna’s flaying (Fig. 10) is important for the spectatorial experience and understanding Algerian torture. The spectator has to endure the torture not as the victim, but the one who needs it to happen in order for his or her own transcendence to occur. The spectator is paired with Anna’s victimizer in search of answers even if the knowledge that is sought is different. As I will

point out later, the stimuli provided by the flaying, however implicit, allows the spectator to potentially reconcile Algerian torture with the present through Anna's pain while taking the position as her victimizer. Tension remains in the alignment between the spectator and Mademoiselle's group, however. The group is largely removed from her ordeal and therefore cannot be in a position to empathize or understand Anna's experience, something the spectator has been through with her.



Fig. 9 Anna being prepped for surgery



Fig. 10 Anna flayed

## Witnessing: Constructing the Allegorical Relationship with History

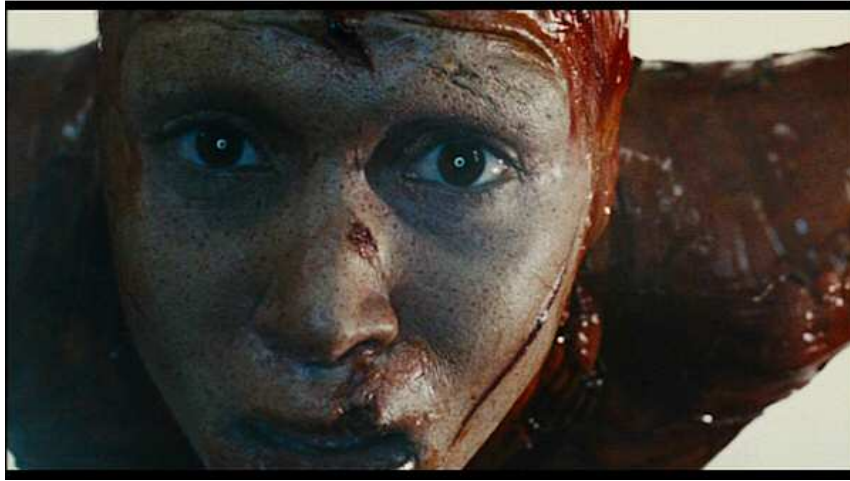


Fig. 11 Anna in sacrificial ecstasy/transcending

Suffering at the hands of others is a central tenet in both films and lends materiality to intangible ideas and vice versa. Bodily sensation is a feeling of substance, of corporality and feeling, which leads us to an immaterial idea through the sensation itself. In Vivian Sobchack's essay, "The Passion of the Material: Toward a Phenomenology of Interobjectivity," she writes, "It is this sense of passion as suffering the agency and power of external forces on our lived bodies that provides us the material foundation that primordially grounds the possibility of our ethical behavior towards others and the world" (288). In other words, those who are familiar with suffering are more apt to be open for considerations of another person's trauma because of the shared visceral experience such a moment provides. *Martyrs* and *The Passion of Joan of Arc* let the viewer experience the suffering of both young women by situating them in the role of the victim and victimizer. This has the potential to allow the spectator's subjective memories of historical trauma be reintegrated into a new objective collective consideration of history.

The spectator's position of witness is illustrated by cinema's ability to use special effects which allows him or her to be present within Anna's transcendental vision. This also what separates the viewer from Mademoiselle because the spectator has in some way physically felt what Anna has experienced keeping them safe from falling into the dangerous position the elder woman's ambition—the spectator is able to understand the transcendence better due the experience of victim and victimizer. Anna's vision is a cosmic void, lacking anything recognizable, except for serenity. However, for the spectator it should be treated as a blank canvas that can then be filled with historical moments like Algeria, and the promise of bringing peace to the tumultuous period. After she is flayed alive, she is placed underneath a medical lamp and the camera slowly zooms into her iris. At this point the viewer is treated to a disembodied POV shot which moves down a dark tunnel with a bright white light at the end, similar to accounts of near death experiences. The camera zooms back out and the viewer is once again treated to Anna's battered face as she stares into the lamp above her head. Serenity and understanding of an afterlife is all that registers there. The scene teases the viewer with an unfathomable idea, only allowing for a moment in the dark tunnel. The sensory nature of her abuse is tortuous to the spectator because the close-up details her flesh stripped body. Anna's skin being peeled off is a material representation of the viewer's mind being exposed to Algerian traumas. Physical rending of flesh produces spectatorial shock that opens up the possibility for the viewer to experience the past.

I see the position of witness working through transgression and suffering, two components I argue help understand trauma and further illustrate how. Georges Bataille wrote extensively on the suffering of life. In *Eroticism* when he writes, "We are

discontinuous beings, individuals who perish in isolation in the midst of an incomprehensible adventure, but we yearn for our lost continuity” (8). For him continuity means death, a simultaneously attractive and terrifying prospect for people. The search for the continuity of death is given tactility in the content and form of both films, as is the materiality of transgression. Bataille writes, “Religious eroticism is concerned with the fusion of beings with a world beyond everyday reality” and is reached through his notion of “sacrifice” (12). The young women in these films are subjected to this “fusion” by force from an aggressive external force. This allows the spectator to privilege both victim and aggressor, but more importantly allows for the position of witness to the torture. This last viewpoint, which cannot be filled by the characters in the film, is solely reserved for the spectator. This position is offered to the spectator through Laugier’s film, even though it is antagonistic to the viewers’ senses, and allows for possibilities of glimpses of and fusion with the past.

This brief instant of fusion happens when the spectator is brought into Anna, and shares only the smallest notion of co-existence with her. The film viewer is invited to be a part of Anna through the close-up and transcend with her (Fig. 11). The camera becomes an extension of the viewer in this respect and film, camera, character and spectator are all as one. This unity, no matter how brief, unlocks the possibility for understanding an afterlife. For the spectator this afterlife is the postcolonial existence of France after WWII. “Official” French history is rather vague in its dialogue about Algerian torture and there is a sense of not wanting to offend Algeria. However, collective memory surrounding this event is starting to push out the “recognized” historical facts and a new understanding of the past is emerging in contemporary rhetoric.



Both films invoke the idea of transcendence in their narratives and aesthetics that offer spectators the possibility of exploring the guilt of French history. There is guilt over the death of an innocent woman in Joan of Arc and the torture of numerous people throughout the course of the Algerian war. Both acts are put on full display for the viewer. However, Laugier's film goes further and is indicative of further French national moments of guilt. The films' instances of transgression add substance to ideas, such as racial and national purity and Nazi collaboration. Anna's and Lucie's non-white appearance and their abuse at the hands of mostly older whites parallels the treatment of both the Jews under Vichy and the current handling of Muslim and Roma populations under Sarkozy. Furthermore the role of women as scapegoats under patriarchal rule after the liberation of France is echoed in the shaving of Anna's head; this was done to mark Nazi sympathizers after the war as symbol of shame. Past and present are united under the theme of guilt. However, both films share a similar view on how to present their ideas. Political and national ideologies are manifested, or transcribed, onto the bodies of young women and given materiality by their suffering and sacrifice. The materiality of shock offered to the spectator, both in content and form, helps the spectator transcend history. This transcendence leads to an allegorical reinterpretation of history by the spectator, one that continuously invokes new voices each time it is accessed.

## **Cannibalism and Commodity: Capitalism's Influence in Post-War France**

Marina de Van's 2002 film *In My Skin* uses a bloody narrative and stylistic shocks to examine France's relationship with contemporary late-stage capitalism and engage the spectator in an allegorical revaluation of his or her own role in the same system. The result potentially allows for a renewed vision of late-stage capitalism, or neoliberalism, one that reconciles France's past and present economies, in order to seek reunification rather than atomization of people. De Van, like Xavier Gens efforts in *Frontiere(s)*, cites 1970's American horror, in this case Brian De Palma's work in *Sisters* (1973), to critique and re-conceive her own era's involvement in late-stage capitalism. Her work specifically explores the problems of isolation and alienation in a high-speed global network and develops the idea of reconciling the past with the present through several intense relationships the main character Esther experiences. She is a successful businesswoman who outwardly appears to have everything going for her. Her career is beginning to blossom, she is being given an opportunity to advance, and she has a seemingly happy, stable relationship with her fiancée.

Yet, as the film progresses, she becomes increasingly distant from those around her and engages in self-mutilation and cannibalization in order to combat the anxiety of her disconnection. The film explicitly focuses on encounters of inside/outside, self/"other," and separation/incorporation that begin as oppositional, through Esther and the film, and move towards being reconceived as interrelated at the end. Each of these

entanglements is set against a backdrop of contemporary France's capitalist corporate world. Esther's self-mutilation and cannibalization can also be seen as a consequence of the separation she experiences within that same space. *In My Skin* argues for a reconciliation of the self with its internal "other" which becomes external, or what I see as the external influences, such as interpersonal relationships and a career, that are a part of selfhood, as well as the present and internal past in late-stage capitalistic France. I contend the film does this through a mode of bringing the repulsiveness of this internality outside so that it may potentially be reincorporated into the self and present. These ideas are brought on by de Van's use of extreme angled close-ups, split screens, and a bloodied narrative about France's own unstable relationship with capitalist consumerism and its evolution and growth over the last sixty five years. De Van's work readily provides a critique and reconception, through a reunion of atomized workers, in her content and style, which uses self-consumption to explore the results of this expansion and the effects on its participants. Her self-consumption is both a *critique of* and an *answer to* late capitalism, as well as the shocking means by which the spectator, too, can critique and answer late capitalism by reincorporating the present economic state with its past.

### **Deregulation and Distance: Product-less Consumptions Bad Habits**

The post-World War II economy in France is a leading example of the regulated, public industrialism that defined mid-century capitalism. Kristin Ross extensively outlines the rise of capitalist commodity culture in *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies* in post-war France. The industrialization of France after the war saw capitalism come under the control of the government in the recently liberated country. Newly rebuilt Paris, with running water and electricity, increased the perceived need for goods and services, such

as appliances, while the glow of nightlife provided a place to express oneself with new clothes, cultural consumption, and American made cars and films. The French New Wave frequently referenced this period in film, whether to make characters look cool, like Godard's Michel in *Breathless* (1960), or as a point of contention, and a symbol of distress, such as Godard's later work in *Week End* (1967). Ross's work brings to light an interesting phenomenon that happens in mid-century capitalism, pointing out the idea of Fordism, commonly thought to be the implementation of efficient, assembly-line qualities in the work place. However, even more than this, it encourages the workers, the producers of a product, to actively consume what they make.

Jean-Pierre Dormois gives a general account of the history of France's economy in his book *The French Economy in the Twentieth Century* and describes the seemingly contradictory nature of French economics. The government had significant control of the direction its national market took after the war. Dormois writes there was an "attachment of the French to the vision of the state as the supreme arbiter of social processes and individual actions is put down to the country's historical legacy, its legal dispositions and, ultimately, its cultural preferences" (63). Dormois also cites Ezra Suleiman, a political science professor at Princeton University and board member of two of France's Fortune 500 companies, who states, "The idea that the state is responsible for the public good is indeed a typically French idea which baffles most Anglo-Saxons" (Dormois 63). This notion is what France's economy has been moving away from for the last three decades.

Contemporary late-phase French capitalism began to develop in the early 1980s, after the election of François Mitterrand, and saw a sharp turn away from post-war

economic endeavors. This move was mainly due to France's inability to stand alone as a global power, and Mitterrand sought refuge in the security of the European Union. A major consequence of this was a further lessening of state authority as France's economy became intertwined with those of its neighbors. Participation in this faster paced capitalist market limited the State's ability to exert its influence on the direction its markets took. The authority the French state maintained on its economic development has frequently lessened through various treaties by its continued involvement in an ever-expanding European Union and the creation of the Euro as currency in 1999. Also at this time, the German model of industry that France replicated, a hierarchical business mode popular in modernity, was quickly becoming obsolete. Instead, a move towards a sped-up modular network was rapidly taking over.

Neoliberal capitalism has increased its authority, through deregulation and privatization, and revived itself since the late '60's and '70's by moving away from state control. Late capitalism's extended influence is represented by its socioeconomic structure seen routinely crossing borders into former socialist countries and developing "third-world" nations. Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello discuss the spread of late capitalism's influence in their book *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. Neoliberalism has grown stronger in recent decades, enduring the forecast of its impending demise due to tighter regulations and control from state authority. This marked increase in power is owed to late capital's deregulation and privatization and highlighted by promises of proximity and connection among participants because of lesser restrictions on growth. Consequently neoliberalism is presented as "an acceptable and desirable order of things: the only possible order, or the best of all possible orders" (Boltanski and Chiapello 10). The purpose of this

expansion is to set up an “information” economy, one that trades in knowledge rather than physical equity. With little to no material goods being exchanged, just data, trade increases exponentially by essentially erasing the distance between businesses, customers, and the markets in which they work. Yet, this desire for order exists within a framework of chaos that is characteristic of failed promises, leading to isolation rather than connection, as well as the resulting product-less consumption they create. This is brought to light when Boltanski writes that there is “the despair or nihilism which the capitalist order likewise constantly induces – not only in those whom it oppresses but also, on occasion, in those who have responsibility for maintaining it” (10). The despair the authors mention is linked to the failed vision of utopia that capitalism fails to create, in this case the always on, high-speed global network that seamlessly connects everyone and everything. Workers that maintain the system have firsthand knowledge and thus can be affected by this failure to achieve the idyllic vision of neoliberalism.

De Van’s Esther is a combination of several of the economic developments that took place in France. The late-stage capitalism workplace she toils in doesn’t produce a “product” in the sense of something to stock shelves or showrooms. She essentially works with data and cultural knowledge garnered from surveys, the Middle East specifically, and uses it to find better ways to buy and sell to others and increase revenue streams for her company. However, Esther is also an updated example of Fordism that Ross discussed. Esther’s condition is a manifestation of this turmoil; without products the late capitalist is left to consume him or herself. Her job as an analyst is also affecting her because she monitors the neoliberal system and likely sees the connections that it is supposed to provide fail to manifest.

## Separation in Late Stage Capitalism: Revealing Divisions in *In My Skin*



Fig. 12 Title card of *In My Skin*

The opening sequence of *In My Skin* illustrates my claim of divisions between self and “other” in daily interactions under neoliberalism and highlights the tension of opposition and reversal in modern urban capitalism that results in alienation. The film opens to split-screen still images of the same or similar spaces, often public places with glass and steel high-rises taking precedence. These are the spaces that Esther and the spectator move in and out of every day. It should not be viewed as coincidence that de Van chose positively and negatively developed images as there is a direct correlation with the positive and negative of contemporary capitalist consumer culture. The positive images convey a sense of power and the pristine, especially when looking at the sparkling steel and glass buildings, feelings that are at the heart of modern consumerism.

The undeveloped negative images foreshadow a feeling of unease and illustrate a social split from the immaculate positive images that highlights alienation and atomization of workers in late capitalism. Martine Beugnet describes the scenery as an

“oppressive formatting frame imposed on the body by the workstation as the material extension of the office environment” (Beugnet 112). The imposition on the body she mentions is, for my argument of the external becoming internal, symbolized by these structures because this is where Esther works and that influence is corrupting her notion of herself thereby creating the external “other.” The consequence of this anxiety is infused into Esther and prefigures her own split persona of an inside and outside in relation to late-capitalism and its history.

The move from outside to inside these spaces is indicated by a pair of computer keyboards in the final two stills of the sequence and is symbolic of a techno-capitalist society. A reasonable assumption by the viewer can place the keyboards within any of the previously seen buildings. The positive side invokes the keyboards ability to connect to others. These devices are a direct link to anywhere in world because of their ability to access information and link up with anyone else using a computer, all in the blink of an eye. They are the access points to both the global, high-speed network and the corporate financial world.

Yet, the negative side reminds the viewer that there is separation, made apparent by the split-screens, and that the keyboard is also the means by which people remain separated from one another in the same modular network. Part of humanity’s sense of self comes from the routine physical contact with the larger world, its history, and other people. When those contacts are held at a distance, in this instance through a keyboard, the result can create an experience of viewing some part of ourselves as “other.” The keyboard is also another instance of the external becoming internal; because the user must filter any information they send or receive through themselves.



De Van's use of split screens in the opening elevates this formal technique and focuses on not only the environment as self and other, but her character as well. The isolation of being behind the keyboard has serious repercussions for Esther as she becomes further detached from her sense of self, friends, and fiancée in her personal life. Esther feels cut off from others in the globally networked society in which she lives and her treatment of her body as an external object indicates external alienation becoming internal alienation. Under this duress, her indulgence in self-mutilation is a physical manifestation of this anxiety. This division in her psyche, as an isolated and dispersed sense of self, is a result of the evolution of capitalism in post-war France from a colonial power to a participant in a high-speed, unregulated, and product-less global market. The positive/negative images at the beginning of the film are only a precursor to the fractured psyche of Esther. The trauma she inflicts on her objectified body is rooted in the cold, lifeless steel and glass structure she works in. This notion is reinforced by *In My Skin's* critique of late-stage capitalism's negative influence on the self and further developed by the paired images showing an opposing "other" that is alienating.



Fig. 13 Esther hallucinating at dinner

Esther's breakdown and self-mutilation begins as a result of the pressure experienced working in the heart of French capitalism, namely the business complex known as la Defense. Esther's bloodletting, in part, is due to her alienation and numbness and an attempt by her to reverse these lack of sensations. De Van thoroughly explores the notion of detached subjectivity in Esther through a scene at a dinner hosted by her boss for high-priority clients. As her boss and clients discuss global markets in Asia and the Middle East, Esther slips further into her delusions. Here de Van is really indicating capitalism as the main source for Esther's estrangement as the scene takes place in a fine-dining establishment amid courses of expensive food and wine. She is offering a critique, through Esther, that centers on the isolation of late-stage capitalism. The pace at which the conversation moves between discussing various world markets is indicative of the high speed global network of which business people are part. Amid all of this Esther begins to hallucinate and sees her arm act on its own by grabbing handfuls of food on her plate which she repeatedly tries to stop. This is done in tight shots which make the arms appear disconnected from their host. Beugnet states that these close-ups are "the itemization of the body and its fetishistic treatment become first and foremost a tool for the objectification, visual possession and consumption (or erasure) of the 'Other'" (93). Esther increasingly treats her body like a commodity to be consumed, further indicating her attempts to feel something amidst the anesthetized dinner. Eventually it is revealed that Esther views the unresponsive arm as actually being unattached to her body (Fig. 13). Her self-mutilating has been gradually building to this point. This break from reality sends her over the edge and she deteriorates into obsession. This isn't a crazed descent, however, but rather a slow methodical spiraling inward of the psyche indicating the

invading external forces' alienation taking over. Her body has become an object to be manipulated by her mind; her corporeal being is apart from her consciousness.



Fig. 14 Esther's caress

Fig. 15 Skin Removal

Fig. 16 Trying to connect

Shock is a natural spectatorial response to her delusions and actions of self-harm, and works on the level of the film as well as the reality of the viewer, which are reinforced through de Van's close-ups during particular moments of distressed detachment. For the film, it is shock at her cutting herself and the intimacy with which it is shown through close-ups and high angles. These moments in the film detail just how far Esther has objectified herself. She caresses her body the way a lover would a partner, indicating a complete detachment of her internal and external self. When this is not enough, she removes small pieces of her flesh, moments that I read as her trying to fill the void of her isolation by using her skin to create a connection to "someone" else.

Shock for the spectator is the understanding that Esther's alienation as a result of capitalism is likewise happening to them. I see de Van's use of close-ups exploring this tension between Esther and the viewer. Beugnet states that de Van's choice to film this way provides a "direct impact that aim[s] to effect on the body of the spectator, call into question the viewer's status as detached" (93). The director's use of close-ups during the severed arm scenes allow for an intimacy with the spectator and further stresses the objectivity of the individual. The severed arm is shown through a POV shot that situates

the viewer within Esther's eyes, briefly uniting the isolated character and spectator, and becomes a literal manifestation of detachment under late-capitalism.

*In My Skin* is a continuation of the critique of capitalist expansion in post-war France that the French New Wave and Godard's *Week End* undertook in the '60's. Esther's body brings to light the negative effects of neoliberalism, while the trauma of the film allows for a dialogue with Godard's *Week End* through his similar take on lingering post-war industrialization. Links to Godard by de Van are developed through their shared consideration of cannibalism as a critique of consumption. What separates her from him is Godard's illustration of consuming subjects consuming each other while de Van shows Esther consuming herself. *Week End* is ripe with criticism for mid-century capitalism, including being set in a dystopic French society focused on luxury goods and money. Godard returned France to a war-torn landscape with no visible enemy attacking. However, the foe here is the unabashed desire for commodities over everything else. Death is commonplace in this chaotic diegesis and characters show no sympathy to each other. Godard even corrupts Hippies, countercultural icons who are associated with world peace and free-love movements, who are seen at the end of the film brainwashing people they capture and sometimes eating them. In doing so, Godard suggests that participants in industrial capitalism cannot simply remove themselves from its social and economic configurations, but rather must work within them.

Godard's assessment of regulated, public capitalism, and its alienation, while nihilistic and cynical, uses cannibalism to pervert the desire for consumption in order to press for a transformation and revaluation of the capitalist system. Robin Wood writes, "Cannibalism represents the ultimate in possessive-ness, hence the logical end of human

relations under capitalism” (21). Wood’s notion about “return of the repressed,” in this case the past coming back to consume the present and future, is relevant as well because of cannibalisms taboo nature and what it unveils about capitalisms desires for ownership. With *Week End* society has turned on itself and begun to be devoured by a social structure that promotes classism, resulting in wide spread disenfranchisement. The shock at the world Godard created was meant to evoke conversation about the role capitalist consumption was playing in post-war France. However, his characters never sought to change their habits, maintaining the “drop out” attitude of the Hippies, while operating within that social structure.

De Van differs from Godard’s take on mid-century capital in that her business culture has broken Esther and turned her on herself as an individual rather than the public at large. This reflects the increase of deregulation and privatization under neoliberal capital as Esther becomes increasingly isolated. What began as disenfranchisement, the isolation of certain groups or classes, under mid-century capital has evolved into the atomization of the individual worker. Both examples are the result of an unfeeling society that has no sense of community under the influence of capitalism and its desire.

Esther’s cannibalism is an indication of the destructiveness of the effect late-stage capitalism has on its participants. Tim Palmer, paraphrasing David Macdougall in *The Corporeal Image: Film, Ethnography and the Senses*, states, “*In My Skin* does trace Esther’s plight to the personal costs of careerism and late-phase capitalism.

[Furthermore], there is an opposition of the individual body and the social body, [seen as] a backlash against the fragmentary corporatization of humanity” (84). What Palmer is saying is that Esther is an analysis of the atomization experienced in late-stage capitalism

and is the result of the sacrifice and isolation that is needed to succeed in that world. Her self-mutilation is part of the “backlash” and a physical manifestation of an increased alienation and the site at which de Van offers a critique of capitalism and its history in France. The extent of the separation comes to the forefront when Esther envisions a part of herself removed.

Still, when academics like Beugnet and Palmer examine this tension, they do not situate their arguments within a larger historical context, which I am doing with the evolution of late-capitalism’s negative influences. Just as France as a whole must re-examine itself, so, too, must the individual embark on a similar search within him or herself to find a relationship to the history that has produced seclusion in the present. For instance, Palmer sees *In My Skin* as “a protracted examination and systematic analysis of de Van’s own body; its narrative is inscribed on to her flesh” (83). I agree with his assessment that the film is an examination of the self, but I differ in that I see current anxieties about late capitalism, a reconsideration of the way it conceptualizes the self, as the narrative that is being incised on Esther rather than just an analysis of the body. The dinner scene affixes the fears and isolation of living in a high-speed, global world; the narrative of contemporary reality under late capitalism and its history is lived out in de Van’s diegesis through Esther’s ever-increasing separation from that reality.

### **An Answer to Isolation: Reintegrating the Past With Abject Self-Consumption**

Self-consumption in *In My Skin* represents a critique expressing the concerns of late capitalism, but also points to a solution. De Van’s film imagines a reconciliation of Esther’s internal self and internalized external “other” as a means of also reconciling socioeconomic insides and outsides caused by failed promises of proximity and

connection which lead to anxiety. Ultimately, *In My Skin* looks to reevaluate the system of neoliberal capitalism and reintegrate the participant with a desire to return to an avowedly regulated system that conceives of a “public good” in some manner. The film seeks to do this both on screen with Esther and off screen with the spectator, through the mode of self-consumption, which can alleviate the fear of confronting the disconnectedness of this high-speed world. For Esther, the idea is literal with her self-mutilation, but for the spectator, self-consumption is a moment of rediscovery. The final sequence of the film bears out how reintegration takes place and Esther’s actions are united with the spectator’s by way of their shared proximity with late capitalism in the form of allegory.

The final moments of *In My Skin* highlight Esther’s reconciliation with her internal self, what I see as her identity and how she copes with the world, and what has become her external “other,” or her displaced sense of self, a process that ultimately allows her to reconnect with her fiancée, friends, and work. The sequence begins with Esther entering a market to presumably run routine errands. However, after only a few minutes inside, she begins to have blurred vision and appears dizzy, what I see as further physical manifestation of her detachment and the burden of capitalism’s influence, especially given that it happens amid a flurry of economic activity. Also, the POV shots of Esther’s blurred vision are sped up, which I see as more proof indicating the high-speed modular network of late capitalism. This is the moment before her internal self’s final confrontation with her external “other” and serves as a reminder to the spectator of the external pressure of neoliberal capitalism.

The final sequence of the film begins in a hotel and unfolds similarly to the start of the film, with split screens—the paired images are not stills this time, but play out

simultaneously. The left side shows Esther rummaging through her purchases removing items from the various plastic grocery bags in no particular order, ending with knives and razors of varying kinds beginning to emerge. The bags represent the previously mentioned economic activity that caused Esther's distress. There is a cut to Esther drawing a square on a yet unknown part of herself with a marker followed by another cut and drops of blood appearing on the floor. While all of this is happening the right frame remains somewhat ambiguous. A pile of Esther's clothes is shown indicating her disrobement. The pile of clothes is important because it represents two things. First articles of clothing are symbols of the self; they are choices made by a people to help identify and define themselves. Secondly, the pile is indicative of her shedding the customary limits between inside and outside, self and other. This is followed by Esther positioning a standing mirror. There is a cut to a lamp being placed in front of the mirror; the reflection of its light on the wall indicates that it has been turned on its side. The pair of images becomes nearly identical as a camera, reflected in the mirror, fills both of them followed by a fade to black. During this time the click of the camera's shutter can be heard repeatedly as numerous pictures are taken.

De Van's decision to employ split screens in her work illustrates the division among participants in a global network and is similar to Brian De Palma's work in the 1973 thriller *Sisters*. In this film, he uses mirrors to illustrate a split personality in his main character Danielle/Dominique, conjoined twins that were separated, causing the death of Dominique. To help ease the loss of her sister, Danielle assumes Dominique's persona. De Palma's use of mirroring is indicative of Danielle's split personality and highlights both herself and her sister as two selves and two others. De Van differs from



this with Esther as a detached self viewing its body objectively, rather two selves inhabiting one body. The split-screen is employed to highlight Esther's psyche becoming detached from her body and the alienation she experiences. This is important because character and film are united by their atomization. The repeated split-screen and mirroring effects are indicative of a subjective/objective relationship both within the character of Esther and viewers of the film.

Throughout this entire sequence, the sounds of the hotel and the hum of activity outside are heard, leading to a juxtaposition of sight and sound that contradict one another, but which I see as Esther reincorporating herself with the world. She is still connected to the high-speed world by its sound but secluded enough that she can complete her reconciliation. The split screens culminate in Esther surrounded by the photos of her self-mutilation, lovingly caressing a piece of excised skin. Yet, rather than consume it, as she has before she instead seeks out a way to preserve it at a pharmacy. The skin is indicative of the external "other" that she has internalized. By re-externalizing the invading force of neoliberalism, Esther supplants the isolation that came with it. Unlike after the dinner scene (Fig.14-16) when she tried to create someone to connect to, the act of preserving the skin illustrates Esther's first successful attempt to reassert control over the external "other." She has embraced the "other" of herself and now seeks to keep it as a reminder of her journey through self discovery and reintegration. The process suggested by the film isn't easy. It is painful, repulsive, and dredges up both the physical and social repressions of neoliberalism.

This sequence of events for Esther is another example of a "return of the repressed," literally with her cannibalism and exploration of her insides and figuratively

through a connection with her alienated self. Julia Kristeva outlined how this exploration of the abject self takes place when she writes, “There is nothing like the abjection of self to show that all abjection is in fact recognition of the *want* on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded. One always passes too quickly over this word, ‘want,’ and today psychoanalysts are finally taking into account only its more or less fetishized product, the ‘object of want’” (5). What Esther has done through her “abjection of self,” what I see as the exclusion of privatization and deregulation that caused her alienation, is restructured her own view of herself and how she interacts with the world without the oppressiveness of late capitalism’s influence. The excised piece of skin is indicative of the change that has taken over Esther because it represents the abject part of Esther, the final exclusion of negative neoliberal influence. Although the neoliberal structure has not changed, Esther’s relationship with it has and illustrates the potential for the spectator to do the same. It is up to the viewer to restructure the limitations imposed by neoliberal capitalism for him or herself.

Esther’s painful experience is the cure for her alienation and numbness while her abject inside is a revaluation of the exclusions she has made to define herself in late capitalism. What returns is then reconsidered and reincorporated according to her new sense of self and how she fits into the world. Cannibalism and Esther’s self-objectification in de Van’s film externalizes the internal tension of disconnection in a globally networked society. Esther’s abject treatment of her body is a means to regain a sense of herself and the relationships she has in life rather than cede that control to outside, destructive forces.

Just as Esther's mind has separated from her body, the film mimics the split, especially during the scenes of cutting, through the split-screen editing. As the knife explores the body each frame of the film is cut as well. Simultaneous points of view, that independently switch become commonplace during the climax sequence in the hotel room. Beugnet interprets this part of the film by writing, "It is the film itself that, like the skin and the life of its main character, splits open and falls into the exploration of the unnamable part of reality" (158). I diverge from that latter part of her argument and view, rather than existing as an unnamable reality, the trauma of Esther's body, and the film, becomes the site of engagement between the spectator and late capitalism's history.

De Van's film reads like an allegory of confronting the neoliberal, conceptualized self, what I call the external "other," of Esther which she wrestles with nearly the entire film. She knows something is not right and she repeatedly tries to figure out what it is. When she probes herself with the knife, tentatively at first, she is trying to figure out where to begin the reconciliation with her abject self. Transference of this exploration occurs through the spectator's reaction to her self-mutilation, which is experienced as shock. Esther's success of overcoming her alienation and confronting her abject self is highlighted by the successful removal of the flesh on her leg. She looks back on the open wound in a mirror, which is how I perceive spectators pursuing their active engagement with the film and the same history. The past is always right behind a person, staring them in the face if they turn to look at it; history often leaves a mark on anyone, sometimes an ugly one. Yet, when Esther preserves the excised flesh and holds on to it, she does so to be reminded of it. She doesn't want to let it go, it is a part of her and should be remembered even if it is from afar.

### **Amelioration of History: Spectator Continuation of the *In My Skin* Critique**

The final scene of the film, after Esther's successful preservation of the skin, shows Esther reconnecting with her life, first calling her fiancée and then confirming her starting time at work. She lounges on the hotel bed still covered in blood with the excised piece of skin nearby, but dutifully attending to a stack of papers, presumably related to her job, before going to sleep. The blood and skin are reminders that it is not business as usual, however. She receives a wake-up call from the hotel and begins to dress for her return to the distanced, high-speed workplace she has finished reassessing. She places the now tanned piece of skin over her heart, a physical reminder of the revaluating process she has endured. The film ends with a close-up of Esther's face, staring at the camera, which turns and zooms out showing her lying on the hotel bed.



Fig. 17 End of Esther's journey

This ambiguous ending is the conclusion of Esther's abject journey through self-consumption and highlights it as both the critique of and the answer to late capitalism's influence. Esther reestablishes her relationships with work, family, and friends, which are proof of her prevailing over the alienation she experienced under late capitalism, but does so with her restructured view of neoliberalism and the world she inhabits. For the spectator, this moment is the realization that his or her shock at Esther's behavior is

necessary to continue the critique begun by the film. Shock is also from the recognition of the internal struggle and tension of the present existing as an external manifestation and vice versa, as well as acknowledging a similar occurrence with the past and present relationships to France's economy. The final moments of *In My Skin* illustrate a reintegration into a global network of product-less modern capitalism, with an eye toward mending its destructive forces. Although Esther has changed, the neoliberal structure has not and that tension, between a changed character and an unchanged world, is the final shock for the spectator. The shock is meant provoke thoughtfulness in the spectator towards social change under late-stage capitalism. The idea being that change can combat his or her own alienation and isolation in the same structure as Esther, perhaps seeking out ways to return to a "public good," one that connects workers in the way neoliberalism promises but ultimately fails to deliver.

## **Brutality and Memory: Reincorporating the Historical Taboo**

New French Extremity is a genre of horror film known for its transgressive style and has caused intense debates, about its validity as a body of cinema, amongst scholars and popular critics. What has been ignored by nearly all the voices in that discussion is the attention to history that the genre's directors have explicitly and implicitly referenced. France's identity as a progressive nation that has evolved from a colonialist state to a central hub of modern economics is challenged and explored by many of the works in New French Extremity and reveal the lingering tensions of the past. Transgressive cinema is often overlooked as having no merit in a social or political discourse, a stance many of the critics take on this genre. The duality of history present in France is being examined critically by some of these directors and their films offer opportunities to disintegrate and reincorporate this troubled history into present dialogues on topics, such as socioeconomics, race and class relations, and torture. Attempts to dissolve the parallel accounts of the past are undertaken in violent fictitious films in order to have the spectatorial experience offer new visions of history created by the viewer. The purpose for this is so that these new understandings of the past can be reincorporated into a contemporary, individuated, subjective, and collective memory, rather than the objective and collective history that has persisted since World War II.

My choice of *Frontiere(s)*, *Martyrs*, and *In My Skin* offers the best possibility to understanding my approach to engaging France's past. Their attention to social history is

bolstered by an acknowledgement of film history and illustrates the directors' awareness of contemporaneous works that addressed many of the problems still faced in the present. This filmic history is important as being a source of shock that opens the continuum of history and helpful in situating the spectator in multiple periods of the past simultaneously with the present. My research brings to light how these films address the anxieties that have persisted from past events in French history and offers possibilities for reincorporating them into a re-imagined national identity. I achieved this through a combination of Walter Benjamin's theory of allegory, and Adam Lowenstein's interpretation of it, with Tim Palmer's and Martine Beugnet's contemporary research on the effect of the spectatorial experience in New French Extremity. Their attention to bodily sensation allowed me to offer explanations to what those feelings speak to and how they could (re)envisage the present through past connections.

Spectatorial shock as a means to engage historical traumas through an allegorical re-envisioning of the past which addresses contemporary anxieties is not unique to New French Extremity. I foresee my research in this field being applied to studies that engage similarly transgressive national cinemas with an eye towards understanding history that has produced lasting apprehensions and fear. By focusing my efforts on events in post-war France my research findings can extend to other countries in Europe, with similar traumatic histories, as well. Two countries I have identified that fit this distinction are Serbia and Hungary. Both countries have troubled pasts that recent filmmakers residing in them have attempted to engage with. Hungary, like France, developed after WWII, but under the authority of Communist Russia. An examination of Hungary's oppression and mistreatment during and after the war is one possible avenue that my work can address.

Hungarian film director György Pálfi's work in the 2006 film *Taxidermia* is rich with clues that address Hungary's varied history. Told through three generations of men, beginning with WWII and ending in the present, Pálfi's film illustrates a shocking engagement with that past that offers relevant discussions about the Hungarian spectator's relationship with his or her own history. His film is made in the same vein as those of the New French Extremity, but finds its influence in fantasy/body horror that differs from New French Extremity. Still, notions of Robin Wood's "return of the repressed" are still present and actually more prevalent because of the film's generational plot. Furthermore, it addresses the fears associated with WWII, the resulting Cold War, and modern isolation.

My method of addressing past and present traumas applies to the history of Serbia also, which includes a recent violent and protracted fight between it and former members of Yugoslavia, namely Bosnia and Croatia, that involved the use of torture and other means of ethnic cleansing. Serbian director Srđan Spasojević and his 2010 film *A Serbian Film* takes transgressive cinema to new heights. This film is the most recent to receive wide spread bans in numerous countries around the world. However, its violent, oppressive narrative offers insight into a country that has been ravaged by civil war, poverty, and genocide. Evidence for addressing these traumas begins in the narrative about a man returning to work as a pornographic actor and the divisive relationship he has with his jealous brother. Further adding to this plot are images of rape, torture, implied pedophilia, and necrophilia, moments that can be read as addressing the recent war's atrocities. One possible approach to addressing past and present traumas could be done by linking the government of Slobodan Milošević, Serbia's corrupt president



convicted of human rights violations, and the puppet government installed by the Axis powers during WWII similarly to what I did in chapter one.

There are many possibilities for expanded inquiries into other nations' cinemas, two of which I have identified and which are perhaps more transgressive than New French Extremity, which would likely uncover their historical traumas relating to war, economics, and social policies. Further examination of New French Extremity is also possible through continued modes of historical reintegration that I have done here. The approach I have taken to understanding national transgressive cinema is important because, as I have shown, it has the potential to displace collective history in favor of collective memory, one that includes subjective voices and narratives that may have been excluded from any "official" account.

## Bibliography

- Dans ma peau(In My Skin)*. Dir. Marina de Van. Perf. Marina de Van, Laurent Lucas, Marc Rioufol. Rézo Films, 2002. DVD.
- Frontière(s)*. Dir. Xavier Gens. Perf. Karina Testa, Aurélien Wiik, Patrick Ligardes, Samuel LeBihan. Europa Corp. Distribution, 2007. DVD.
- Martyrs*. Dir. Pascal Laugier. Perf. Morjana Alaoui, Mylène Jampanoï, Catherine Bégin. Wild Bunch Distribution, 2008. DVD.
- Le Petit Soldat*. Written and Directed by Jean-Luc Godard ; Produced by Georges De Beauregard. Ed. Georges de Beauregard, et al. New York, NY: Fox Lorber Films : Distributed by Winstar TV & Video, 1963.
- The Passion of Jeanne d'Arc*. Produced by Société Général Des Films ; a Film by Carl Dreyer; Scenario, Carl Dreyer and Joseph Delteil. Ed. Antonin Artuad, et al. Monroe, Conn: Video Images, 1985.
- The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. Vortex ; Producers, Tobe Hooper, Lou Peraino ; Writers, Kim Henkel, Tobe Hooper ; Director, Tobe Hooper. Ed. Wayne Bell, et al. Special ed. ; Widescreen version. ed. United States: MPI Home Video : Distributed by Pioneer Entertainment, 1974.
- Vivre Sa Vie: Film En Douze Tableaux (My Life to Live: A Film in Twelve Scenes)*. Les Films De La Pleïade. Ed. Pierre Braunberger, et al. Digitally remastered ed. ed. New York, NY: Fox Lorber Home Video, 1962.
- Week End*. Gaumont ; Les Films Copernic Présentent Un Film ; [Écrit Et Dirigé Par Jean-Luc Godard ; Produit Par Comacio ... Et Al.]. Ed. Comacico (Firm), et al.
- Abel, Marco. *Violent Affect: Literature, Cinema, and Critique After Representation*. Ed. Inc ebrary. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007.
- Alexander, Jeffrey C. *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2004.

- Austin, Guy. *Contemporary French Cinema : An Introduction*. Manchester ; New York : New York: Manchester University Press ; Distributed exclusively in the USA and Canada by St. Martin's Press, 1996.
- Azoury, Phillippe. "En écho aux photos de Jeff Wall." *Libération* 11 July 2001: 6.
- Balázs, Béla. *Theory of the Film: Character and Growth of a New Art*. Trans. Edith Bone. New York: Dover, 1970.
- Bataille, Georges. *Eroticism*. London: Boyars, 1987.
- . *Erotism: Death & Sensuality*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986.
- Barker, Jennifer M. *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience*. Ed. American Council of Learned Societies. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009.
- Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Trans. Howard Eiland. 4. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003.
- Benjamin, Walter 1892-1940. "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media"; Edited by Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin ; Translated by Edmund Jephcott ... [Et Al.]. Ed. Brigid Doherty, et al. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008.
- Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zohn. Ed. Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken, 1968.
- Beugnet, Martine. *Cinema and Sensation: French Film and the Art of Transgression*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 2007.
- Bordwell, David. *The Films of Carl-Theodor Dreyer*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981.
- Bürger, Peter. "The Avant-Gardiste Work of Art." Bürger, Peter. *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984. 55-82.
- Charney, Leo. *Empty Moments: Cinema, Modernity, and Drift*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1998.
- Clover, Carol J. *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1986.

- Doane, Mary Ann. "The Close Up: Scale and Detail in the Cinema." *A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* Volume 14.3 (Fall 2003): p. 89-111
- Duffy, Enda. *The Speed Handbook: Velocity, Pleasure, Modernism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009
- Gelder, Ken. *The Horror Reader*. Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group, 2000.
- Gunning, Tom. "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)credulous Spectator." *Art and Text*. 34 (Spring 1989): p. 31-45.
- Huyssen, Andreas. *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2003.
- Kracauer, Siegfried 1889-1966. *The Mass Ornament : Weimer Essays*; Translated, Edited, and with an Introduction by Thomas Y. Levin. Ed. Thomas Y. Levin. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers Of Horror : An Essay On Abjection / Julia Kristeva ; Translated By Leon S. Roudiez*. New York : Columbia University Press, 1982.
- Lowenstein, Adam. *Shocking Representation : Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.
- Marks, Laura. *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.
- McCormack, Jo. *Collective Memory: France and the Algerian War (1954-1962)*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007.
- Nichols, Bill. *Movies and Methods: Volume II*. California : University of California Press, 1985.
- Palmer, Tim. *Brutal Intimacy: Analyzing Contemporary French Cinema*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2011.
- Prédal, René. *Le Jeune cinéma français*. Paris: Nathan, 2002.
- Quandt, James. "Flesh & blood: sex and violence in recent French cinema". *ArtForum*. 31 Oct, 2011.
- Ross, Kristin. *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996.

- . *May '68 And Its Afterlives*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002.
- Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- Sobchack, Vivian Carol. *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*. Ed. American Council of Learned Societies. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.
- . "Embodying Transcendence: on the Literal, the Material, and the Cinematic Sublime." *Material Religion*. 4.2 (2008).
- Sontag, Susan 1933-2004. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. 1st ed. ed. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003.
- Williams, Linda. "Discipline and Fun: Psycho and Postmodern Cinema." *Reinventing Film Studies*. Ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams. London : New York: Arnold ; Co-published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Wolfe, Cary. *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal*. Editor. Ed. Cary Wolfe. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.
- Wood, Robin. "Return of the Repressed." *Film Comment* 14.4 (July-August 1978): p. 25-32.