Erotic Body Horror:
Dangerous Female Corporealities in Contemporary French Cinema

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by

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Abstract:

Current trends in popular visual culture are oppressively restrictive in their representations of female corporeality and expressions of sexuality. This thesis looks at a number of contemporary French films that rupture the typically clean and glossy veneer that women's bodies have traditionally had in the cinema. *Anatomy of Hell* (2004), *In My Skin* (2002) and *Trouble Every Day* (2001) all showcase unruly carnalities that encourage a feminist re-thinking of the female grotesque as a potential site of protest and empowerment. Through a close analysis of the films and their reception, I argue that they have significant political implications, especially with regards to the relationships women have with their bodies. By disrupting ideals of femininity and bodily containment, and encouraging the expression of desire that exists outside the dominant (male) visual economy, erotic body horror creates a radical space that prompts new ways of thinking about female corporeality.

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"Focusing on a body that has no specified materiality will not further feminist agendas, rather hegemony will retain its dominance. Denying the weighty materiality of flesh and fluid will enable masculinism (the unmarked norm) to retain its hegemonic position."
-Robyn Longhurst, *Bodies, Exploring Fluid Boundaries*, p. 135.

"The rhythm, the way bodies are framed and lit, that's when we start to lose ourselves, and cinema comes closest to what it essentially is: a sensual experience of the world."
-Filmmaker Philippe Grandieux as quoted by Beugnet in *Cinema and Sensation*

"Pleasure only starts once the worm has got into the fruit, to become delightful happiness must be tainted with poison."
-Georges Bataille as quoted by Michel Surya in *Georges Bataille: An Intellectual Biography*, p. 442.

Feminist work on the body continues to be of vital importance in the study of visual culture, especially considering the amount of bodily imagery that saturates our everyday lives. In North America, we currently live in an extremely visual and hypersexualized culture in which bodies are commodified at every turn. Within this image-based culture, men's and women's bodies have very different options for representation. Although men occupy positions as sex symbols more than ever before, women's bodies sustain their positions as the main objects of a scrutinizing and desiring gaze within the mass media. The ideal female body is one which is shiny and impermeable and never spills over the edge. Sexuality can only exist for a certain type of body: one that is thin, firm and clean, with no options for actual bodily functions. As Rosalind Gill states: "Indeed, the figure of the unattractive woman who wants a sexual

partner remains one of the most vilified in a range of popular cultural forms."[1] Media obsession with the control of women's bodies is apparent in every corner. Celebrity gossip magazines fill their covers with close-up images of stars' cellulite, in a demonstration of disgust with this out of control flesh. Sweat stains and excess cleavage are also the subject of close scrutiny and distaste. Male bodies are simply not monitored in the same manner. In this way, women learn to self-monitor their bodies with an understanding that an unruly body is an undesirable one. Cosmetic industries are flourishing; women pay huge sums of money to remove their fat, rip out their body hair, eliminate their wrinkles, plug their holes and smooth their surfaces, all in an effort to make the female body as glossy and flawless as possible. Female bodies and behaviour continue to have very limited possibilities for representation in mainstream media.

The early part of the 21st century saw an onslaught of talk about sexuality in popular culture. Feona Attwood describes this as:

> a contemporary preoccupation with sexual values, practices and identities; the public shift to more permissive sexual attitudes; the proliferation of sexual texts; the emergence of new forms of sexual experience; the apparent breakdown of rules, categories and regulations designed to keep the obscene at bay; our fondness for scandals, controversies and panics around sex.[2]

The North American success of the television series "Sex and the City" (1998-2004) demonstrated this overwhelming desire to engage in the discussion about women's places as sexual subjects in contemporary society. The program prided itself on showcasing a liberated view of female sexual agency in the urban environment for a primarily female

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[1] Rosalind Gill, "From Sexual Objectification to Sexual Subjectification: The Resexualisation of Women's Bodies in the Media," *Feminist Media Studies* Vol. 3. No. 1, (2003): 103.
[2] Feona Attwood, "Sexed Up: Theorizing the Sexualization of Culture," *Sexualities* Vol. 9, No. 1, (2006): 78-79.

audience. While the show breaks down some of the accepted notions of proper female behaviour, its presentation of female sexual desire is actually very safe and clean. In regards to "Sex and the City", Feona Attwood says: "The 'classiness' of female sexual activity is extremely important here both as a way of establishing its legitimacy and of linking sexuality to a range of other contemporary bourgeois concerns such as the development and display of style and taste and the pursuit of self-improvement and self-care.[3] Atwood exposes the ways in which the show's representations of female sexuality are deeply saturated in class politics and a rejection of the lower, dirtier forms of female sexuality. The show's bourgeois female characters make the topic of sex acceptable by erasing all associations with the lower class and the trashiness that is often associated with sex on screen. The female bodies in "Sex and the City" are shown through a heavy coating of consumer culture and safe television standards. A very specific type of woman is allowed to have a sexually charged body within representations on film and television. The characters from "Sex and the City" epitomize this ideal. Needless to say, a desiring female is usually a white and upper class beauty whose body and desires are contained within tightly inscribed boundaries.

In mainstream media, options for excessive and dangerous corporealities exist, but they are almost never outlets for female empowerment. Gross physical humour is a mainstay in popular comedy genres. The "Jackass" (2000-2002) reality television series bases its success on a series of gruesome gags that push the protagonists' bodies to the limit. They shit and vomit in public while their buddies laugh hysterically on the sidelines. The fact that it is a group of *male* friends who perform this series of disgusting

[3] Ibid, 85.

stunts is of utmost importance. Women would not be allowed to perform similar atrocities with their bodies while maintaining first class celebrity status.[4] There is nothing funny about a woman who does disgusting things with her body and the average viewer would not tolerate such a transgression. There are cases of female comedic performers who break the rules for bodily decorum. For example, Roseanne Barr was famous for her "tasteless" jokes in which she would often ridicule her own fat body.[5] The popular comedy routine was transgressive in its radical presentation of her body as fat and unruly, but this transgression hid behind the safe exterior of comedic catharsis.[6] Roseanne may have achieved success as a comedian who did not fit into the usual standards of Hollywood beauty, but she certainly would not have been taken seriously as a desirous sexual subject. Laughter cleanses much of the riskiness away.

While the necessity for an impermeable female body persists, a curious and seemingly contradictory trend has simultaneously emerged. There is currently a widespread fascination with grossness and gore in popular visual culture. Whether it's live internet broadcasts of plastic surgery procedures or the TV crime drama "CSI" ("Crime Scene Investigation," 2000-present) which offers microscopic views of autopsies on murdered corpses, there seems to be a heightened desire to be disgusted and stimulated while getting closer and deeper into the human body. This is a noticeably global trend

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[4] Interestingly, some of the members of Jackass made a guest appearance on "America's Next Top Model", Cycle Five, which aired in November 2005. The men were encouraged to be "gross" and "outrageous" during a photo shoot with the aspiring models. In an effort to join in on the fun, one of the models (Lisa D'Amato) put on one of the men's diaper props and announced to the group that she was urinating in it. Needless to say her behaviour was vehemently criticized by both the models and the Jackass members, as "unladylike" and "disgusting".

[5] This will be further discussed in relation to the carnivalesque and the unruly woman later in this chapter.

[6] I felt it was necessary to mention the use of comedy as a potentially radical genre for female unruliness within the context of this essay. An exploration of how gross body humour can function as a feminist strategy warrants further exploration, but is unfortunately beyond the scope of this essay.

that has gushed onto the cinematic scene as well. The so-called "Asian Extreme" has made waves on the global film market with gruesomely violent entries such as *Oldboy* (Chan-Wook Park, 2003) and *Ichi the Killer* (Takashi Miike, 2001). In North America, horror films like *Hostel* (Eli Roth, 2005), and *Saw* (James Wan, 2004), which flaunt graphic scenes of violence and torture have enjoyed unprecedented success at the box office and through ancillary markets. This noticeable trend has caught the attention of various film critics who question (albeit superficially) the reasons for this audience appetite for gore. In an article for *New York Magazine* titled "Now Playing at Your Local Multiplex: Torture Porn", David Edelstein describes North America's ongoing cinematic fascination with "blood, guts and sadism."[7] Edelstein proposes a number of hypotheses about the current popularity of these supposedly artless displays of violence. He argues that perhaps the films perform a sort of cathartic purification or a pseudo-sexual release, or that maybe they provide viewers with a means to feel something visceral in a world that is numb to the real-life violence. While his description of "torture porn" (a now popular term used to describe this brand of film, also known as "gorno"), is useful for the purposes of generic categorization, his approach to the films results in a value judgement that fails to engage in a thorough analysis of the films themselves and their cultural/historical context. Such is the nature of most review-type articles that appear in the mainstream media outlets, with reviewers offering attitudes of disgust and boredom. Although gorno may have achieved commercial success, it is certainly not popular amongst pre-eminent film critics, many of whom have recently announced gorno's (eagerly anticipated) decline.

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[7] David Edelstein (February 6, 2006), "Now Playing at Your Local Multiplex: Torture Porn", *New York Magazine*: http://nymag.com/movies/features/15622/.

In Europe, a similar urge towards extreme violence has emerged. In this case, it has often been paired with graphic sexual content in a controversial one-two punch. North American audiences (and censors) may not yet be ready for the types of images that have come out of the European art cinema scene. No where is this surge of sex and violence more apparent than in France, a country famous for filmmakers who push the cinematic envelope. In a trend that James Quandt has dubbed "the New French Extremity,"[8] filmmakers are assaulting audiences with exceptionally violent scenes that leave very little to the imagination. Tim Palmer notes: "Contemporary French cinema is today catalyzing a new wave of controversy. In particular, a part of recent French films that deal frankly and graphically with the body, and corporeal transgressions, has provoked an international scrutiny at times bordering on hysteria."[9] Many of these films have gained international notoriety through shock tactics: *Irreversible* (Gasper Noé, 2002) for its extended rape scene and graphic face smashing, *Baise-Moi* (Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi) for its explicit sex and woman-on-man violence, *Twentynine Palms* (Bruno Dumont, 2003) for its male rape and vicious stabbing. In an apt description of the trend, Quandt remarks that French filmmakers are "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."[10] Quandt is amongst many critics who consider this display of sex and violence to be all shock and no

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[8] James Quandt, "Flesh and Blood: Sex and Violence in Recent French Cinema." *Artforum*, (February 2004): 126-132.
[9] Tim Palmer, "Under your skin: Marina de Van and the contemporary French cinema du corps." *Studies in French Cinema* Vol. 6, No. 3, (2006):171..
[10] James Quandt, 127-128.

substance. Like torture porn from the US market, the New French Extremity has made few friends in film critic or academic circles.

Easily dismissible as excessive and exploitative, the films of the New French Extremity rarely receive a deeper critical look. Issues of gender and representation are almost never discussed, as critics often become too engrossed in the spectacles of violence to imagine anything else going on. Amongst the films that define this trend, a number of works stand out from the crowd in terms of their approaches to female sexuality and the female body. Catherine Breillat's *Anatomy of Hell* (Original French title: *Anatomie de l'enfer*, 2004), Mariana de Van's *In My Skin* (Original French title: *Dans ma peau*, 2002) and Claire Denis' *Trouble Every Day*[11] (2001) are all films written and directed by women that separate themselves from the larger trend through their feminist tactics. By classifying (and therefore dismissing) these films as part of the New French Extremity, critics are not giving proper attention to the ways in which these films function as feminist texts. In this thesis project, I will isolate these three films as examples of a feminist counter-cinema. I have classified *Anatomy of Hell*, *Trouble Every Day* and *In My Skin* as models for "erotic body horror." This term was taken from a *Village Voice* review of *Anatomy of Hell* written by J. Hoberman. In one of the few positive reviews about the film, Hoberman says: "The most original and perhaps the most disturbing thing about Breillat's poetic treatise on gynephobia is its unique juxtaposition of the cerebral and the visceral. This is a most radical exercise in erotic body horror—and, pace David

[11] There is no French language title.

Cronenberg, it may be the mode's ultimate example."[12] Because of their similar approaches to the body on screen, I have given all of these films the same designation. It is my belief that they set themselves apart from other films because of the ways in which they approach violence, sexuality and female corporeality.

Writings about cinema and the body inevitably include essays on the films of David Cronenberg. His work has received attention both as an expression of misogyny as well as a critique of patriarchal society.[13] In critical and academic writing, the films of this thesis are often compared to Cronenberg's work. While the comparison seems inevitable, I would argue that as an *auteur* of erotic body horror, Cronenberg has quite a different approach than the filmmakers of this thesis. Cronenberg has undoubtedly created fascinating movies that deal with horror of corporeality, but he is certainly not the only *auteur* to engage with these themes in intellectually and physically engaging ways. Stephen Shaviro has gone as far as to say: "Nobody has gone further than Cronenberg in detailing the ways in which the body is invested and colonized by power mechanism, how it is both a means and an end of social control."[14] This opinion obviously depends on what extremes we are talking about exactly, and I would argue that Denis, Breillat and de Van go "further" than Cronenberg, at least in the domain of engaging in challenging

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[12] J. Hoberman, *Village Voice*, (October 12th, 2004): http://www1.villagevoice.com/film/0441,hoberman,57465,20.html.

[13] Lianne McLarty mentions this in her essay ""Beyond the Veil of the Flesh": Cronenberg and the Disembodiment of Horror," in *Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant, 231-252 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 231. She explains how Robin Wood's essay "The return of the repressed" characterizes Cronenberg's brand of horror as "reactionary" due to its portrayal of the female body as a site of disgust. McLarty goes on to mention a number of feminist articles which also dismiss Cronenberg's work as sexist. Simultaneously, other authors argue that his work is a critique of this male disgust. Needless to say, there is no consensus on the position of Cronenberg's work vis a vis feminism.

[14] To be fair, Shaviro was writing a decade before any of these films came out, so maybe he would have something more to say on the subject. Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 134.

conceptualizations of women's relationships to the grotesque body. Cronenberg's early work deals with the monstrous body as a site of horror and eroticism.[15] In *The Brood*[16] (1979) and *Dead Ringers* (1988) he presents the female body as a site of disgust which requires either fixing or destruction. In *Videodrome* (1983) and *The Fly* (1986) he presents the terror of the strong male body being transformed into something horrifically fleshy. In this thesis I argue that the female grotesque has the possibility of being a source of feminist protest. I do not however feel that Cronenberg's films necessarily offer the same potential. What makes a difference is *how* these bodies are portrayed and, arguably, by whom. First of all, Cronenberg's protagonists are almost always men. In *The Fly*, the horror is based on the main character's disgusting bodily transformation into an insect. It seems as though he gets turned inside out and thus feminized through the corporealization of his previously clean, strong, masculine body.[17] In *Dead Ringers*, the double protagonist twins' obsessive investigation into gynecology (and the "abnormal" female body) leads to their horrific downfall. Cronenberg gives a distinctly male perspective on these issues (both through his main characters and through his own overarching perspective as the director). Female agency and subjectivity are secondary to men's relationships with whatever problem is presented. He also regularly deals with the convergence of body with technology as a main thematic concern, an area into which the films of this thesis rarely venture. While his work can be arguably championed as an

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[15] Cronenberg's more recent work (such as *A History of Violence* (2005) and *Eastern Promises* (2007)), is not as relevant a comparison to the films of this thesis as he seems to be moving away from focusing specifically on the grotesque body as a site of horror.

[16] This film will be further discussed in relation to *Trouble Every Day* in chapter 4.

[17] Linda Badley, *Film Horror and the Body Fantastic* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995), 127.

innovative exploration of corporeality and male fear of the female body, I do not believe that his films have the same feminist possibilities as those discussed in this thesis project.

This feminist brand of erotic body horror is aptly named because of its precarious generic straddling. Not comfortably resting in the realms of pure horror or pornography, these films play with the expectations many viewers have about the integrity of film genres. Because of this generic impurity, my study of erotic body horror will incorporate academic writing on horror films, pornography, as well as work on feminist counter-cinema. I will separate them from other film practices that deal with similar subject matter, namely those of the New French Extremity, horror (and gorno), pornography and other films that are considered to have a feminist slant. I will argue that erotic body horror is an example of feminist filmmaking even though it rarely gets accreditation for its subversive powers.

Feminist approaches to film studies have had a long and troubled past. Debates in feminist film theory began during the women's liberation movement in the 1960s. The movement demanded a critical re-thinking of gender roles and an adjustment to the societal structures that consistently excluded women from positions of power. Feminists also began to question the ways in which women were represented within popular image culture. The first approaches to feminism in film called for an end to stereotypical images of women within Hollywood films.[18] Feminist critics demanded that cinema begin to portray "real women", thereby ending the supposedly destructive glamorization of the "unrealistic" women who occupied the screen. This approach was later usurped by

[18] Amongst the most prominent works of this type are Molly Haskell's *From Reverence to Rape: Treatment of Women in the Movies* (1974) and Marjorie Rosen's *Popcorn Venus: Women, Movies and the American Dream* (1973).

feminist theorists who began to question the very nature of the cinematic apparatus.[19] These writers believed that a feminist film practice needed to do more than simply offer positive images of women. Laura Mulvey's now famous (and endlessly discussed) essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" became the fundamental text for feminist writing on film. Mulvey's approach to cinema argued for the "destruction of pleasure as a radical weapon."[20] With psychoanalysis as a base, Mulvey demanded a deconstruction of the traditional cinematic apparatus by disengaging viewers from their comfortable spectatorial positions. Through a breakdown of traditional viewing practices, film viewers would be unable to engage in the usual escapism that kept women in fixed positions as objects of a voyeuristic "male gaze." Mulvey's counter-cinema ideal attempted to eliminate the tenet of "woman as image/man as bearer of the look"[21] , but the type of critical detachment she championed was often alienating for male and female viewers alike. Not all feminist film scholars considered the viewer's complete emotional detachment to be the only path of resistance against the sexism of mainstream cinema. Mulvey's ideas have been criticized for various reasons, including their strict binary divisions and their essentializing tendencies. Since the heyday of feminist film theory in the 1970s and early 1980s, many different and often conflicting methods for feminist approaches to the cinema have emerged. There is no easy-to-follow rule book for feminists in film studies. It is a

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[19] Ann Kaplan defines the cinematic apparatus as "cinema in its many dimensions—economic, technical, psychological, and ideological." Ann Kaplan, *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera*. (New York, Methuen: 1983), 12.

[20] Laura Mulvey. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Feminist Film Theory, A Reader*, ed. Sue Thornham (New York, New York University Press, 1999), 59.

[21] Patricia White. "Feminism and Film," in *Film Studies, Critical Approaches*, eds. John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 117.

constant negotiation between politics and pleasure, with no uncomplicated answers and no viable end in sight.[22]

In this thesis project, I am arguing for the feminist value of *Anatomy of Hell*, *In My Skin* and *Trouble Every Day*. I will approach this task through a variety of theoretical means. In an attempt to move away from the psychoanalytical approaches to film analysis that clog the arteries of feminist film scholarship, I will only reference these theories in passing. Although I strongly believe that by watching movies, viewers become deeply entangled in their unconscious fears and desires, I do not believe that the psychoanalytical model is the most effective (or most interesting) way to gauge how films make meaning. I will address the issue of alternative pleasure in the cinema, but not in the same way as the "Mulvey school of thought" proposes. Many of the prototypical feminist films that appear in feminist literature on the subject are praised for their abilities to distance viewers from the voyeuristic tendencies of mainstream cinema. The most discernibly feminist works dismantle the usual structures for spectator pleasure through a refusal to place women as sexual objects under the (male) gaze, an abandonment of the conventions that encourage enjoyable identification with characters and a distinct lack of narrative resolution. This type of feminist filmmaking includes films such as (but are not limited to) *Jeanne Dielman* (Chantal Akerman, 1976), *A Question of Silence* (Marlene Gorris, 1982), *Natalie Granger* (Marguerite Duras, 1972). These films all came out of a specific era, when the feminist spirit of the Second Wave was still being felt. They represent a specific idea of

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[22] For a further look at the various debates in feminist film criticism, see: *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*. Patricia Erens (Ed.) (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), *Multiple Voices in Feminist Film Criticism*. Dian Carson, Linda Dittmar and Janice R. Welsh (Eds.) (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994) and *Passionate Detachments: An introduction to Feminist film theory.* (London and New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997).

what feminist cinema is supposed to look like and feel like. Films such as these have their important place within the history of feminist filmmaking, but the cold distance they inspire through their radical cinematic techniques is not always productive for the average female viewer who may not be versed in feminist film theory. On the other hand, various Hollywood films that have been labelled as feminist productions come with a different set of problems, such as *Thelma and Louise* (Ridley Scott, 1991), *Fried Green Tomatoes* (Jon Avnet, 1991), *A League of Their Own* (Penny Marshal, 1992). These are all films that have been (generally) praised as examples of "pop feminism" in action. Despite all coming from the same historical moment, these films do represent the most accepted idea of feminism in mainstream cinema. They all use conventional narrative structures and film aesthetics while encouraging audience identification with characters. This list only scrapes the surface of a much larger roster. Although they deal with "women's issues" and have strong female protagonists, their subversive potential risks getting lost in the numbing qualities of typical Hollywood entertainment.[23] It is my contention that erotic body horror hovers between these two approaches, creating a space that encourages a pleasurable cinematic engagement as well as a critical feminist stance.

A feminist psychoanalytic approach to film studies has been widely criticized. It practices a problematic disregard for the socio-historical context of films. The approach has also been criticized for neglecting to acknowledge differences between women (early feminists were accused of limiting their scope to white, middleclass, heterosexual women). Cultural studies, an interdisciplinary discipline that has gained popularity in

[23] This topic obviously deserves further discussion and is not simply a case of Hollywood films inevitably co-opting with "The Man". Unfortunately, a thorough investigation into the nuances of mainstream cinema and feminism is beyond the scope of the thesis project.

recent years, claims to fill this particular gap. A cultural studies approach to cinema proposes a move away from the textual analysis of films to a more all-encompassing examination of film audiences and the discursive, economic and regulatory contexts in which particular filmic products exist.[24] Of particular importance is an examination of film culture, and not only of individual texts existing in a seemingly untouched art-zone. In a polemical article in which he discusses cinema studies' function as a discipline, Toby Miller says: "The life of any popular or praised film is a passage across space and time, a life remade again and again by institutions, discourses, and practices of distribution and reception that make each uptake of a text in to a specific occasion. We must consider all the shifts and shocks that characterize the existence of cultural commodities..."[25] Using this statement as a benchmark for my thesis, I intend to examine erotic body horror with a cultural studies approach, paying special attention to the films' "social lives". A large part of this extra-textual study will be to look at reviews and articles about the films in mainstream media outlets. These official reactions to the films and the controversy the films have inspired will be considered in connection to the films themselves and how they communicate through audio-visual language. Even though I strongly believe in the sullying of cinema studies as a discipline, I also continue to advocate for the importance of textual analysis. In order to gain the most thorough understanding possible of a film, it is necessary to begin with a detailed translation of the cinematic cues that are presented on screen. The Camera Obscura collective notes: "The study of film as a signifying practice

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[24] Graeme Turner. "Cultural studies and film" in *Film studies: critical approaches*, eds. John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 193.
[25] Toby Miller. "Cinema studies doesn't matter; or, I know what you did last semester" in *Keyframes: popular cinema and cultural studies*, eds. Matthew Tinkcom and Amy Villarejo. (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 306.

(through rigorous analysis of films as texts) contributes to an understanding of how ideology determines and is determined by the mode of representation."[26] My approach in this paper will be to examine erotic body horror through a feminist/gender studies lens, while using established film studies strategies in combination with less traditional approaches.

I have a number of objectives for this thesis project. First, I hope to prove that this particular brand of erotic body horror is a radical exercise in feminist film language. In each movie, the *ways* in which the filmmakers approach "horrific" tales of the body are the essence of their feminist message. Film form is vital to the films' radical potential. I am not arguing that erotic body horror is the only way to make feminist films, but I will argue that this approach to the female body and to female sexuality is a particularly powerful method. Secondly, despite the now unpopular notion of the film *auteur*, I will argue that these films embody a "female sensibility". I am not arguing that these films present a universal female experience, however, the fact that they were all written and directed by women makes a difference to the ways in which the subject matter is presented.[27] Although I do not think that all women directors automatically produce feminist films, or that male directors are incapable of producing feminist films, I do believe that the experience of living as women shapes the directors' approaches to filmmaking. I also contend that the gender of the films' "authors" to some extent shapes

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[26] Camera Obscura Collective. "Feminism and Film, Critical Approaches," in *Feminism and Visual Culture*, ed. Amelia Jones (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 234.

[27] In fact, these films are quite limited in their scope of female experience in that the directors all come from similar backgrounds: they are all white, middle class women and the erotics of their films exist in specifically heterosexual situations. Despite these limiting factors, I still maintain that these expressions have an important place in the larger (more inclusive) picture of feminist filmmaking.

the critical reactions the films receive, especially in the case of Catherine Breillat.[28] Thirdly, in an intentional move away from a psychoanalysis-based approach, I hope to encourage a different way to "do feminism" in film studies. It is my contention that the traditional feminist academic dependence on Freudian ideas and language often dissuades many readers from approaching the subject of feminism in film. The veritable tidal wave of Oedipus scenarios, castration fears and penis envy potentially paralyzes intellectual thought in its inability to have much real-world significance for most people.[29] Finally, I hope to prove that feminism is still of vital importance to film studies (and by extension, to all studies of popular culture). Although most official reactions to these films refuse to identify them as feminist (or even as films that deal with issues of sexual difference), I will argue that the controversy and shock they incite is a marker for the profound fear of female bodies and female sexuality that continues to exist in Western culture. By looking at the films and the critical discourse that surrounds them through a feminist lens, I will prove that we continue to live in a deeply sexist society that limits space for women to truly exist as sexual subjects.

Anatomy of Hell, *In My Skin* and *Trouble Every Day* all generate viewer disgust because of the ways in which they represent leaky, bleeding and dangerously fleshy bodies on screen. Their graphic corporeal displays betray the usual rules for proximity that exist in the cinema. These tactics can be observed in a number of other film genres. In her article "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess", Linda Williams describes how

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[28] This will be further discussed in chapter one.

[29] For example, a recent publication titled *Feminist Film Theorists* by Shohini Chaudhuri (London and New York: Routledge, 2006) continues to propound the notion that psychoanalytic models are still the mainstays in feminist approaches to film.

melodrama, horror and pornography use spectacles of "excessive" female bodies on screen (women crying, women screaming, women orgasming) in order to incite "excessive" bodily reactions from the people in the viewing audience. Her classification of "body genres" is also appropriate for the films of this thesis project as they can be seen as straddling horror and pornography while engaging the viewers' bodies in similar ways. Williams says: "Alone or in combination, heavy doses of sex, violence, and emotion are dismissed by one faction or another as having no logic or reason for existence beyond their power to excite."[30] These films, like the ones in my study, are often dismissed as being too gross and/or sensational to be worthy of serious consideration. This dismissal can be linked, at least in part, to their connections with the body, a dismissal which, in turn, is deeply intertwined with discourses on sexual difference. Cartesian notions of a mind/body split still permeate Western thought. This binary framework is hierarchical in nature, placing value on the masculine over the feminine. "Fluids are implicitly associated with femininity, maternity, pregnancy, menstruation and the body. Fluids are subordinated to that which is concrete and solid. In turn, solidity and rationality become linked."[31] My films upset masculinist ideals for a clean female body through the threat of fluidity. For example, in *Anatomy of Hell*, the image of the typically beautiful, nude female is ruptured by foregrounding her leaky vagina. *In My Skin*'s main character obsessively cuts her own skin despite the obvious disgust of her loving boyfriend. In *Trouble Every Day*, an animalistic woman hungers after male bodies, in turn transforming

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[30] Linda Williams. "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess," in *Film Quarterly* (1991) Vol. 44, No. 4 (1991): 3.

[31] (Robin Longhurst references Luce Irigaray's *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. C Porter with C. Burke, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985, 113) Robin Longhurst. *Bodies: Exploring Fluid Boundaries* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001): 31.

their flesh into that which is usually associated with the fluid female. The politics of disgust in these films are intricately linked to issues of gender.

Viewers' typically violent reactions to these ruptures of the ideal female body can be related to what Julia Kristeva describes, in her oft quoted work, *The Powers of Horror*, as the process of "abjection". Using a variety of examples to illustrate this state of aversion/attraction, Kristeva explains how this reaction has deeper implications for the human subject: "Abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it—on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger.[32] For Kristeva, this feeling of disgust is deeply connected to the process of subject formation. When one's borders of subjecthood are threatened with contamination (because of objects that inspire disgust, objects that are often dirty, fluid, sticky, etc.), one feels an overwhelming urge to expel that which threatens it, while at the same time harbouring a feeling of fascination with the possibility of losing oneself to the mystery of borderless being. The result is an "in-between" state, a liminality that has become a key element for discussions of post-modern identity formation. This blurring of borders plays an important role in the discussion of erotic body horror. Each of the films inspires abjection because of the horrific scenarios they present involving the human body. For example, the protagonist of *In my Skin* scratches through the border (the skin) that maintains people's belief that they are self-contained beings. With nauseating closeness, we can feel the rupturability of our own skin's borders. This creates a sense of vulnerability and fear that is difficult to ignore. Elizabeth

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[32] Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 9.

Grosz says: "Body fluids attest to the permeability of the body, its necessary dependence on an outside, its liability to collapse into this outside (this is what death implies), to the perilous divisions between the body's inside and its outside."[33] This perilous border-crossing is partly what defines my films as erotic body horror.

Kristeva's notion of abjection has had profound influence on theoretical discussions of the horror film. Barbara Creed uses the abject as her main concept in *The Monstrous-Feminine*, a canonical text for feminism and horror. Her work relies heavily on Freudian concepts of psychoanalysis, and while these will not be explicitly employed for the purposes of this essay, some of her notions about viewer disgust with the female grotesque will provide a basis for discussion of the films in question. Creed describes the "perverse pleasures" involved in watching horror films. She notes viewers' desires to be "grossed out", as well as the pleasure they experience of ejecting that feeling from the safety of their safe spectatorial seats.[34] In relation to abjection during the act of watching horror films she says:

> The horror film puts the viewing subject's sense of a unified self into crisis, specifically in those moments when the image on the screen becomes too threatening or horrific to watch, when the abject threatens to draw the viewing subject into the place 'where meaning collapses', the place of death. By not-looking the spectator is able momentarily to withdraw identification from the image on the screen in order to reconstruct the boundary between self and screen and reconstitute the 'self' which is threatened with disintegration. This process of reconstitution of the self is reaffirmed by the conventional ending of the horror narrative in which the monster is usually 'named' and destroyed.[35]

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[33] Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 193.
[34] Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-feminine: film, feminism and psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 48.
[35] Ibid, 65.

While the films of this study do initiate this momentary loss of 'self', they lack the conventional endings which would, according to Creed, reaffirm the previously damaged sense of viewer selfhood. As opposed to conventional horror films, these films do not define "the monster" so explicitly. The sense of horror they inspire is uncanny. The horror is often based on realistic representations of the "monstrous" human body. *In My Skin*'s monster is the protagonist herself, who unexplainably attacks her own body. *Anatomy of Hell*'s "grossness" is based on the natural processes of the female body. *Trouble Every Day* is the most conventionally horror-like film of the group, with animal-like characters whose sexual hunger is the basis for the horror (and excitement). The films also upset rational, straightforward and what might be termed as "masculine" constructs of narrative. Unlike the classical realist style of cinema, which has been characterized as having "efficient action-centered, goal-oriented linear narratives driven by the desire of a single protagonist, involving one or two lines of action, and leading to definitive closure"[36], the films of this study have fairly "irrational" styles. The goals and desires of characters are often unclear. For example, we never understand why Esther in *In My Skin* insists on cutting herself, nor do we sense that she is going to stop. The film ends with a blank stare, not satisfying the urge for closure or offering the type of explanation that is usually offered in horror films. This results in films that are full of "messy" bodies, as well as "messy" narrative structures, in what becomes disruptive attack on cleanly, masculinist ideals at every level.

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[36] Linda Williams ("Film Bodies") references the Bordwell/Thompson/Staiger study of *Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 3.

The spectacular victimization of women in horror films received tremendous attention from feminist scholars who, until recently, have generally rejected the genre as misogynist. Much of this work relied on Mulvey's thesis that women only exist on screen to be looked at under an oppressive male gaze. Through this line of reasoning, female viewers have no hope as active, autonomous spectators. As Mary Ann Doane says, "the woman's exercise of an active investigating gaze can only be simultaneous with her own victimization."[37] Studies of this nature, such as Linda Williams' article "When the Woman Looks", do not account for the types of tricky situations that are found in the films of this essay, in which women are the monsters *and* the victims. In these cases, the supposedly inevitable victimization of women becomes doubtful because of the ambiguity that the films present. In her discussion of mainstream horror films, Williams says:

> What we need to see is that in fact the sexual "freedom" of such films, the titillating attention given to the expression of women's desires, is directly proportional to the violence perpetrated against women. The horror film may be a rare example of a genre that permits the expression of women's sexual potency and desire and that associates this desire with the autonomous act of looking, but it does so in these more recent examples only to punish her for this very act, only to demonstrate how monstrous female desire can be.[38]

When the violence perpetrated in the films is done by a woman, or done by a woman to herself, the same argument does not hold sway. Because erotic body horror exists in the uncertain generic ground, it is able to break many of the rules that are usually found in horror films.[39] It extends the options for representation and expands simple conceptions such as "monster" and "victim". This creates fertile ground for discussion of women's

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[37] Williams quotes Doane in "When the Woman Looks" in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 17.

[38] Williams, "When the Woman Looks", 32-33.

[39] This is not to say that I wholly believe in what Williams argues in her article, re. Horror films=perpetrators of sexist ideologies, female viewers=no hope for pleasurable or autonomous viewing unless you conspire with the phallic enemy.

roles as monster/victims in cinema as well as in society. Isabel Pinedo says: "The postmodern horror film's routine staging of the spectacle of the ruined body, particularly the female body, calls for a feminist analysis."[40] Erotic body horror opens up this discussion by problematizing the "ruined female body" and disabling the option to quickly classify it as an example of male aggression against a female casualty.

Anatomy of Hell, *In My Skin* and *Trouble Every Day* are all films directed and written by women.[41] Within film studies, *auteur* theory is considered somewhat outdated, with the "death of the author" and focus being placed on what meanings viewers bring to the text instead of the original intended meaning of the filmmaker. Anneke Smelik discusses this shift within the discipline, saying: "At a time in the mid 1970s when women filmmakers started making movies and female subjectivity became an issue for feminists, poststructuralist film theory declared it passé to theorize the author/subject."[42] Recently, feminist scholars have reinstated the importance of the feminist *auteur*, indicating that the gender of the filmmaker makes a difference in the ways female subjectivity is represented on screen.[43] In Sandy Flitterman-Lewis' meticulous study of three French female directors, she notes that their work shows a distinct and important deviation from other types of (masculine) filmmaking. She says: "A counter-cinema will attempt to reinsert the subject—a sexed object—into the process of meaning-production, thereby allowing its

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[40] Isabel Christina Pinedo "And then she killed him: Women and Violence in the Slasher Film," *Recreational Terror* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 75.
[41] In the case of *Trouble Every Day*, Claire Denis co-wrote the script with Jean-Pol Fargeau.
[42] Anneke Smelik, *And the Mirror Cracked: Feminist Cinema and Film Theory* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 31.
[43] Ibid, 28.

structures to subvert, rework, or offer alternatives to the pervasive logic of masculine desire articulated by dominant cinema."[44]

Using Smelik's and Flitterman-Lewis' convincing arguments for the importance of "feminist directors as female and feminist subjects"[45], I contend that the films discussed in this essay succeed in creating "alternative conceptions of female subjectivity and desire"[46] in ways that have not been expressed by other male directors of the New French Extremity who deal with similarly "scandalous" subject matter.

It is the ravaged female body that often takes centre stage in films that use shock tactics as a selling feature. This is a rampant practice in horror films, where female victims notoriously receive more screen (and scream) time than men when getting killed.[47] Within the New French Extremity, the cycle of films in which *Anatomy of Hell*, *In My Skin* and *Trouble Every Day* are inevitably lumped, the rape scene in Gasper Noé's *Irreversible* has received considerable attention. In this scene, Noé unflinchingly films the anal rape of Alex (Monica Bellucci's character) in one excruciatingly long take. This now famous scene has pushed Noé into the ranks of auteur superstar, whether out of disgust or admiration. Although his carnal approach to filmmaking often gets compared to the films of this discussion, *Irreversible*'s presentation of the female body is noticeably different from its feminist counterparts. Although the rape scene is what makes *Irreversible* so famous, Alex is not in fact central to the story. It is actually a story about the two men who, in response to Alex's rape, go on a quest for revenge. Also, Bellucci is obviously a

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[44] Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, *To Desire Differently: Feminism and the French Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 23.
[45] Smelik, 29.
[46] Flitterman-Lewis, 20.
[47] Carol Clover, "Her Body, Himself" in *The Dread of Difference*, 82.

"classic beauty", whose gorgeousness is profiled throughout the film, even during the rape scene when she maintains a typically pornographic pose, showcasing her still feminine traits. As Wencke Mühleisen explains, "The camera dwells on the exposed face, upper body, her breasts and long, slim extended legs. Alex is in a paradoxical way keeping the main female character Monica Belluci's cover-girl splendour."[48] At no point does Alex break down any salient notions about femininity or female victimhood. This is quite different in the cases of *Anatomy of Hell*, *In My Skin* and *Trouble Every Day*, in which the female characters are constantly attacking masculinist ideals of beauty and femininity. *Baise-Moi* also violently shatters these ideals, but does not operate in the same sensuous and intricate ways as the other films of this thesis. Throughout the following chapters, I will further compare erotic body horror with other examples of extreme cinema (including *Baise-Moi* in chapter one) in order to show how my corpus operates differently from the rest.

As the previously discussed onslaught of torture porn demonstrates, recent horror films focus primarily on the body as a means to excite and terrify viewers. Linda Badley offers an explanation for this move towards body horror, saying: "Horror has become a fantastic 'body language' for our culture in which a person's self-concept has been increasingly constituted in images of the body."[49] This is especially true of women, who have been consistently defined by their bodies and judged on how their bodies look. More and more, women are self-regulating in an attempt to discipline their bodies into the ideal form. Fat bodies, flabby bodies, "unfit" bodies are considered to be out of control and

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[48] Wencke Mühleisen, "Realism of Convention and Realism of Queering: Sexual Violence in two European Art Films", *Nordic Journal of Women's Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 115-125, (November 2005): 120.
[49] Linda Badley, *Film, Horror and the Body Fantasic.* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995), 3.

therefore the enemy. From the overwhelming popularity of plastic surgery to the onrush of make-over shows on television, contemporary image culture makes us believe that we can manipulate our bodies into whatever form we want. This is perhaps one of the reasons why the out-of-control bodies in horror films are so terrifying for contemporary viewers. The genre's impulse towards body horror, one that has been occurring since the 1980s with the emergence of the slasher film,[50] coincides with this impulse to discipline the body through fitness and dieting. These are not gender neutral activities and women have more invested in this process of "beautification" than men do. Women's insecurities are the nexus for fashion and beauty industries' multi-billion dollar profits.[51] Despite this overwhelming urge towards a female beauty ideal, there are various ways in which this oppressive notion of femininity is being contested within visual culture.

The concept of the carnivalesque has effectively dealt with the idea of women who spill over the edge. Based on the writings of Mikhail Bahktin, feminists have appropriated his ideas about the carnival towards their own ends. In her study of "the unruly woman" in comedic genres, Kathleen Rowe gives a succinct description of the types of "inappropriate" spectacles that women make of themselves. Her definition of the unruly woman is helpful in this project as all of the women of my films fit the following description: "Associated with both beauty and monstrosity, the unruly woman dwells

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[50] Linda Badley details this propulsion towards the body as the main site for horror as finding its most obvious expression in the 1980s with the slasher film and continuing on into the 1990s, when her study ends. It would seem as though the cycle of torture porn that has recently emerged is an extension of this urging towards the body as a source of terror. Badley, 6-9.

[51] Naomi Wolf gives a thorough discussion of this in her now famous book *The Beauty Myth* (Toronto, Vintage Canada, 1997).

close to the grotesque."[52] The carnivalesque propounds that this can potentially be a position of power, which, I argue, is the case in my films. Rowe heavily references Mary Russo's work on the female grotesque. She says:

> Mary Russo notes that the category of the grotesque is often projected on the female body when it makes a spectacle of itself through pregnancy, age, or other violations of proper feminine bodily containment. She asks how this category might be used "affirmatively to destabilize the idealizations of female beauty or to realign the mechanisms of desire."[53]

In the chapters that follow, I will demonstrate how erotic body horror does just this, by crossing boundaries of proper female imagery and body behaviour.

Anatomy of Hell, *In My Skin* and *Trouble Every Day* blur innumerable boundaries in terms of genre, as well as the borders of the body. One of the most daring ways in which they create this sense of liminality is through their dangerous renderings of the erotic. This is one of their main sources of power as expressions of alternative feminist projections of desire and female sexuality. The disturbances they create with their depictions of the grotesque female body are paired with equally unsettling expressions of eroticism. This results in an unusual effect for the viewer, who holds precarious footing on this dangerous and provocative ground. During these cinematic moments, when the bodies on screen become almost unbearably fleshy, drenched in sex and blood, the push/pull of desire and disgust makes pleasure difficult to define. By blurring the boundaries of the erotic, these films create a fuller experience that refuses to maintain the restrictive divides that are usually used to control our desires. Unlike many expressions of

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[52] Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 11.

[53] Rowe quotes Mary Russo's *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 12. Russo's page was 221.

the grotesque in horror in which the nasty displays of the body become easy to dispel with disgust, these films create a dynamic confusion that enables us to extend our rules for sex and sexuality on screen. They express "the disquieting effect of sexuality as it spills the boundaries of its proper containment, the unease of bodies breaking and flowing over their limits."[54] As I engage with the erotic elements of these films, my aim is to "write of pleasures pleasurably."[55] Laura Marks says: "When translating from one medium to another, specifically from the relatively more sensuous audiovisual media to the relatively more symbolic medium of words, the task is to make the dry words retain a trace of the wetness of the encounter."[56] In this way, the language of the following chapters will not always be what one may expect from academic writing. I justify this because of the nature of my films and my desire to push boundaries as they do.

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[54] Elizabeth Grosz and Elspeth Probyn. *Sexy Bodies: The Strange Carnalities of Feminism.* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995),xi

[55] Sexy Bodies, x.

[56] Laura Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), x.

"Unsafe" Sex: How *Anatomy of Hell* Dangerously Explores the Politics of Disgust

"When bodies get together in sex, a whole history, cultural as well as personal, comes along with them."
-Susan Bordo "Never Just Pictures," in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, p. 460

"There are scenes here where Breillat deliberately disgusts us, not because we are disgusted by the natural life functions of women, as she implies, but simply because The Woman does things that would make any reasonable Man, or Woman, for that matter, throw up."
-Roger Ebert in his review of *Anatomy of Hell*

Catherine Breillat has established herself as one of the most controversial French filmmakers of recent years. Her films deal with sexuality in ways that are not often approached in mainstream cinema. Notorious for clouding generic categorizations by confusing art cinema[1] and pornography, Breillat often initiates disgust and anger from viewers. Whether deemed as feminist battle cries or misogynistic pronouncements, Breillat's films usually provoke extreme responses. Through her explorations of eroticism and sexuality, Breillat succeeds in dismantling the usual standards of pleasure and desire that exist in the cinema, whether those are mainstream commercial productions or standard heterosexual moving-image pornography. Her films focus primarily on the

[1] Throughout this paper the term "art cinema" is used as a loose generic reference. This is mostly based on viewer expectations about European art films. Although it perhaps cannot be defined as cleanly as other genres, I believe that it retains its usefulness as a category despite the degeneration of actual arthouse cinemas (where the term was originally used). In his article "The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice" (in *Film Theory and Criticism* (Fifth Edition), ed. Leo Braudy and Marshal Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998): 716-724), David Bordwell argues that "the overall functions of style and theme remain remarkably constant" in art cinema, despite its various cultural contexts (717). Amongst art cinema's definitive characteristics discussed in the article are: lack of cause/effect logic, psychologically complex characters, realism, lack of closure and authorial expressivity. All of these characteristics can be noted in the films discussed throughout this thesis project.

experiences and bodies of young female protagonists, while creating spaces that betray the accepted rules for proximity and intimacy that exist in mainstream cinema. As a result, they create alternative playing fields that validate female sexual subjectivity in complex and subversive ways.

In this chapter, I will demonstrate some of the ways in which her films succeed as radical feminist texts that go beyond the safe, accepted practices for representing sex and the body on screen. Although most of Breillat's films deal with the female body in subversive ways, I will focus primarily on *Anatomy of Hell* as it visually pushes the limits of obscenity further than any of her other films. *Anatomy of Hell* plays with viewer disgust and arousal in ways that are considered unacceptable in mainstream cinema. Breillat does this by using the conventions of pornography and experimenting with viewer expectations for sex on screen. By foregrounding orifices and fluids in grotesque ways, the female body escapes easy commodification, but it also retains its power as a site of dripping sexuality. In this way, Breillat creates a slippery space on screen that complicates viewer pleasure and reconfigures viewer perceptions of the female body and its place within the world of cinematic eroticism. The film's feminism lies in its presentation of sex, desire and the body that is outside the dominant male visual economy.

Compared with the other films of this project, *Anatomy of Hell* borrows the least from conventions of the horror genre. It does not contain the thrilling elements of the "roller-coaster sensibility" with its rhythms of "anticipation, shock, and release" that Linda Williams describes as having gained ascendance in postmodern moving-image

culture.[2] There is no driving force of suspense pushing the narrative ahead. Instead, the basis for its terror is a calm and unrelenting exposition of the female body itself and the uneasy relationship that men and women have with it. *Anatomy of Hell* changes how we expect to see female sexuality and female corporeality in the cinema, while presenting penetrating explorations of the body and shameless displays of graphic sex acts.

Anatomy of Hell lacks the conventional storyline that is considered acceptable from a mainstream narrative film. Its episodic narration and depiction of non-dramatic events are unconventional in Hollywood cinema, but have been common in art cinema from the 1940s up through the present. The most memorable aspects of the film are the ways in which it portrays the body in explicit and disturbing ways. Narrative is subordinate to visuality. The film opens with a medium close-up of a man performing fellatio on another man in an abandoned lot outside a nightclub as dance music thumps loudly on the soundtrack. The music continues and we cut to a gay nightclub where men dance on a crowded dance floor. A woman (Amira Casar) stands immobile against a wall, observing and detached, her face unexpressive. She suddenly walks upstairs to the bathroom where she slits her wrist. Her attempt at suicide is thwarted by a man (Rocco Siffredi) who noticed her as she was walking up the stairs. When asked why she did it, she responds: "Because I'm a woman." This sets the stage for the rest of the conversations that take place throughout the film. The man takes her to a late-night doctor where her wound is treated and bandaged. After the medical treatment, the two walk through the abandoned city streets, having a short discussion about the nature of men's relationship to

[2] Linda Williams, "Discipline and Fun: Psycho and Postmodern Cinema," in *Reinventing Film Studies*, eds. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London and New York: Arnold, 2000), 356.

women. Soon thereafter, the woman fellates the man and swallows his ejaculate. Afterwards, the woman, who is never named, makes a proposition: She wants to pay the man, also never named, to look at the 'unwatchable' and 'hellish' places on her body throughout the period of four nights. He begrudgingly agrees to this arrangement, which becomes the basis for the remainder of the film. For four nights in a row, they meet in an empty house by the ocean where he looks at her naked body with both fascination and repulsion. The film unremittingly depicts the intimate moments they share, both physically and emotionally. It ends when the man is left alone and the woman is pushed to her death in the ocean.[3]

Anatomy of Hell has gained notoriety because of the explicit sexual images it displays. Throughout the film, Breillat examines the alleged masculine fear and hatred of the female body. But even before the characters get naked, Breillat alludes to this infamous phobia, which becomes the main subject of conversation in the film. After the woman is medically treated for her slit wrist in a late-night clinic, she walks back toward the man who is waiting by the cash register. He watches her carefully as she moves towards him. While the camera tracks forward, the man's stare changes from disdain to horror. The reverse shot reveals the source of this terror: the woman is staring directly

[3] On the surface, this admittedly seems like a problematic ending for a feminist reading of the film, as it appears to conform to the convention in which the doomed woman must be ultimately sacrificed. I would argue that this scene does not in fact represent a case of female victimization, but instead operates as a projection of the man's fantasy of violence. This is apparent due to the scene's distinctive and fantastical feel. Aesthetically, it stands apart because of its muffled soundtrack and slow-motion camera work, techniques that were not used throughout the rest of the film. Instead of functioning in support of a female sacrifice, it shows how the man continues to consider the woman as a threat. Prior to this scene, he converses with another man in a bar, telling him about his experience with the woman. He tells the man that no matter how hard he ravaged her body, she always wanted more. Her excessive insatiability is too much for him to bear. He later indicates that he should have "ripped her guts out and made her eat them." Along with the dreamy audio-visual quality of the final scene, these statements support the notion that the image of the woman being pushed off the cliff is in fact the man's fantasy ending, rather than a realistic one.

back at him while she slowly and deliberately slits her own throat with a razor blade. Blood drips down the ivory skin of her throat, but her eyes remain cold and calm, staring back at him without flinching. This action seems to be a fantasy of the man's imagination, and with this shot, the stage is set for the rest of the film. We are reminded that underneath the security of smooth pale skin is a sea of blood that is waiting for rupture. The way in which this particular scene is filmed is also a precursor to the nature of the images that fill the rest of the film. The trickle of blood that drips exquisitely from her wound is not the ghastly display that we might expect from a horror film. Instead, the drip of bright red liquid seems strangely pleasing as it is set against the almost translucent white skin of the woman, who does not appear to be in any pain whatsoever. In this way, and throughout the entire film, images that could potentially be seen as exclusively horrible and disgusting are instead presented as oddly beautiful and fascinating. It is with dread and longing that we approach Breillat's films.

The premise for the film is that the woman pays the man to look at her naked body and tell her what he sees. He identifies as a gay man and has a pronounced distaste for women in general. These sessions are held in a secluded house on the edge of the ocean, which is reminiscent of the old, isolated mansions of Gothic horror. All of the main action takes place in one bedroom of the house, a barren space that acts as a stage for the scene of looking. On the first night, the man sits somewhat awkwardly in a chair in the corner and watches the woman undress in front of him. As she takes off her matronly bra, red marks appear where the straps have dug into her skin. Here Breillat sets up a strange striptease; one which is devoid of the usual accoutrement and stripper seduction. After taking off all her clothes, the woman lies down on the bed in an elegant pose that one

might expect to see in a classical painting. What follows is a wordy dialogue between the two characters about the nature of men's secret disgust for women. The man moves around the room while the woman stays in the same position on the bed. Every moment is staged so that he is able to continue looking at her. As a voice-over narration[4] begins to explain the origin of the man's hatred for women, the camera moves slowly down her body, relishing her stillness and smoothness, stopping only once it reaches her crotch, with its shock of dark pubic hair. We are invited to share in this gaze, and appropriately so, since the film is ultimately all about looking.

Harkening back momentarily to Mulvey's influential thesis, it can be said that *Anatomy of Hell* explores this notion of the woman as passive object of the gaze. In the film, the woman puts herself in that position and indulges in the resulting pleasure. But her passivity has landmines under the surface because hers is not the polished and impermeable body we would expect from a woman of such typical feminine beauty. She is constantly rupturing the veneer of femininity that she simultaneously expounds. Asbjorn Gronstad notes that the film succeeds in setting up an alternative mode of spectatorship, as well as producing images of the feminine that "disrupt and even deflect the recalcitrant to-be-looked-at-ness which Mulvey considered to be intrinsic to cinema's representation of women."[5] Breillat is able to put into action the seemingly hopeless ideal for a "new language of desire"[6] expounded by Mulvey. In order to do this, Breillat mixes repulsive

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[4] Although the narrator is a woman, she speaks in the first person, as if the voice inside the man's head was a woman's voice. Interestingly, it is Catherine Breillat herself who acts as the narrator in the film, fulfilling the "inner voice" for both the man and the woman. Her vocal presence throughout the film secures her position as an auteur and a director with supreme control over the filmic product.

[5] Absjorn Gronstad, "Abject Desire: *Anotmie de l'enfer* and the unwatchable." *Studies in French Cinema*, Vol. 6, No. 3, (2006): 162.

[6] Mulvey, quoted by Gronstad, 161.

images with seductive ones. She successfully complicates the notion of a smooth and sexualized naked female body. While Mulvey's approach is now considered somewhat dated within academic writing on film, her basic political concern involving "women's struggle to gain control over their own bodies and how they are represented"[7] continues to be supremely relevant within the field.

Breillat's expression of an alternative desire is based on an intimate relationship with the grotesque. In this way, *Anatomy of Hell* shares common ground with many of the other transgressive films to have emerged out of the global contemporary cinematic urge towards extreme sex and violence with what Gronstad describes as a "mischievous appetite for the unwatchable."[8] The difference here is in the manner of presentation *and* the subject matter of Breillat's work. Breillat directly confronts issues that pertain to women's lives, particularly their relationships with sex and their bodies. This is not a concern for the majority of the New French Extremity. Also, Breillat's approach does not only bask in grossness and gore, but exalts the aesthetics of the grotesque in a celebratory way. She places value on the poetics of the image. For example, in *Anatomy of Hell*, she is somehow able to make a vagina gushing menstrual blood into an oddly beautiful cinematic experience. In relation to Breillat's cinematic work, Gronstad says the "sheer flatness of the film images must be resisted, undermined, so as to make room for other modes of carnal knowledge. In short, Breillat wants, impossibly, to release the body from the prison-house of the image, while still working in a relentlessly visual medium."[9] Not only is *Anatomy of Hell* a visually luscious film, but it deals head-on with feminist issues,

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[7] Shohini Chaudhuri, *Feminist Film Theorists* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 33.
[8] Gronstad, 163.
[9] Ibid, 166.

where other films may only deal with them inconsequentially as a result of the foregrounding of violence directed towards women's bodies in an onslaught of scandalous images. *Anatomy of Hell* is not unwatchable simply because of graphic violence, as is the case in *Irreversible*, *Twentynine Palms* and various films of the New Asian Extreme. Nor is it unwatchable simply because of its explicit sex scenes, as can be seen in other sexually explicit films to come out of the same period, such as *The Idiots* (Lars von Trier, 1998), *9 Songs*, (Michael Winterbottom, 2004), or *Shortbus* (John Cameron Mitchell, 2006). What makes *Anatomy of Hell* stand apart from these other examples of "shock cinema" is the manner in which it approaches sex and violence.

In *Anatomy of Hell*, the sex is not sexy and the violence is hard to pinpoint, but the anger and disgust it initiates is stronger than many other films that approach similar cinematic themes. The rejection of the film is based on three main issues: First, the fear of sex acts on screen, especially when presented outside the category of pornography. This creates generic anxieties as well as general moral anxieties about sex as (public) spectacle. Secondly, fear of the body, but more specifically, fear of the *female* body. The film's presentation of bodily fluids and orifices creates a profound unease amongst viewers. This is primarily based on deeply ingrained misogynistic attitudes about the female body. Thirdly, anger towards Breillat as an individual as is expressed by various film writers and critics. Because of the widespread controversy her films have spurred, Catherine Breillat has achieved notoriety as a director. Through interviews in film magazines, as well as commentaries on the DVD releases of her films, Breillat proves to be a very articulate and vocal personality in the extra-textual buzz that surrounds her films. She has gained a certain star status within film culture. Reactions to her work often include intense attacks

on her as an individual, with sly personal insults and an unusual amount of rage. This is something that is certainly not seen for all films that receive bad press. It is my contention that this is based the underlying sexism that arises when a woman dares to transgress certain firmly instilled boundaries.

Anatomy of Hell is peppered with explicit sexual imagery. Because of its graphic nature, the film is often compared with pornography. This is not a new practice for Catherine Breillat, who incorporates scenes of explicit sexual content in many of her films, including *Romance* (1999) and *Fat Girl* (*À ma Soeur!*, 2001), two of her most critically successful works. Because of these types of scenes, it is impossible to satisfy desires for a clear generic categorization when considering Breillat's films, although it almost inevitably becomes part of the discussion. The confusion arises out of the ways in which her films mix pornography and "respectable" art cinema. A great part of the displeasure the film creates is a result of the typically boring, slow-moving, extra-talky, "profound" discourse of art cinema. It is the juxtaposition of this type of "high art" cinema alongside "meaningless" porn that enrages many critics. The self-righteousness of art cinema is foregrounded only to be ridiculed by plain porn. At one point in the film, following one of the man's long, boring reflections on women, the woman says: "I am sick of your dallying!" This moment seems like an underhanded insult that Breillat is throwing at pompous art cinema critics. She brushes aside his "profound reflections" only for the sake of satisfying her/our desire for the visual pleasure of sex. In that moment, the film is being pushed to function as porn, and criticizing the often self-centered and futile nature of art cinema.

Breillat's use of nudity and explicit sex scenes is deemed obscene by some critics and censors. While the display of female nudity is usually considered an acceptable practice for art cinema, the appearance of full male nudity often entices more shock from viewers. Breillat confronts this double standard in her films, by displaying (often erect) penises, as well as full female nudity. Nowhere is this more explicit than in *Anatomy of Hell*, with its unflinching close-ups of both male and female sexual organs in various states of arousal. But Breillat's pornographic stylings are quite different from what we might expect from explicit sex films. Breillat has stated that one of her main objectives is to reclaim images of sexuality from pornography.[10] She reworks the conventions of pornography within the realm of a more legitimate type of cinema. This generic confusion is a key issue when thinking about viewers' limits of acceptance for explicit sexual imagery in the cinema. As Linda Williams indicates: "In the U.S. we have grown so used to the separation of pornography from art that we tend to assume—sometimes hypocritically—that any arousal response is antithetical to art and any emotionally complex art is antithetical to arousal."[11] By confusing those two usually separate worlds, Breillat disrupts the clean filmic categories that have been historically upheld. By dirtying things that do not often get dirtied, Breillat makes us re-think the conventions of generic classification and enables us to explore some of the further possibilities of sexual syntax within the cinema.

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[10] Gronstad, 166.
[11] Linda Williams, "Cinema and the Sex Act." *Cineaste* Vol. 27, No. 1, (Winter 2001): 22.

Feminism's relationship with sex acts on screen has had a notoriously thorny history. In the 1970s, pornography became a pivotal issue for feminists.[12] Many felt as though pornography was inevitably oppressive for women. The attitudes towards this issue were militant and passionate. The general sentiment of the anti-pornography feminists was that "violence is inherent in the male role in 'normal' heterosexual relations."[13] This hugely problematic rhetoric has since been thoroughly debated by feminists and academics, but the tricky question of how to deal with sex on screen in a 'fair' and 'inclusive' way continues to be of concern for people interested in the politics of smut. Harkening back momentarily to the early feminist disputes with conventional pornography, the question arises: If the inevitable result of heterosexual sex on screen is the domination of men over women, where does this leave films like those of Catherine Breillat? By complicating the sex act into a series of complex negotiations and by changing the way that bodies are presented on screen, Breillat shows that the presentation of sex at the movies does not necessarily have to be oppressive to women. She gives voice *and* body to women within sexual scenarios on screen and shows how false the notion of an inevitable one-sided oppression can be, thus permitting her to "reclaim images of sexuality from pornography."[14]

Breillat's full-frontal attack on many conventional film practices has been embraced by some feminist scholars who believe that it enables women to be full subjects in representations of sexual situations that usually deny them this complexity. As Valerie

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[12] For further discussions on the porn debate, see Carole S. Vance's *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (London, Sydney, Wellington, Pandora Press, 1989) and Drucilla Cornell's *Feminism and pornography* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).
[13] Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press: 1999), 17.
[14] Gronstad, 166.

Fournier writes, "Since de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*, feminist critiques have argued that women become women by being constituted as the other of the male subject."[15] Pornography has been traditionally criticized for this lack of female subjectivity. Breillat's films give insight to a female perspective without becoming like "couples porn" or soft-core erotica, products that supposedly show *what women want* when they see sex on screen. Although these products are presumed to display sex with a "female sensibility" (less violence, "sweet nothings" whispered amongst couples), they often continue to portray the woman as "the passive recipient or bearer of inscriptions."[16] Breillat allows for women to have a multitude of sometimes conflicting desires. She has often criticized contemporary French cinema for failing to generate a discourse of desire for young women.[17] As Liz Constable explains, Breillat's films "[observe and represent] how this absence affects young women's self-construction as sexual subjects and how it shapes their explorations of the different spaces and forms of intimacy."[18] Many of Breillat's films do just this. For example, *Fat Girl* dismantles the typical coming of age scenarios found in mainstream cinema by showing adolescent women's treacherous sexual negotiations and awkward pubescent awakenings in ways that are uncomfortable to watch, without simplifying the experience of young adulthood into visions of stolen kisses at school dances and gentle fondlings over cardigan sweaters. In *Romance*, the female protagonist actively seeks new and stimulating sexual experiences since her boyfriend is unwilling to have sex with her. *Anatomy of Hell* switches the presumed gender roles for

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[15] Valerie Fournier, "Fleshing out Gender: Crafting Gender Identity on Women's Bodies." *Body and Society*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: SAGE Publications, Vol. 8, No. 2, (2002): 56.
[16] Ibid, 57.
[17] Liz Constable. "Unbecoming Sexual Desires for Women Becoming Sexual Subjects: Simone de Beauvoir (1949) and Catherine Breillat (1999)," *MLN* Vol.119, No. 4, (September 2004): 675.
[18] Ibid.

sexual transactions as it is the woman who pays the man for his services rather than the other way around. She arguably holds the power in the situation since she has the financial power in the transaction. In almost all cases, Breillat's films give women a new sexual vocabulary that has been previously lacking in cinematic explorations of sex on screen. Williams notes that for women, one constant of the history of sexuality has been a failure to imagine their pleasures outside a dominant male economy.[19] This is where Breillat takes the workings of porn to a new level.

Anatomy of Hell is easily dismissed because of its intense bodily explorations and its connection to porn. In Roger Ebert's scathing review of the film, he likens it to a "Bangkok sex show"[20], thereby cheapening the film's value by associating it with a dirty and foreign Other. This comment exemplifies the general attitude that exists in relation to explicit sex scenes in narrative cinema. As previously stated, *Anatomy of Hell* does not rest comfortably in the category of pornography. While the film may contain the basic iconography of pornography, with close-ups of vaginal openings, erect penises and penetration, the ways in which they are presented do not function like the genre has traditionally functioned and do not enable the viewer to become easily and uncomplicatedly sexually aroused. Porn is both a dismissible and sometimes laughable genre because of the nature of its function. It makes non-users embarrassed to imagine viewers masturbating to a film, which is the primary and official (generally understood) function of pornography. Barbara Creed notes that pornography is notoriously difficult to define, but says: "Most would agree that pornography is intended to cause sexual

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[19] Williams, *Hard Core*, 4.
[20] Roger Ebert. Review of *Anatomy of Hell*.
http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20041111/REVIEWS/41105002/1023

excitement, leading to sexual activity."[21] Despite the encroachment of sexualized body images within advertising and pop culture, the flesh we see is always airbrushed into smoothness and the actual exchange of fluids continues to be taboo. Pornography effectively throws the awkward existence of our carnal desires in our faces, although its championing of the body is not entirely all-embracing. As a genre, it can also safely be stored away by most of the population as something used by a deviant minority, but certainly nothing they have to deal with in mainstream image culture. Because of the emergence of hardcore tendencies in films that rest outside of the safety of the genre, people are forced to contend with the issues and images of pornography in a different context.

Pornography is known for showing naked bodies engaging in explicit sex acts on screen for a primarily male audience. Although audience reception of pornography has drastically changed through the introduction of the internet and home viewing, the overlying public conception continues to be that men are generally the ones who consume pornography. Because of this popular perception (whether fact or fiction), most pornographic products continue to address a presumed heterosexual male viewer. This creates a situation in which, traditionally, women's pleasure as well as female bodies in sex acts on screen have been defined by men for men. One of the main issues for feminist film theorists has been to gauge the place of woman's image in visual economies of 'male pleasure'.[22] Nowhere is this more apparent than in pornography, a genre based on harvesting women's bodies for the pleasures of male viewers. Superficially, porn seems

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[21] Barbara Creed, *Media Matrix* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2003), 59.
[22] Marilyn Burgess, "Women in Film: Teaching Across Disciplines." *Cineaction*, No. 24/25, (1991):5.

to take a celebratory stance on carnality, its bottom line being the presentation of bodies participating in sex acts. It might seem that porn has the potential to squash the uneven valorization of mind over body that permeates masculinist thinking, but as Robert Stam writes:

> Porn's "celebration" of the body usually amounts to little more than the dreary *mise-en-scene* of male partialism: i.e. the anxious foregrounding of fragmented body parts manifesting sexual difference. The veneration of the ejaculating penis, often centre-frame and giganticized by wide-angle lenses, rather than an homage to fecundity, is a salute to the phallus, the phallus which "stands in," so to speak, as the synechdoche for the absent male spectator.[23]

Anatomy of Hell's mise-en-scene thwarts the usual workings of mainstream pornography thereby creating a space that encourages a more inclusive fascination with the body.

The primary difference of *Anatomy of Hell* from mainstream pornography is the distinct lack of "money shots" in the film. This subverts the valorization of male ejaculate as the exclusive measurement of sexual pleasure and therefore diverts focus away from the usual phallic power of porn. Author Eugenie Brinkema writes: "In pornography, a man ejaculating in a woman is generically impossible because the real transgression-stuff must be made visible to prove that the act occurred...On the other hand, [the woman's] sexuality is not figurable, not sufficient. In traditional pornography, female sexuality is not there."[24] Breillat definitely changes this notion by foregrounding female subjectivity and making invisible the money shot. In *Anatomy of Hell*, the man ejaculates inside the woman. The orgasm is measured on his face, rather than through a physical manifestation

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[23] Robert Stam. "Bakhtin, Eroticism and the Cinema: Strategies for the Critique and Trans-Valuation of Pornography," *Cineaction*, No.10, (1987): 13.
[24] Eugenie Brinkema. "Celluloid is Sticky: Sex, Death, Materiality, Metaphysics (in Some Films by Catherine Breillat)." *Woman, a cultural review.* Vol. 17, No. 2, (2006), 152.

of his ejaculate. His muscles tighten and he is shown in a state of vulnerability, which is quite rare in depictions of male orgasms on screen.

Although the money shot is successfully thwarted, pleasure is not then transposed onto the female counterpart. The woman in *Anatomy of Hell* does not offer us the usual squeals and moans that we are accustomed to seeing in pornography. To paraphrase Linda Williams, she does not fulfill the goal of making visible the involuntary confession of female pleasure, which has been a constant concern for the porn genre.[25] Instead, she is seemingly unfeeling and without sensation. The man flops her body around like a dead fish, entering her as she remains unresponsive to his actions. Her body is almost completely immobile throughout the film. She talks about her pleasure ("The waiting has become part of my pleasure"), but besides the odd whimper, she never expresses it through bodily spasms. The ever elusive female orgasm is what porn is always seeking to find out. As Linda Williams points out: "The animating male fantasy of hard-core cinema might therefore be described as the (impossible) attempt to capture visually this frenzy of the visible in a female body whose orgasmic excitement can never be objectively measured."[26] The one time in the film that the woman visually demonstrates an orgasm, her faces contorts in a way that looks more like she's a deer about to be hit by a car than a woman in throws of pleasure. Throughout the rest of the time she plays the part of a passive body, unmoving and unmoved, although thoroughly exposed. This is a break from the tendency for women's bodies to be the primary embodiments of pleasure, fear

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[25] Linda Williams, *Hard Core*, 50.
[26] Ibid, 50.

and pain.[27] Breillat robs us of the generic satisfaction for watching the spectacle of female body spasms while still effectively throwing carnality in our collective faces.

By the 2000s, many narrative fiction films emerged internationally which showcased scenes of explicit sexual content. They inevitably received media attention because of their controversial non-simulated sex scenes. *Shortbus*, an example of one such film, met with high controversy due to its notorious use of graphic sex, sparking a rash of discussion about pornography and the use of "real sex" in cinema. The flurry of media coverage only seemed to aid in the promotion of the film, which received a variety of reviews, both positive and negative. While one reviewer adamantly dismisses it as "a porn film disguised as a legitimate movie"[28], another endorses it because "it is not art-house porn. It's not pornographic in any sleazy sense."[29] Ultimately, the anger it incited amongst reviewers was not widespread and the film managed to be relatively successful because of its playful and humourous nature. Although the film displays hardcore imagery, including one scene in which a man fellates himself and ejaculates into his own mouth, the boundaries it pushes are far different from those pushed in *Anatomy of Hell* and other Breillat films. Visually, *Shortbus* does not get as deep (literally and figuratively) as *Anatomy of Hell*, and even though bodily fluids are readily squirting into mouths, on walls and in bathtubs, the film does not problematize its rendering of the female body, or dangerously push pornographic images to a new level in the way that Breillat does.

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[27] Linda Williams. "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess," *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No, 4, (Summer 1991): 2-13.

[28] Zorianna Kit, guest reviewer on the Ebert and Roeper show. http://tvplex.go.com/buenavista/ebertandroeper/mp3/061009-short_bus.mp3

[29] Mark Bourne, in a review of *Shortbus* http://www.film.com/dvds/story/digital-valentines-day-favorites-part/18431679

Baise-Moi, a controversial French road movie shot on digital camera, also prides itself on non-simulated sex scenes. The film details the raucous killing spree of two women who make their way across France, fucking and killing people at random. As a dirtier and more disturbing version of *Thelma and Louise* (Ridley Scott, 1991), the movie is riddled with graphic sex and violence which earned the film accusations of meaningless sensationalism.[30] In articles and commentary about the state of sex, violence and feminism in contemporary French cinema, *Baise-Moi* often gets paired with films by Breillat.[31] Not only do these films break the established rules for nudity and explicitness, they also, as Colin Nettelbeck notes, "subvert conventional cinematic representations of heterosexual sex and female sexuality."[32] He continues by saying that these films "represent a rebellion against a male-dominated cultural reality—or in the words of the film-makers themselves, they are effectively a 'declaration of war.'"[33] This war is waged differently in the films of Breillat than it is in *Baise-Moi*. A major difference between the two movies is the manner in which *Anatomy of Hell* confronts the practices and conventions of art cinema. *Anatomy of Hell* feigns depth, through the man's boring reflections and the woman's voice over. This depth is shown to be vacuous. This must have been particularly enraging for proponents of the art cinema tradition, who notoriously take themselves very seriously. *Baise-Moi*, on the other hand, never exposes art cinema's depth as being merely empty rhetoric. *Baise-Moi* is too easily contained by critics as an excessive piece of sensationalist trash. *Anatomy of Hell* on the other hand,

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[30] Martine Beugnet, *Cinema and Sensation: French Film and the Art of Transgression* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2007), 49.
[31] Eugenie Brinkema, 149.
[32] Colin Nettelbeck, "Self-Constructing Women: Beyond the Shock of *Baise-Moi* and *A ma soeur*!" *Fulgor*, Vol. 1, Issue 3, (December 2003): 58.
[33] Ibid.

does say profound things about man's conception of woman – but it simultaneously exposes man's self-reflexive contemplations of his own sexism as being merely a smokescreen that allows him to remain sexist while claiming to acknowledge his flaws.

Breillat pushes different buttons because she confuses the border between art cinema and porn, while *Baise-Moi* rests somewhat comfortably in the realm of trashiness. The film received a merciless critical thrashing across the board, mostly based on its lack of moral compass and art cinema prettiness. Although it dabbles in feminist politics (albeit problematically) *Baise-Moi*'s aesthetic brutishness and shock tactics make a comparison with Breillat's work somewhat awkward. *Anatomy of Hell*'s luscious cinematic exploration of the body strongly influences reactions to the film. In her book *Cinema and Sensation*, Martine Beugnet addresses this issue in a number of recent French films. She says: "...to open oneself to sensory awareness and let oneself be physically affected by an art work or a spectacle is to relinquish the will to gain full mastery over it, choosing intensity and chaos over rational detachment."[34] It is through this opening of the senses that *Anatomy of Hell* finds its most disruptive subversion.

Anatomy of Hell engages viewers on an uncomfortably visceral level. With extreme close-ups of orifices, fluids and bodies engaging in fleshy sexual acts, the film's notoriety is based on its carnality. Viewers inevitably react viscerally to this spectacle, whether they find this experience enjoyable or not. Linda Williams describes this type of bodily reaction at the movies in her conceptualization of "body genres."[35] These are films that move the viewer beyond logical, intellectual responses. They offer up spectacles that

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[34] Martine Beugnet, 3.
[35] Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess."

are in excess to the narrative tidiness that is expected from a classical realist style of cinema. Williams mentions pornography, horror and melodrama as examples of body genres, which all focus on the display of female bodily excesses on screen. Williams' thesis ultimately demonstrates that images of the body evoke the greatest physical responses.[36] It is worth noting that all of these genres have been historically dismissed as illegitimate or unworthy of serious scholarly consideration. The dismissal of body genres has been widespread, both in cinema studies as a discipline, as well as in popular film criticism. Vivian Sobchack notes: "Most film theorists still seem either embarrassed or bemused by bodies that often act wantonly and crudely at the movies, involuntarily countering the fine-grained sensibilities, intellectual discriminations, and vocabulary of critical reflection."[37] Horror movies and pornography, the two most corporeal of film genres, continue to occupy marginal spaces in the film world. While Breillat's films do not easily fit into any of these filmic classifications, it is useful to think of her work in terms of its connection with the body. There is often a lack of comfortable viewer distance when watching Breillat's films, something that also occurs in horror and pornography. Viewers tend to feel too close to the bodies on screen, as well as to the intimate situations that Breillat painstakingly constructs.

The easy dismissal of these body genres is fundamentally based on the association they have with the corporeal. Western philosophy has a long history of somatophobia that places value on the mind over the body in a profoundly dichotomous manner of thinking.

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[36] Linda Badley, *Film, Horror and the Body Fantastic* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995), 11.
[37] Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press: 2004), 56.

Descartes helped to clinch this dualistic tendency by "[succeeding] in linking the mind/body opposition to the foundations of knowledge itself, a link which places the mind in a position of hierarchical superiority over and above nature, including the nature of the body."[38] Although this dualistic mode of thinking has been heavily criticized by postmodern thinkers, it continues to permeate popular thought. This is of major significance for women, who have been subsequently associated with the corporeal and therefore assigned lesser value. This issue is debated by Robin Longhurst who references Luce Irigaray's important work on the body: "Fluids are implicitly associated with femininity, maternity, pregnancy, menstruation and the body. Fluids are subordinated to that which is concrete and solid. In turn, solidity and rationality become linked."[39] In this way, the politics of disgust are intricately linked to issues of gender.

The female body, with its plethora of "mysterious" fluids, has generally been considered to be leakier and dirtier than the male body. This notion, based on years of deeply ingrained misogyny, is thoroughly explored in *Anatomy of Hell*. During one of their first meetings, the man sticks his fingers inside the woman's vagina. This is filmed in extreme close-up as the intensified sounds of stickiness and glop creep into our ears. He removes his hands and closely examines the sticky slime that covers his fingers. Through her supremely intimate film techniques, Breillat makes us feel that our flesh is somehow involved in the action. This process of attraction/repulsion is precisely what Kristeva discusses in her essay *Powers of Horror* with her conception of abjection.

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[38] Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 6.

[39] Robin Longhurst references Irigaray, *Bodies: Exploring Fluid Boundaries* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 31.

Breillat strategically explores this strange pleasure in all of her films. She forces us to confront that awkward state when pleasure in no longer so easy to define. This adds a complexity to the display of the female body, as well as to the reaction one feels when engaging with images of the body in the cinema. It is the point at which borders of all sorts collapse, making the firm human subject feel uneasily fluid. The up-close viscosity of vaginal fluid on the man's fingers brings us dangerously close to that borderline state that we so often try to avoid. Elizabeth Grosz references Mary Douglas' work on dirt and contamination, saying:

> ...In keeping with Douglas's claims about dirt, what is disturbing about the viscous or the fluid is its refusal to conform to the laws governing the clean and proper, the solid and the self-identical, its otherness to the notion of an entity—the very notion that governs our self-representations and understanding of the body. It is not that female sexuality is like, resembles, an inherently horrifying viscosity. Rather it is the production of an order that renders female sexuality and corporeality marginal, indeterminate, and viscous that constitutes the sticky and the viscous with their disgusting, horrifying connotations.[40]

Through her exploration of female viscosity Breillat is able to question the very order that places the female body in that subordinate state.

Another way that the film deals with (male) disgust of the female body is through its blatant images of menstruation. One of the most shocking images of the film is the close-up of the man's penis withdrawing from the woman's vagina as a wave of menstrual blood gushes forth. This scene is so shocking because of the incredibly taboo nature of menstrual imagery. One only has to observe the anxious whitewashed imagery of tampon TV commercials to understand the profound unease that exists in contemporary culture surrounding issues of menstruation. In another scene, the couple dips a bloody tampon

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[40] Grosz, 195.

into a glass of water and they both take a ritualistic drink of the red-tinted liquid. There is quite obviously a marked uneasiness in dealings with menstruation.[41] Critics can't help themselves from mentioning this scene with either mocking or disgust. The problematics of menstruation have been thoroughly explored by feminist writers from Simone de Beauvoir to Julia Kristeva. The overlying factor is that in Western culture, a supreme disgust and fear exists of the menstruating woman. Laura Kipnis says: "All bodily secretions are construed as dirty (tears are the exception), but menstrual fluids are even dirtier than the rest, possibly even lethal. The vagina is associated with rot and decay...in fact, the entire female body is frequently seen as a source of dangerous contagion..."[42] What Breillat does in this film that is so revolutionary is the way in which she confronts the unspoken disgust that exists vis-à-vis menstruation through dialogue and imagery. She also blurs the boundaries of disgust by presenting images of menstrual blood that are both visually fascinating *and* unwatchable. By foregrounding and even *eroticisizing* menstruation, Breillat forces viewers to deal with the widespread loathing of women's bodily processes that is always on the back burner, but rarely ever dealt with in popular visual culture.

> The displays of vivid sex and flesh remind us of the body's imminent death, as does the grotesque body in general. Kathleen Rowe states: "The 'grotesque body' exaggerates its processes, bulges, and orifices, whereas the static, monumental 'classical (or bourgeois) body' conceals them...The grotesque body is above all the female body, the maternal body, which through menstruation, pregnancy,

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[41] Laura Kipnis describes a 2002 study in which researchers tested subjects' disgust thresholds. In one experiment, subjects were asked to put a new, unused, and previously wrapped tampon in their mouths, an act which the majority (69 percent) were unwilling to do. *The Female Thing: Dirt, Sex, Envy, Vulnerability* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2006), 114.

[42] Ibid, 114.

> childbirth, and lactation, participates uniquely in the carnivalesque drama of 'becoming,' of inside-out and outside-in, death-in-life and life-in-death."[43]

By displaying a version of this grotesqueness through the filmic medium, Breillat makes us confront troubling feelings about the body's animality (and pending expiration) in a physically engaging way. Breillat creates a nauseating closeness to the body and this collapses the borders that maintain our sense of safety. Female materiality is an especially uneasy reminder of the body's imminent death and decay. The fleshier the image, the more painfully close we get to it, the more disturbing this feeling becomes.

Eugenie Brinkema writes: "That female genitalia suggest hiddenness, suggest nothingness, create the great threat of boundless female sexuality, anxieties about female sexuality...revolve around this special problem: phallic sexuality is terrified of this seemingly vast, seemingly empty, unseeable, unknowable space...."[44] Breillat explores this notion in *Anatomy of Hell* with the numerous close-ups of female genitalia. During one of these shots, the woman squeezes a slippery black stone out of her vagina. The sudden appearance of this object comes as a surprise, as the vagina seems to be innocently at rest and hiding nothing. The woman's vagina is also graphically shown as a receptacle for large amounts of gushing menstrual blood, as if she has an ocean of fluid inside her. This image correlates to the images of the ocean that reappear throughout the film. In these shots, we can feel the immensity of the ocean, which is at once seductive and terrifying, just like the conceptions of the woman's body. Our association of the ocean with the interior mysteries of the woman unfolds in a sensual way.

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[43] Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 33.
[44] Brinkema, 154.

Many of the ways Breillat makes her radical statements are through the flesh; both the flesh of the characters on screen and the flesh of the film's spectators. In a scene that rehashes the childhood memory of the man, a young boy climbs a tree to discover a nest full of baby birds. The boy picks up one of the little delicate beings and lovingly holds it in his hands. We are very aware of its fragility. But during the trip down from the tree, the bird accidentally dies in the boy's chest pocket. It becomes a lifeless fleshy mass. The boy suddenly turns violent and smashes the once beloved object into the ground with this foot. The image of the fleshy and vulnerable baby bird comes directly after a lengthy close-up of the woman's vagina. The association these two images make when cut together is obvious; it is the most violent moment of the film and we are forced to connect the young boy's brutality against the baby bird to the acute hostility he expresses against women's bodies throughout the film. This scene tempts us to believe in the tender and intimate moments that can exist between people, but also reminds us of the violence of the (inevitable) crush. It is difficult to watch, but again it functions exquisitely within a film about that anxiety surrounds the flesh.

The grotesque body plays an important role in theories of the carnivalesque. Mikhail Bakhtin's writings on the carnivalesque have been appropriated by various feminist scholars in their discussion of the body, although many have indicated the ways in which Bakhtin's writings have fallen short for gender theorists. For example, Bakhtin describes the image of a pregnant laughing hag as the epitome of the grotesque body, without ever addressing the issue of gender in this conceptualization.[45] Despite this

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[45] Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 63.

oversight, Bakhtin's ideas are a valuable addition to a discussion of disgust and the female body. With reference to Bakhtin's text, Mary Russo says: "The grotesque body is the open, protruding, extended, secreting body, the body of becoming, process, and change. The grotesque body is opposed to the Classical body which is monumental, static, closed, and sleek, corresponding to the aspirations of bourgeois individualism..."[46]

What is interesting in *Anatomy of Hell* is that the woman's body plays both of these roles simultaneously; she is at once a sleek and static Classical body in a delicate position on the bed, while at the same time she embodies the notion of the grotesque with her ever emerging bodily fluids. This presentation of the female body makes it impossible to commodify her as a pristine image of femininity. As Asbjorn Gronstad explains: "[*Anatomy of Hell*] enacts a decommodification of the body that in turn implies a liberating gesture vis-à-vis the reductive regimentation of the corporeal by the hegemony of the spectacle."[47] It also puts into question the complex relationship between the grotesque body and the issues of class that were of original interest for Bakhtin. His notion of the carnival was a decisive critique of bourgeois sensibilities. In a similar way, *Anatomy of Hell*'s bodily fluids rupture the potentially high art space of the film and the relegation of this beautiful female body to mere adoration. But at the same time, Breillat's films are notoriously pretentious and inaccessible for popular audiences. So while the woman's body in *Anatomy of Hell* is gushing unrefined body fluids, she is still doing so within the realm of art cinema, a markedly bourgeois domain, while safely cushioned by wordy philosophical dialogue. This is where the theory of carnival falls short in an

[46] Mary Russo, quoting Bakhtin, 63.
[47] Gronstad, 161.

analysis of *Anatomy of Hell*. This is not an inclusive party to which everyone is invited.[48] In fact, the guest list is fairly restricted.

The concept of the unruly woman continues to play an important role in feminist musings on contemporary culture. In some ways, the woman in *Anatomy of Hell* fulfills this role with the unabashed exposure of her body in all its fleshy and fluid glory. The concept of the unruly woman can be pushed even further to include Breillat as a personality and presence within film culture. Kathleen Rowe describes how in the public domain, female outrageousness and transgression can cause delight on the one hand and unease on the other.[49] This is how the figure of the unruly woman plays a dangerous and rebellious role. Just like the type of woman Rowe describes, Breillat disrupts the norms of femininity and upsets social hierarchies by being outrageous and often brutally transgressive. Her presence as an overly opinionated and difficult personality both delights and disgusts, just like the content of her films. She sits firmly in the very masculinist film industry with an unwavering willingness to break the rules again and again. As an opponent of both mainstream Hollywood and pornography, Breillat's work fills a void that is otherwise unexplored by feminist filmmakers. Her explorations of the grotesque and sexualized female body go places that other films do not or will not go. The pleasure experienced in a Breillat film is difficult to define. Like Mulvey once encouraged, *Anatomy of Hell* does not seduce us with narrative escapism. But on the other hand, there is a provocative and inevitable engagement of the body and this is something that a so-called "passionate detachment" does not encourage. Breillat's feminism can be

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[48] This is how Robert Stam describes Bakhtin's carnival, 13.
[49] Rowe, 30.

found in the nature of her audio-visual language, which is at once seductive and unsettling. She demonstrates how the politics of disgust cannot be approached without considering the gender inequalities that ooze through our masculinist society.

The Open Wound as a Protest: *In My Skin* and the Erotics of Self-Mutilation

"The tension between sexual danger and sexual pleasure is a powerful one in women's lives. Sexuality is simultaneously a domain of restriction, repression, and danger as well as a domain of exploration, pleasure and agency."
-Carole S. Vance, *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality,* 1.

"All our fears add up to one great fear...of the body under the sheet. It's our body."
-Stephen King, *Night Shift*, foreward, xvi.

In *Anatomy of Hell*, the woman slits her wrist and says that she does it because she's a woman. In this scene, suicidal self-mutilation is a plot point that incites the major actions and discussions of the rest of the movie. *In My Skin* uses self-mutilation towards different ends. Instead of using it as a means to comment on conventions of female victimization and sacrifice in art cinema, the film uses cutting as a source of power and pleasure. This chapter will demonstrate how *In My Skin* addresses the issue of female cutting through a very different lens than that which is usually seen in popular discourse. The film documents the fictional story of Esther (played by Marina de Van, the writer/director of the film), a woman who becomes obsessed with cutting herself and eventually eating her own skin. Instead of showing this obsession as part of a mental illness that needs to be fixed, the film foregrounds the *process* of cutting as an act of self-gratification that disturbs any easy definition for erotics on screen. The film draws viewers into a claustrophobic world in which our skin and Esther's skin become confused in a surge of blood and intimacy. It pushes the borders of disgust by creating a space that is at once revolting and erotic. The film raises questions about the gendered nature of this urge towards addictive self-mutilation and the connection it may have to women's abusive relationships with their bodies in contemporary Western culture. While feminists have

long protested violence against women in the cinema, this film complicates the issue since the ravaged body we see on screen is the result of self-inflicted injury. Because of deVan's cinematic approach to erotic body horror, it cannot be simply dismissed as masochistic female self-victimization. Instead, the viewer is forced to consider the potential power of this practice within the realm of feminist body politics.

In My Skin is an intense and intimate exploration of one woman's journey into a compulsive realm of self-mutilation. Esther is a young professional working as an international market researcher in a French urban setting. She has a blossoming career and a loving boyfriend (Laurent Lucas). One night, while at a work-related party, she ventures into the backyard and falls in the dark, ripping her pants and cutting her leg. She re-enters the party as if nothing is wrong and only later, in the privacy of a bathroom, discovers that she has severely gashed herself. This experience deeply affects Esther as she becomes entranced with her new wound. A few days later, while at work, Esther abruptly gets up from her desk and isolates herself in a dark and abandoned part of the building. Possessed by a violent urge, she pulls down her pants and reopens her healing wound, also cutting herself a new wound elsewhere on her leg with a sharp hinge she finds lying nearby. She experiences extreme pleasure while cutting herself and afterward returns to work. Later, when her boyfriend realizes what she has done, he becomes confused and enraged. Even though Esther apologizes for her behaviour, she does not/cannot offer him an explanation. After a subsequent working dinner with potential clients, Esther has a significant breakdown. As a result, she checks into a hotel and spends the evening cutting, eating and sucking on her skin. She conceals this activity by feigning a car accident, which her boyfriend only half-believes. Esther attempts to hide

her self-mutilating because of the judgmental and condemning attitudes of the people around her, but she also cannot stop doing it. It becomes an addiction for her. In the final scene of the film, Esther locks herself in a hotel room once again, taking her brutal practices to a new extreme. The film presents an ambiguous ending in which Esther remains in the hotel room, unmoving and staring into the camera. No resolution is presented for her problem and viewers are left with the same feeling of discomfort that has permeated the rest of the film.

In My Skin offers a disquieting look at the experiences of one woman in contemporary urban culture. Martine Beugnet indicates that the film "digs under the smooth shell of ordinary life's implicit daily brutality."[1] This has been a recurring theme for other contemporary French directors, one of whom is feminist *auteur* Agnès Varda.[2] She explored this sense of alienation in *Sans toit ni loi* (1985), giving the subject a feminist edge. The film's protagonist is a young woman who rejects social and sexual productivity as she wanders like a vagabond, rejecting normalized notions of femininity.[3] *In My Skin*'s Esther functions in a similar way, although not to the same extreme as Mona, who dies at the end of the film. In the director's commentary on the DVD release of *In My Skin*, de Van says that Esther is not completely marginal, but that she is at the border.[4] Esther has a comfortable life, a good corporate job and a stable place within a

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[1] Martine Beugnet, *Cinema and Sensation: French Film and the Art of Transgression* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2007), 158.
[2] Varda is a well-known feminist French filmmaker who has been the subject of much academic attention on feminist filmmakers, including a chapter in *To Desire Differently*, an important source material for this thesis.
[3] Susan Hayward, "Beyond the Gaze and Into Femme-Filmécriture: Agnès Varda's Sans toit ni loi (1985)," in *French Cinema: Texts and Contexts*, eds. Susan Hayward and Ginette Vincendeau (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 270.
[4] Marina de Van, Director's commentaries. *In My Skin* (2002), DVD Distributed by Wellspring , DVD released April 2004.

heterosexual coupling, but by continuing to engage in anti-social cutting, she is refusing to whole heartedly co-opt all the values of the supposedly ideal lifestyle of bourgeois capitalist society. Esther is torn between two worlds as she constantly hovers on the borders between clean, respectable living and the seductiveness of her fleshy addiction. This sense of divergent realms is highlighted during the opening credit sequence. Here de Van presents a split screen of urban images, with one side in positive and the other side with an eerie negative effect. In this way, both the cold alienation and the stark beauty of the urban setting are foregrounded. These images are set against a shot of Esther's bare legs as she works at her computer in her apartment. As the camera tracks up her smooth and unmarked legs we immediately understand that this film will be an exercise in sensuality, as her tender, almost juicy skin is set against the two-dimensionality of the urban images.

Esther's flesh slowly takes over her life, and the life of the film. She practices her self-cutting in private and, at least initially, continues to function at her job and in her private life. She tries to hide her cutting from those around her and it becomes a source of heavy shame and secrecy. Her boyfriend Vincent adds to this feeling of shame by reacting violently to the wounds that appear on her body. Even after the first incident, in which Esther wounded herself unintentionally, Vincent becomes angry with her for not immediately going to the hospital and implies that she is some sort of freak for not feeling the pain of the cut. Superficially these seem like the actions of a caring and concerned boyfriend, but under the surface there is a propensity toward violence and control. The two have a confrontation in which Vincent aggressively pulls Esther's pants down, pointing at the wounds and yelling: "Does this satisfy you!? Does this satisfy you!?" The

personal relationship she has with her own body inspires rage from her boyfriend who feels very threatened when he is not involved. In a review of the film, C.W. Nevius of the *San Francisco Chronicle* complains that Esther's behaviour is nonsensical because of the fact that she has a great boyfriend, but decides to cut herself anyway.[5] Esther's refusal to stop cutting herself can be read as a subtle protest against the presumption that to be in a 'loving' heterosexual coupling results in automatic personal fulfillment.

The inherent hostility that lies under the surface of female relationships is also highlighted in the film. Esther's friendship with Sandrine (Léa Drucker) is complicated and difficult. Sandrine's jealousy over Esther's professional success is obvious from the very beginning of the film. At the first party, she sends annoyed and hostile glances at Esther whenever she engages in professional schmoozing. Further on in the film, after Esther has purposefully cut herself for the first time, she approaches Sandrine in what amounts to the only 'cry for help' in the film. When Esther confesses to Sandrine that she has just cut herself, Sandrine simply says: "If you are hurt there is a first aid box." Esther's wound is obviously more than physical, but Sandrine refuses to engage emotionally in the situation, offering instead what amounts to cold and medical advice. Later, when Sandrine sees Esther's self-inflicted wounds, she does not offer help, but instead looks at her with disgust and anger as she quickly removes all sharp objects within Esther's reach. The most chilling representation of Sandrine's behaviour happens at a work pool party, after Esther tells Sandrine that she has received a promotion. Sandrine is

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[5] C.W. Nevius, "It's the cruelest cut of all. With no insight, story is just a big bloody flop," in The San Francisco Chronicle, Review of *In My Skin*
http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2003/11/28/DDG0G3C19B1.DTL

obviously jealous of new success. A few moments after telling Sandrine the news, three male co-workers grab Esther and try to throw her into the pool. Knowing that she has a plethora of wounds hidden under her pants, Esther frantically struggles and screams in order to avoid exposure. When she anxiously begs Sandrine for help, her pleas are reciprocated with a cold stare. As a result of the struggle, Esther's wounds open up and blood seeps through her pants. The men immediately drop her and she is left to deal with the embarrassment of the situation alone. The blood on her pants makes reference to the shame of menstruation, as her secret bleeding is suddenly pushed into the public realm. The horror of this moment is pronounced through the audio track, as the only thing we hear is Esther's heavy breathing and the prominent dripping of water. This is how de Van powerfully brings us in to her private world of shame and isolation. Sandrine's behaviour is a crushing act of betrayal that helps to expose the underlying jealousy, competition and aggression that often lies at the heart of female friendships. *In My Skin* does not candy-coat female solidarity, as is the case with many other female friendship films.[6] Sandrine is judgmental about Esther's private and violent relationship with her own body and is as unhelpful as Esther's boyfriend in the way that she handles it.

Despite a surface appearance, Esther's relationship with her professional life is also unsteady. Even though she obviously values her position and advancement within her company, she cannot stop indulging in the addictive cutting of her own skin, even if the repercussions of the behaviour could potentially end her career. During a business dinner with potential clients, her uncomfortable behaviour takes a turn for the worse. The

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[6] For further discussion of this topic, see Karen Hollinger's *In the Company of Women* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

clients persuade her to drink wine at the beginning of dinner. Instead of sipping idly on one glass, Esther proceeds to nervously gulp down copious amounts and becomes gauchely intoxicated; laughing too loudly at jokes and upsetting her boss. This is typical behaviour of an "unruly woman", a concept discussed in the previous chapter, as a woman who makes a spectacle of herself thereby thwarting expectations for suitable feminine behaviour.[7] By drinking too much wine, too quickly, Esther demonstrates how she is fueled by her desire; to drink more, to feel more and to press up against the borders of what is socially acceptable. As she drinks more wine, she becomes less and less able to engage in the chatty business banter around the table and soon becomes engrossed with her own body. Suddenly it appears as though her arm is detached from her body and lying idly on the table. Eventually she reattaches it and secretly stabbing herself under the table until she draws blood. Although the dismemberment is a product of Esther's imagination, this moment stands out as the most fantastical and unrealistic of the film. The moment is important as a gauge of the disembodied feeling that Esther gets in the relation to the pressure to perform as her corporate self. Here, as well as in other facets of her compartmentalized life, Esther's behaviour contradicts the actions of a productive and well-adjusted member of society. She refuses to be fixed into place and cannot help but reside on the margins, threatening to tumble into the darker, dirtier side at any moment.

Esther's gaping wounds—sometimes visible, sometimes hidden—are a shocking reminder of the flesh and blood that lies under the clean surface of the corporate world.

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[7] Kathleen Rowe (*The Unruly Woman*) and Mary Russo (*The Female Grotesque*) discuss "making a spectacle of oneself" as typical behaviour of an unruly woman.

In her book on corporeal geographies, Robyn Longhurst says: "'Professional' workplaces...are constructed as spaces in which bodies must not transgress their boundaries...It can require enormous vigilance to construct the proper, professional and respectable body—to present a 'public face'—at work."[8] Esther transgresses these boundaries by bringing her bleeding body into the work environment. The first time she purposefully self-mutilates is at work. She is sitting at her desk typing away when suddenly she makes a run for the door. She reaches a dirty back hallway and proceeds to frantically cut open new wounds. Directly after the intensity of cutting, we cut to a cityscape similar to those of the opening credits, as if to pair the corporeal intensity of Esther's private moment to the impersonal presence of urban architecture. When she returns to her desk, she is obviously self-satisfied. We are aware of the bleeding that has just taken place and of the bleeding that is most likely still taking place under her business attire. Her wounded body's placement in this sterile work space sticks a subtle knife in the side of masculinist corporate culture because, whether she is bleeding or not, we are aware that just under the surface there is always a new wound waiting to be cut open.

De Van's expressive use of *mise-en-scene* is a key component of the expression of horror in the film. With Esther's world divided in two, de Van sets clean corporate and domestic spaces against the seedy spaces where Esther engages in self-mutilation. Twice she checks into hotels in order to spend all night cutting and eating her own body. *L.A. Times'* film critic Manohla Dargis states: "This character, cut off from the world, is having an illicit affair with her flesh and blood...There is something undeniably witty about

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[8] Robyn Longhurst, *Bodies: Exploring Fluid Boundaries* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 132.

Esther checking into a hotel for an orgy of self-mutilation."[9] These are not high end hotel suites with fresh linens and chocolates on the pillows, but instead rooms that have undoubtedly housed a history of sordid affairs and "unwholesome" sex acts. These spaces are a vital part of the film's *mise-en-scene* and help to set the stage for the types of illicit activities that take place. They further express Esther's isolation and self-alienation as liminal locations that she passes through, becoming the only other witnesses to Esther's gruesome performance. Much of the disturbing nature of the self-mutilation scenes is due to De Van's particular acting style. Despite the horrific nature of the film's events, de Van does not dramatize her pain or pleasure in exaggerated ways. Tim Palmer notes: "Even in scenes of acute physical crisis, when Esther literally turns on herself, de Van allows herself only flickers of facial response, a neutrality that does not seek sympathy from the viewer."[10] In these moments, with the camera often very close to her face, de Van expresses an uncanny intensity with her unblinking stare and almost imperceptible twitches and shakes. This is quite different from the usual acting practices one might expect from horror films in which the victim of such slashings may articulate excessive expressions of terror. The typical acting style of the horror film includes two opposite but ultimately similar types of performances: First, the overblown display of screams and gestures of panic; and second, the petrifying stillness of the unfeeling monster. But in *In My Skin*, Esther strangely represents both victim *and* monster and her acting style in the cutting scenes is neither "over-the-top" nor completely unfeeling. While de Van's

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[9] Manohla Dargis, Review of *In My Skin*, *Los Angeles Times*: http://www.calendarlive.com/movies/reviews/cl-et-dargis7nov07,2,1375288.story?coll=cl-mreview.
[10] Tim Palmer, "Under your skin: Marina de Van and the contemporary French cinema du corps." *Studies in French Cinema* Vol. 6, No. 3, (2006): 176.

performance seems "realistic" in contrast to the often excessive feeling of popular horror films, her intense trembling is often shot in close-up, lending an edge of excess to these moments, which are in contrast to the mundane realism of Esther's "normal" world.

Although *In My Skin* does not fit neatly into the horror/gore genre, it certainly borrows many of the genre's characteristic features. Over the last decade, the horror genre has been demonstrating a noticeable move towards a more graphic style of body horror. The genre is "grounded in the wish to see monsters, mutilated bodies and mutilation as they 'really' are, grounded in the desire "to penetrate 'fictional facades' and glimpse forbidden areas of privacy." This desire to reveal the secrets of the flesh, to expose the hidden, and to penetrate the surface of the body is exemplified in the gore film."[11] Contemporary horror is often based on a "panic about what the body is actually like."[12] There is both fascination and denial about what exists under the clean surface of our skin. This refusal to acknowledge our own materiality has been discussed by George Bataille who writes:

> I can deny my dependence, denying sexuality, filth, death, and insisting that the world submit to my action. But this negation is fictitious. I finally have to tell myself that the carnal origin of which I am ashamed is my origin nonetheless. And however great my horror of death may be, how can I escape the fate appointment? I know that I will die and that I will rot.[13]

Contemporary horror cinema uses this dread of the body to inscribe fear in its viewers. In an age of AIDS panic, viral epidemics and obsession with bodily sanctity, the popularity of this type of horror is abundant. While *In My Skin* uses all of these conventions and

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[11] Isabel Christina Pinedo, with sub-quotes from Daniel Dervin, *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 57.
[12] Linda Badley, *Film, Horror and the Body Fantastic* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995), 134.
[13] Georges Bataille, as quoted by Michael Richardson, *Georges Bataille, Essential Readings* (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 1998), 18.

seemingly falls into the global trend towards a more carnal type of horror, it does so for a different audience and towards a different end than most commercial productions that deal with cinematic gore. As Dargis says: "It explores violence intellectually rather than to employ it for easy entertainment."[14] With a lack of mawkishness and artificiality that can be noted in much of contemporary pop horror (such as the *Saw* and *Hostel* series), *In My Skin* cannot be watched for the predictable generic excitements. The film also approaches the subject from a gendered perspective that sheds interesting light on some of the old issues of horror that have been discussed by feminist writers over the years.

Horror films have not historically been popular amongst feminist writers. Linda Williams describes the typical attitude towards the genre when she explains how the female viewer of horror is forced to "bear witness to her own powerlessness in the face of rape, mutilation and murder" adding that "women are given so little to identify with on the screen."[15] And Tania Modleski argues that "popular horror films enable the male spectator to distance himself somewhat from the terror" and continues by saying that "as usual, it is the female spectator who is truly deprived of 'solace and pleasure.'"[16] Barbara Creed's work on the horror film locates the female grotesque as a site of misogyny that ultimately culminates in a conservative reinstatement of patriarchal order. She says that the feminine is constructed as monstrous "within a patriarchal discourse that reveals a great deal about male fears but tells us nothing about feminine desire in relation to the

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[14] Manohla Dargis, Review of *In My Skin*, *Los Angeles Times*: http://www.calendarlive.com/movies/reviews/cl-et-dargis7nov07,2,1375288.story?coll=cl-mreview.
[15] Linda Williams, "When the Woman Looks." In *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 15.
[16] Pinedo quotes Tania Modleski, 69.

horrific."[17] Some feminist writers have argued against the notion that female victimization and displeasure are inevitable results of the horror film. In regards to Barbara Creed's position on the monstrous feminine, Isabel Pinedo says: "And though Creed treats feminine monstrosity, or as she calls it, the monstrous-feminine, as the historical product of a male-dominated social order of which she is critical, she fails to consider the transgressive pleasures of the violent female for female viewers."[18] *In My Skin* chronicles the ways in which opening up new wounds on the body does not necessarily have to be equated with a sense of powerlessness. Esther engages in transgressive pleasures, ones that are strictly prohibited within the masculinist world in which she lives, while also engaging the viewer in the transgressive pleasure of experiencing this spectacle within the cinematic realm. *In My Skin* reclaims Creed's notion of female monstrosity as a site for protest. In the end, the monster (Esther) is not destroyed, nor is a sense of safety and normalcy restored. Instead we are left to reel in the after-effects of such a viscerally potent movie without the usual pay-off at the end.

In My Skin's transgressive pleasures are particularly powerful because of de Van's stylistic approaches to female flesh and the act of cutting. Contemporary horror films are known for their extreme displays of violence enacted on the body in order to provoke extreme emotional responses from viewers. Carol Clover explains how horror movies attack their audiences, saying: "The attack is palpable; we take it in the eye."[19] She later explains how we also "take it in the ear", as the soundtracks to horror films play huge

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[17] Barbara Creed "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection," in *Dread of Difference*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996): 63.
[18] Pinedo, 68.
[19] Carol Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 202.

roles in the perpetuation of fear and excitement. The audio-visual language used in *In My Skin* is partially responsible for why it stands apart from other films that may deal with similarly grotesque subject matter. In her study of certain experimental films, Laura Marks emphasizes "the tactile and contagious quality of cinema as something we viewers brush up against like another body."[20] Martine Beugnet discusses the haptic quality of recent French filmmaking, saying that is has "an inherently transgressive element" that reminds the viewer "to open oneself to sensory awareness and let oneself be physically affected by an art work or a spectacle is to relinquish the will to gain full mastery over it, choosing intensity and chaos over rational detachment."[21] This is how *In My Skin* affects viewers so profoundly.

Twenty minutes into the film, we are subjected to the first horrific scene of self-cutting. It is a difficult scene to bear not because of visually explicit gore, but instead because of what is implied. The editing style is relatively slow paced and Esther's wounds and emotions are not exploited through exclusively close-up shots. She crouches in a semi-theatrical spotlight with her pants down around her ankles as she anxiously cuts herself new wounds. As Esther digs into her skin, her body shakes discerningly as if it is tightly coiled with an intensity that only cutting can release. This is paired with a chilling, wide-eyed gaze that blankly gapes into emptiness. The result of this combination of visual techniques elicits what Martine Beugnet calls "an unanchored, tactile gaze", one that evokes various sensory affects.[22] Like with the other erotic body horror films,

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[20] Laura Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), xii.
[21] Beugnet, 3.
[22] Ibid., 161.

viewers are inescapably induced into a corporeal cinematic experience because of the ways that bodies on screen are presented.

Perhaps the most effective technique employed in this scene, and in all of the scenes of self-mutilation, is the use of sound. As she frantically jabs into her wounds, the sounds of digging, cutting and heavy breathing feel incredibly close and unbearable. Author Karen Lury describes this type of intensified use of sound in television's "CSI", and although it is used in a very different context than *In My Skin*, the effects are comparable:

> These squelches, rips and gulps are shocking in that they animate the special effects of the image (made up of zoom camera shots, CGI and model animation) and they act most effectively as a kind of aural assault, but in their 'liquid' quality they also have a acutely intimate and even an 'oral' feel. This 'oral' quality of the sound encourages a sensual and erotic dimension, yet because these interludes are often associated with violence this is frequently quite disturbing.[23]

In My Skin's use of sound helps to push viewers over the edge in their corporeal engagement with the film. This is an integral part of how the film is able to disturb people's ordinary sensibilities in such a profound way. Linda Williams indicates that in pornography, intensified sounds (such as heavy breathing and moaning) are often used to seek an effect of closeness and intimacy, rather than of spatial reality.[24] Similarly in *In My Skin*, the viewer is brought uncomfortably and excitingly close to Esther's private moments with her own body.

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[23] Karen Lury, CSI and Sound. "CSI and Sound." In *Reading CSI: Crime TV Under the Microscope,* ed. Michael Allen (London and New York: I. B. Taurus. New York: Distributed in New York by Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 112.

[24] Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press: 1999), 123-124.

Esther's newfound fascination with her skin's surface is an exercise in atypical erotics. She is engrossed with the possibilities her body holds. In the first cutting scene described above, Esther's facial expressions are awash with a mixture of pain and ecstasy. During one of the close-ups, her mouth opens slightly and her almost imperceptible shaking implies an orgasm-like state. Although the violent nature of Esther's cutting sometimes makes it difficult to watch, the erotic dimension of these acts are impossible to ignore. This is not the type of sensuality that is typically explored in the cinema. Laura Marks describes eroticism as an oscillation between control and loss of control, a sexy in-betweeness in which one loses themselves and finds themselves, noting that the erotic does not necessarily have to have anything to do with actual sex acts.[25] In their introduction to *Sexy Bodies*, a collection of inter-disciplinary essays about sexuality and the body, Elizabeth Grosz and Elspeth Probyn indicate that the goal of the volume was to "rethink, to reconceptualize, explore, disentangle or recomplicate sexual bodies, considered in their broadest and loosest terms, and to analyze sexualities in transition, in movement. Its goal is to ask rather than presume what sex, sexuality or sexiness are."[26] Through the intimate audio-visual encounters we have with Esther's skin, *In My Skin* is able to achieve similar results.

While Esther's cutting practices can be perceived as unhealthily self-destructive, they also express an intense display of self-gratification. During Esther's first solitary stay in a hotel, she takes her obsession one step further and begins to eat her own skin instead

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[25] Laura Marks, *Touch*, xvi.
[26] Elizabeth Grosz and Elspeth Probyn. *Sexy Bodies: The Strange Carnalities of Feminism.* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), ix-x.

of simply cutting it. The result is an extremely erotic sequence that shows her sucking, biting and kissing the flesh of her arm. Although *In My Skin* does not deal with the iconography of porn as overtly as *Anatomy of Hell*, the film's erotic moments sometimes make reference to pornographic practices. In this same scene at the hotel, Esther gets on the floor and opens a wound on her leg, allowing the blood to drip back down into her mouth and eyes while she pleasurably rubs it all over her face. This seems to be in direct reference to the classic "money shot" in porn, which acts as a quantifiable measurement of the male orgasm and is the ultimate gauge of success for a sex scene. In this hotel sequence, Esther essentially "comes" on her own face in a reversal of the money shot's typical male on female power dynamic. In relation to the classic money shot in porn, Linda Williams says: "It is quite evident that this spectacle is not really for her eyes. She may even close her eyes if the man comes on her face...The man, in contrast, almost always sees himself ejaculate; the act seems much more clearly intended for his eyes and those of the viewer."[27] *In My Skin* uses this convention as a moment of indulgent self-gratification in which Esther is able to visually and physically experience a pleasure usually reserved for men. It also plays upon the above notion of "taking it in the eye" as a practice of horror films. In this case, Esther is literally taking the manifestation of her dangerous pleasure directly in the eye ball, while her gaze remains unwavering. As viewers of body genres who operate through a practice of mimesis, as described by Linda Williams, we simultaneously take it in the eye as well. As Tim Palmer says:

> [A] vital focal point of both *Dans ma peau* and the *cinéma du corps* overall arises from its impact on the spectator. Much of the hostility directed at these films centers on their ability to shock, disturb, and consciously 'dis'please their

[27] Linda Williams, *Hardcore*, 101.

> audiences. But why need this effect be considered in wholly negative terms? So long theorized and conceived of as an entirely passive recipient, the spectator of the *cinéma du corps* is instead a profoundly active participant.[28]

The physical engagement that the film encourages disputes the traditional feminist conception of the passive voyeur and opens up new possibilities for feminist discourse in the cinema.

In critical writing about *In My Skin*, rarely do authors make mention of gender politics within their commentary. *The Washington Post*'s Michael O'Sullivan only references the film's *failure* to solve issues pertaining to women's lives, saying "it could have been a serious attempt to shed light, through exaggeration, on the problem of negative body image among women."[29] The statement implies that if there is no resolution to the problem, there is no point of discussing the issue. This has been a concern for some feminists who feel that feminist films have a responsibility to enact real life change in people's lives rather than simply make provocative commentaries about them. It is my contention that feminist films do not have to "solve problems" for us in order to be powerful and positive feminist statements. *In My Skin* raises many important issues about women's place in the world without presenting a clear feminist manifesto. In fact, De Van herself rejects the idea that she is performing service to a feminist agenda. In his discussion of the scene at pool in which blood seeps through Esther's pants like a menstrual stain, Tim Palmer says: "It is suggestive to link such images to a feminist agenda, but de Van herself downplays this reading, insisting that Esther's estrangement is

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[28] Tim Palmer, "Under your skin: Marina de Van and the contemporary French cinema du corps" in *Studies in French Cinema*, 179.
[29] Michael O'Sullivan, "'Skin': Bodily Harm." Review of *In My Skin*. *The Washington Post*. http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2004/06/03/AR2005033116152.html

corporeal and not gender specific..."[30] As I have argued in previous chapters, the linkage of the corporeal to the female realm is a prevalent practice and is a major reason for the widespread disgust with and rejection of erotic body horror. De Van denial of a feminist standpoint is not of great importance for the construction of meaning within the film. As a female writer/director/performer she inevitably gives insight into women's bodily experience in the world. Although it can be read on many different levels, a major part of *In My Skin*'s power originates from the ways in which it addresses feminist concerns about body in modern urban society. Whether or not this was part of its original intention is largely inconsequential.

Self-mutilation is mainly a practice of girls and young women.[31] The subject has been dealt with in a many films, most recently in *Girl Interrupted* (James Mangold, 1999) and *Secretary* (Steven Shainberg, 2002) In these popular representations of cutting, it is shown exclusively as a part of a mental illness that needs to be (and eventually is) fixed. *In My Skin* approaches this practice in a very different way, foregrounding the process of self-mutilation as an act of erotic self-gratification rather than simply a harmful psychosis. A major difference in its approach to the subject is the way in which it offers no explanation for the problem, nor does it offer a solution. Whereas other filmic presentations about cutting often explain it away with accounts of unhappy childhoods and abnormal psychology, *In My Skin* does not fall into such an easy question/answer formula. Esther is a well-adjusted, successful citizen of capitalist culture who for all intents and

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[30] Tim Palmer, "Under your skin: Marina de Van and the contemporary French cinema du corps," *Studies in French Cinema* Vol. 6, No. 3, (2006): 176. Based on personal interviews with the director.

[31] Sheila Jeffreys references Sarah Shaw's 2002 work on the subject of self-mutilation. *Beauty and Misogyny: Harmful Cultural Practices in the West* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 150.

purposes should be completely satisfied and stable. Because of the way they are presented in the film, her acts of self-mutilation cannot be easily contained. They end up acting as a subtle protest against the masculinist world in which she is completely enmeshed. The film also speaks to the relationship women have with their bodies within this contemporary world. There is an edge of empowerment in the way that Esther engages with her body. In her study on the subject cutting, Sarah Shaw concludes by saying: "In the end, self injury undermines women's freedom, limits their possibilities and may blaze a trail towards suicide attempts."[32] Arguing against this perception, I believe that *In My Skin* complicates the act of self-mutilation in such a way that it cannot simply be dismissed as pure self-destruction or a symptom of female masochism. Ultimately, the film's political outcome is an opposition to critiques of "deviant" sexuality. Since the point of the film is not to offer an answer to the question of why Esther is she doing this to herself, it compels spectators to recognize her pleasure and reject our "natural" tendency to see this as an unhealthy behavior that must somehow be a symptom of a larger problem and therefore must be cured.

Esther's masturbatory sessions of self-mutilation can be viewed as acts of protest against societal constructions of femininity and expectations for female behaviour. Barbara Jane Brickman says: "Mutilation by definition presumes an ideal that the cutter or burner maims and mars, thereby committing an almost sacrilegious act – an act in defiance of the cultural mores professing faith in the ideal body."[33] This point is further discussed by Martine Beugnet who notes: "Esther commits the ultimate transgression—she

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[32] Sheila Jeffreys quotes Sarah Shaw, 151.
[33] Brickman, Barbara Jane. "'Delicate' Cutters: Gendered Self-mutilation and Attractive Flesh in Medical Discourse." In *Body & Society.* Vol. 10 (4): 87-111, (2004): 98.

mutilates, disfigures and thus renders dysfunctional a body that had been shaped to fit, represent and efficiently contribute to the perpetuation of a specific socio-economic system."[34] This is what is so shocking about Esther's behaviour. It is unnerving to imagine an attractive woman who is willfully mutilating her own body, since within a patriarchal society a woman's worth is largely measured by her physical beauty. In this way, Esther is intentionally rendering herself a less valuable commodity within this system of exchange. Male self-mutilation, on the other hand, is mostly celebrated, as can be seen in *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999) or any number of popular films in which men offer themselves up as willing participants in violent acts of masochistic brutalization. They are able to wear their wounds as symbols of toughness and male power. French performance artist Orlan uses body mutilation as a source of empowerment. She publicly performs plastic surgeries on her own body for a viewing audience and has created heavy controversy amongst both feminists and art critics. In one of her past performances Orlan had horns surgically implanted in her forehead, mutating her otherwise classically beautiful face into her own monstrous creation. She says that "art has to be transgressive, disruptive and unpleasant in order to have a social function" and that "both artist and audience need to feel uncomfortable so that 'we will be forced to ask questions.'"[35] *In My Skin* functions in a similar way.

It is reckless to talk about cutting and practices of obsessive bodily mutilation without discussing their connection to gender. As an act of physical self-modification,

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[34] Beugnet, 161.

[35] Kathy Davis quoting Orlan in "' My Body is My Art': Cosmetic Surgery as Feminist Utopia?" in *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*, eds. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (New York: Taylor and Francis, 1999), 458.

cutting can be linked to anorexia, another contemporary exercise of body control that is overwhelmingly practiced by women.[36] Many parallels can be drawn between the two afflictions, insofar as both present situations in which women attempt to gain control over their bodies through behaviour that is considered pathological and self-destructive. Susan Bordo notes that much of the medical discourse on anorexia situates it as a mental disturbance that often finds its source within unhappy or abusive family situations. Popular and medical discourses on cutting follow the same lines. Bordo disagrees with this diagnosis, saying that it must be understood as a social pathology, not only as individual psychopathology."[37] It is not inconsequential that the majority of anorexics and cutters are women. It is part of a larger trend in which contemporary society urges women to engage in obsessive regulation and tampering with their bodies through variety of means, including exercise, diet and plastic surgery.

In her influential book on feminism, Western culture and the body, Susan Bordo explains: "The social control of female hunger operates as a practical 'discipline' (Foucault's term) that trains female bodies in the knowledge of their limits and possibilities."[38] While anorexia is mostly seen as a self-destructive and dangerous practice, it does reveal a number of interesting points about the nature of women's relationships with their bodies in contemporary Western society. Reportedly, a common attitude of anorexics is the sense of being trapped in one's body and despising its fleshy

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[36] Christine Battersby notes that ninety percent of all anorexics are female, "Her Body/Her Boundarie,." in *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*, eds. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (New York: Taylor and Francis, 1999), 346.
[37] Susan Bordo, "Never Just Pictures," in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 456.
[38] Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 130.

mass and animal cravings. Bordo describes the anorexic's urge to control her need for food. She says: "The young woman discovers what it feels like to crave and want and need and yet, through the exercise of her own will, to triumph over that need."[39] What is valued is the practice of self-discipline and control, which are values generally coded as "male." Women's cravings and indulgences are considered to be shameful.[40] Through a denial of the embarrassing, "female" urges to eat, the anorexic feels a sense of empowerment over the bodily yearnings that seem to weaken her. It essentially boils down to triumph over desire. In the case of *In My Skin*, rather than suppressing her desire, Esther allows herself to fully engage in the pleasure of her flesh. Instead of a prison, her body in treated as a playground for a variety of transgressive pleasures.

The original event that spurs Esther into a cycle of self-mutilation is when she falls during the first party and doesn't notice the injury. Anorexics have often been described as having a "basic delusion of not owning the body and its sensations."[41] Bordo says: "This experience of bodily sensations as foreign is, strikingly, not limited to the experience of hunger. Patients with eating disorders have similar problems in identifying cold, heat, emotions, and anxiety as originating in the self."[42] Unlike anorexics, who aim to be cut off from bodily sensations, Esther discovers the pleasure of hyper sensation through cutting. After Esther's original accident, she becomes obsessed with being able to feel the pain of the cut. Although the desire to cut sometimes takes over her and she is unable to resist it, in other ways she demonstrates a high degree of control over her

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[39] Ibid, 178.
[40] Ibid, 129.
[41] Ibid, 147.
[42] Ibid.

actions. Esther also practices control over her own images, as she documents her cutting with a camera in the final scene. These images are shown in a split screen set-up, a device that almost presents the screen as an extension of Esther's body as the screen itself seems as though it is also wounded.[43] The issues of controlling one's own body and controlling one's own image are of particular importance for feminist discourses on the body in the cinema. *In My Skin* openly deals with these issues without flagging us with a potentially suffocating feminist party line.

In one of the final scenes, Esther goes shopping before her final stay in a hotel. She goes shopping in a brightly lit mall where she buys a variety of things, including a knife and a camera, while becoming extremely disturbed and disoriented. The scene is shot with a series of out-of-focus shots, confusing close-ups and shifty camera work, creating a sense of acute unease. Esther's unstable movements and monetary transactions are highlighted with these formalistic camera techniques. This exposes her rejection of the capitalist, consumerist gaze and aligns her with Irigaray's critique of philosophy's privileging of "optics"[44] In this scene, Esther cannot see properly; everything is out of focus; she seems overwhelmed by the phallic gaze of consumerism. The only solution to undermine this system of looking at superficial surfaces is to appropriate the gaze and turn it on itself – the seeing, desiring subject becomes the desired, subjugated object. She buys a camera to record herself cutting her own body. She thus undermines platonic optics, first, by leaving the binary world of the mall where the viewing subject owns/consumes objects-to-be-looked-at, and secondly, by collapsing the viewing subject and the observed

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[43] Tim Palmer, "Under your skin: Marina de Van and the contemporary French cinema du corps," 179.
[44] Christine Battersby, 354.

object. With her camera, she becomes the director of her own porn film (the perfect emblem of patriarchal consumer society) in which she controls all of the images and actions.

A major part of women's oppression is often attributed to their lack of voice. This has been an issue throughout the feminist movement, as women have struggled to gain autonomy and authority in their lives. Valérie Fournier discusses some of the problems with this concept, saying: "The discourses of 'inclusion' and 'giving voice' suggest that someone is in possession of voice (or of a place from which to issue invitations) and in a position to offer it to the other as a gift, a gift for which the other should be grateful; also assumes that the 'other' wants voice."[45] In *In My Skin*, Esther actually has a comfortable place and a sizeable voice within the masculine corporate system. Instead of searching for a voice *within* the world of male power, Esther finds a 'non-voice' within her own body, rejecting rationality and language. Her absorption into her physicality is a subtle protest against the outside world in which she feels out of place. She finds a source of power and a source of pleasure through this exploration of her own corporeality through the use of the camera. In reference to Luce Irigaray's feminist theories, Christine Battersby says: "According to her, identities based on spatial containment, substances and atoms belong to the masculine imaginary, and what is missing from our culture is an alternative tradition of thinking identity that is based on fluidity or flow", also arguing that "identity as understood in the history of western philosophy since Plato has been constructed on a

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[45] Valérie Fournier with reference to Kappeler (*The Will to Violence,* 1997); "Fleshing out Gender: Crafting Gender Identity on Women's Bodies." *Body & Society*, Vol. 8, No. 2, (2002): 72.

model that privileges optics, straight lines, self-contained unity and solids."[46] Using the common conception that "the female body 'spills over' while the (idealized) male body has defined boundaries,"[47] *In My Skin* shows that the leaky, fluid corporeality associated with the female does not necessarily have to be a source of only disgust and repression, but can also exist as a source of fascination, eroticism and to a certain extent, self-empowerment. This is one of the ways in which *In My Skin* becomes a liberating feminist project. Just like Irigaray "uses the techniques of philosophical terrorism to mount raids on past philosophers and psychoanalysts"[48], *In My Skin* uses cinematic terrorism to mount raids on the clean, solid, ideal body, while also attacking the usually clean, safe space that is reserved for women's bodies in the movies. In this way, the film engages viewers in the discourse on boundaries that has been a major part of the feminist project.

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[46] Battersby, 348.
[47] Michelle Henning, "Don't Touch Me (I'm Electric): On Gender and Sensation in Modernity" in *Women's Bodies: Discipline and Transgression*, eds. Jane Arthurs and Jean Grimshaw (London: Cassell, 1999), 26.
[48] Battersby , 348.

Sex, Blood and Cannibalism:
Trouble Every Day's exploration of female sexuality

"It is precisely because we are human, because we live under the somber prospect of death, that we know the exacerbation of violence, the desperate violence of eroticism."
-Georges Bataille as quoted by Martine Beugnet, *The Cinema of Sensation*, p.105

"Dirt and sex: always such a fun couple, strolling hand in hand through history."
-Laura Kipnis, *The Female Thing*, p.102

In the previous chapter I discussed how *In My Skin* presents female self-mutilation as a source of protest and pleasure, while raising questions about feminist body politics. In this chapter, I will look at how *Trouble Every Day* constructs a similar site for eroticism in its presentation of sex acts that straddle the dangerous zone between excitement and disgust. Although *Trouble Every Day* does not deal exclusively with the *female* body in carnal terms, the film foregrounds the aspects of corporeality and desire that have been of major interest for this thesis. By concentrating primarily on the character of Coré (Béatrice Dalle), I will demonstrate how the film complicates the practices of on-screen erotics, calling attention to female sexual hunger and the dissolution of bodily boundaries, thereby valorizing the realm of fluids and flesh that is usually denied within masculinist society.

Trouble Every Day presents two parallel stories. The first involves Dr. Shane Brown (Vincent Gallo) and his wife June (Tricia Vessey), who are on their honeymoon in Paris. Shane is obviously a troubled and dark individual while his wife is the perfect picture of feminine purity. Although at times they seem like a happy couple, tension rises

as we learn that Shane has a brain disease that compels him to engage in cannibalistic and predatory sex with members of the opposite sex. He keeps this a secret from his new wife while suppressing the urge to ravage her. He has actually come to Paris with ulterior motives: to find a cure for his disease by tracking down Dr. Léo Semeneau (Alex Descas) with whom he worked as a scientist in Guyana some years previous and where his mysterious disease has its source. Léo's wife Coré, who was also in Guyana, caught the same disease. In this second story, we watch as she seduces and kills various male victims. While Léo searches for a cure to Coré's disease, he locks her away in their home as a way to stop her from killing men, but she always seems to escape in order to quench her thirst for sex and blood. The two stories collide as Shane eventually finds Coré and kills her. June, in the meantime, has become very suspicious of her moody and distant husband. She leaves the hotel in search of answers, which she never finds. After killing Coré, Shane goes back to the hotel and savagely murders a young chambermaid (Florence Loiret-Caille). At the end of the film, Shane and June are reunited and make plans to go back to America. A semblance of normality is depicted, but the reminder of blood and violence still hovers in the air.

In *Trouble Every Day*, Denis uses themes and character types that are often found in the horror tradition. For example, Denis borrows narrative devices from Gothic fiction as she foregrounds "a woman with anti-social appetites" who necessitates "enclosure within a large shuttered mansion."[1] She also presents Coré as a kind of ravenous, sexualized vampire, a figure that has held an important role in the history of horror. In

[1] Douglas Morrey, "Textures of Terror: Claire Denis's Trouble Every Day." *Belphegor*, Vol. 3, Issue 2, (2004) http://etc.dal.ca/belphegor/vol3_no2/articles/03_02_Morrey_textur_fr.html

Bram Stoker's Dracula (Francis Ford Coppola, 1992), a popular rendition of the Dracula story, many of the typical characteristics found in traditional conceptions of the female vampire can be noted. For example, Lucy, a vivacious young socialite, is seduced by the strong male Dracula figure at the beginning of the film. After she is bitten, she "writhes, moans, and stalks her men" becoming "the woman as sexual monster, predatory, wanton, requiring performance and satisfaction from her partner."[2] At another point in the film, a trio of sexy female vampires seduces Jonathan, the main male protagonist, in what amounts to a titillating scene of soft-core erotica that could be seen on late-night cable. The main difference between these vampires and the figure of Coré in *Trouble Every Day* is the fact that they are controlled by a dominating male figure (they are known as "the devil's concubines", a term that obviously indicates a system of power relations) who ultimately dictates their behaviour. Also, as Lucy further develops into Dracula's vampire/sex slave—becoming more sexually aggressive and wanting—she is presented in a progressively less attractive manner. She eventually becomes completely undesirable as an excessively "feminine" monster, with pasty white skin and obscenely ornamental costumes. The same pattern can be observed historically in many horror films in which the female vampire is depicted as subservient to the dominant male vampire.[3] This chapter will discuss how, in *Trouble Every Day*, Coré's vampire-like qualities are

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[2] Vera Dika, "From Dracula—with Love," in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 393-394.

[3] In the 1960s and early 1970s, a cinematic trend for sexually aggressive vampires with lesbian tendencies can be noted (see, for example, *Daughters of Darkness* (Harry Kümel, 1971), *The Vampire Lovers* (Roy Ward Baker, 1970) and *Twins of Evil* (John Hough, 1971). In relation to Coré, whose appetites are specifically geared towards men, the lesbian vampires of these films come with a different problematic in regards to the representation of female sexual appetite on film. For further discussion of this particular topic, see Bonnie Zimmerman's article "Daughters of Darkness: The Lesbian Vampire on Film," in *The Dread of Difference*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press), 379-387.

presented as more independent, empowering and attractive than can be noted in more traditional representations of the female vampire.

Along with the other directors of erotic body horror, Denis also employs many of the tendencies of contemporary horror films that have been discussed in previous chapters. By using such devices, *Trouble Every Day* creates a forbidding atmosphere of fear and dread without falling into the usual generic clichés.[4] Philippe Met states: "*Trouble Every Day* is the closest Denis has come to making a pure horror film."[5] He continues by saying that the film "is a superbly refined sample of cinematic art where such typical minuses as a flimsy plot, quasi-nonexistent characterization, sparse dialogue and minimal regard for genre conventions all become assets rather than flaws."[6] But Denis's disregard for traditional narrative conventions is a point of disapproval for other critics who feel that the story lacks coherence and fails to thrill the viewer in satisfactory ways, veering instead towards pure sensationalism. James Quandt complains that "Denis barely musters a hint of narrative to contain or explain the orgiastic bloodletting."[7] This is typical of complaints about the torture porn cycle in the US that have critics reeling over their exploitative spectacles of blood and guts.[8] Indeed, *Trouble Every Day* contains a number of extremely

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[4] *Trouble Everyday* was originally devised for a project that was intended to give international *auteurs* the opportunity to work in the horror genre. The larger, international project was never completed. Hampus Hagman, "'Every Cannes needs its scandal': Between art and exploitation in contemporary French film." *Film International* Vol. 5, No. 5, (2007): 34.

[5] Philippe Met, "Looking for trouble: The dialectics of lack and excess. Claire Denis' *Trouble Every Day* (2001)" *Kinoeye*, online source. http://www.kinoeye.org/03/07/met07.php

[6] Ibid.

[7] James Quandt, "Flesh and Blood: Sex and Violence in Recent French Cinema." *Artforum*, February 2004: 128.

[8] For further discussion of torture porn see David Edelstein's "Now Playing at Your Local Multiplex: Torture Porn," *New York Magazine,* February 6, 2006. http://nymag.com/movies/features/15622/ and Warren Kinsella's "Torture porn's dark waters," *The National Post*, June 07, 2007. http://www.nationalpost.com/news/story.html?id=373ed690-d213-4bc1-bf9f-d84f53220e75

gory and disturbing moments, especially in scenes that mix sex and death in a particularly gruesome ways. These moments of graphic bloodletting and sexual violence do not always sit well with viewers. In fact, the film inspired mass walkouts at the Cannes film festival during its public screenings in 2001.[9] Along with stories of spectators vomiting in their seats, this has become part of the film's popular mythology as one of the more excessively gory films of the New French Extremity. As opposed to the torture porn cycle of horror films, the primary market for films like *Trouble Every Day* is the international festival circuit, where scandal is often considered to be a major part of the cultural economy.[10] Despite the fact that scandal is somewhat expected at these high profile international festivals, some audience members still manage to be so incredibly shocked and appalled by certain films as to warrant mass walkouts. There is a political nature to these types of collective demonstrations of disgust, as critics take their personal reactions to a public forum, thereby creating a spectacle of their own. This creates a hierarchy of taste in which certain 'experts' actively dismiss the films that do not meet their high cultural standards. Pierre Bourdieu, who has written at length about issues of taste and class says:

> Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make...The denial of lower, coarse, vulgar, venal, servile—in a word natural—enjoyment, which constitutes the sacred sphere of culture, implies an affirmation of the superiority of those who can be satisfied with the sublimated, refined, disinterested, gratuitous, distinguished pleasures forever closed to the profane. That is why art and cultural

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[9] Tim Palmer, "Under your skin: Marina de Van and the contemporary French cinema du corps." *Studies in French Cinema* Vol. 6, No. 3, (2006): 171.

[10] See Hampus Hagman's "'Every Cannes needs its scandal': Between art and exploitation in contemporary French film." *Film International* Vol. 5, No. 5, (2007): 32-38, 40-1.

> consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfill a function of legitimating social differences.[11]

Unsurprisingly, the films that most often receive such reactions are ones that deal with carnal displays of sex and gore, such as *Irreversible*[12] for its violence, sexual and otherwise, and *Brown Bunny* (Vincent Gallo, 2003)[13] for a short fellatio scene near the end of the film. It becomes apparent that crossing these boundaries, both corporeal and social, creates a supreme discomfort that pushes people, kicking and screaming, into perilous places they do not wish to enter.

Just like *In My Skin*, *Trouble Every Day* sets up two distinct spatial realms: One of dirty, dripping carnality and blood-drenched sex acts and the other of empty conversations and clean, emotionless settings. Its demonstrations of sex and violence are splashed up against an otherwise whitewashed background. It's almost like a maxi pad commercial in its anxious portrayal of purity, especially in the spaces of the laboratories and the hotel where Shane and June stay. This hotel is quite different from those portrayed in *In My Skin*. Here the linens are fresh and the rooms probably aren't rented by the hour. The stale corporate cleanliness of this space is set against Shane's bloodlust, which he fights hard to control. But even within the hotel there is a hierarchy of spaces, and we catch glimpses of the annals of the hotel where the employees reside. It is in one of these dungeon-like spaces that Shane savagely kills one of the room attendants. While it seems as though this hideous act is safely contained within the lower, dirtier parts of the hotel, the final scene

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[11] Pierre Bourdieu as quoted by Kevin Glynn, Tabloid Culture: Trash, Taste, Popular Power, and the Transformation of American Television (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 109.

[12] Eric Allen Hatch describes how the film inspired mass walkouts at Cannes in his article about the film, "Succès de Scandale." http://www.citypaper.com/film/review.asp?rid=7281

[13] Roger Ebert describes the "unrestrained hostility of the audience" during screenings of the film at Cannes, in "Gallo goes on the offensive after 'Bunny' flop."
http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20030604/FILMFESTIVALS01/66010303

shows that the sanitary gleam of hotel room in which Shane and June are staying has been subtly soiled. As the couple embraces in the white bathroom and make plans to go back to America, a small trail of blood drips down the shower curtain. The security of cleanliness is shown to be superficial, and as always, under the surface, a bloody and gruesome world threatens to emerge. The danger of dirt[14] is that it disrupts the proper order of things. Mary Douglas says: "Ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that semblance of order is created."[15] *Trouble Every Day* plays upon this notion with its show of 'clean' and 'dirty' as territories that seem to constantly spill over into one another, so that the demarcation of these two realms is shown to be shaky at best. This inevitably disrupts the hierarchized and dualistic categories upon which (patriarchal) social order is based.

The scientific world also plays a key part in the mise-en-scene of the film. Martine Beugnet explains: "The film takes us into the sanitized space of scientific laboratories. The stereotypical opposition between the neon-lit, ordered cleanliness of these controlled, specialized environments and the sense of dreadful sensuality induced by the confusion and excessive violence of the horror scenes is heightened to the extreme."[16] This contrasting of spaces, especially in the scientific laboratory settings, emphasizes the carnal, non-rationality of the scenes of horror. There is a succession of shots that display

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[14] This term refers to a variety of "dirty" substances, including blood, vomit, fecal matter etc.
[15] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), 4.
[16] Martine Beugnet, *Cinema and Sensation: French Film and the Art of Transgression* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2007), 44.

the dizzying rhythms of lab equipment as it shakes and mixes beakers full of mysterious liquid contents. The key here is that they are *contained* liquids, measured and controlled. During another scene, a brain is shown submerged in liquid, lifeless and dead, with no apparent relationship to a living human body. Directly afterwards, a scientist with a large knife is shown cutting the brain into thick slices, which are reminiscent of week-old meatloaf, and equally unappetizing. The scientist wears goggles, a mask and gloves, so as to have no contact whatsoever with this body matter. This cold and sanitized approach to the corporeal is contrasted to the other moments in which the heat and wetness of skin on skin contact is of utmost importance. Through Shane, "the boundary between science and the corporeal has been ruptured."[17] Because he is both a scientist *and* a cannibal, he is able to straddle the two worlds. But he is still a functional member of the scientific community, unlike Léo who is mockingly referred to as being part of "the talk show circuit" because of his radical and supposedly bogus scientific beliefs. Along with Shane, we know that Léo's claims are true and so the main scientist's voice of scientific authority is seen as pompous and infuriating. In this way, not only is the authority of scientific knowledge criticized, but the doubleness of Shane's character is exposed as he successfully performs for whichever audience is watching. A central goal in film is the urgent need to discover a scientific cure for the disease that Shane and Coré have. Both Léo and Shane have this as their main objective throughout the film, although they ultimately fail at its resolution. This is a major difference from *In My Skin* in which treatment for Esther's 'disease' is never sought. The presence of a scientific discourse is

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[17] Kate Taylor, "Infection, postcolonialism and somatechnics in Claire Denis's *Trouble Every Day* (2002)." *Studies in French Cinema*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2007): 25.

obvious throughout the film as we are often treated to close-ups of lab equipment in motion and brains being spliced under the harsh glow of florescent light. By showing us these unusual activities and objects in aesthetically engaging ways, visual fascination is encouraged. Despite aesthetic appeal of these moments, science and technology is ultimately shown to be inadequate in its ability to figure out and fix the central problem. In the end, irrational carnality, sexual hunger and cannibalism defeats rational scientific understanding. This shows how not everything can be contained within tidy scientific explanations. The film demonstrates the residual authority of those unexplainable and mysterious carnal functionings of the world.

In *Trouble Every Day*, moments of sexual excitement and moments of profound disgust are placed side by side. In what is probably the most disturbing scene of the film, Coré seduces a young man who has broken into her house. They meet for the first time as Coré is trapped in her room behind wooden planks that have been nailed to the doorframe by her husband. The intruder approaches the door and Coré seductively stares at him through the gaps. The two touch and kiss in a moment of heightened eroticism. Coré lifts her skirt in a luxuriously slow way to reveal her panty-less lower half. The camera, shooting from the man's point of view, lingers here intensely for an extended moment. Eventually the man, who is in a frantic state of arousal, rips down the boards that are blocking his full access to Coré. We then cut to a sex scene inside the room and a series of extreme close-ups that slowly and intimately move over the textures of his skin so that even the most minute hairs and blemishes becoming visible and (or so it seems) touchable. Along with the proximity of the visuals, the man's intensified breathing heard on the sound track makes the scene almost unbearably sensual. As Coré's hands move over his

body we experience this moment from her perspective. She eventually mounts him and penetrative sex is implied. Because of the heat and sexiness of the scene, we momentarily forget about the violence that is bound to come. The soundtrack soon cues us to this unfortunate eventuality and the scene turns violent as Coré's bites, initially thought to be playful, become threatening. She gnaws at his flesh, getting deeper and deeper with her bites. The man starts screaming and telling her to stop, but to no avail; Coré is overcome with cannibalistic desire and proceeds to devour him with her unusually large mouth, which suddenly takes centre stage. Dark blood drips from the now panicked man's nose and shrieks of pain echo through the house. Coré greedily eats the flesh of his face and neck as his protests become weaker and weaker. When Coré sticks her finger into a newly created wound on his body, her pleasure is unmistakable. The scene culminates in the young man's death and Coré's ultimate satisfaction. The evidence of this brutalization is subsequently revealed in images that show huge blood splatters across a large expanse of wall. In this shot, Coré moves through the foreground in a delirious post-sex haze with bloody residue all over her face and dress. Despite the horrific source of this blood splatter, on a purely visual level, it is hard to resist the graphic beauty of the image, which resembles a Jackson Pollock painting with its violent energy and frantic streaks of dark red liquid on a white background. Again, Denis blurs the lines between delight and disgust, demonstrating how frighteningly close the two expressions can be to one another.

In this sex/death scene between Coré and the young man, the boundaries of the body are violently ruptured. We undoubtedly feel attacked by this sudden surge of flesh and blood. Coré transforms the man's body into a heaving, shaking mess of raw meat. These new found fluids and orifices create an extremely disturbing scenario that attests to

the human denial of the body's carnal origins. As I have discussed in previous chapters, the body's fluids are often disquieting reminders of the precarious nature of the body's boundaries (which we like to imagine as being solid, sturdy and impenetrable). By crossing those boundaries, this scene becomes a threatening reminder of the body's vulnerability. For some critics this border-crossing is considered to be exclusively the realm of the abject. But while it is thoroughly disturbing on one level, it is also dangerously pleasurable on another. It is through this tension that the eroticism of the film finds its source. As always, Georges Bataille articulates a poetic understanding of this type of eroticism: "For Bataille, the erotic, which always borders upon death, is one of the processes whereby subjectivity, pulled towards the realm of the undifferentiated (orgasm as *la petite mort*), is at risk of being annihilated; in order to experience *jouissance*, I must accept, albeit temporarily, dissolving and merging into the other."[18] This describes erotic moments in which dissolution of self is welcomed in a confusion of flesh and pleasure. But sometimes this feeling is taken too far, as is the case in *Trouble Every Day*'s sex scenes. In one of the most eminently disgusting acts of the scene between Coré and the man, she slips her finger into a newly formed wound, playing gleefully with the fleshy opening. Laura Kipnis says:

> The apertures become the most threatening places on the body—the mouth, anus, ears, nostrils, and for women, of course, the vagina—because these apertures are forever vulnerable, inviting penetration and thus contamination. Our apertures make us permeable, but we desire not to be—or only under those special circumstances, like sexual attraction or when in love, and even then the desired permeability is frequently achieved only in tragically defended and self-limiting ways.[19]

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[18] Ibid., 106.
[19] Laura Kipnis, *The Female Thing: Dirt, Sex, Envy, Vulnerability* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2006), 88.

Although Coré demonstrates a carefree enjoyment of this moment, it is obviously very troubling for the man who is experiencing it, as well as for the audience, who feels a little too close to the action. Coré crosses a precarious line, taking the moment of eroticism too far, pushing the scene towards excess. The hole is reminiscent of a vaginal opening into which Coré repeatedly pokes her finger, thereby feminizing his body by penetrating this newly formed orifice. Through this reversal of roles in which the penetrator becomes the penetrated, *Trouble Every Day* successfully disarms the gender hierarchy that is so often upheld in moments of sex and violence.

When representing a sexually insatiable woman, it is easy to fall into the old misogynist traps of creating negative images that stress the grotesque and threatening features of female sexual performance.[20] Coré arguably embodies these negative features, but somehow her performance does not feel like a betrayal of feminist concerns. *Trouble Every Day* shows how these value judgments in terms of 'good' or 'bad' feminist messages are not always easy to pin down. Coré is the ultimate unruly woman, urgently smashing all expectations for feminine etiquette and control. Even though the reason behind Coré's behaviour is a mysterious disorder, it does not transform her into a strictly undesirable monster. She still manages to embody a certain potency of desire that inevitably seduces us. Her sexuality isn't contained within the confines of pathological diagnoses. The scenes in which she seduces and devours men carry a weighty significance for the articulation of female sexuality. She actively pursues her pleasures and it becomes difficult to deny the haptic arousal that these scenes instigate. Denis films them with an

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[20] Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press: 1999), 183.

utmost appreciation for the sensuality and complexity of these erotic, fleshy moments. She makes room for what Asbjorn Gronstad calls "other modes of carnal knowledge"[21] which are of vital importance for the feminist cinematic project. In relation to the work of the French feminists such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, Janet Wolff notes: "*L'écriture feminine* is writing founded in women's experience of the body and sexuality, an experience which is not mediated by men and by patriarchy."[22] Irigaray advocates for the fluid multiplicity of female desire as a more diffuse, shapeless form of eroticism than its masculine equivalent.[23] Coré's unruly manifestations of sexuality operate in much the same way, especially since the director and cinematographer (Agnès Godard) of the film are also women. Her character therefore becomes a powerful instance of female carnal expression.

While Shane and Coré both "consume" others, Denis presents their exploits in quite different ways. Their distinctive styles of attack and enjoyment become obvious in the scene in which Shane 'seduces' and murders the room attendant. In terms of narrative, the scene is similar to that of Coré's and the young intruder. Both begin with consensual sex acts between the two characters that soon turn violent, ending in murder. As previously discussed, in Coré's scene, the eroticism is painstakingly recorded, with roaming close-ups of skin and prolonged moments of tenderness and mutual pleasure. Coré's enjoyment is visually emphasized. Shane's scene is approached in another way,

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[21] Asbjorn Gronstad, "Abject Desire: *Anatomie de l'enfer* and the unwatchable." *Studies in French Cinema*, Vol. 6, No. 3, (2006): 166.
[22] Janet Wolff, "Reinstating Corporeality: Feminism and Body Politics." *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 420.
[23] Luce Irigaray *The Sex which is not One*, translated by Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 28-32.

and as a result, his sexual violence and cannibalism come across quite differently. From the beginning, Shane is presented as the aggressor. Unlike Coré and the boy, who simultaneously touch through the border between the boards upon meeting, Shane sneaks up on the maid and takes her by surprise. While she initially seems to agree to this game of power and submission, she soon begins to resist as Shane physically overpowers her by lying on top of her on the floor and holding down her struggling arms. There is very little play between the lovers and very little screen time given to the display eroticism. In fact, Shane doesn't even seem to be enjoying himself. There is no thorough exploration of the other's body, no lavishing in her skin. Instead, he pins her down quickly and bites into her vagina, initiating shrieks of protest. During this moment of cannibalism, all expression/emotion is shown on her face, as the camera is positioned directly above her body, with Shane not even appearing in the shot. We only see him again when he 'comes up for air' with a large amount of viscous blood dripping from his mouth. Shane finishes the job and drags the girl's body away. He wipes the blood off his mouth, hiding the bloody towel amongst a pile of other clean ones. Afterwards, he returns to the hotel room to take a shower and reconcile with his wife as if nothing has happened.

Although Coré and Shane have the same disease, the *effect* of his disease (both aesthetically and socially) is quite different. Denis demonstrates that 'giving free reign' to one's violent sexual desires is quite different for men and women. Despite being a murderous rapist/cannibal, Shane is able to pass as a 'normal' citizen. As a man, he gets away with being sexually aggressive and violent, precisely because these are attributes we accept as part of conventional masculinity. During a stint in which Shane wanders through Paris alone, he rides the subway and rubs up behind a random woman. Another

female passenger on the subway notices this and stares at him with distaste, but Shane stares back at her with his aggressive and unflinching gaze and she eventually looks away. His menacing stares are part of acceptable male behaviour. Earlier in the film, June and Shane are engaging in foreplay when suddenly Shane gets up and locks himself in the bathroom to masturbate. After he's finished, he storms out of the room, violently pushing June aside without an explanation. All of this violent and sexually aggressive behaviour may be 'uncivilized', but it is not unmanly. It is ultimately deemed as acceptable by patriarchal society, whereas Coré's behaviour as a savagely desiring woman is seen as an absolute aberration; something so incredibly monstrous that it must be stopped at all costs. In this way, Denis creates two worlds in the film: One in which the man gets away with rape and murder and the woman must be punished for her aberrant behavior (thereby encouraging a critique of actual patriarchal cultural values). The other world is the spectacular space of feminist fantasy in which Coré is allowed to indulge in her most excessive desire in a way that is disturbing but still strangely beautiful and sensual.

Just like *In my Skin*, *Trouble Every Day* deals with female hunger, which has become an important issue for feminists. The prevalence of anorexia in contemporary society demonstrates a widespread urge towards the repression of the female appetite. This is encouraged through a variety of means, including films and other modes of visual culture. We are taught that in order to be desirable women, we must suppress our appetites. Anorexics display extreme versions of this denial, as they attempt to reject the fleshy, corporeality that is coded as female. Clearly, anorexia as a disorder embodies misogynist attitudes about women's bodies. The denial of food is intricately linked to matters of sexuality. As Susan Bordo states: "The last thing that most women with eating

disorders want is a body that blatantly advertises female sexuality."[24] As an unruly woman, with appetites and desires, Coré reclaims this repressed hunger and the sexually saturated body as an ultimate expression of empowerment.

In his discussion of the film, Douglas Morrey states that Denis is fascinated with "'the power of desire' for which gender is arguably all but irrelevant"[25], a statement with which I profoundly disagree. In the articulation of desire on film, gender is never irrelevant. Popular cinema has historically been a place that denies women the option to express their desire. Raymond Bellour states: "The American cinema is entirely dependent...on a system of representation in which the woman occupies a central place only to the extent that it's a place assigned to her by the logic of masculine desire.[26] In *Trouble Every Day*, Coré's insatiable sexual appetites are more meticulously displayed than Shane's, whose animal desires are understood to exist, while he maintains a cool veneer of control. Coré, on the other hand, is completely ravenous. Her character does not fall into alignment with logic of masculine desire. She is pure sex and want, with a hunting gaze and voracious sexual appetite that commands authority. Her character helps to reshape our ideas about proper female behaviour. Kathleen Rowe discusses the sometimes problematic aspects of this type of behaviour, saying: "The tropes of unruliness are often coded with misogyny. However, they are also a source of potential power...Ultimately, the unruly woman can be seen as prototype of woman as subject—

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[24] Susan Bordo, "Never Just Pictures," in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 462.
[25] Douglas Morrey, "Textures of Terror: Claire Denis's Trouble Every Day." *Belphegor* Vol. 3, Issue 2, (2004): http://etc.dal.ca/belphegor/vol3_no2/articles/03_02_Morrey_textur_fr.html.
[26] Raymond Bellour as quoted by Sandy Flitterman-Lewis in *To Desire Differently: Feminism and the French Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 1.

transgressive above all when she lays claim to her own desire."[27] Coré's transgressive unruliness embodies this power, proving that the gendered nature of desire is not indeed irrelevant.

Coré exists in the liminal space between human and animal. This gives her the dangerous edge that many horror film monsters embody. Stephen Neale's discussion about the monster's role in the horror genre sheds light on Coré's disturbing presence in the film:

> The monster, and the disorder it initiates and concretizes, is always that which disrupts and challenges the definitions and categories of the 'human' and the 'natural'. Generally speaking, it is the monster's body which focuses the disruption. Either disfigured, or marked by a heterogeneity of human and animal features, or marked only by a 'non-human' gaze, the body is always in some way signaled as 'other', signaled precisely, as monstrous.[28]

Like Esther from *In My Skin*, Coré's gaze is disturbingly intense. She never looks away in a coy or delicate way, as women are trained to do. Instead she stalks her prey with her eyes and controls the hunting gaze. Despite her monstrosity, she is not completely dismissible as 'other', which, according to Robin Wood, is how monsters become truly transgressive.[29] In some ways Coré is similar to other female monsters in the horror tradition, with her aggressive sexual nature and violent behaviour, but in other ways she does not conform to the conventions of female monstrosity. Barbara Creed discusses many such monsters in her book *The Monstrous-Feminine* (1996), the main argument of which makes a claim for the horror film's ultimate conservatism and reinstatement of

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[27] Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter.* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 31.
[28] Stephen Neale, *Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1980), 21.
[29] See for example Robin Wood's discussion of the progressive aspects of the horror genre in the introduction to "An Introduction to the American Horror Film," in *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film*, eds. Barry Keith Grant and Christopher Sharrett (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2004).

social boundaries.[30] Creed often makes succinct points about the misogynistic representations of the monstrous feminine, but I am arguing that the female 'monsters' of erotic body horror function differently than those described by Creed. Among the monsters that Creed discusses is Nola from *The Brood*, who embodies the figure of the monstrous mother, a woman who gives birth to mutant, murderous children. The children she produces (aka "the brood") turn violent and kill people if Nola becomes too angry. Therefore she must remain emotionally neutral in order to stop the brood from attacking. She is locked away in a mental institution that is governed by a domineering male doctor. Although she is the central 'problem' of the film, the narrative actually revolves around her husband whose goal it is to save his non-mutant child from the brood. At the climax of the film, Nola's grotesque body and behaviour is exposed as we watch her give birth through a pouch on the side of her body. She digs into it with her teeth and licks the fetus. This is by far the most graphic moment in the film. In the end, the husband succeeds in saving their child and Nola is destroyed. There are some major differences between Nola and Coré. First, there is really nothing erotic about Nola's carnality and brutality. The scene in which she bites into her birthing pouch is not a sensuous display that helps to blur the boundaries of disgust and enjoyment for the viewer. It is repulsive in the strictest sense. Also, Nola is not empowered in any way by her monstrosity, instead she manically whines, "Noooo, I disgust you..." when her disturbed husband watches the fetus-licking spectacle. And finally, *The Brood* is really about the husband's relationship with the

[30] Creed uses a different critical apparatus than is used for this thesis. She approaches the discussion of the female monster from a psychoanalytical perspective. Even though I have refuted the usefulness of psychoanalysis for my the purposes of this thesis, Creed's work on the monstrous feminine continues to be one of the most referenced works on the subject. For this reason, I am going to engage with a number of her points and films, but I am not going to delve deep into a psychoanalytical discussion.

monstrosity and not about Nola's experience with herself, her body and its sensations. She's merely used as a showpiece to drive along the 'more important' story about a father's rights to his children in the face of a crazy, overly-emotional and grotesque mother. Similarly, *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973), another film in Creed's discussion of the monstrous-feminine, seems to be about a possessed *female* pre-teen, when really the focus of the psychology of the story is the *male* priest's inner struggle (and resulting heroics).[31] In the end, the major difference between Creed's monsters and Coré (as well as the other monsters of this thesis) is the lack of eroticism involved in their monstrosity, the lack of empowerment they display as a result of this monstrosity and their lack of centrality with the story as autonomous *and* desirous figures.

Another feature of Coré's animality is her toothy and feral mouth, a body part for which actress Béatrice Dalle is famous. In reviews of the film, it is almost always mentioned. Indeed, the threat of Coré's mouth is an important part of terror in the film. Coré does not need to appropriate phallic weapons in order to be a successful threat, as can usually be seen with more powerful female figures in horror films. Instead, she devours them with her gigantic mouth, and despite her relatively small frame, she always seems to overpower them. Of course, from the perspective of a heterosexual male, Dalle's huge mouth is also (presumably) sexually exhilarating. Her mouth and its activities may be disturbing precisely because they represent an extreme version of what men actually desire: to be 'eaten' or 'swallowed'. In the end, Coré is 'too much' woman, but it is her radical excesses that make her such a powerful figure. Kathleen Rowe notes that the

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[31] Carol Clover discusses how, in possession films, "behind the female 'cover' is always the story of a man in crisis." *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 65.

female mouth is a truly menacing space, perhaps even more so than the vagina; not only because it is a wet and dark orifice, but also because of its "dangerous emanations—laughter and speech."[32] In the case of Coré, neither laughter nor speech is part of the threat. Instead it is the animal-like sounds that emerge from her mouth that render the viewer uncomfortable

Trouble Every Day does not depend on dialogue in order to tell the story, instead the film communicates almost entirely through audio-visual language, especially in the case of Coré. Tim Palmer recognizes *Trouble Every Day*'s lack of dialogue, stating that it resists the usual wordiness of French intellectual movies. He says: "French cinema, historically noted for its dense, witty, scripted dialogue, here takes a disconcertingly different turn."[33] In this way, it is quite different from *Anatomy of Hell*'s mode of address, which also implicitly critiques French cinema's wordiness through its overuse of that convention. *Trouble Every Day* is more similar to other contemporary horror films, in which, "the inarticulate body paradoxically, hysterically speaks for itself."[34] By permitting for the body to 'speak' for itself, Denis allows the non-verbal, non-rational realm to gain a sense of authority. On the subject of hardcore pornography, Linda Williams notes: "The allure of the sounds of pleasure resides at least partly in the fact that they come from inside the body and are often not articulate signs (meaningful combinations of sound and sense) but, rather, inarticulate sounds that speak, almost

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[32] Rowe, 34.
[33] Tim Palmer, "Style and Sensation in the Contemporary French Cinema of the Body." *Journal of Film and Video*, Vol. 58, No. 3, (Fall 2006), 30.
[34] Linda Badley, *Film, Horror and the Body Fantastic* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995), 38.

preverbally, of primitive pleasures."[35] Similarly to pornography, body sounds are used in *Trouble Every Day* to express pleasure, but also to express pain and terror. Coré, of course, almost exclusively 'speaks' in animal sounds. In fact, the only words she says are spoken to her husband in a very tender and heartbreaking moment when she gently says: "I don't want to wait any more...I want to die", a wish she is ultimately granted. But more often, Coré's sounds come from inside the body, to express her sexual excitement and, in the end, the terror of being strangled to death. There is sometimes a confusion of pleasure and pain in the sounds that victims make, but there is always a point when the noises cross over into pain. In her book *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry discusses the incommunicability of pains, saying: "Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned."[36] Scarry argues that this lack of language denies subjectivity to the person experiencing it, since it is through language that we become subjects. But I would argue that there is another side to the concept of non-verbal noises of pain (and pleasure). There is also something powerful in the expression of carnal noises[37], which have consequently been gendered 'feminine' and often renounced as excessive.[38] Feminists have long proclaimed the potential powers of expression outside of (patriarchal) language. There is a certain freedom involved in

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[35] Linda Williams, *Hardcore*, 126.

[36] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 4.

[37] For the sake of this discussion, I am attempting to open up the possible meanings of body sounds as potentially empowering 'voices'. That being said, I do not mean to take lightly the real life evils of torture that rob people of their voices which Scarry discusses in her book

[38] I am reminded of a story in the news recently in which Tom Cruise, a well-know actor and scientologist, was reported to have forbidden his wife to make any noises during childbirth for fear of damaging the baby's mental stability. These rules for silence can easily be equated to misogynist attitudes towards women.

Coré's lack of words. Linda Badley says: "The most primitive of languages, horror simultaneously alters identity and proclaims the subject's reality. Yet even while expressing alienation from the body, it is a kind of writing from the body—based in its consciousness of the body on the one hand as prison and, on the other, as medium, as expression and means of transcendence."[39]

The tension between these two poles is ultimately irresolvable, but the important thing is that the film engages with these questions and points to potentially new directions for human non verbal articulation.

A feminist reading of *Trouble Every Day* is by no means unproblematic. For example, superficially it seems to punish women for actively pursuing their sexual pleasures, as Coré and the maid die in the end and Shane is able to survive. But at its core the film is a very sensual, exciting exploration of female desire. Sandy Flitterman-Lewis says: "The work of film theory has shown that Hollywood cinema produces and reproduces a particular logic of desire, a logic which is masculine, for it is always the hero who stabilizes his desire in relation to the (image of the) woman."[40] Coré makes it impossible to safely stabilize woman as image. Her uncontainable animality and raw hunger allow her to burst through the seams of otherwise tame images of femininity. June, on the other hand, is her opposite; she is clean, fresh, and clueless. While her feminine beauty is obviously recognizable throughout the film, she is ultimately duped by her husband and left wanting. Her failure to tap into her desires is not presented as positive trait. Through June and Shane, there is also an implicit criticism of the sanctity of

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[39] Linda Badley, 36.
[40] Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, *To Desire Differently: Feminism and the French Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 2.

the couple. Even though they seem like a picture perfect couple, their relationship is essentially rotten and unfulfilling.

In relation to *Trouble Every Day*, Tim Palmer says: "Sexual consummation is depicted as wanton and animalistic, inherently destructive."[41] Although there is a strong sense of destructiveness to the sex acts in the film, they are not presented as entirely negative. They are simultaneously portrayed as exciting and erotic instances in which characters are able to lose themselves in the heat of a different type of (albeit heterosexual) desire, one that is not contained within the love coupling or usual representations of sex on screen. Philippe Met says that the film succeeds in "epitomizing an erotic compulsion that cannot seem to find fulfillment through the usual, socially accepted manifestations of sexuality."[42] Just like *In My Skin*, the film makes new modes of sexual fulfillment available to us in an otherwise dry wasteland of cinematic sex. In the end, *Trouble Every Day* irreparably soils the sheets.

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[41] Tim Palmer, "Style and Sensation in the Contemporary French Cinema of the Body," 27.
[42] Philippe Met, "Looking for trouble: The dialectics of lack and excess," *Kinoeye* http://www.kinoeye.org/03/07/met07.php

Conclusion

"Focusing on a body that has no specified materiality will not further feminist agendas, rather hegemony will retain its dominance. Denying the weighty materiality of flesh and fluid will enable masculinism (the unmarked norm) to retain its hegemonic position."
-Robyn Longhurst, *Bodies: Exploring Fluid Boundaries*, p.135

"The body is always treated as an image of society: all the stories we tell about it are cultural and political narratives dressed up in an anatomical guise."
-Laura Kipnis, *The Female Thing*, p.69

This thesis' exploration of erotic body horror as feminist film practice was written with the hopes of offering an alternative take on the portrayal of the female grotesque in the cinema. It emerged out of my distaste for current trends in popular visual culture that are oppressively limiting in their representations of female corporeality and expressions of sexuality. By analyzing these films and aspects of their reception, I hope to have encouraged a different way of thinking about women's bodies as sites for protest and empowerment. I want to conclude this project by briefly mentioning a number of topics that did not explicitly make it into the body of the paper.

The issue of national cinema was not a major concern for this thesis, despite all the films being products of France. French film history is full of films that have scandalized viewers in ways similar to the films of this thesis. For example, *Un Chien Andalou* (Luis Buñuel, 1929), a French surrealist film, shocked audiences with a scene in which a man slices through a woman's eyeball with a razor blade. Similarly, Georges Franju's *Le Sang des bêtes* (1949) harrowingly showcased graphic scenes from a slaughter house that continue to haunt audiences to this day. Obviously French filmmakers are no strangers to controversy. North American reactions to French cinema range from fascination to

abhorrence and the country's film history certainly has an affect on viewer expectations and responses. For this project, I have looked at *Anatomy of Hell*, *In My Skin* and *Trouble Every Day* in the context of an ever growing transnational atmosphere of film culture, where access to films of different countries is more vastly available than ever before. Instead of placing these films exclusively within a French context, I have looked at them as existing within this more fluid space of cultural exchange. The reactions to the films that I have discussed, besides being intensely personal, have generally come from North American sources (reviews, articles, etc.). The films undoubtedly have different baggage in France, or in other viewing contexts.

France has also notably produced many of the world's most interesting and radical feminist filmmakers.[1] This is due, in part, to women's access to filmmaking (funding, materials, etc.) within France's national cultural infrastructure. France has also generated many important feminist writers, some of whom I have briefly discussed in this thesis. A more thorough exploration of the relationship between France's film policies, French feminism and French feminist filmmakers is certainly warranted, but ultimately beyond my current scope. In this project, while arguing for the feminist value of the films in question, I have tried to incorporate a diverse sampling of feminist writers, who have written on a variety of topics, including feminist film theory, the body, eating disorders, the horror genre, pornography and the carnivalesque. It is my hope that this diversity of voices has contributed to a feeling of open academic exploration. Also, by stretching the

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[1] Sandy Flitterman-Lewis discusses three such filmmakers (Germaine Dulac, Marie Epstein and Agnès Varda) in *To Desire Differently: Feminism and the French Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996)

scope of what some people deem to be "feminist", I also hope that the term can be widened beyond its current definition.

All of the films of this thesis have important feminist attributes. *Anatomy of Hell* opens up new possibilities for depictions of graphic sex onscreen. Without falling into the usual traps of conventional pornography, the film creates an alternative space in which women's bodies and articulations of their sexual desire enjoy more diversified forms of expression. Director Catherine Breillat confrontationally ruptures the veneer of the ideal/clean feminine body, while calling out men's fear of women's bodies, and mocking certain conventions of male art cinema practice. *In My Skin* takes the subject of female cutting to a new extreme, showing how self-mutilation is not always a site of victimization and masochistic self-abuse. Through an erotic and intimate portrayal of one woman's relationship with her own skin's surfaces, the film digs deep into the carnality and sensuality of cutting. It ultimately empowers women's ownership of their bodies and the sensations they produce while encouraging alternative sexualities to be explored. *Trouble Every Day*, the most problematic of the films in terms of a feminist reading, is also the most exquisitely erotic. Unlike the other two films, it does not thoroughly explore the boundaries of women's bodies; instead it offers a perspective on women's sexual agency as expressed *through* the body. With its sensuous exploration of sexual hunger and the body as a site for communication, *Trouble Every Day* engages in a fantasy in which women's sexual aggression and hunger is given free reign in moments of heightened eroticism. The film also comments upon society's current disavowal of this female sexuality and offers a subtle critique through its paralleling of male and female characters

with similar cannibalistic urges. Director Claire Denis shows how important gender is in relation to the expressability of desire and sexuality.

As I have noted throughout this paper, these films are often located within a larger trend in recent French cinema that opts for shocking presentations of sex and violence.[2] Many critics who discuss the New French Extremity dismiss it as empty sensationalism with no larger political implications. For example, James Quandt compares *Trouble Every Day* to other "difficult" films that are "distinguished by clear-eyed empathy and sociological insight," saying that "Denis disdains these traditional virtues."[3] In relation to the larger trend of the New French Extremity, Hampus Hagman says that "it is rarely explicitly grounded in real political or social problems, but exists in an art-cinema vacuum."[4] In congruence with these pessimistic outlooks is the fact that popular reviewers rarely ever mention the issue of gender in their discussions of the films.[5] This thesis argues that the political implications of *Anatomy of Hell*, *In My Skin* and *Trouble Every Day* are particularly relevant, especially with regards to the relationship women have with their bodies. Although they can not be considered "popular" works (they appeal to a limited audience), they do extend beyond a so-called "art-cinema vacuum." The issues they address and "solve" carry huge weight for women's representation in contemporary audio-visual culture. Although often deemed as too gross and too disturbing, these films radically help push boundaries that are set in place within the

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[2] I have adopted James Quandt term "New French Extremity", but various other labels have been thrown around, such as "Cinema du corps" (Palmer), "Cinema of Sensation" (Beugnet).
[3] Quandt, "Flesh and Blood: Sex and Violence in Recent French Cinema." *Artforum* (February 2004): 128.
[4] Hampus Hagman, "'Every Cannes needs its scandal': Between art and exploitation in contemporary French film." *Film International* Vol. 5, No. 5, (2007): 37.
[5] The "gender blinders" that reviewers seem to have are certainly related to the fact that most reviewing positions are occupied by men.

cinema. Robyn Longhurst says: "The instability of boundaries, whether they be the bodily boundaries of individuals or the collective boundaries of nation-states, causes anxiety and a threat to order."[6] It is through the anxiety that these films create that change will become possible.

Linda Williams notes that all body genres help us to deal with "persistent problems in our culture, in our sensualities, in our very identities."[7] From a feminist perspective, the films of this thesis perhaps go even further than other body genres, as they deal specifically with women's experiences with/in their bodies. They do this in ways that are at times graphically disturbing and others that are excitingly erotic, all the while disputing current masculine cultural values about the female body and its function within society. As women are defined by their bodies more than ever before, opening up discussion about these issues is of profound political importance for "the bigger picture". In her essay on feminism and body politics, Janet Wolff explains how one must be careful with expressions of the grotesque body and the carnivalesque, because in many cases they can operate in "reactionary ways, particularly with regard to gender."[8] This is the risk that these films run, and they have certainly received some misogynist reactions. But it is my hope that that their disturbances will ultimately help to "affirmatively destabilize the idealization of female beauty or to realign the mechanisms of desire."[9] By submerging themselves in the erotic and not allowing the female grotesque to fall into the realms of

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[6] Robyn Longhurst, *Bodies: Exploring Fluid Boundaries* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 123.
[7] Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess," in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, eds. Leo Braudy and Marshal Cohen (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 736.
[8] Janet Wolff, "Reinstating Corporeality: Feminism and body Politics," in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 416.
[9] Janet Wolff, with reference to Mary Russo, 418.

pure disgust, these films imbue it with a value and authority that is not usually seen in the cinema. They offer up spaces where the female grotesque can thrive, excite and disturb, all with the hope of stretching the boundaries of representation of the female body in visual culture. In closing, Robyn Longhurst says: "Perhaps thinking, writing and talking about bodily fluids, abjection, orifices, and the surfaces/depths of specific bodies can offer a way of prompting different understandings of power, knowledge and social relationships between people and places."[10] It is my hope that this thesis has done just that.

[10] Longhurst, 135.

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