

**“No Reason to Be Seen”: Cinema, Exploitation, and the Political**

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# **“NO REASON TO BE SEEN”: CINEMA, EXPLOITATION, AND THE POLITICAL**

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University of Pittsburgh, 2017

This dissertation argues that we can best understand exploitation films as a mode of political cinema. Following the work of Peter Brooks on melodrama, the exploitation film is a mode concerned with spectacular violence and its relationship to the political, as defined by French philosopher Jacques Rancière. For Rancière, the political is an “intervention into the visible and sayable,” where members of a community who are otherwise uncared for come to be seen as part of the community through a “redistribution of the sensible.” This aesthetic rupture allows the demands of the formerly-invisible to be seen and considered. We can see this operation at work in the exploitation film, and by investigating a series of exploitation auteurs, we can augment our understanding of what Rancière means by the political.

Chapter 1 treats the films of Lloyd Kaufman, co-founder of Troma Studios. The chapter offers a fuller account of Rancière’s conception of the political alongside a reading of the apparently-incoherent politics of Kaufman’s films. Chapter 2 offers a necessary supplement to an account of Rancière’s conception of the political by thinking through the ways that community works in the films of Lars von Trier. Chapter 3 turns from the constitution of community to the moment of rupture that creates a space for *dissensus*. This notion of rupture helps us to understand the cinema of David Cronenberg, whose films are overtly and consistently concerned with rupture. Chapter 4 takes a slightly broader view, thinking through Quentin Tarantino’s recent historical films with the aid of Rancière’s conception of the political. Rather than understanding Tarantino’s engagement with politics as resting on his invocation of historical

tragedy, this chapter begins with a reading of *The Hateful Eight*'s "Lincoln letter" to argue that the fundamental gesture of the political is one of affirmation. The conclusion offers a brief glimpse at the ways in which temporality, cinema, and the political are intertwined.

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## 1.0 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

"I've got debts that no honest man can pay."

- Bruce Springsteen.

It's a line so good that Springsteen uses it in two different songs on his 1982 album *Nebraska*. In the context of the hard-scrabble, working-class narratives of those songs, Springsteen's characters have taken to stealing because of the weight of their financial burdens. I invoke it here not because this dissertation has led me to a life of crime, but because if I am honest about what I owe to those who helped make it possible, there is no way the debt can be paid.

First, the committee. Adam Lowenstein has shepherded this dissertation from a series of loose ideas into a set of arguments that feel more unified than I could have hoped for at the outset. His confidence in my ideas, which often came before my own belief in them, has been unflagging. While the dissertation was still a set of wild possibilities, Dan Morgan helped me sort the probable from the improbable, helping me to organize those probabilities along the way. Marcia Landy asked questions that continually pushed me to think harder about the edges of my ideas, especially about the places where they could grow in new and fruitful directions. Jen Waldron's support has been unstinting, and her insights have kept the dissertation from being as insular as it might have been otherwise.

Beyond the committee, the Pitt community has offered a wide and fertile intellectual atmosphere that shaped these ideas. I'd like to thank David Pettersen, Randall Halle, and Colin MacCabe. For each of them I wrote a seminar paper that includes a seed of an idea that blossomed in the pages that follow. Their attention, indulgence, and commentary made the arguments sharper and more clear.

Outside of Pittsburgh, I have had the good fortune to have many exemplary colleagues. I first read the work of Jacques Rancière with Brian Price and Meghan Southerland, and I cannot overestimate their influence. I first read Rancière alongside Adam Cottrell and Kalling Heck, and the ideas that appear here were sharpened in conversation with them across a number of years. Aaron Bobick watched many Troma films with me and never complained. One could not ask for better friends.

At North Carolina State University, I owe a debt to the committee of my Master's thesis: Devin Orgeron, Marsha Gordon, and Jon Thompson. Though officially there is no overlap between the

thoughts I expressed about Cronenberg's work there and the ones elaborated here, each of them pushed me to think about his work in ways that bridged the gap from there to here.

Of course I owe my parents. I owe my father for first watching *Videodrome* with me when I was a teenager, and I owe my mother for putting up with us as we marveled (too) loudly at Cronenberg's brand of cinema. Their encouragement has meant everything.

This dissertation reaches many conclusions – perhaps chief among them is that the political, if it is to be anything, must be affirmative. This is also the lesson of cinema. However, I learned affirmation not from politics or movies, but from Rhea, who has spent more than a decade affirming our life together. This dissertation is only one slice of that life, but without her it would have been impossible.



“At the same time, we can acknowledge that the exemplary figures who make it possible for us to reflect are not the ones who give us the *means* to reflect, that is, the methods for interpreting texts and images.”

– Jacques Rancière, *Roland Barthes' Cinema*

“We’ve got gunslingers acting out *High Noon* in the White House. You don’t find that kind of politics in Aristotle; you find it at the movies.”

– Theodore Roszak, *Flicker*

## 2.0 INTRODUCTION: “YOU FIND IT AT THE MOVIES”

The central scene of Greg McLean’s *The Belko Experiment* (2016) is one of election. It occurs at the end of the film’s second act. Previously, the film had followed a group of Belko Corporation employees at a remote office in Colombia. On this particular day, 80 foreign (which is to say American, in the context of Colombia) workers have been admitted to the heavily-guarded building for another day at the office (what the corporation does is tantalizingly ambiguous). A general air of paranoia and suspicion pervades the film, as the mostly-white office workers recognize that their Columbian co-workers have not arrived or have been sent home. Then a voice announces over the building’s public address system that if two people in the building aren’t killed within the next 30 minutes, more people will die. Backing up this threat is a series of bombs implanted in the workers’ skulls as part of an apparent employee-tracking anti-kidnapping initiative. The workers are sealed into the building, and the demands of the unseen tormentor escalate in scale and violence.

The film tracks two broad responses to this threat. The first are those who imagine that resistance to the voice is essential. They rally around Mike Milch (John Gallagher Jr.) as he attempts various strategies to stymie the voice, including taking a tool to his head to remove his bomb and a banner to signal sympathetic outsiders to the building’s plight. The other group, led by Barry Norris (Tony Goldwyn) instead looks for ways to oppose the voice forcefully. This

includes organizing those more imposing members of the work force (including ex-military personnel) to raid the building's (conveniently) over-stocked gun cabinet. Though they initially claim that their ploy will keep the weapons out of the hands of hot-heads, that strategy doesn't last long, as the voice demands that 30 workers be killed in 30 minutes or 60 will be killed by exploding their trackers.

This leads us to the film's crucial scene. Using the threat of their guns, Barry's crew rounds up almost all of the remaining employees and forces them to the lobby. Barry begins by separating the gathered employees by their status as parents, asking everyone with underage children to "step forward." The next group summoned are those "over 60," and they are placed on the opposite wall from those with children. This first winnowing doesn't produce enough possible bodies, so Barry becomes more capricious, choosing individuals himself with no apparent rationale<sup>1</sup>. Barry begins killing with a woman who asks him the scene's most pertinent question: "who the fuck are you to decide who lives and dies?" The question is crucial because the process of election, and Barry's power, is contingent. One of his confederates even suggests that it doesn't have to be this way. Terry (Owain Yoeman) asks Barry, "Perhaps you should consider this differently, yeah?" Terry's suggestion is a "lottery" where "people just can write their names on a scrap of paper." In response, Barry wraps his hand around Terry's neck, threatening him with reprisals for "undermining" him as the selection continues.

The scene ends not, however, with the appropriate number of people dead, but when a character who wasn't rounded up shuts off the power, turning off the lights and creating chaos. Barry and his confederates pursue them, with at least one of them being killed by a group of the

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<sup>1</sup> Though a certain amount of animosity does seem to be at play when he chooses protagonist Mike Milch

employees. Though the scene is over, this “round” of the experiment doesn’t end until the off-screen “voice” has detonated the bombs in the employees’ heads, killing the threatened number of them. After this, the film becomes a free-for-all, with those persons who earns the most kills (or who kills everyone else) in the remaining time offered their freedom. Unsurprisingly, Mike is the one who triumphs and is allowed to pull back the curtain on the titular experiment.

Critics have not been kind to Greg McLean’s *The Belko Experiment*. Most seem to agree that the film builds from a solid premise. That premise, however, doesn’t earn the film much credit with the critics. Matt Goldberg’s comments from a review at *Collider* can stand in for the dominant view of the film:

The script wants to coast on [its] proposition and asking the audience what they would do in this situation. However, you can answer that question without seeing *The Belko Experiment*, and you certainly don’t have to watch people play it out for ninety minutes to glean any new insight. The majority of *The Belko Experiment* is watching innocent people beg for their lives before being slaughtered. It’s dark, ugly, twisted, and that may be Gunn and McLean’s view of humanity—that when pushed into a corner, we’ll act in our own self-interest. But rather than try to skillfully demonstrate that point, the film uses a sledgehammer and it makes for an unrelentingly despicable experience.<sup>2</sup>

Here we have the most prevalent elements of *The Belko Experiment*’s reception laid out. First, the film has a solid premise. Second, it pursues that premise in a way that’s “twisted” via an emphasis on spectacular violence/”slaughter.” Finally, the film has a point, but that point is either banal or unrealized. Perhaps unsurprisingly, no one really agrees on what that final point is or should be. Goldberg claims the film could be making “a point about the ubiquity of violence

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<sup>2</sup> Matt Goldberg, “‘The Belko Experiment’ Review: A Bad Day at the Office,” *Collider*, March 15, 2017, <http://collider.com/the-belko-experiment-review-james-gunn/>.

or even trying to satirize office culture” but fails to because it doesn’t “provide a framework to make the violence palatable.”<sup>3</sup>

What critics can agree on, however, is that *The Belko Experiment* is an exploitation film, and it suffers in comparison to other exploitation films. As one reviewer puts it: “‘Belko’ never had to be deep; it’s an exploitation movie. But the best exploitation movies slip in heady ideas amidst the trash and carnage.”<sup>4</sup> Todd VanDerWerff compares the film to the director’s debut, *Wolf Creek* (2005), which “stayed on the right side of exploitative.”<sup>5</sup> Moreover, “Good exploitation movies have a certain verve to them. Every time *Belko* gets into a groove, with some fun plot twists or inventively gory moments, it pauses to make some point or another.” This tension – between “heady ideas” and “paus[ing] to make some point or another” – will be significant. But for now it’s enough to say that critics are perceiving in *The Belko Experiment* some connection between violence, ideas, and exploitation.

Of course, they’re also profoundly misreading the film. It is not, as VanDerWerff claims, an “empty” film. Rather, the points that it is making are more subtle than the overt appeals to violence would suggest. The most obvious example is the case of Wendell Dukes (John C. McGinley), one of Barry’s crew, who spends the film’s first act making grotesque eyes at one of his co-workers, one who rebuffs his advances but feels trapped by both his surveillance (due to the placements of their offices/desks) and his seniority in the company. When the intercom goes live and the killing begins, Wendell very easily falls into a macho, violent role as one of the trio

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<sup>3</sup> I don’t want to take critics of the film too much to task (I think *The Belko Experiment* has some things going for it, but it’s hardly a perfect film); however, the idea that making violence more palatable would somehow more effectively convey the ubiquity of violence is painfully wrongheaded.

<sup>4</sup> Matt Prigge, “The Belko Experiment’ is a weirdly boring exploding head movie,” *Metro*, March 16, 2017, <http://www.metro.us/entertainment/review-the-belko-experiment-is-a-weirdly-boring-exploding-head-movie/zsJqcp--doOHsAIDZSEGo>.

<sup>5</sup> VanDerWerff, “The Belko Experiment is an empty, nasty, weirdly out-of-date office satire,” *Vox*, March 17, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/3/17/14943300/the-belko-experiment-review-movie>.

of men who decide that they need weapons and get to determine who will die so the rest of the employees may live. The film is very careful to construct Wendell's gaze both before and after the "experiment" begins to demonstrate that the potential for violent power was always-already present in his behavior and inheres at least in part in his position in the corporate structure as such. While perhaps not the most trenchant critique of patriarchy, the film is hardly "empty," and because it doesn't linger on the threat of Wendell assaulting his female co-workers, it feels progressive in its context.

Moreover, the film is not "empty" because it is absolutely concerned with questions of politics and the political. As we have seen, the moment of election in the film is crucial and suggestive. It depicts the tension between different types of political rule, with kratocracy (rule by the strong) contrasted with democracy (rule by the people, which was originally, rule by lottery). Whether the film (or its audience) is on the side of might or lottery, the film is concerned less with survival than it is with community and who gets to constitute it (both in terms of who will be a member of the community and who gets to decide who belongs to the community). Though several characters do atomize and try to hide (most memorably in a freezer unit), it's important to the film that the office workers continually gather in groups, and both of the major contingents are just that, contingents, groups of like-minded people. Significantly, neither Mike nor Barry (as avatars of their position or as characters) is the self-sacrificing type; neither is portrayed particularly as obsessed with their own survival. Again and again they emphasize trying to save as many people as possible, with Mike risking his life several times to try to thwart the voice's commands. The film is therefore not immediately about survival of individuals. In this context, Glenn Kenny of *The New York Times* notably compares the film's premise to "the trolley problem...that is, do you sacrifice one life to save five workers from

being killed by a runaway train?”<sup>6</sup> This isn’t a place for the ethical ramifications and historical import of the trolley problem, but what’s clear from Kenny’s citation is that the film seems to be presenting us with a numbers game – kill 30 or let 60 die. But this belies the film’s emphasis on community. Both Mike and Barry are concerned with *simultaneously* saving as many people as possible *and* with creating a community they can live with (in fact this latter attribute is what ultimately distinguishes them, as Barry is more comfortable with killing much sooner).

What I have referred to as the “election scene,” is therefore readable as a radical distillation of the process of politics, wherein a decision is made about who constitutes a community and the criteria for inclusion in that community. I say radical because, at least for that one scene, inclusion in the community means immediate survival, and exclusion is summary execution. But this extremity (and its supposed “emptiness”) is precisely what critics have gouged the film for. When this radical attempt at politics fails, chaos ensues and community becomes impossible. But before that happens, there is an odd moment that caps off this round of the “experiment.” The round ends when a character is convinced he has survived, but after a significant pause is in fact the final person to have blood spew from the back of his head. Then, a most curious thing happens. For the first time since the experiment began, we leave the Belko office building, and indeed for the first time in the film we leave the perspective of a character. From this final death, we cut to a shot of the Belko building’s exterior, from a distance, a fence interposed between the camera and the building. A dog in the middle of the frame urinates on the fence and then kicks before running off-screen. This is not the height of trenchant critique, and yet it is significant that this shot of the building, one that removes us from the scheme of the

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<sup>6</sup> Glenn Kenny, “Review: ‘The Belko Experiment’: Kill or Be Killed,” *The New York Times*, March 15, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/15/movies/the-belko-experiment-review.html? r=0>. (Kenny is hardly alone; there are numerous references to the film’s “thought experiment” by critics).

film, comes immediately after the round of the experiment that finds the employees embroiled in an election.

This question of election, of who belongs to a community and how that decision gets made, is the central question of politics. Who *counts* in a given community. The central insight of philosopher Jacques Rancière, for whom the political, is above all “an intervention into the visible and the sayable”<sup>7</sup> is precisely this awareness of who *counts*. At the heart of politics is the notion of *disagreement*, which “generally bears on the very situation in which speaking parties find themselves.”<sup>8</sup> As with many of his concepts, Rancière is careful to delineate what he is not talking about. In this case, “Disagreement is not concerned with issues such as...the presence or absence of a rule for assessing different types of heterogeneous discourse.”<sup>9</sup> Disagreement is “concerned with...what can be argued, the presence or absence of a common object between X and Y.”<sup>10</sup> For Rancière, “The structures proper to disagreement are those in which discussion of an argument comes down to a dispute over the object of the discussion and over the capacity of those who are making an object of it.”<sup>11</sup> Put another way, disagreement, and therefore politics, is concerned with what *counts* and who has the capacity to make things (objects, arguments, ideas) *count*. For Rancière, this counting happens through what he calls the “distribution of the sensible,” where “sensible” plays on the both the sensuous and intellectual valences of the term. The sensible is that which can be perceived (the “visible and sayable”) and what “makes sense”

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<sup>7</sup> Jacques Rancière, “Ten Theses on Politics” in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 37.

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2004), 9.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-10.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*



or provides a “common sense” to us. Thus, and we’ll go into more depth on this idea later, this counting is always-already aesthetic.

This is why the election scene in *The Belko Experiment*, and the film’s general emphasis on groups and community, is so significant. It is about the political as such as Mike and Barry fight for control over who gets to define the community. But Rancière’s formulation also brings the film’s odd moment with the dog into sharper relief. Here, the film understands that, with the failure of the community to define itself (and therefore the failure of politics as such), the film must offer us a new “distribution of the sensible” by removing us from the film’s previously claustrophobic visual scheme. Again, it’s not an earth-shattering insight or a particularly trenchant critique, but the film absolutely – pace its critics – engages with politics and specifically with the aesthetics of politics.

The genius of Rancière’s formulation of the political is that it allows us to account for these instances of the political in a way that more rationally-centered approaches would and could not.<sup>12</sup> Though we will have cause to supplement Rancière’s account of the political, we will take as a given his idea that the political is always-already an aesthetic phenomenon concerned with who or what gets to count in a given community. But before we take Rancière for granted, it’s worth dwelling a moment on his work more generally to put both his political philosophy in context and provide some limits and justifications for the discussion to follow.

Rancière largely works across four interrelated fields. The most obvious is that of political philosophy, where his notion of *dissensus* has proved influential. Unsurprisingly, given

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<sup>12</sup> As Terry’s plea to Barry makes clear, there is no rational argument to be had with Barry and his power. Indeed, even his apparently rational, logical constitution of the community (his focus on age and dependents) breaks down. But what does change things is an aesthetic that is a sensory, appeal to darkness from turning out the lights.

the imbrications of aesthetics and politics, Rancière has also written significantly on aesthetic philosophy, especially the relationship between *aesthesis* and *poesis* throughout various “regimes” of art. Related, though by no means directly following from it, Rancière has also written about cinema, almost exclusively on what falls under the umbrella of the European art film<sup>13</sup> from Jean-Luc Godard to Lars von Trier. Finally, though we won’t have cause to address it, Rancière has also done significant archival work, represented by texts such as *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*<sup>14</sup> which elaborate a theory of pedagogy.<sup>15</sup> Though all of these interests turn on the question of equality,<sup>16</sup> there is surprisingly little overlap between Rancière’s political philosophy and his writings on cinema, and when he does address the two together, his objects are far from the kinds of films considered here.<sup>17</sup> One goal of this dissertation is to more clearly show how Rancière’s political philosophy helps us think through cinema. Another goal is to expand the discussion of cinema beyond Rancière’s rather narrow canon of established European art house names.

To accomplish these goals, this dissertation argues that Rancière’s political philosophy has a special relationship with exploitation cinema. I mean this in two ways. The first is that one way to understand what the term “exploitation” means is by seeing it in relation to the political as Rancière describes it. Similarly, understanding exploitation cinema can give us a lever to further open Rancière’s conception of the political, offering necessary supplements to his

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<sup>13</sup> The exceptions are few – Vincent Minnelli, Anthony Mann, Nicholas Ray in *Film Fables* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), Charlie Chaplin in *Aesthesis: Scenes from the Regime of Art* (London: Verso, 2013).

<sup>14</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991).

<sup>15</sup> And by extension, spectatorship, as *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2011) makes clear.

<sup>16</sup> See Todd May’s *The Political Thought of Jacques Rancière: Creating Equality* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008).

<sup>17</sup> The exception is the work of Lars Von Trier, and, as we shall see, when he does unite the two it’s not always to effective insights.

understanding. The *prima facie* case for considering exploitation is that it has, as a subject, been marginalized for much of the history of film studies. What we approach in dealing with exploitation cinema is a classic example of Rancièrian politics: the very process of inclusion and exclusion – whether in terms of who gets to vote or in what films are canonized and studied in academic departments – is the process of the political. The properly political question isn't "Should we consider mise-en-scene or narrative more crucial to Classical Hollywood cinema," but "Is Classical Hollywood cinema the standard-bearer for what it means to study a film as such?" The question of what constitutes exploitation cinema – as well as its relation to the more "central" Hollywood cinema, is *a priori* a political question because it requires us to interrogate what *counts*. We can get a better sense of what this means by diving into the standard work in the field, Eric Schaefer's *"Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!": A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959*.

Though the term "groundbreaking" is perhaps too often applied as a word of praise, Eric Schaefer's *"Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!": A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959*<sup>18</sup> can lay claim to the term with little effort. Prior to his 1999 publication, the exploitation film had received haphazard treatment in scholarly circles – the occasional essay calling for a loosening of the film studies canon,<sup>19</sup> or the discussion of a single film phenomenon (John Waters' *Pink Flamingos* [1972] or the like) – and while fan-oriented publications could claim to be more numerous, they were no less haphazard. To the study of exploitation films, Schaefer's book brings several important contributions: a consistent definition for the consideration of what makes a film "exploitation," an abundantly-researched account of those exploitation films in the

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<sup>18</sup> (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

<sup>19</sup> Most famously, perhaps Jeffrey Sconce's "'Trashing' the Academy: Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style." *Screen* 36, no 4 (1995): 371-393.

period covered along with the ways in which they fit into the wider culture, and a slightly less explicit conception of the political relevance of the exploitation film.

I am less interested in the specific history of the exploitation films covered by “*Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!*” than by the definition for the phenomenon that Schaefer describes, the cultural implications he draws from it, and the underlying conception of the political that it reveals. Though the book is helpfully broken down into chapters on the production and distribution of the films,<sup>20</sup> their treatment by censors, and the various (sub)genres<sup>21</sup> that the “classical” era of exploitation films birthed, what we see consistently throughout the book is a pattern that is revealed at the opening and continues,<sup>22</sup> a pattern we’ll explore further as it relates to the book’s conception of the political. Therefore, rather than dwelling on the particular examples of the drug film or the burlesque, we can instead focus on Schaefer’s definition of exploitation and the ways in which he sees exploitation films fitting into the wider world of culture, especially Hollywood films.

In defining the exploitation film, Schaefer offers us six criteria for delineating the exploitation film from other films, whether those are the (obvious) differences to Hollywood products or the comparatively minor differences to other low-budget fare.<sup>23</sup> The first criterion is that the “primary subject” of an exploitation film is a “‘forbidden’ topic.”<sup>24</sup> Though “forbidden” is obviously a rather vague term, Schaefer makes clear that the topic of an exploitation film – which might include sex hygiene, prostitution, or drugs – were those explicitly not allowed in

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<sup>20</sup> Which includes aspects like promotion and exhibition practices as well.

<sup>21</sup> Which include “sex hygiene” films, “drug” films, “vice, exotic, and atrocity” films, as well as “nudist/burlesque” films.

<sup>22</sup> And, as we will see, continues in the scholarship about later exploitation films.

<sup>23</sup> Like the creature-features that emerged in the 1950s, which share a number of the production elements of exploitation films (low budgets, bad acting, inconstant distribution) but none of the content.

<sup>24</sup> Schaefer, *Bold*, 5.

Hollywood films by the Production Code, or which were excluded by state and local censorship boards. Moreover, in dealing with these subjects (which could, occasionally, emerge in some Hollywood films), exploitation used them as “the primary point of interest in the motion picture.”<sup>25</sup>

Schaefer’s second criterion includes the ways in which exploitation films are<sup>26</sup> produced: “classical exploitation films were made cheaply, with extremely low production values.”<sup>27</sup> His third criterion is that the exploitation film is “distributed independently.”<sup>28</sup> These criteria include both “state’s rights” distributors having a print or two for their local territory, as well as independent producer-directors renting theaters themselves to ‘four-wall,’ recouping the expense of renting the theater by selling tickets. Related to the previous criteria, Schaefer also notes that exploitation “films were generally exhibited in theaters not affiliated with the majors.”<sup>29</sup> This might include “grindhouses or Main Street theaters specializing in exploitation” or “burlesque theaters,” but “they usually played in theaters that showed standard Hollywood fare that took a break from their typical programming”<sup>30</sup> and would often remain in circulation for decades.<sup>31</sup>

Though it’s important to outline a definition when discussing the phenomenon of exploitation films, Schaefer’s definition is worth dwelling on not only because of the content he

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid. This also has the effect of excluding films that have peripheral characters who engaged in “forbidden” acts – *A Streetcar Named Desire* (Elia Kazan, 1951) is therefore not an exploitation film because prostitution is only implied rather than the “primary” point of interest.

<sup>26</sup> Because Schaefer is dealing with historical objects (and not treating them as literary/filmic objects as such) he generally refers to exploitation films in the past tense. Though he makes a compelling case for the end of his historical trajectory, I would argue instead that his criteria for exploitation films apply beyond his 1959 demarcation, thus justifying my use of the literary present tense.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Though most of his discussion pits exploitation fare against Hollywood standards, Schaefer also describes the way that exploitation isn’t hard-core pornography either and had to be carefully distinguished from non-simulated sex acts on film.

outlines, but because of the form that his definition takes. His criteria attempt to describe what will “count” as an exploitation film. His schema attempts to put films in their appropriate place – despite its drug content, *The Man with the Golden Arm* (Otto Preminger, 1955) is a mainstream product; despite the narrative of familial drama, *One Way Ticket to Hell* (B. Lawrence Price Jr., 1954) is an exploitation product. Moreover, Schaefer assumes the category of the Hollywood film and that his audience is aware of the conventions that govern it during its “classical” period,<sup>32</sup> and here we see that Schaefer’s book overlaps almost perfectly with the “classical” or “golden” era of the Hollywood studios.

*Grindhouse*, the Quentin Tarantino/Robert Rodriguez film of 2007, crystallizes the problem inherent in Schaeffer’s definitional approach to exploitation: there is nothing to guarantee the accuracy of any judgment about the “marginality” of the margin. *Grindhouse* is an anthology film, comprised of *Planet Terror* (directed by Robert Rodriguez) and *Death Proof* (directed by Quentin Tarantino). The structure of the film is intended to evoke the feeling of the grindhouse of the title – the film opens with an old ratings warning, offers vintage advertisements, and then the trailer for *Machete*<sup>33</sup> before segueing into the first “feature,” *Planet Terror*. Other “fake” trailers are included in between *Planet Terror* and *Death Proof*. The film is seemingly intended to evoke exploitation films of the 1970s and the experience of the grindhouse

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<sup>32</sup> To be clear, I don’t think this is, in itself a problem. Schaefer is writing in response to significant work (especially *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960*, David Bordwell, Janet Steiger, Kristin Thompson, eds. [New York: Columbia University Press, 1985]), and orienting his history of exploitation films around the Hollywood framework ensures that he has a consistent frame of reference for his own “departure” into the comparatively under-studied world of the exploitation film.

<sup>33</sup> It’s slightly difficult to address *Grindhouse* because of its tangled distribution history. Because audiences were befuddled by the film (for more see David Lerner’s “Cinema of Regression: *Grindhouse* and the Limits of the Spectatorial Imaginary” in *Cinema Inferno: Cinema Explosions from the Cultural Margins* [Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2010], 358-380), it was a box office flop. The two films (which both had longer cuts before being put together for *Grindhouse*) were released separately on home video. It wasn’t until 2010 that *Grindhouse* was released on home video. Perhaps as significantly, though it’s only a trailer in *Grindhouse*, *Machete* (Robert Rodriguez, 2010) became its own feature in 2010 as well, and now has a sequel, *Machete Kills* (Robert Rodriguez, 2013).

theater. However, fans of more mainstream or arthouse cinema can sneer at *Grindhouse* for being insufficiently “high culture” or “mainstream,” while fans of movies from the historical era of the grindhouse can equally sneer at the film for being *too* mainstream and insufficiently “authentic.” There’s nothing to ensure that we’ve made an appropriate judgment about what “counts” as exploitation in this context. Supplementing Schaefer’s account with insights from Rancière can highlight some of the problems with Schaeffer’s approach, while also pointing us toward a possible solution.

Though he approaches the question from the realm of politics rather than that of the exploitation film, Jacques Rancière has long been concerned with what “counts.” In fact it is this “counting” that forms the backbone of his discussion of politics, as the brief précis above suggests. However, to understand what Rancière means by “politics,” we must start with his notion of the *partage du sensible*, or the “distribution of the sensible.” For Rancière it is “the dividing up of the world...and of the people,”<sup>34</sup> and should be understood in two ways. As a partition it functions to “divide” but also as what “allows participation” by assigning both a “common sense” alongside “exclusive parts.” All of this “presupposes a distribution of what is visible and what not of what can be heard and what cannot.”<sup>35</sup> The order, which Rancière dubs “the police,” exploits this distribution, normalizing a particular set of what is visible or sayable.

Rancière explains:

The essence of the police lies in a partition of the sensible that is characterized by the absence of void and of supplement: society here is made up of groups tied to specific modes of doing, to places in which these occupations are exercised, and to modes of being corresponding to these occupations and these places...It is [the] exclusion of what ‘is not’ that constitutes the police-principle at the core of statist practices.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Rancière, “10 Theses,” 36.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

The police “consists, before all else, in recalling the obviousness of what there is, or rather what there is not, and its slogan is: ‘Move along! There’s nothing to see here!’” If the action of the police lies in partitioning the world such that it appears whole, without either void or supplement, then re-stating the obvious in this way is essential for the function of the police.

Here we see how politics is fundamentally an aesthetic phenomenon. If humans are political, and if what separates humans from animals is the possession of the *logos*, then it becomes possible to question: “how you can be sure that the human animal mouthing a noise in front of you is actually articulating a discourse, rather than merely expressing a state of being?”<sup>37</sup> Because of this question, “[i]f there is someone you do not wish to recognize as a political being, you begin by not seeing him as the bearer of signs of politicality.” Thus the police can deny political agency in the space of circulation precisely by disallowing anything but circulation – the gesture of “Move along!” makes discourse difficult. The political must combat this problem by creating a shared distribution of the sensible by producing a “common *aisthesis*.” The political, then, “consists in making what was unseen visible; in making what was audible as mere noise heard as speech [as evidence for possession of the *logos*] and in demonstrating that what appeared as a mere expression of pleasure or pain [which are the sounds of animals, not political humans] is a shared feeling of a good or an evil.”<sup>38</sup>

The political, then, is always an aesthetic rupture, one that reconfigures the sensible such that what was previously invisible becomes visible, and what was once merely inarticulate noise becomes speech signifying judgments and demands. Rancière dubs this rupture “*dissensus*.” It is not, Rancière clearly delineates, “a confrontation between interests or opinions,” which for him

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.



is another way of saying that the political is not itself a type of discourse or mode of argumentation. Instead, it is “the demonstration of a gap in the sensible itself.” A “political” argument alone is insufficient to create the political. Instead, any instance of politics must be dissensual, simultaneously articulating an argument while producing visibility to demand that the argument be heard.

What I want to argue, then, is that there is an isomorphism between Rancière’s account of the police and Schaefer’s account of exploitation. The basic problem with traditional concepts of politics, following Rancière, is that it is possible to deny possession of the *logos* to any particular being, ensuring that his or her arguments go unheard. To be truly political in this account, one must not only produce something like political speech, but do so in a way that ensures that that speech is counted as political speech. Similarly, the problem with Schaefer’s account of exploitation is that any given film might be denied status as an exploitation film – whether it is too mainstream (*The Man with the Golden Gun*) or too pornographic (*Deep Throat* [Gerard Damiano, 1972] can never be exploitation by Schaefer’s account). There is neither “void” nor “supplement” in Rancière’s terms, with every film fitting into one of Schaefer’s categories (Hollywood, exploitation, pornography).

Put another way, Schaefer’s account is always on the side of “the obviousness of what is.” His account assumes the hegemony of Hollywood, and despite his interests in what the “margins” can teach us about the center, his definition of the exploitation film does very little to challenge notions of the centrality of Hollywood or the culture it represents. Though I don’t want this to be taken as a devastating criticism, there is a way in which the whole book seems like a conscious attempt at “move along, nothing to see here” – because he insists on the marginality of his objects, Schaefer’s discussion of exploitation is falls on the side of the police order, one that

assumes it knows what “counts” as mainstream and non-mainstream. What’s missing in Schaefer’s account is a vital sense of interrogation – both of his objects and his world. What I hope to develop is a theory of the exploitation film more indebted both to the aesthetic and to Rancière’s notion of *dissensus*, a theory which not only produces a definition of the exploitation film as such but reckons with what it means for something to “count” as exploitation without falling down on the side of the police.

We should pause to note a certain irony: despite a capacious definition of what we consider “aesthetic” phenomena in relation to the political (Davide Panagia’s example of chocolatiers “performing” in public being the most striking),<sup>39</sup> Rancière himself rarely deviates from a canonical set of filmmakers and films, whether discussing cinema as an art, or discussing its relation to politics. The list of directors (for all of the chapters are organized around directors)<sup>40</sup> in *Film Fables* reads like a syllabus that would be familiar to any student of film from the past 40 years: Sergei Eisenstein, Fritz Lang, Roberto Rossellini, Jean-Luc Godard. Even the exceptions to this largely-European list (Anthony Mann, Nicholas Ray) reflect the influence of *Cahiers du Cinema*’s attempts at an *auteur*-oriented canon.<sup>41</sup> When Rancière has written about more recent cinema, his gaze has fallen continually on European directors (Lars von Trier, Pedro Costas). In the context of Rancière’s biography, these decision make sense. He is a French intellectual who was “substantially informed by the events of [May] ’68,”<sup>42</sup> when, as Colin MacCabe describes it in his biography of Godard, “students and police clashed on the streets of

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<sup>39</sup> See “The Piazza, the *Edicola*, and the Noise of the Utterance” in *The Political Life of Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 45-73.

<sup>40</sup> With the notable exception of a chapter dedicated to Deleuze, who shares an interest in the same directors as Rancière.

<sup>41</sup> See *Cahiers du Cinema: The 1950s: Neo-Realism, Hollywood, New Wave* edited by Jim Hiller (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985) which has a “dossier” on Nicholas Ray and a review of Mann’s *The Man from Laramie* (1955).

<sup>42</sup> Ross, Kristin. *May ’68 and Its Afterlives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 24.

Paris and...the entire work force came out in a general strike which paralysed the country.”<sup>43</sup> MacCabe’s biography is cited here because Godard’s work both fostered and responded to the events of May of ’68, and that summer proved decisive for both filmmaker and philosopher. However, the irony is that by continually referring to the same set of canonical texts, Rancière risks setting up his own “police order” with respect to the history of films, as huge swaths of film history are seemingly dismissed with a “move along, nothing to see here.” I don’t want to take Rancière to task for not treating all of cinema history, but I do want to make clear that examining exploitation films alongside Rancière’s notion of the political is itself a political act meant to (re)distribute what we think of as an object worthy of political analysis

We might dub the isomorphism the practical reason for considering Rancière alongside Schafer, but there is a theoretical consideration worth exploring, and it highlights why exploitation cinema is a venue as worthy, if not more worthy, than Rancière’s choice of European art cinema. That theoretical consideration is mitigating the influence of “transgression” as a way of understanding both European art cinema and exploitation. Take, for instance, the introduction to *From the Arthouse to the Grindhouse: Highbrow and Lowbrow Transgression in Cinema’s First Century*. While the goal of uniting “high” and “low” brow cinema has some historical significance, the discussion of “transgression” is troubling:

If societies are defined by the limits they place on personal behavior, then acts of transgression are necessary to identify just where those limits lie...[t]he very essence of transgression[:] societal limits are crossed, and then they are reinforced or redefined – sometimes both.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> *Godard: A Portrait of the Artist at Seventy* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2003), 209.

<sup>44</sup> John Cline and Robert G. Weiner, eds., (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2010). xvii.

The problem with such a definition is that it utterly ignores what is properly political. In this account the rules of engagement (the institutions and authorities doing the “limiting”) are firmly in place, and it is within the power of individuals (and individual films) to trans-gress, to step over<sup>45</sup> the “lines” that have been drawn.<sup>46</sup> Therefore these lines either obscured or strengthened by the stepping. I would argue, instead, that what unites arthouse and grindhouse; European art cinema and exploitation, is a sense of provocation. Instead of stepping over, these films offer a “call” that has no predetermined conception of who or what is necessarily going to be called. The call is, in my conception, dissensual, offering an alternative distribution of the sensible, and is therefore always-already political.

The solution to this impasse – for it is an impasse, with Schaefer’s work useful but unable to offer a more coherent theoretical account of exploitation either in the period he discusses or its after-life outside the “Golden Age” – that this dissertation proposes is to understand exploitation as a mode of cinema that is inextricably bound up with the political. I am indebted to Peter Brooks and his *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, and the Mode of Excess*<sup>47</sup> for the concept of “mode” as an approach to thinking through exploitation as something other than an historical category or a genre. In his original preface Brooks makes clear that melodrama is “a mode of conception and expression...a certain fictional system for making sense of experience, as a semantic field of force.”<sup>48</sup> Perhaps more significantly, this insight emerges from a consideration that will feel familiar. Brooks is motivated against “traditional literary history”

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<sup>45</sup> The etymological components of transgress. See “transgress,” *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014),

<http://www.oed.com.pitt.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/204775?rskey=N4gfGb&result=2&isAdvanced=false#eid>

<sup>46</sup> It is also suspect that society is defined by limits, but we only know those limits by crossing them, but how do we know we’ve crossed a limit? Something about the definition seems circular in an unhelpful way.

<sup>47</sup> (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995).

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, xvii.

because it “explicitly or implicitly claims the possibility of arranging literary events in a diachronic pattern that is itself the basis of explanation.” He further elaborates: “it is more often teleology that takes over as the controlling principles: history becomes a *development*, heading toward realization.”<sup>49</sup> Here Brooks is arguing that traditional literary history is unable to cope with melodrama because it can only find what it sets out to seek in a cycle of confirmation rather than a discovery. This is similar to the concept of transgression, which assumes the object of its stepping before even stepping out.

For Brooks, the melodramatic mode operates as a response to a particular historical contingency:

[It]is a form for a post-sacred era, in which polarization and hyperdramatization of forces in conflict represent a need to locate and make evident, legible, and operative those large choices of ways of being which we hold to be of overwhelming importance even though we cannot derive from them any transcendental system of belief.<sup>50</sup>

In response, Brooks emphasizes the “ethical dimension of melodrama...the hidden yet operative domain of values that the drama...attempts to make present within the ordinary.”<sup>51</sup> Exploitation, as a mode of cinema, offers a similar origin. It too arises from a lack of “transcendental system[s] of belief,” but rather than operating in the domain of the ethical, the exploitation mode is concerned with the political, as Rancière describes it. The melodrama exists because of the “death of God” in the Nietzschean sense – in the absence of God, new values need to be described and underwritten. Melodrama accomplishes that task. Similarly, the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is also the history of the failure of rational argument to stop atrocity. Rational, “political” arguments supported total war, the Holocaust, and the doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid. Emphasis in original.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., viii.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

Exploitation cinema responds to this situation by offering us a glimpse at the political, a new distribution of the sensible largely driven by spectacular images and their connection to narrative logic.

In the chapters that follow, I trace this relationship – between the political and spectacular images, especially of violence – through the work of four directors to simultaneously trace the contours of exploitation cinema as a mode of cinema concerned with the political while also testing the boundaries of what it might mean to call someone an exploitation filmmaker. Though the work of the directors under discussion – Lloyd Kaufman, Lars von Trier, David Cronenberg, and Quentin Tarantino – are separated by nationalities, critical regard, distribution size/scope, and the subject(s) of their films, they share a commitment to spectacular violence and a relation to the political as Rancière describes it. There is thus a *prima facie* case for yoking them together here, but this explicit connection serves the speculative purpose of expanding the treatment of these directors.

Chapter 1 treats the films of Lloyd Kaufman, co-founder of Troma Studios. This chapter offers a fuller account of Rancière’s conception of the political. Rancière’s emphasis on sensation, the distribution of the sensible, and the way in which political arguments must simultaneously make an argument and create the conditions for that argument to count, offer an interesting counterpoint to Kaufman’s films. His films are obsessed with spectacular images (often of bodily disintegration, like his infamous head-smashing scenes) and with offering what looks like a traditional, rational political argument in the form of a leftist critique of neoliberal capital. And yet for all the progressive speeches Kaufman’s characters make, they seem initially at odds with the frequent use of nude women as props and the general air of comedic violence that would undermine this apparent appeal to politics. This chapter will begin to unpick this

tangle of contradictory images while laying a foundation for our understanding of Rancière's thought.

With that foundation laid, Chapter 2 offers a necessary supplement to an account of Rancière's conception of the political. Lars von Trier's *Dogville* initially seems to offer a perfect representation of Rancière's ideas. The film's town portrays a community that works along dissensual lines, and yet by the film's end the community is irreparably sundered. This suggests a gap in Rancière's conception of community, and the rest of the chapter turns to von Trier's Depression Trilogy to map out the ways in which a more nuanced conception of ethics (following Simon Critchley's work on anarchic politics and ethical demand) helps us develop a theory of *fictioning*, whereby community (and indeed the larger world) is something *created* rather than merely given. von Trier's Depression Trilogy shows us how such fictioning might function, even in its fictiveness.

Chapter 3 turns from the constitution of community (which is arguably the terminus of Rancière's conception of the political) to the moment of rupture that creates a space for *dissensus*. Though *dissensus* is obviously central to Rancière's conception of the political, he is largely silent on the way in which it occurs. Part of that silence is no doubt explained by a desire to avoid historical contingency – the factors that opened up *dissensual* possibility in Paris during May of 1968 are almost certainly different than those that led to the Arab Spring. This lacuna, however, is not entirely explained by a desire to avoid bogging down in historical detail. Instead, we can turn to Paul Eisenstein and Todd McGowan's concept of "rupture," which are those moments where "tradition" is interrupted by some other force. The old order fades away and the possibility of a new one emerges, paving the way for *dissensus*. This notion of rupture helps us to understand the cinema of David Cronenberg, whose films are overtly and consistently

concerned with rupture. Rancière, supplemented with Eisenstein and McGowan, helps explain Cronenberg's cinema, while Cronenberg's films help to explain the way in which novelty, or the new, is crucial both to Cronenberg and to the political.

Chapter 4 takes a slightly broader view, thinking through Quentin Tarantino's recent historical films with the aid of Rancière's conception of the political. Rather than understanding Tarantino's engagement with politics as resting on his invocation of historical tragedy, this chapter begins with a reading of *The Hateful Eight's* "Lincoln letter" to argue that the fundamental gesture of the political is one of affirmation. Though Rancière doesn't formulate it this way, the constitution of a community through the act of *dissensus* always serves to add new subjects to membership in the community, affirming a shared humanity, which is what the Lincoln letter achieves for its bearer, Major Marquis Warren. The rest of the chapter argues that, for Tarantino, this gesture of affirmation is also the fundamental gesture of cinema, which exists to combine elements (whether they are narrative, generic, or technical) affirmatively. Though this doesn't expunge his record of dubious politics, it does open the way for a more sympathetic reading of both his films and of cinema as a tool of the political.

The conclusion, after a brief summary, points a way forward through a consideration of what temporality – one of, if not the, fundamental aspects of cinema – might suggest to us about the future of the political.



### 3.0 “LET’S GO MAKE SOME ART!” TROMA, SENSATION, AND THE POLITICAL

Founded in 1974, Troma Films claims to be the “longest running independent film studio in North America.”<sup>1</sup> The studio began with a collaboration between Lloyd Kaufman and Michael Herz, with directorial duties shared between the two for eight of the first ten films produced under the Troma name. After those first ten films, Lloyd Kaufman took over the directorial reins, while Herz has largely stayed a silent business partner and co-producer (which is why relatively little will – or even can – be said about him here). Kaufman, on the other hand, is anything but silent, and has made his interest in film a staple of his biography. Starting at Yale, where Oliver Stone was a classmate and collaborator, Kaufman demonstrated an interest in then-contemporary cinephilia.<sup>2</sup> After a stint in the Peace Corps and college graduation, Kaufman (and Herz) spent

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<sup>1</sup> “The Troma Team: History and Practice.” <http://www.troma.com/history/> (accessed 5/3/2015).

<sup>2</sup> See Lloyd Kaufman and James Gunn, *Everything I Needed to Know About Filmmaking I Learned from the Toxic Avenger* (New York: Berkeley Boulevard Books, 1998), especially 20-22, where Kaufman cites *The Magnificent Ambersons* (Orson Welles, 1942), *Sullivan’s Travels* (Preston Sturges, 1941), *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956), *The Art of Vision* (Stan Brakhage, 1965), and *The Immortal Mr. Teas* (Russ Meyer, 1959). It is Ernst Lubitsch’s *To Be or Not To Be* (1942), however, that Kaufman singles out as the film responsible for his desire to be a director. Most of the background information contained here is from *Everything I Needed to Know*, but other bits of Troma history can be gleaned from Kaufman’s other co-authored texts *Make Your Own Damn Movie* (New York: St. Martins, 2003), with Adam Jahnke and Trent Haaga; *Direct Your Own Damn Movie!* (New York: Focal Press, 2009) with Sarah Antill and Kurly Tlapoyawa; *Produce Your Own Damn Movie!* (New York: Focal Press, 2009) with Ashley Wren Collins; *Sell Your Own Damn Movie!* (New York: Focal Press, 2011) with Sara Antill. See also Rebekah McKendry’s “Troma Entertainment: The Boobs, Blood, and Brains of Reel Independence,” in *Cinema Inferno: Cinematic Explosions from the Cultural Margins* (New York: Rowman & Little, 2010) which offers a packaged overview of Troma’s history, though it is more journalistic than academic.

the 70s simultaneously on the fringes of Hollywood<sup>3</sup> and producing low-budget sex comedies under the Troma moniker. In the 80s, the boom in VHS allowed Troma to expand from a strictly production company (and a contingent one at that) to one that also distributed films on VHS. In 1984, they had their first big hit with *The Toxic Avenger* (Lloyd Kaufman and Michael Herz), a film that tapped into the then-current craze for fitness and concerns about the environment. The popularity (and profitability) of the Toxic Avenger franchise carried the company for almost a decade until the relative flop of the studio's attempt at a family film, *Sgt. Kabukiman NYPD* (Lloyd Kaufman and Michael Herz, 1990). It took the company six years to return with another Kaufman-helmed feature, with *Tromeo and Juliet* (1996) inaugurating the contemporary era of Troma production. With *Tromeo*, the company locked on to the formula that would carry them through to today's *Return to Nuke'em High: Volume 2* (2015). This formula includes a blend of genres (comedy, horror, drama), an emphasis on cheaply-produced gore,<sup>4</sup> a tendency towards intertextuality with more "high culture" forms,<sup>5</sup> and an obsession with left/progressive causes like feminism, environmentalism, and anti-capitalism.<sup>6</sup>

Despite forty years of "reel independence," Troma has largely been ignored by academic film studies, while their critical and commercial success has been highly variable.<sup>7</sup> The studio's

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<sup>3</sup> Kaufman's most "Hollywood" credit is "pre-production supervisor" on *Rocky* (John G. Avildsen, 1976).

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, the numerous chapters in *All I Needed to Know* and *Make Your Own Damn Movie* dedicated to visual effects. Though there is some care given to the typical concerns of stunt work and safe gun handling, there are also detailed instructions on faking a head-crushing with a watermelon and a wig (see especially *All I Needed to Know* 47-61).

<sup>5</sup> *Tromeo and Juliet* is obviously indebted to Shakespeare, *Citizen Toxie* to *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941). Though *Poultrygeist: Night of the Chicken Dead*'s title references might not be so high-brow, the film is indebted to a cinephilic tradition with nods like the franchise-branded soda "A Cluckwork Orange."

<sup>6</sup> Many of these traits are present in earlier Troma films, like *The Toxic Avenger* (1984), but they more consistently come together starting with *Tromeo*. This is something of an historical argument, and this is also a fancy way of saying that Troma became a brand in a way that wasn't quite as evident prior to the mid-90s.

<sup>7</sup> Though one senses his commitment to underdog branding behind the tone, *Make Your Own Damn Movie!* ends with an epilogue, written in the wake of *Citizen Toxie*, where Kaufman refers to the fact of the derringer revolver in his desk: "Nobody has even made the connection between the gun in my desk and my frequent threats to 'blow my

output has a rabid fan-base (many of whom are willing to work on a Troma film under disgusting conditions for no money),<sup>8</sup> but the films rarely get any credit from non-fans. In his dismissive, half-star review of *Poultrygeist: Night of the Chicken Dead* (Lloyd Kaufman, 2006), *Slant* scribe Rob Humanick offers us perhaps the most succinct overview of the output of Troma studios.

Humanick, both contextualizes and vilifies the film:

Part Peter Jackson gross-out fest, part shapeless political commentary, cult director Lloyd Kaufman's film is grindhouse schlock without form or content, the shadow of an idea somehow granted the resources and manpower necessary to manifest itself in the feature-length cinematic medium.<sup>9</sup>

We will have cause to return to the ways that this brief overview stands in for many (if not most) evaluations of Troma films, but for now let us stick with Humanick's evaluation of the film. He goes on to say, after a brief capitulation of the plot – wherein a fast-food restaurant is built on an “ancient Native American burial ground” – to attempt objectivity by acknowledging the film's good points, which include the fact that “the image of countless chicken zombies overwhelming the film's fictitious food chain is a freakishly inspired and disturbing one.”<sup>10</sup> However, he is quick to point out that, disturbing or not, “such perverted creativity proves more regressive than inventive given the film's shrill ideas about what constitutes subversion...soul-crushingly obvious irony...and Z-grade song-and-dance numbers that provide exposition for an equally lame-brained plot involving a geek attempting to recapture his now-lesbian ex-girlfriend.” He

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fucking brains out.” Of course what keeps him from suicide is the thought that his death will increase orders for *Citizen Toxie*, orders which the company won't be able to fill. Kaufman pulls the trigger, and it's revealed to be a dream, with the rest of the epilogue taking a slightly more positive outlook. In contrast, *Poultrygeist*, just a few years later, had the highest per-screen average in the U.S. on its opening weekend (Brad Miska, “Troma Brings ‘Poultrygeist: Night of the Chicken Dead’ to HD,” *Bloody-Disgusting*, December 27, 2009, <http://bloody-disgusting.com/news/18518/>)

<sup>8</sup> See “Farts of Darkness” on the making of *Terror Firmer* (Lloyd Kaufman, 1999), “Apocalypse Soon” on the making of *Citizen Toxie*, and “Poultry in Motion” on the making of *Poultrygeist*, all available on their respective film's home video release.

<sup>9</sup> Rob Humanick, “Poultrygeist: Night of the Chicken Dead,” *Slant*, May 6, 2008, <http://www.slantmagazine.com/film/review/poultrygeist-night-of-the-chicken-dead>.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

maintains the same structure for his next salvo: “The filmmakers have an obvious bone to pick with purported liberal hypocrisy ... the one-note *Poultrygeist* smacks of one-sided bias devoid of discourse or competence, too caught up in rote chaos to instill even the broadest of its cultural slams with point or meaning.” In sum the film is “so superficially turgid and nihilistic that, by the time the film's central fast-food joint gets blown to kingdom come, the only thought that comes to mind is ‘What took so damn long?’”

Numerous aspects of this brief (365-word) review are worth stopping on. The first is Humanick’s initial claim: *Poultrygeist* is “schlock without either form or content.” Schlock, a polite synonym for trash, we’ll pass over in silence, but it should be noted that Humanick says little, if anything, in evidence for his assertion that the film is without form. In point of fact, his description of the “Z-grade song-and-dance numbers that provide exposition” provides a *prima facie* case for the form of the musical, a fact he acknowledges by addressing the film as “possibly the world’s first horror-musical-sex-comedy.”<sup>11</sup> Moreover, his own description of the film gives the lie to the idea that the film could, in any way, be considered devoid of “content.” He even tells us in the review’s final line (before the film is dismissed as “turgid and nihilistic”) that “Gays, hillbillies, terrorists, Mexicans, and BJ-giving chickens all get thrown into the mix of this rancid jambalaya.” That sounds, at least to me, like significantly more than “nothing,” even if one wanted to dismiss “BJ-giving chickens” as outside the realm of serious consideration. And those are only the aspects of the film that Humanick summarizes – he also mentions that, in the film, “vegetarian protestors declare their love for poultry via signs that read ‘I love cock’” and elsewhere “after decrying conglomerate greed, a crowd of protestors sip their Starbucks in

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

unison.”<sup>12</sup> Something, it seems, is going on here, as Humanick reels off a litany of observations about the film while simultaneously denying that there’s anything to reel off. It’s especially odd given that his central claim is that the film lacks form and content but all his examples of how the film fails are nothing but examples of the film’s content (and to a lesser extent, form).

I don’t particularly want to pick on Humanick or his view of *Poultrygeist* - his screed is part of a general pattern of the treatment of Troma by reviewers, even as it stands as a particularly well-stated version of the incoherence that writers often find themselves stuck in when addressing Troma films, going back to at least *The Toxic Avenger*. Inverting Humanick’s formula, Stephen Holden said of *The Toxic Avenger* that it “may be trash,” but it is redeemed by “a maniacally farcical sense of humor.”<sup>13</sup> Holden at least gives credit to the film for having ideas – he singles out a scene in which a blind woman lovingly prepares a meal (of, among other things, Drano) for the monster-hero – but that praise can only be couched in terms of schlock, or trash. What these two brief reviews make clear – and they are but the tip of the proverbial iceberg – is that Troma films engage with and are engaged by a variety of questions, starting with their status as “trash,” and moving very quickly from there into the realm of what might constitute “form and content” in an exploitation film. Just as significantly, though, both these reviews can’t help but mention the “ideas” that Troma films contain, ideas that point outside the texts of the films themselves to “political commentary” however “shapeless” it may ultimately be. The very see-saw movement of these reviews, “trash” versus “ideas” may find their most powerful expression in the incoherence of Humanick’s review, but it also points to the ways in

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<sup>12</sup> Both of these statements are delivered in parentheticals, as if Humanick acknowledges that they provide both form and content in the film, but he is unwilling to entertain them, thus relegating them to parenthetical asides so as not to besmirch his well-earned vitriol.

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Hunter, “FILM: 'TOXIC AVENGER'” *The New York Times*, April 4, 1986, <http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9A0DE0DC133FF937A35757C0A960948260>.

which Troma films have something to say about politics, the political, and exploitation film(s) more generally.

This chapter, therefore, will have two interrelated aims. The first is to take Troma films seriously as political art. I want to do so without the hedging notion of “it’s trash, but...” Rather, I think the litany of subjects that Humanick highlights in *Poultrygeist* – which is itself incomplete and doesn’t even begin to address other Troma films – provides sufficient justification for the project of looking at Troma films as something other than “schlock.” By taking Lloyd Kaufman’s Troma films seriously, I want to explore what relation the films have to Rancière’s notion of the political. Rather than either “shapeless” or “without form or content,” Lloyd Kaufman’s Troma films have something to tell us about the way that aesthetics can organize the political through film via an appeal to sensation.

As Humanick’s review makes clear (if it wasn’t already from the subtitle *Night of the Chicken Dead*)<sup>14</sup>, *Poultrygeist* utilizes familiar genre architecture. The film features a “Chicken Bunker” franchise built on an “ancient Native American burial ground” that causes the fast food to become contaminated, turning all who eat it into possessed zombie-chickens.<sup>15</sup> Those who have not been turned find themselves trapped in the Chicken Bunker in a siege-like situation reminiscent of both Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and John Carpenter’s *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976). Through an heroic act of sacrifice – by Humus (pronounced “who-moose,” Rose Ghavarmi), a character who eventually strips off her niqab to reveal a bomb-clad and bikini’d white body – the denizens of the Chicken Bunker are saved from the incensed Native

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<sup>14</sup> Which, since this is a chapter at least partially about the obvious, is a reference to George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and sequels.

<sup>15</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, the film isn’t particularly interested in the mythology and mechanisms of the possession. It seems to rely on the audience’s implicit knowledge of possession films – *Poltergeist* (Tobe Hooper, 1982) is the obvious intertext – which frees the film up for other concerns.

American spirits. The Tromatic twist to this familiar genre exercise is that the main character is Arbie (Jason Yachanin), a young fast food worker who gets a job at Chicken Bunker on its opening day so that he might have the money to re-woo his former girlfriend Wendy (Kate Graham), who has been turned into a lesbian thanks to the efforts of C.L.A.M. (College Lesbians Against Mega-conglomerates). C.L.A.M. also happens to be picketing the opening of this Chicken Bunker franchise, and thus Arbie and Wendy are reunited in a way that sends him on a journey of self-discovery (which includes a musical interlude with an older version of himself, played by writer/director Lloyd Kaufman) and frames the zombie storyline. Rather than just a summary of the plot, these details outline precisely how complicated the film is, and though Humanick's criticisms have some merit, even a cursory summary like this one makes abundantly clear just how much is going on in the film.

Unlike other zombie films, which locate their political power in the figure of the zombie – a figure whose *unheimlich* power saturates it with multiple levels of meaning – *Poultrygeist* is less concerned with the figure of the chicken-zombie than it is with configuring a particular world that accounts for the chicken-zombie. More specifically, *Poultrygeist* orchestrates the sensational to produce a political possibility. Therefore, the emergence of the chicken-zombies is not the film's political moment. Rather, that comes earlier in the film, as *Poultrygeist* stages an encounter between the denizens of Tromaville,<sup>16</sup> their ranks bolstered by member of C.L.A.M. and the owner of the Chicken Bunker corporation, General Lee Roy (Robin L. Watkins).<sup>17</sup> The General appears at the restaurant's grand opening, as a stretch SUV enters the frame, behind

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<sup>16</sup> The fictional New Jersey town in which most of Lloyd Kaufman's films have been set since *The Toxic Avenger*.

<sup>17</sup> And of course this is more of the "soul-crushing irony," as the General is not only a nod to KFC's Colonel Sanders, but by referring to him as General Lee, the film makes a heavy-handed nod to General Robert E. Lee and the entire operation of Southern racism, the principles of which the General largely seems to share.

which we glimpse protesters. The manager of the Chicken Bunker location (Denny,<sup>18</sup> played by Joshua Olatunde) rushes over sycophantically to greet the fearless leader, who emerges from the SUV in a white suit. He's flanked by a militarily-themed chicken mascot and four young women in camouflage skirts and brightly-colored bikini tops. When the General greets the Tromaville crowd, their response is to jeer at him. He is undeterred until the leader of C.L.A.M., Micki (Allyson Sereboff), literally sticks it to the man, poking the General in the stomach while telling him "We will never rest while big business tramples the rich history and culture of Native Americans while simultaneously slaughtering innocent chickens." We see shots of the General's nonplussed reaction, as well as Wendy's adoring gaze. Micki's mini-speech completed, the camera cuts back to the crowd as everyone raises a coffee cup (obviously modeled on Starbucks), takes a sip, and then exclaims a collective "Ahh." In response to Micki, the General offers platitudes about providing new "accommodations" for the "dead, red men."

The scene is typical enough, as confrontations go, but then the General says "Hit it" and begins to sing a song, the first verse of which is an exhortation for the crowd to ask him questions so that he can "sort [their] problems out." An overweight man emerges from the crowd, claiming fast food made him fat, to which the General replies with more platitudes. Wendy follows suit, dancing while reminding the General that franchises like Chicken Bunker put small companies out of business. While the General delivers his reply (more platitudes), his young companions dance with each other, and the film also briefly shows us Denny dancing (again sycophantically) with a TV crew who appear to be won over by the rhythmic nature of the General's arguments. Micki mounts a final assault on the General, arguing that franchises rely on unskilled labor while offering a non-living wage. As Micki's point reaches its climax she raises

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<sup>18</sup> In case it's not already clear, the majority of the fast-food workers are named for famous franchises.



her pitch and her fist while Wendy looks on admiringly. The song culminates with the crowd joining in to accuse the General of advertising to children, making them fat. While the crowd sings, Wendy and Micki engage in a kind of Broadway dance-battle with the General, like something out of *West Side Story* (Jerome Robbins and Robert Wise, 1961). The General responds by claiming that Chicken Bunker can help kids scholastically before ending on the thought that Chicken Bunker “is more popular than Jesus” while resting his hands in prayer, appealing to the crowd’s piety.

On one level, we might read this scene as another in the long line of moments revealing an obvious politics – both sides of the fast-food debate offer familiar arguments: C.L.A.M. charges that fast-food restaurants are unsafe and exploitative, while the General defends free-market capitalism and individual autonomy. However, it is precisely the fact that the film stages this argument about politics as a musical – reliant on spectacle and sensation – that tells us something about what the film is trying to do. What the General knows – and the film reinforces – is that it is not enough to make a particular political argument, whether for or against fast food. Instead, it is necessary to engage in what Jacques Rancière calls “an intervention into the visible and sayable”<sup>19</sup> which is the essence of the political. Thus, rather than being concerned with a particular politics – like the anti-corporate leanings evidenced by Wendy, as well as the film’s general insistence that fast food practices are rife with abuses both systemic and individual – the film is concerned with the political more generally, wherein the social is reconfigured to make particular arguments “worthy” of consideration.

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<sup>19</sup> Jacques Rancière, “10 Theses on Politics,” *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 37.

This is the central insight of political philosopher Jacques Rancière – that the political is not about decisions or arguments in the realm of the social. Rather, the political occurs through *dissensus*. Rancière begins with the notion of the *partage du sensible*, or the “distribution of the sensible.” For Rancière it is “the dividing up of the world...and of the people,”<sup>20</sup> and should be understood in two ways. As a partition it functions to “divide” but also as what “allows participation” by assigning both a “common sense” alongside “exclusive parts.” All of this “presupposes a distribution of what is visible and what not, of what can be heard and what cannot.”<sup>21</sup> The order, which Rancière dubs “the police,” exploits this distribution, normalizing a particular set of what is visible or sayable. Rancière explains:

The essence of the police lies in a partition of the sensible that is characterized by the absence of void and of supplement: society here is made up of groups tied to specific modes of doing, to places in which these occupations are exercised, and to modes of being corresponding to these occupations and these places.<sup>22</sup>

Elsewhere, Rancière provides a vivid example of what, for him, constitutes the police. He returns to Althusser’s famous instance of interpellation, when the policeman “hails” a subject, and by responding, the subject forms him or herself as a subject (of ideology, etc.). This is anathema for Rancière, for the workings of the police lie not in “interpellating demonstrators, but in breaking up demonstrations.”<sup>23</sup> The police “consists, before all else, in recalling the obviousness of what there is, or rather what there is not, and its slogan is: ‘Move along! There’s nothing to see here!’” If the action of the police lies in partitioning the world such that it appears whole, without either void or supplement, then re-stating the obvious in this way is essential for the function of the police. Finally, the police maintains what *is* as *only* what it is: “[The police] asserts that the space

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 37.

for circulating is nothing but the space of circulation.”<sup>24</sup> But of course the space of circulation needn’t *only* be a space of circulation. It can, in fact, be a place for demonstration and protest as well. Politics, for Rancière, “consists in disturbing [the police’s] arrangement by supplementing it with a part of those without part, identified with the whole of the community.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, rather than a new regime, politics works to disrupt the logic whereby everything has a place and is therefore placed in it. To return to his example of the space of circulation, politics “consists in transforming this space of ‘moving-along’, of circulation, into a space for the appearance of a subject: the people, the workers, the citizens. It consists in refiguring space, that is, in what is to be done, to be seen and to be named in it.”<sup>26</sup> Ultimately, a “dispute over the distribution of the sensible.”<sup>27</sup> Politics is therefore fundamentally an aesthetic phenomenon, and politics must produce a shared distribution of the sensible by producing a “common *aisthesis*.” Politics, then “consists in making what was unseen visible; in making what was audible as mere noise heard as speech and in demonstrating that what appeared as a mere expression of pleasure or pain is a shared feeling of a good or an evil.”<sup>28</sup> A redistribution of the sensible turns the non-human sounds of pain (which have no political significance) into speech that must be acknowledged, and this transformation is always-already aesthetic, or sensible.

Politics, then, is always an aesthetic rupture, one that reconfigures the sensible such that what was previously invisible becomes visible, and what was once merely inarticulate noise becomes speech signifying judgments and demands. Rancière dubs this rupture “*dissensus*.” It is not, Rancière clearly delineates, “a confrontation between interests or opinions,” which for him

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

is another way of saying that politics is not itself a type of discourse or mode of argumentation. Instead, it is “the demonstration of a gap in the sensible itself.” Just as democracy is rule by those who have no right to rule, politics “makes visible that which had no reason to be seen.” Rancière’s example is a factory worker “who puts forward an argument about the public nature of a ‘domestic’ wage dispute” who “must demonstrate the world in which his argument counts as an argument and must demonstrate it as such for those who do not have the frame of reference enabling them to see it as one.”<sup>29</sup> *Dissensus*, or all properly political speech, must be “at one and the same time the demonstration of a possible world in which the argument could count as an argument...to an addressee who is required to see the object and to hear the argument that he ‘normally’ has no reason either to see or to hear.”<sup>30</sup> A “political” argument alone is insufficient to create the political. Instead, any instance of the political must be dissensual, simultaneously articulating an argument while producing visibility to demand that the argument be heard.

Rancière’s analysis of politics has ramifications beyond the realm of political philosophy, as the centrality of aesthetics would suggest. Indeed, Rancière matters deeply for questions of studying film, as Davide Panagia makes abundantly clear:

One might say, in this regard, that aesthetic experience is political for Rancière not because the quality of any one object is in itself political, but because aesthetics is the name we give to that kind of experience of beholding that troubles our confidence in our abilities of apprehension when affronted by the capture of attention.<sup>31</sup>

The moving image can confront viewers with an aesthetic experience, one which reconfigures the possibilities of “common sense,” allowing for the development of politics in democratic terms. The moving image can help articulate new modes of perception that create *dissensus* in

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Davide Panagia, *Impressions of Hume: Cinematic Thinking and the Politics of Discontinuity* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013), 29.

Rancière's formulation. The political, then, is not about making an argument as such – rather, it is about reconfiguring the aesthetic domain, the domain of sensation, to make a particular kind of argument *count*.

Indeed, *Poultrygeist* acknowledges that the political must not only make arguments but make those arguments *count* through the General and his musical interlude. As he appears, the General faces an apparently intractable group of protesters. Their signs are militant (“My Cock is Bleeding”), and they seem united in their dislike of the Chicken Bunker franchise. After the General introduces himself, we get a medium-long shot of the crowd making rude gestures as Micki emerges as the spokeswoman to poke at the General. She then takes her sip of ersatz Starbucks, which prompts a similar gesture in the rest of the crowd.<sup>32</sup> Here we can read this shared gesture of caffeinated solidarity not merely as a wry comment on the liberal agenda (which is happy to protest fast food but refuses to acknowledge the hypocrisy in its own consumption), but also as a gesture that demonstrates the way in which the crowd is united, and therefore their hatred of Chicken Bunker is “obvious” in political terms. The musical number, for the General, is then an aesthetic appeal that attempts to reconfigure the obvious means of interaction already calcified in the crowd.<sup>33</sup> By the song's end, we see that the General's exhortations have had a significant effect. When the General makes his last argument about the effects of fast food on youngsters, the music takes a brief pause before the General takes a final opportunity to sing. Rather than addressing arguments against Chicken Bunker, the General

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<sup>32</sup> Excluding Wendy, whose abstention signals her eventual disillusionment with C.L.A.M. in general (she gets back with Arbie, so she's not a lesbian in the film's terms) and with Micki in particular (who, if she is still a lesbian by film's end, is one engaged in a fetishistic relationship with the General that involves him as an adult baby and her wearing fast food packaging as an ersatz bra).

<sup>33</sup> This is also how we can read the General's mis-gendering of Micki, when he refers to her with “settle down there young man!” Rather than another wry commentary on the way in which conservatives identify lesbianism with excessive masculinity, this moment seems calculated on the part of the General precisely to disrupt what is “obvious” about Micki.

switches registers and returns to the rhetoric of advertising, telling the crowd “Don’t fight temptation, give yourself to taste sensation.” These lines are accompanied by a rhythmic drumming on the soundtrack along with shots of one of the dancer’s chests jiggling back and forth intercut with the General’s singing. When he begins to describe the “Extreme Chicken Supreme,” the film cuts to a wider shot with the General in the foreground, dancers with their backs to the camera shaking their hips behind him with the crowd in the background. We can see clearly that the crowd – including members of C.L.A.M. – have their hands in the air making “jazz hands” in a way that mirrors the rhythm of both the song’s drums but also the twitching hips of the backup dancers. Once the General intones “we’re more popular than Jesus” while folding his hands, an off-screen voice begins to say the “Our Father.” The film cuts to a shot of the crowd, hands in the air. They hold their hands up for a beat, but then slowly lower them, a confused babble issuing from their talk while a different off-screen voice tells us “Well Colonel Cluck [the Chicken Bunker mascot] certainly has a better ad campaign than Jesus.” It’s clear that the crowd has been at least partially swayed by the General’s musical interlude, while not having been completely won over.

What the scene makes clear is the way in which politics and the police can operate. The protesters have attempted to turn the parking lot, a space of circulation that does not support lingering, into a space for the articulation of demands. They are in the midst of a dissensual moment, one where they hope to have their demands – the shuttering of the fast food restaurant, presumably, though the fact that the group fails to articulate a set of proper demands is at least part of the strategy of *dissensus*<sup>34</sup> – acknowledged. However, the General is the greater master of the aesthetic, and his entire song-and-dance routine could easily be paraphrased as “move along,

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<sup>34</sup> The echoes of the Occupy movement, especially as it manifested on Wall Street in particular, are suggestive.

there's nothing to see here." More significantly, by turning the space of protest into a space of song-and-dance, the General controls the ways in which the arguments against fast food get to be made. It is he, after all, who initiates the number, both with his "hit it" and his "tell me all of your concerns and I'll sort your problems out" lyrics that end the opening salvo of his song. Rather than the chaotic riot of protest that the General confronts when his stretch limo appears in the frame, this song and dance number works to arrange and contain the crowd. This is a staple of the musical genre – as Steve Cohan notes, Busby Berkeley's elaborately choreographed musical numbers "define heterosexuality through the female body, which they equate with technology and capital exchange."<sup>35</sup> It might be a stretch to say that the General's musical number equates women's bodies with technology – if for no other reason that Kaufman and company can't stage a number anywhere near as complex as those favored by Berkeley – but their presence does connect them to the Chicken Bunker franchise (in branded half-shirts) that links the dancers' sexuality to their utility as extension of the General and the Chicken Bunker franchise. Moreover, beyond the carefully choreographed movements between the dancers proper – whether the C.L.A.M. characters or the General – the crowd itself is visibly swayed by (and swaying with) the General's musical number. Though the General doesn't re-establish the parking lot as a space of circulation, he does challenge the crowd's protestations on aesthetic grounds.

The General doesn't triumph during the musical scene, but he does eventually sway the crowd and inspire them to consume Chicken Bunker products (with fatal consequences, since it is this infected food that turns the crowd into chicken-zombies). In a later scene, after it is abundantly clear to the audience that the Chicken Bunker food is contaminated – we've seen

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<sup>35</sup> *Hollywood Musicals, the Film Reader*, Ed Steven Cohan (London: Routledge, 2002), 63.

Jose Paco Bell fall into a meat grinder only to emerge as a sentient sandwich, and another character have sex with an infected chicken carcass before being turned into a chicken-zombie – the General emerges from the restaurant with Denny and Humus carrying buckets of fried chicken. Again the General faces a hostile crowd, but rather than appealing to any musical sense, the General claims to make a “peace offering” by distributing “free fried chicken.” As the buckets circulate, members of the crowd look skeptically at the pieces of chicken – which have green pustules growing on them – before Micki emerges from the crowd once again to confront the General. She retrieves a piece of chicken from the General’s bucket and waves it in his face before telling him “If you think free chicken will win us over, you are completely mad.” But then a curious thing happens, as a two shot finds the General holding the bucket and Micki threatening him with a piece of chicken. She pauses, looks down at the chicken, and then the film cuts to a close-up as she takes a giant bite out of the chicken piece (green pustules and all). We then get several shots of the crowd, gasping in surprise. With a mouthful of chicken she accuses the General again, saying “You *are* mad. Mad to give away chicken this good.” A few shots of the bemused General and Micki chewing follow before she turns to the crowd to deliver the final blow: “It’s delicious!” The crowd is suddenly, and completely, swayed by Micki’s aesthetic argument about the quality of the General’s chicken. When Wendy questions Micki – “what about the Native Americans” – Micki’s response is to claim that the chicken is “bigger than us...it’s the American dream...I can hear America singing” while she continues to eat the chicken. What we don’t know, and won’t discover until Wendy overhears a tryst between Micki and the General, is that Micki was always in the employ of the General and her entire performance of protest was a sham.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> There’s a paper to be written – sadly not here – about the question of “good faith” with respect to an aesthetics of



Though it may seem a bit heavy-handed, this is also a scene of the political as Rancière describes it - the General has reconfigured the sensible such that the objections of the crowd are neutralized with an appeal to sensation, this time the sensation of the taste of chicken rather than the appeal to the visual/aural spectacle of the musical number. As Davide Panagia makes clear in *The Political Life of Sensation*, if the political is an aesthetic phenomenon, then it can't be confined just to one particular form of sensation. The mouth, then, is "a complex organ of political reflection,"<sup>37</sup> and therefore the General's change in tactics is in keeping with a generally aesthetic understanding of politics, even if the organ of perception/sensation has changed. The General took the arguments of the protesters – that his corporate greed fueled the desecration of Native American culture while simultaneously producing unhealthy food and exploitative working conditions – and made those arguments not count. If the chicken is that good – whether we believe Micki's miraculous conversion or not – then it can overcome the (political) arguments against it through a distribution of the sensible that makes those arguments count less in the face of overwhelming sensorial goodness. This fact should give us pause, as the General uses the moments after this Damascene conversion to make a racist remark. What the film is telling us, then, is that irrespective of the presence of the possessing Native American spirits, the General's aesthetic appeal to reconfigure the political has succeeded. The crowd now seems to be a set of eager consumers of the General's chicken. Perhaps the chicken's special status as cursed object might help account for the crowd's rapid acceptance and eager consumption of the proffered buckets, but recalling the earlier musical scene makes such a reading more

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politics. All the thinkers under consideration here insist on a kind of fair dealing on the side of democracy, whether that's conceived of as a dissensual (re)distribution of the sensible, or a more populist approach in Laclau's terminology. What both models elide is the possibility of a kind of bad faith, both in the production and the description of aesthetic experience.

<sup>37</sup> Panagia, *Political Life*, 19.

problematic. The crowd was already swayed by an aesthetic recasting of familiar arguments during the musical number, so it doesn't take much of a stretch to imagine them being similarly swayed by free chicken, much less requiring a narrative of possession to explain their consumption away. And so the film tells us that the General – and fast food corporations more generally – can win over consumers through the recasting of aesthetic arguments. This, despite their obvious racist remarks and dubious practices.

What these moments from *Poultrygeist* reveal is that there's nothing inherently emancipatory about understanding the aesthetics of politics. Though democracy, as Rancière explains, emerges from *dissensus*, that need not be the only kind of politics to emerge from a reconfiguration of the sensible. This is the central insight that Ernesto Laclau provides in thinking about Rancière and the aesthetics of politics. In *On Populist Reason*,<sup>38</sup> Laclau offers an important critique of Rancière's analysis of *dissensus*. Though he admits to approval of the general insight that politics is always a question of what counts – and how the emergence of what had not counted might come to count – Laclau rightfully notes that there is a difficulty in Rancière's discussion of politics. For Rancière, democratic politics is always emancipatory.

Laclau claims differently:

[T]here is no a priori guarantee that the 'people' as a historical actor will be constituted around a progressive identity (from the point of view of the Left). Precisely because what is put into questions is not the *ontic* content of what is being counted but the *ontological* principle of countability as such, the discursive forms that this putting into question will adopt will be largely indeterminate.<sup>39</sup>

Laclau's analysis offers us an explanation for the evidence of *Poultrygeist*, where the conservative, racist, rapaciously-capitalist General succeeds where the more emancipatory,

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<sup>38</sup> Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.

ostensibly-progressive work of C.L.A.M. fails. To begin to unpack this possibility more completely, we should turn to the concept Laclau offers in contrast to Rancière's *dissensus*: populism.

In Rancière's account of politics, the people (the *demos* of democracy) become visible through an act of *dissensus* that disrupts the ways in which the parts and wholes of the community are counted. What was previously denied – the ability of the worker to have a say in government – is disrupted by a new “distribution of the sensible” that demonstrates the part that the worker plays in the political reality of the *polis*. Populism, which Laclau refers to explicitly as a “political logic,”<sup>40</sup> similarly constructs a people who fundamentally alter the political reality to which they belong. However, rather than a new “distribution of the sensible,” Laclau finds populism where a people find themselves, temporarily, defining themselves in relation to an empty signifier. This signifier allows them to define themselves and articulate a set of demands simultaneously.

These demands are significant if we are to understand politics or populism, as Laclau makes clear in his preface, “the unity of [a] group is...the result of an articulation of demands.”<sup>41</sup> However, Laclau is careful to note that this is not a situation in which some standard part of the social totality makes a demand on itself – this is not a business-as-usual situation, it “does not correspond to a stable and positive configuration which could be grasped as a unified whole.” Instead, these demands “present claims to a certain established order...in a peculiar relation with that order, being both inside and outside.”<sup>42</sup> However, because any group is composed of a series

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., “Preface” x

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

of individuals who are not reducible to each other, they require a name to bring them together to articulate their demands. Laclau gives the name “empty signifier” to this function.

The empty signifier “expresses and constitutes an equivalential chain,” which creates “an autonomization of the equivalential moment vis-à-vis this integrating link.”<sup>43</sup> Laclau stresses that this equivalential logic, which allows individual subjects to find something of themselves in the demands being articulated, “is not merely ancillary to these demands, but has a crucial role in making their plurality possible.” This equivalence “tends to give solidarity and stability to the demands, but also restricts their autonomy.” We can think of the empty signifier as the center of an atom – it provides a gravitational force that allows individual electrons (or subjects) to become part of the atom, but at the same time it restricts the ability of those electrons (or subjects) to bond with other atoms. Laclau’s example is the Italian Communist Party of the 40s and 50s, which “pushed democratic demands.”<sup>44</sup> This move had the dual result of making them “better defined in their aims and more efficient in their tactical moves” but also made them “less autonomous and more subordinated to the Communist strategic aims.”<sup>45</sup> The tension between solidarity and autonomy that the empty signifier creates is “inherent in the establishment of any political frontier and, indeed, in any construction of the ‘people.’”<sup>46</sup> The tension between these two poles, and therefore the fragility of any construction of the people, underscores the temporal element of Laclau’s analysis: any formation of the people is always-already temporary.

Laclau’s insights are significant for visual culture, especially film. As Meghan Sutherland has shown, Laclau’s formulation of populism has a particular affinity with spectacular aesthetics.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

Sutherland's essay "Populism and Spectacle" attempts to think through Laclau's conception of populism via the "blackface minstrel show."<sup>47</sup> In particular, she tries to "look at how the staging of the audience in a particularly charged form of popular spectacle... showcases an aesthetic automation of the every same tropic relations that Laclau traces out on the terrain of political discourse."<sup>48</sup> By figuring the people as both different from the racialized spectacle of the minstrel show and simultaneously suggesting an identity in contrast to this opposition, the minstrel show participates in populist logic. From Sutherland's analysis we can take the following formulation of spectacle: "The term spectacle would thus seem to refer to nothing so much as the aesthetic relation of undecidability between [entertainment spectacle and political rally] that manifests itself as the unstable substrate of visual presentation undergirding the 'empty' imagery of rhetoric and spectacle alike."<sup>49</sup> Though the role of aesthetics in populism is broad, the question of spectacle – as in the musical moments we witness in *Poultrygeist* – puts a special pressure on Laclau's terms that allows us to see the inherent undecidability that undergirds all formations of the political.

Just as significantly, Zach Campbell shows us the significance of thinking through populism and the "equivalential chain" by thinking through the way we see crowds and spectatorship represented in film. His specific case is the *Step Up* franchise (2006-2014), as each film "revels in its articulation of individualism and some measure of cultural difference" that "also produces a fictive unity."<sup>50</sup> This fictive unity is the site for an articulation of a politics that might disrupt the teleology of the films' working class character, who without the unity brought

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<sup>47</sup> Meghan Sutherland, "Populism and Spectacle," *Cultural Studies* 26, nos. 2-3 (2012): 334.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 343.

<sup>50</sup> Zach Campbell, "How We Got the Mob," *LOLA* 4 (2013), accessed October 15, 2017. <http://www.lolajournal.com/4/mob.html>.

about by the staging of elaborate dance sequences would simply be atomized into dead-end jobs or left to dream about a better life. Though Campbell's critique of the films is that they abandon this equivalential chain and the creation of an empty signifier to instead emphasize difference (between dance crews, between the dancers and the wider culture), his analysis demonstrates that the way in which a film constructs configurations of "the people" – whether a "mob" in *Step Up*'s logic, or the crowd in the Troma film – helps construct the film's attitude toward the political.

Here we may return again to *Poultrygeist* to further nuance our understanding of its engagement with the political. Laclau's populism is especially attractive in this regard because he highlights the ways in which populist demands are "always going to be imprecise and fluctuating" and for Laclau these "moment[s] of vagueness and imprecision – which, it should be clear does not have any pejorative connotation... – [are] as an essential component of any populist operation."<sup>51</sup> Imprecise, vague, and fluctuating are three adjectives that perfectly describe the demands articulated by Troma productions, especially in *Poultrygeist*. The variety of claims made against the Chicken Bunker franchise have all the hallmarks of Laclau's populism. They are articulated by a variety of individuals – from the overweight man claiming fast food made him fat, to those claiming exploitation at the hands of the industry – which taken together form a vision (or version) of 'the people' demanding, for their variety of reasons, that the fast food restaurant be shut down. We might initially critique the scene's evolution into a song-and-dance spectacle as the General rebuts concerns about his company as lacking serious engagement, a kind of snub that refuses to recognize the sincerity of those making demands. However, as we've seen, the spectacular aesthetic shares a special affinity with populism, and

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<sup>51</sup> Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 118.

the musical number allows for a greater articulation of the demands of “the people,” even as it (necessarily) risks dissolving the differences between the General and his detractors. Arguably, as Campbell suggests for the *Step Up* films, the risk of dissolving the difference between the General and the crowd is necessary precisely because only by creating a “fictive unity” through the “equivalential chain” can the crowd hope to present a politically effective front through which to articulate their demands.

More significantly, Laclau allows us to see two important aspects of the scene that Rancière’s terminology forces us to glide over. The first is that there isn’t anything necessarily politically progressive about the scene. As we noted before, the film seems to want to have it both ways: critiquing the General for his rapacious business practice but then having those characters levying the critique sip from ersatz-Starbucks cups, apparently showing their unstable commitment to anti-corporatism. On the one hand this is evidence of the “fickle” nature of populism, what Laclau elsewhere describes as its “dangerous excess.”<sup>52</sup> On the other, it allows us to see that even if this is an instance of the political (as I am arguing) it needn’t necessarily be a politically progressive one. Certainly the scene is open to feminist critique on the grounds that the bodies of women are often made to be mute objects in the Colonel’s song-and-dance without apparent condemnation on the part of the film. Second, Laclau’s explicitly temporal formulation allows us to understand the way in which the crowd is won over by the Colonel in another scene (and won over easily at that, with free – and tainted – food). Though Rancière’s *dissensus* is implicitly temporal – any distribution of the sensible is only ever temporary since it can always be further re-distributed – Laclau highlights the temporary nature of any populist rhetoric, and when the General makes a counter-appeal later by offering the crowd free food, it is less a new

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., x.

redistribution of the sensible than it is an appeal to the individuals of the group – their individual hunger for fried chicken dissolves whatever unity the rhetoric of C.L.A.M. had over them.

What the example of the General’s fried chicken makes clear, however, is what we lose in a turn from Rancière to Laclau. Though Laclau’s populism is a powerful concept for unraveling the “spectacle” of a film like *Poultrygeist*, what it elides is the notion of *sensation*. The “empty signifier” of course has a sensual, perceptual dimension – we must either see, or hear, or taste, or touch this “empty signifier” for it to unite us as political subjects – but it perhaps too quickly becomes an object for cognition. Rancière, however, suggests that sensation is as significant as cognition – the world that *dissensus* creates through *aisthesis* (the world in which particular arguments *count*) must be co-created with the arguments that will be articulated in that world. Sensation, as Panagia describes it, is “the heterology of impulses that register on our bodies without determining a body’s nature or reading in any one organ of perception,”<sup>53</sup> and it is this heterology that exists alongside the “empty signifier” as it is recognized as part of the equivalential chain. *Poultrygeist* makes clear the necessity for thinking both these ideas in tandem, as the film appeals to both the rhetorical gesture of the empty signifier in the spectacular elements of the *mise-en-scène* while also attempting to reconfigure the perceptual with an appeal to sensation via the gross-out aesthetics of (for instance) a man defecating himself thin.

The combination of Laclau’s populism and the crowd in *Poultrygeist* offers us a convenient pivot to discuss other Troma films, as the crowd is a consistent feature of Kaufman’s work. Though the example of *Poultrygeist* most clearly crystalizes the ways in which a crowd might articulate political demands, it is hardly the only example of a crowd in Kaufman’s films.

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<sup>53</sup> Panagia, *Political Life*, 2.



One of the most trenchant examples is found in *Citizen Toxie: The Toxic Avenger IV* (Lloyd Kaufman, 2000). The film opens on “Take a Mexican to Lunch” day at the “Tromaville School for the Very Special” (i.e. the developmentally delayed), where the “Diaper Mafia” breaks in demanding a television crew to witness their eugenic program against “the ‘tards.” The Toxic Avenger (David Matthey) enters, disguised as Samantha Chambers (Carla Pivonski) from “Really Real Bikini TV.” After dispatching the “mafia,” Toxie and his sidekick (Joe Fleishaker) must escape a bomb the “mafia” has planted. Though his sidekick doesn’t make it, Toxie rescues two of the students, but the resultant explosion creates a hole in space-time, stranding Toxie and the students in Amortville.<sup>54</sup> Meanwhile, Toxie’s opposite number in Amortville (Noxie, also David Matthey) is transplanted to Tromaville. The film’s main plot concerns Toxie’s attempts to return to Tromaville while Noxie wreaks havoc there. A significant subplot is that Toxie and his blind wife Sarah (Heidi Sjursen) are attempting to have a baby. Though she’s pregnant when Toxie is dispatched to Amortville, she mistakes Noxie for Toxie and the two have sex, resulting in a pair of simultaneous impregnations. As Corey Feldman’s goofy-doctor character explains later in the film, the fetus from Toxie’s sperm contains his “Tromatons,” a fictional particle that makes Toxie fight evil, while the fetus from Noxie’s sperm contains “anti-Tromatons,” the fictional particle that pushes Noxie toward evil. These particles are mixing in Sarah’s blood, “fighting, fighting, fighting.” To illustrate what this will ultimately look like, the doctor pours a test tube containing green fluid (for Toxie) and red fluid (for Noxie) into one another – the resultant “sizzle” is a violent reaction that overflows the test-tube and the doctor emphasizes “that will be you” to Sarah. Her choices are “to explode” or “to abort,” with the added pressure that she has

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<sup>54</sup> Which is the “Troma” in “Tromaville” backwards, to engage in my own soul-crushing bit of the obvious.

only “two or three hours until this whole process takes place.” It is only then that the previously-thin Sarah’s stomach inflates into a pregnant belly.

To suggest that abortion is an option – even in the case of medical necessity – and moreover to suggest that it’s Sarah’s “choice,” puts the film in a radical position with respect to the wider culture. However, what’s more interesting is the way the film stages Sarah’s exploration of her “choice” with a visit to Tromaville’s abortion clinic. We’re introduced to the clinic as a phone rings and a receptionist answers, responding that the doctor is “still in a topless bar, I mean appointment” before hanging up. The scene then shifts outside, where a group of protesters are holding signs and walking in a circle, presumably in front of the clinic itself.<sup>55</sup> The protesters are holding signs like “Choose Life or We’ll Kill You” and “Abortion Kills Beavers” while chanting “Choose life or die.” It’s the kind of “soul-crushingly obvious” irony that Humanick described earlier, but it’s the staging of the scene that’s significant.

After establishing the protesters’ circular movement, the camera pulls back to reveal Sarah at camera right, walking cane-and-belly first. A close-up reveals her saying “it sure is hot out here today” before a series of shots see her trying to figure out where the line for “family planning” (as she puts it) starts. As she fumbles to find the entrance, she runs up against a protester holding a bottle of red liquid. Though initially disturbed, this protester double takes and realizes that Sarah is pregnant. She exclaims “burn in hell abortion bitch” before spraying Sarah with her red liquid, presumably meant to symbolize the blood of the aborted. This obvious attempt by the protester to shame Sarah into reconsidering or abandoning her abortion falls

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<sup>55</sup> Though this is a legal difficulty in the United States, the cuts suggest that the protesters are directly outside the clinic. However, given Troma’s catch-as-catch-can production techniques, it’s unlikely they could find a clinic-setting for the interiors that would also allow them to shoot the protest outside. Thus, no shots see Sarah explicitly traveling from one space to another.

completely flat. Instead, Sarah mis-recognizes the symbolic blood as a “gentle rain” that she hopes “will cool things off.” Though the protester tries to place Sarah in the equivalential chain that would unite this “crowd” against abortion, Sarah refuses such an emplacement or identification. It is her literal and metaphorical blindness that keeps her from joining in the hegemonic formation that the protesters represent. Here, the film makes clear that the necessity for an emphasis on similarity can be disrupted when someone refuses to see that similarity. The fact that at least part of Sarah’s refusal is one based on sensation – the lack of sensation in her eyes and the presence of sensation on her skin in the form of misunderstood “rain” – only helps to emphasize that this is a moment of the political.

Moreover, this is a moment where the film’s politics are not entirely clear. Though I stand by the assertion that to make abortion an option is radical vis-à-vis the wider culture, the film itself does not seem to be promoting abortion as a serious option. The abortion clinic – with its absent doctor – is a dingy, unappealing place visually. Though this could be the basis for a critique of funding for abortion – “look at how terrible the facilities are, we need to do more to support abortion clinics!” – the film instead maintains an ambivalence towards the procedure itself. In fact, rather than giving us an abortion *per se*, the film would rather stage an in-utero fight between the two fetuses. Sarah does eventually give birth, and the baby is revealed to look like Toxie, signaling his triumph. But then a nurse enters with her other baby. Everyone anticipates this will be the “evil” baby, but is instead revealed to look like Toxie’s friend Sgt. Kabukiman (Paul Kyrmse). Kabukiman claims he was drunk, and therefore can’t be held responsible for the pregnancy. The film essentially laughs off Sarah’s rape by the drunken Kabukiman after refusing to settle the abortion question, further reinforcing Laclau’s claim that a given articulation of the political needn’t be progressive as such.

What Kaufman's films understand – and show us – however, is that populism is a “political logic” that doesn't depend on a particular articulation of a politics. While *Poultrygeist* dramatizes the fight between citizens and corporations and *Citizen Toxie* focuses on the struggle surrounding abortion, *Terror Firmer* (Lloyd Kaufman, 1999) shows us the way in which a populist logic can exist outside an articulation of a particular politics. The film itself is essentially a slasher. Lloyd Kaufman plays a blind movie director trying to make what is basically a Troma film – low budget and full of gore and nudity – and in addition to navigating the usual problems of low budget production, someone is trying to kill members of the crew. The relevant scene takes place after the first death – of sound guy Todd (Gary Hrbek) – when a bumbling crew member sets off a series of slapstick mis-adventures as the anarchic crew run around chaotically causing mayhem. As the blind director, Kaufman wanders through this chaos until it reaches a fever pitch before he yells “quiet!” Though most of the shots of Kaufman's character Larry have been close-ups on his face or cane, at this point the camera cuts to a wider shot that contains Larry in the center with the crew behind him. Though he's addressing them, the joke is that he's facing the camera just as they are since he's blind. The group behind him, however, is atomized into a series of smaller groups – a lone topless woman occupies camera left, a small trio stands directly behind Larry, while camera right features a duo. Similar small groups make up the background. Though not as chaotic as the preceding moments, it's clear the crew is not working together as a well-oiled machine.

At this moment, the topless woman turns Larry around and he begins to rant at the crew – he tells the crowd he's a “director” and his emphasis is not for “bullshit artistic reasons” but because he's “been making 10 cent movies for 30 years.” To unite the crew, Larry emphasizes their difference from the “horrible world” at large before listing its problems: “Starvation,

dismemberment, torture, rape, corn-holing.” In contrast, the movie set has danger “and stupidity,” and it’s this latter quality that Larry wants to emphasize. Their shared status as film crew is what unites this disparate group. During Larry’s rant, we see a series of reverse shots that start to represent the group’s new-found unity. Instead of a wider shot of atomized individuals, the reverse shots from Larry’s rant are a series of medium shots that capture larger groups in depth. The frame is filled from left to right and in the fore and middle ground.<sup>56</sup> Though the group is not completely united at this point, visually we can see the film starting to stitch them together, especially as characters appear in multiple shots at the edge of different frames.<sup>57</sup> As Larry’s rant continues, the reverse shots go from being static to panning over the crew, further emphasizing their connection to one another. As his rant ends, the final shot of the crowd is from a similar angle as the first, but this time they’re arranged in a continuous grouping from left to right behind Larry (who now has his back appropriately to the camera). Though the main grouping is still camera right, the characters who are to the left of camera start with a cut-off figure, and no background can be glimpsed as person overlaps person visually all the way to the other side of the frame. The crowd has united behind Larry’s vision of cinema before he finally declares the film’s central cry, “Let’s go make some art!”

Art is the empty signifier that unites the film crew into a hegemonic formation that sees them de-emphasizing their differences to craft a film – perhaps this is the overall subject of *Terror Firmer*, a justification for exactly the kind of movies and movie-making that Troma has had a hand in for decades. More significantly, however, the scene demonstrates that the film

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<sup>56</sup> Here one suspects that Kaufman would have filled the background too, but the lack of both characters on the set and the ability to pay extras curtailed his Wellesian visions of true deep-focus.

<sup>57</sup> Which is also probably a nod to the film’s flagrant dis-regard for continuity, a joke the film makes explicitly at one point. This is further evidenced in this scene when characters are obviously in both shot and reverse shots in different positions.

understands how to construct a crowd into a “fictive unity” even in the absence of an overtly political impetus like corporate capitalism or abortion rights. Together, these films demonstrate that Lloyd Kaufman’s films have both a consistent emphasis on particular kinds of progressive politics and on the staging of conflicts that is political in Rancière’s sense. I hope that this complicates the “soul-crushingly obvious irony” of moments like the Starbucks-drinking crowd in *Poultrygeist*. While some of the pronouncements characters make in Troma films – like “Let’s go make some art” – might be soul-crushing in their irony, the presentation of those characters through the formal construction of the film challenges any notion that the films are themselves simple on any level.

Though Rancière and Laclau can help us articulate what is politically savvy about Troma films, Troma films also help us understand a bit more about the political, especially as Laclau formulates it. The specter that haunts Troma films is one that would ask not for revenge as Hamlet’s ghost does, but rather one that asks for consistency and coherency in the Troma canon in terms of the films’ politics. The films offer, on the one hand, an apparently clear politics that’s anti-corporate, pro-environment, etc., while on the other a series of spectacles that are gendered and designed to be offensive. As we’ve seen from Humanick’s review, this combination leads to a simultaneous inability to categorize the films (itself a political concern in Rancière’s terminology) with a concomitant inability to take the films’ politics seriously. Part of the problem turns on the question of what might be “obvious” about a politics and the way it is articulated. Put another way, how are we to take seriously the anti-corporate logic of *Poultrygeist* if it is spoken by members of an organization called C.L.A.M., itself obviously a potentially-offensive (and certainly stereotypical) reference to female genitalia. A detour through precisely

what I mean by what's "obvious" about *Poultrygeist* will help articulate what the film's more "offensive" aspects help the film (and other Troma products) achieve.

The generic architecture of *Poultrygeist* makes clear the debt it owes to other cinematic examples of the zombie, which makes Humanick's claim that "the image of countless chicken zombies overwhelming the film's fictitious food chain is a freakishly inspired and disturbing one"<sup>58</sup> an interesting one. The film takes the usual zombie-horde imagery familiar from Romero's films and offers a reinterpretation focused on the chicken-like features of the possessed fast food customers. In one memorable riff on the zombie film, Micki, her duplicity in aiding the General's plans exposed, decides that she can escape the besieged location by dressing up in the costume of the franchise's mascot. In full chicken regalia, she emerges from the door to confront a scene of the chicken-zombies milling aimlessly about. They appear like their animal counterparts, but also like the mindless, milling hordes that characterize Romero's undead – we are, in this moment, supposed to recognize them as zombie, and more specifically as zombies indebted to Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*.

As Eugene Thacker makes clear in his discussion of "living contradictions,"<sup>59</sup> which are figures (usually "monsters") that exist at the "fissure between Life and the living," and each has "an exemplary figure, an allegorical mode, a mode of manifestation, and a metaphysical principle." The zombie is the "exemplary figure" of the "living dead," and its "allegorical mode...is most often that of the uprising of the underclasses."<sup>60</sup> But what are we to make, allegorically, of the "chicken dead" of *Poultrygeist*? Adam Lowenstein's discussion of the "allegorical moment" is suggestive. As the central insight and guiding thread of his book,

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<sup>58</sup> Humanick, "*Poultrygeist*."

<sup>59</sup> Eugene Thacker, *In the Dust of This Planet* (New York: Zero Books, 2010), 93.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

*Shocking Representation*,<sup>61</sup> the allegorical moment is “a shocking collision of film, spectator, and history where registers of bodily space and historical time are disrupted, confronted, and intertwined.”<sup>62</sup> Such moments disrupt calcified understandings of meaning and priority, allowing for the recognition of the past in the present. Here “shocking representations” takes on a double valence, for the “allegorical moment” is both present in representations that shock us, but also there when our typical understandings of what constitutes “representation” are “shocked” by something else. The concept is indebted to Walter Benjamin’s discussion of allegory and “historical materialism,” where shocking representations are aligned with the latter. Historical materialism “blasts open the continuum of history”<sup>63</sup> and produces “*Jetztzeit*,” which is “an instant in which an image of the past sparks a flash of unexpected recognition in the present.”<sup>64</sup> Lowenstein stresses Benjamin’s emphasis on the way in which *Jetztzeit* is “potentially dangerous”<sup>65</sup> because it is “vulnerable to appropriation by those who wish to manipulate history to oppressive ends.”<sup>66</sup> In either case, the “shock” of *Jetztzeit* can also be the shock of cinema, where a film’s combination of past and present (past *in* present) has the power to “blast open” our understanding of history, allowing for new insights into historical situations (especially historical traumas).

Lowenstein is of course right to point out that an allegory is a “speaking otherwise” – “from the Greek *allos* (‘other’) and –agorein (‘to speak publicly’)”<sup>67</sup> – but perhaps under-discussed is the way in which to encounter an allegorical moment, to be open to *Jetztzeit*, is also

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<sup>61</sup> Adam Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Memory, and the Modern Horror Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>63</sup> Benjamin, quoted in Lowenstein, 13.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.



to *read* otherwise. Though obviously some fictions are created as explicit allegories of particular moments or beliefs, other allegories are as much the product of reading as they are of writing. Thus, the allegorical moment, if it is to be recognized, must be founded on an ambiguity – there is a “flash” of recognition that one may “seize,” but that flash is always temporary and contingent. More importantly, it is also open to mis-recognition, either from ignorance (I know nothing about Vietnam, and therefore the allegory of *Last House on the Left* [Wes Craven, 1972]<sup>68</sup> is lost on me) or appropriation (as Lowenstein notes, even the most “blasted” moments are open to reincorporation into the rationalist, teleological narrative of historians). In either case, ambiguity is central to the possibility of allegory – thus a film like *Platoon* (Oliver Stone, 1986), which is explicitly and unambiguously “about”<sup>69</sup> Vietnam, cannot be an allegory for that conflict, while *Last House on the Left*, absolutely can.

Which returns us to *Poultrygeist*. In *Shocking Representation*, Lowenstein specifically addresses the allegorical potential of the zombie in the work of George Romero and David Cronenberg, drawing a connection between the use of the figure in each director’s work. *Poultrygeist* features a similar engagement with the zombie, though quite differently from either Romero or Cronenberg. Though Lowenstein doesn’t specifically address it, both films feature scenes of otherwise typical outdoor locations into which a zombie or zombies intrude. It happens most famously in the opening graveyard scene in *Night*, where the lone zombie appears in the background of the otherwise idyllic rural graveyard,<sup>70</sup> and in *Shivers* (1975) when a shot of the

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<sup>68</sup> See Chapter 4 of *Shocking Representation*, where Lowenstein addresses *Last House on the Left* as an allegory for U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

<sup>69</sup> Though it is about other things, and may be an allegory for subjects other than Vietnam.

<sup>70</sup> Though the scene(s) that most closely resemble those in *Poultrygeist* are those in which the beleaguered denizens of the farmhouse look and/or venture out in the darkness, attempting to discern or evade zombies. As the film continues, the number of zombies outside the farmhouse increases, leading to a scene similar to the one under discussion here.

outside of Starliner Towers is interrupted by a mass of parasite-infested inhabitants converging on the pool where protagonist Roger St. Luc (Paul Hampton) will be turned. It is the presence of a similar scene in *Poultrygeist* that offers us a way to read the film that follows from Lowenstein's analysis of the relationship between *Night* and *Shivers*. The previously mentioned attempt by Micki to elude the zombies by dressing like a chicken calls to mind the same kind of infested landscape. Though we recognize these zombies as indebted to Romero, something else is also happening in this scene. If the film is treading on Romero's allegorical ground, it should, on some level, crystalize the film's sociopolitical concerns as a fast food mascot hides a turn-coat lesbian from zombies possessed by the spirits of Native Americans on top of whom the franchise has been built. Instead, the film offers us a number of shots of Micki in costume approaching her intended getaway car, but instead of offering viewers the opportunity to experience the "shock" of recognition, pulls a bait-and-switch – we are primed to understand these as Romero-style zombies with some extra feathers, but the film does nothing with the allusion.<sup>71</sup> To end the scene, the crowd of zombies parts briefly and instead of another zombie, the Native American (Martin Victor) – who'd previously appeared in a drunken haze to "bless" the Chicken Bunker franchise during the General's musical defense of the location – appears, causing Micki to scream.

What's notable about this scene is not the connection to Romero's zombie films and their (sometimes excessive) sociopolitical commentary/allegory. Instead, it's the way in which we, as viewers, are not allowed to draw conclusions about the scene because *Poultrygeist* is already there ahead of us, forestalling an allegorical moment by beating us about the head with an over-

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<sup>71</sup> And, I should probably note here, the "mythology" of the film's zombies isn't entirely clear – people get infected from both the consumption of the tainted food, but also when they get bitten. This perhaps makes the "chicken zombies" something other than the living dead as such.

determined reading of the possession of the chicken-zombie hordes. Logically, we can't prove a negative, and so can't say that there is no allegorical moment in the film. However, if we grant the allegorical as a contingent moment of reading/recognition, then *Poultrygeist* does its best to ensure that we can't read the film any other way – the chicken-zombies are caused by the continued desecration of sacred ground by corporate capital, a replaying of the American abuses against native peoples stretching back to before the founding of the country. There is no “flash” of recognition because we already know this – the film is happy to motivate its plot this way, but it doesn't reach for its political significance or commentary from there. Or, to put it another way, this moment, where a (drunken) Native American shows up to scare Micki, is an instance of what Humanick means when he refers to the film's “soul-crushingly obvious irony.” But it's precisely the obvious – what's “in the way”<sup>72</sup> – that leads us to consider what else the film is doing. Unlike allegorical films in the vein of *Night of the Living Dead*, *Poultrygeist* finds its significance not in a flash of recognition where the past and present intermingle, but rather in the way that the film constructs the possibilities of political action through a reconfiguration of what's possible as an aesthetic experience, as we have seen. Because *Poultrygeist* and with it other Troma films, insist so strongly on a particular understanding of their politics, the film is paradoxically able to range further in the kinds of political gestures it makes.

Central to these political gestures is an understanding of contingency. Both the inconsistency and incoherence of Troma films, I would argue, are a direct reflection of the films' engagement with the political. Specifically, they reveal the contingency that animates any particular politics or organization of the political. Whether we're talking about abortion or

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<sup>72</sup> Obvious, from the Latin for “in” (ob) and “the way” (via). “obvious” *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (Oxford University Press, 2014), <http://www.oed.com.pitt.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/130096?redirectedFrom=obvious#eid>

corporate capitalism, the existing state of affairs could always be otherwise, and as we've seen, Troma films often document the attempt to change that state of affairs through an intervention into "the visible and sayable;" that is the political. Though Laclau gestures towards contingency in his discussion of populism – it is delicate, ephemeral, temporal – it doesn't take a central role in his emphasis on similarity in the face of the empty signifier. In his essay "Ethics, Politics, and Radical Democracy – the History of a Disagreement," Simon Critchley notes this lacuna in Laclau's formulation. He understands a hegemonic formulation as "a non-naturalisable, non-essentialistic, contingent articulation that just temporarily fixes [the] meaning of social relations."<sup>73</sup> That's all well and good, but if so, then all societies are "tacitly hegemonic" because all societies have some fixity of social relations in place. Here Critchley introduces a slight wrinkle, arguing for democratic societies as those that are "self-conscious of their political status, their contingency and their power relations."<sup>74</sup> So, if all societies are "tacitly hegemonic," we should distinguish the (good) democratic societies as those that are "explicitly hegemonic." Or, as Critchley defines democracy, as "the name for that political form of society that makes explicit the contingency of its foundations and operations."<sup>75</sup> And though he doesn't cite Rancière at all, we should be reminded that for Rancière, the democratic is also the good object of politics, and it is precisely the question of how democracy emerges that allows Laclau's critique of Rancière. Here Laclau himself is supplemented by Critchley's formulation, which distinguishes good and bad hegemony not on the political content as such, but on the question of whether any particular hegemonic formulation works to simultaneously accomplish its aim

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<sup>73</sup> Simon Critchley, "Ethics, Politics and Radical Democracy - The History of a Disagreement," *Cultural Machine* no 4 (2002). <http://www.culturemachine.net/index.php/cm/article/view/267/252>.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

(fixing a particular set of social relations) while also revealing the contingency of that aim and its accomplishment.

This, I would argue, accounts for the incoherence and inconsistency of Troma film. Yes, they provide us with a representation of a particular engagement with the political through *dissensus* and the organization of crowds, but throughout such moments they keep alive the notion of contingency that undergirds the particular hegemonic formations that we see articulated. It's not that a progressive politics is at odds with rampant nudity and gore. Rather, rampant nudity and gore reminds us that the articulation of what is progressive is always relative. We need both to ensure that something political gets accomplished but that a particular social formation doesn't get accepted as natural, thus arresting any possibility of progress as such.

#### 4.0 “CHAOS REIGNS”: ANARCHIC META-POLITICS IN LARS VON TRIER

As we have seen, *dissensus* is the key term for Jacques Rancière’s political philosophy. Whether perusing Rancière’s own work or the secondary literature, it’s obvious that *dissensus* occupies a privileged place, with various authors claiming evidence of *dissensus* in various public demonstrations or works of art.<sup>1</sup> Comparatively less attention has been given to Rancière’s elaboration of the “opposite” of *dissensus*: the police order. As with many examples, my own previous chapter largely used “the police” to place *dissensus* in relief rather than casting it as its own object of inquiry. Though perhaps a necessary rhetorical gesture, this approach limits our understanding of the police and posits *dissensual* democracy as the only oppositional possibility when confronted with the police order. There are, however, other options. But first, recall Rancière’s definition of the police from “10 Theses on the Political”:

The essence of the police lies in a partition of the sensible that is characterized by the absence of void and of supplement: society here is made up of groups tied to specific modes of doing, to places in which these occupations are exercised, and to modes of being corresponding to these occupations and these places.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Davide Panagia’s *The Political Life of Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), especially the chapter where he argues that a particular group of chocolatiers engages in a *dissensual* act by making artisanal chocolate in public to protest new regulations that would seek to define chocolate as a mass-produced object.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Rancière, “10 Theses on the Political” *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 36.

Rancière presents a “business as usual,” status quo-oriented understanding of the police order, wherein everything has a place and is placed into it.

Lars von Trier’s *Dogville* (2003) offers us the most potent cinematic representation of the police order. The story, set in a small Rocky Mountain community in 1932, is fairly simple. Grace (Nicole Kidman) appears in an insular town during the Depression. Her appearance is miraculous enough in itself given how out-of-the-way Dogville is, but the town’s resident “philosopher” Tom (Paul Bettany) decides that she will provide the perfect object lesson for the point he has been trying to make to the citizens of Dogville, namely that they are not open or accepting enough. For Tom, Grace provides the perfect opportunity for the residents to either practice their openness or admit to their deficiency. The fact that Grace is both mysterious and wanted by someone outside the town makes her threatening. Tom gets the townsfolk to agree to a two-week “test,” and after this period the townsfolk will vote on whether to let Grace continue to shelter in Dogville. Tom urges Grace to ingratiate herself with the townsfolk by spending an hour a day with each of them, which she does. Though I won’t elaborate on every character and their occupation, it is clear from the film that every citizen of Dogville has their own place and an occupation tied to that place.<sup>3</sup> Chuck (Stellan Skarsgård), for instance, is in charge of the apple orchard, and it is there that Grace assists him. Though Grace initially receives a fairly warm welcome, with most of the citizens happy to accept her help and eventually vote for her to stay, she never becomes a full citizen of the town. She’s given a small shed to live in, but no occupation of her own. When “missing” and then “wanted” posters are placed in the town by law enforcement, the townsfolk continue to agree to shelter Grace, but at increasing personal cost to

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<sup>3</sup> “Occupation” is chosen deliberately, as not all of Dogville’s citizen’s “work” but all are engaged in some activity that occupies their time, even if it’s sitting around as is the case with the blind Jack (Ben Gazzara)

her. The paltry wages she has earned are curtailed and she is asked to work more for those wages.<sup>4</sup> Because of the precarity of Grace's situation, she is subject to the whims of the citizens of Dogville. First, a young boy urges Grace to spank him, and then she is sexually assaulted by several members of the town. Tellingly, the unseen narrator (John Hurt) informs us that these assaults "couldn't really be compared to a sexual act. They were embarrassing in the way it is when a hillbilly has his way with the cow." This is obviously not a kind analysis of the citizens of Dogville, but it denies Grace even her personhood. Eventually, Tom turns Grace in and it is revealed that she has been running from her father, a gangster (James Caan), who offers Grace the chance to come home and be his daughter, with all the attendant power that being a gangster's daughter grants her. She elects to accept his offer, using the power to burn Dogville to the ground, and killing Tom herself.

Dogville, in Rancière's terminology, is an ideal police order. It has neither void (initially none of the citizens can think of anything for Grace to do, so perfect are they in their occupations), or supplement (there is nothing extra in Dogville, down to the *mise-en-scène*, to which we will return). Because Grace is never given a place, an occupation that could be tied to that place and which would therefore imply a "mode of being," she is forever circulating through the town (recall, also, that for Rancière one of the functions of the police is to ensure that spaces of circulation stay spaces of circulation and don't become places for "demonstration"). Grace is therefore denied citizenship, and by the time she is assaulted she is even denied personhood. Von Trier reinforces this schematic sense of the town and its spaces by filming *Dogville* in the style of a black box theater. Shot on a sound stage, the film doesn't feature traditional scenery.

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<sup>4</sup> In this respect, *Dogville* feels less a commentary on U.S. politics circa 2003 (a point to which we'll return) than a prescient commentary on adjunctification/precarity (in higher ed, perhaps, but all-over the 21<sup>st</sup> century economy).



Instead, the “buildings” of the town are implied by chalk outlines on the floor, each of them labelled. The actors behave as if these buildings were solid, and sonic details (the knock on a door) accompany actions that have no material correspondence. Even the *mise-en-scène* conspires against Grace, and though chalk on the ground seems mutable, there is no sense that the characters realize they aren’t surrounded by buildings they could run into. Thus is a particular order in the town maintained both inside and outside the diegesis.

It’s easy to imagine a different, *dissensual Dogville*, one in which the citizens of the town open their lives up to the stranger among them. One where Grace contributes to the community not as a slave, but by finding an occupation of her own. When the representatives of law enforcement or the gangsters return to town, a moment of *dissensus* could be represented, where Grace becomes not the supplementary stranger but instead the symbol of the community.<sup>5</sup> Even with the experimental *mise-en-scène*, it’s not difficult to conjure a scene where the townsfolk each admit to being Grace, saving her from a life of gangsterism. Instead, *Dogville* offers us an uncompromising image of the police order and precisely how easy it is for the police order to devolve into tyranny. Even before Grace’s vengeful reckoning, the film offers a potent image of this order, and arguable very little in the way of critique.

This perfect image of the police perhaps explains why Rancière himself is not too keen on the film, and in “The Ethical Turn in Aesthetics and Politics” the film offers a bad object for Rancière’s analysis of the “ethical turn.” Rancière’s objections to *Dogville* take two forms: the first objection is to what the film depicts, the second to how it depicts it. In the case of the

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<sup>5</sup> Here I am reminded of those stories that circulated about the Danish all adopting yellow stars as an attempt to foil Nazi plans to separate Jews for extermination. Though unfounded, these stories are properly *dissensual*, as the “supplementary” Jewish population becomes identified with the whole of Denmark. See Leon Uris’ *Exodus*.

former, Rancière uses *Dogville* as the bad object opposed to the good object of Bertolt Brecht's *St. Joan of the Stockyards*.<sup>6</sup> In Brecht's play, Joan is a volunteer for the "Black Straw Hats," and attempts to improve the lives of stockyard workers in 20<sup>th</sup> century Chicago. She is, as Rancière notes, "portrayed as one who would instill Christian morality in the capitalist jungle."<sup>7</sup> The moral of Brecht's fable, according to Rancière at least, is "that Christian morality was ineffective in the fight against the violence of the economic order."<sup>8</sup> Though Rancière is not explicit about the parallels between *St. Joan* and *Dogville*, it's obvious that both concern young women who enter into a community and find it transformed before them. In both cases the outcome is tragic: in *Dogville* the community is destroyed from without, while in *St. Joan* the title character is martyred by the power she attempts to oppose. But it is in the failure of these parallels to align sufficiently that Rancière finds failing with *Dogville*. What *St. Joan* shows us is how "Christian morality" must "be transformed into a militant morality that took as its criterion the necessities of the struggle against oppression."<sup>9</sup> By showing us this opposition, Brecht is showing us politics, and according to Rancière, the play is a "fable about politics to demonstrate the impossibility of mediating between these two rights and these two types of violence." So Brecht is praised for showing the incompatibility of Christian morality and capitalism. *Dogville*, much to Rancière's consternation, refuses any kind of opposition between two (or more) different kinds of interests, rights, or even violences. Instead, "[t]he evil that Grace encounters in *Dogville*...refers to no other cause but itself."<sup>10</sup> For Rancière this is a problem, as the "tale of suffering and disillusionment does not stem from any system of domination that might be

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<sup>6</sup> *Die Heilige Johanna der Schlachthöfe* (1931).

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Rancière, "The Ethical Turn of Aesthetics and Politics." *Dissensus*, 185.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

understood and abolished.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, if we take *Dogville* as a fable in the same way we take *St. Joan* as a fable, the lesson of von Trier’s film is that “Only evil repays evil” because “the only fitting retribution against [the] community can be its radical annihilation”<sup>12</sup> by the gangsters commanded by Grace’s father.

Rancière’s other objection takes a similar form, but instead of opposing Brecht and von Trier, he opposes *Dogville* to *Mystic River* (Clint Eastwood, 2003). For Rancière, “*Dogville* is the transposition of a theatrical and political fable. *Mystic River* is a transformation of a cinematographic and moral fable.”<sup>13</sup> *Mystic River* – which tells the tale of a trio of childhood friends who investigate the murder of one of their daughters while hiding the terrible secret of childhood trauma done to one of them – is not about the opposition between good and evil. Rancière rightly notes that the film makes evil permeating: “evil, with its innocent and guilty parties, has been turned into the trauma which knows of neither innocence nor guilt, which lies in a zone of indistinction between guilt and innocence, between psychic disturbance and social unrest.”<sup>14</sup> What *Mystic River* captures, then, is the chain of trauma that perpetuates itself in a cycle, and Rancière links this to earlier forms. In the film we “recognize the shift from the intrigue of Oedipal knowledge to the irreducible division of knowledge and law symbolized by another great literary figure...Antigone.”<sup>15</sup> It is Antigone, Rancière tells us, who comes not to herald democracy but instead (following Lacan) “is the terrorist, the witness of the secret terror that underlies the social order.” And so the traumatized child in *Mystic River* grows up to be the

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<sup>11</sup> Which may, before I become too harsh towards Rancière, demonstrate that for all his Danish blood, Lars Von Trier understands something of the affect of small town American life in a way that Rancière simply doesn’t.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* I note with a certain amount of irony that *Dogville* is only loosely an adaptation (or “transposition”) of Brecht’s play, as it is not listed in the credits. In contrast, *Mystic River* is an explicit adaptation of a novel.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

maladjusted man, the one who confronts the audience with the “secret terror” behind the social order of the film (with its police investigations and courts). Rancière uses this discussion as a platform to describe *dissensus* once again, this time in the context of the so-called “ethical turn,” though he sadly pays little attention to the actual “cinematographic” details of *Mystic River* or *Dogville*.

Not so the critics who wish to rescue *Dogville* from Rancière’s criticism. Though he doesn’t do so explicitly, Angelos Koutsourakis’ *Politics as Form in Lars Von Trier* offers a particularly (post-)Brechtian defense of von Trier’s work in general and *Dogville* in particular. Koutsourakis is generally sympathetic to Rancière’s discussion of *dissensus*, though he readily acknowledges Rancière’s own “reservations towards *Dogville*.”<sup>16</sup> It is in fact through von Trier’s Brechtianism and commitment to the art house that puts him in a continuum with the *dissensual* artists so favored by Rancière (among them “Brecht, Rossellini, Godard, and Straub/Huillet”).<sup>17</sup> More explicitly, he claims “von Trier’s films build upon the ‘dissensual’ politics of the art cinema of the past so as to challenge the politics of perception.”<sup>18</sup> Part of challenging these “politics of perception” is to resist “the commodification of the medium.”<sup>19</sup> Here Brecht is the example *par excellence*, because he understood “experimental thinking as a means of changing a medium’s function.”<sup>20</sup> Though we don’t want to get lost in the Brechtian weeds, Koutsourakis is also careful to point out that the focus – for Brecht as for von Trier – is as much on the audience as the medium: “What is also a Brechtian gesture *tout court* is the synthesis of materials from

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<sup>16</sup> Angelos Koutsourakis, *Politics as Form in Lars Von Trier: A Post-Brechtian Reading* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 90.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

different media as a means of encouraging a more productive spectatorship.”<sup>21</sup> According to this reading, von Trier’s cinema is a cinema of pedagogy,<sup>22</sup> and his particular form of pedagogy is concerned with experimentation. This is evident in both the formal elements (especially the *mise-en-scène*) and within the film’s narrative as Tom and Grace “experiment” on the denizens of Dogville. These experiments “raise contradictions that do not solidify to a concrete resolution.”<sup>23</sup> For Koutsourakis, then, “the central question posed by the film’s experiment is whether the overcoming of social oppression can be brought about by those in power.”<sup>24</sup> This leads Koutsourakis back to Brecht, who was fond of “the negative example,” which “refers to the predilection for including within an argument something which is heterogeneous to it, so as to stimulate responses that provoke dialectical questions.”<sup>25</sup> So while Rancière would claim that *Dogville* is too concerned with evil,<sup>26</sup> Koutsourakis claims that the portrayal of evil exists only to provoke a kind of dialectical response that will allow spectators the perceptual distance to reach their own conclusions about Dogville and its citizens.

Similarly, though more explicitly, Paul Apostolidis wants to rescue *Dogville* from Rancière’s analysis, finding in the film some measure of political possibility. The way out is the way through for him, as “‘Young Americans:’ Rancière and Bowie in *Dogville*”<sup>27</sup> doubles down on Rancière’s analysis. He grants that “Rancière’s brief treatment of *Dogville* offers valuable

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> A subtitle of a chapter on *Dogville* and *Manderlay* (von Trier, 2005) is explicit: “Cinema as Pedagogy.”

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>26</sup> Which, if it wasn’t clear, is connected in his mind to George W. Bush, the War on Terror, and justifying the fight against “infinite evil.”

<sup>27</sup> Paul Apostolidis, “‘Young Americans:’ Rancière and Bowie in *Dogville*,” *Theory & Event* 18, no 2 (2015). No pagination.

insight into the film's relation to its political-cultural context,"<sup>28</sup> before embarking on his attempt to "explore in greater depth than does Rancière how the film both records and threatens to reinforce the invidious binary between humanitarian idealism and the military aggressions and control-technologies of the security-obsessed nation-state."<sup>29</sup> Moreover, *Dogville* is "just what Rancière says it is: a bleak representation of the dualistically-shaped ethics in which leading public discourses today implicate the citizen-protectors of the national security state and its victims, alike."<sup>30</sup> Though Rancière condemns the film for precisely this reason, Apostolidis looks harder to redeem the film, finding in the film "a critical alternative, subtly suggesting that the persistence of this depoliticized, hypocritically moralistic, and exorbitantly violent socio-historical condition is not inevitable."<sup>31</sup> Through the cinematic techniques – that Apostolidis is right to point out that Rancière ignores in his zeal to write off the film as a piece of Brechtian theater rather than a cinematic object – "Von Trier's film draws attention to these tactics through a logic of negativity that allows viewers only tenuous and fleeting glimpses of such political possibilities but nonetheless ensures that they are palpably present at key moments."<sup>32</sup> More specifically, the film's use of David Bowie's "Young Americans" over the closing-credits montage of images of poverty and privation, "helps us tease out of *Dogville* a counter-hegemonic politics of style that Rancière neglects."<sup>33</sup>

There are no doubt other approaches to *Dogville*, but Rancière and his critics offer a fairly consistent understanding of what the film tries (and fails) to do. Together, they demonstrate that the film is saying something about the relationship between ethics and politics,

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

and that its “bleak” outlook is an essential part of that statement. However, I want to argue for an understanding of *Dogville* that goes significantly beyond those developed by these other thinkers. For them, the film shows us an ugly world that leads us to some conclusions about the extra-diegetic world we inhabit. Whether we think (like Rancière) that this ugliness has a pernicious effect, or (like Koutsourakis and Apostolidis) that the film may be “rescued” from these charges if only we read it in a particular way, these interpretations are locked into a particular understanding of the relation between art and the political. For each of these thinkers, the film shows us something “bad” and then “works through” that badness in some way. For Rancière, the film works through by presenting us no alternative to the evil, reinforcing a kind of moralism. For Koutsourakis and Apostolidis the film shows us a world in which evil is done but in which it is not a necessary evil – if we only look closely enough and with sufficient attention, we as viewers will recognize the politically progressive possibilities that may arise from even the vilest of situations.

In contrast, I want to return to the notion of *Dogville* as a representation of the police order to argue that the film does what it sets out to do – however bleak – and doesn’t require any “pedagogical” or “counter-hegemonic” recuperation. Put simply, *Dogville* illuminates the lacuna in Rancière’s conception of the political. Recall that for Rancière, the properly political (*dissensual* democracy) is a moment in which some un-represented portion of the populace becomes identified with the “whole of the community.”<sup>34</sup> After this moment, arguments about a particular set of politics – the rights of workers to take an example from *Dogville* – are able to be heard and understood once the community has been identified with this previously-ignored part of the community, the worker. What’s missing from this discussion of the political, however, is a

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<sup>34</sup> Rancière, “10 Theses,” 36.

clear sense of who constitutes the community. Rancière locates the origins of democracy in Plato, where democracy becomes “the specific situation in which it is the absence of entitlement that entitles one to exercise the *arkhè*.”<sup>35</sup> Such an analysis suggests the community is defined by Plato’s concern with the city-state, and thus the *polis*, the root word of *politics*, making the community synonymous with the city. Internally, this is logically consistent and Rancière<sup>36</sup> has amply documented instances where *dissensus* has altered the political landscape. However, much like the lack of focus on the police in favor of *dissensus*, there has been little analysis of what it means for *dissensus* to fail. Put another way, if the community (and the identification of the people and the populace in *dissensus*) is porous, then we have little reason to imagine that *dissensus* will be able to effect change – those in power can simply move the goalposts, arguing for a different constitution of the community that nevertheless denies the *dissensual* claims of the uncounted.

Which returns us to *Dogville*. In contrast to Rancière, I would argue that the film is not showing us the impossible choice of one evil or another. Rather, the film critiques parochialism<sup>37</sup> by showing us that the bounds of the community – who and what counts in it – are not fixed. Though the denizens of Dogville imagine their political landscape secure, and are thus able to treat Grace with impunity, the arrival of The Big Man and his gunmen shatters the political order. Rancière would have us believe this is a function of violence, and the justification of violence in fighting evil, but the violence is ultimately less significant than its source. Grace could have burned down the town herself, but she requires the help of those outside the

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 32. Also note Rancière’s later reference to what “gave rise to Athenian democracy,” bolstering his focus on the city-state.

<sup>36</sup> And others – see especially Panagia’s *The Political Life of Sensation*, where he provides numerous examples of *dissensual* encounters.

<sup>37</sup> Which many reviews mistake for anti-Americanism. Perhaps the film is anti-American, but only insofar as America under George W. Bush was seen as parochial.



community to accomplish the task. The lesson of the film, then, is that any community has an outside, and this exteriority makes the community vulnerable. Even if we imagined a perfectly *dissensual* community that embraced Grace and treated her well, that would be no defense against the power *outside* Dogville. Rather than an “evil vs. evil” deathmatch, the film suggests to us that no power is absolute, and the ability to resist it need not rest in *dissensus*.

All three of the critiques we’ve seen are right, however, to note the ways in which *Dogville* seems to be making a point about the relation between ethics and politics. Koutsourakis argues that the film evacuates the ethical in favor of a representation of (Brechtian) politics, while Rancière and Apostolidis see the film as symptomatic of a turn away from politics to an ethics that “amounts to the dissolution of the norm into the fact.”<sup>38</sup> Because of this dissolution, *dissensus* has no room to grow, and so our contemporary moment (epitomized by *Dogville*) is one where politics is absent in favor of a kind of “that’s the way it is” mentality. I too want to argue for a particular relationship between ethics and politics in *Dogville*, and will use that discussion to launch a larger argument about von Trier’s more recent work as a working through of the relationship between ethics and politics through violence. *Dogville*, however, represents for me an enactment of what philosopher Simon Critchley has dubbed “the motivational deficit at the heart of liberal democracy.”<sup>39</sup>

In *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*, Critchley outlines his conception of ethics and its relation to politics via the idea of “motivational deficit.”<sup>40</sup>

Critchley opens the book with a claim that likely resonates with von Trier: “Philosophy begins in

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<sup>38</sup> Rancière, “Ethical Turn,” 184.

<sup>39</sup> Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (London: Verso, 2013), 39.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

disappointment.”<sup>41</sup> He identifies two flavors of disappointment: religious and political. The former arises when we discover there is no concrete evidence for faith, that the religious project is without ground.<sup>42</sup> This forces us to ask after “the meaning of life.”<sup>43</sup> In the latter case, we similarly look around and find that there is no ground beneath our concepts of justice. They are not only without an ultimate authority, but seem to have little empirical verification in a world filled with injustice. This situation “provokes the question of justice: what might justice be in a violently unjust world?”<sup>44</sup> To address questions of political disappointment, Critchley detours through the question of meaninglessness that arises from religious disappointment. This religious disappointment leads, in Critchley’s reading, to nihilism, and moreover to two different kinds of nihilism: passive and active. For Critchley, “the passive nihilist looks at the world from a certain distance, and finds it meaningless,” and “[r]ather than acting in the world and trying to transform it, the passive nihilist simply focuses on himself and his particular pleasures and projects for perfecting himself.”<sup>45</sup> In contrast, “[t]he active nihilist also finds everything meaningless, but instead of sitting back and contemplating, he tries to destroy this world and bring another into being.”<sup>46</sup>

In the world of *Dogville*, freight driver Ben is the avatar of the passive nihilist. His peripatetic occupation keeps him from being too deeply involved in the politics of Dogville, and when Grace (and Tom) conspire to smuggle Grace away from Dogville in his truck, Ben reneges on their deal. He argues for himself and his own pleasure, telling Grace that in the freight business dangerous cargo earns a “surcharge” and reminding Grace that she said there were few

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>42</sup> Or once we discover “to coin a phrase, God is dead.” Ibid., 2.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 3

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 5.

“pleasures” in his life. For Ben, the surcharge is access to Grace’s body, and he rapes her among Chuck’s apples. Active nihilism, however, is represented by The Big Man, Grace’s father, who appears in the film’s final chapter. In urging his daughter to rejoin him in the family enterprise of crime, The Big Man tries to convince Grace that the citizens of Dogville (and indeed, by extension, anyone outside their lawless circle) are unworthy, saying “Rapists and murders may be the victims according to you, but I, I call them dogs. And if they’re lapping up their own vomit, the only way to stop them is with a lash.” Moreover, when Grace objects, he continues: “Dogs can be taught many useful things, but not if we forgive them every time they obey their own nature.” Nature, according to the Big Man is meaningless. Instead, he substitutes a world of violent transformation, offering “the lash” to all who offend. He eventually wins Grace over, and with her new-found power to control her father’s henchmen, she violently remakes the town of Dogville to bring her own world of crime. It is this apparent victory for active nihilism that likely causes Rancière to condemn the film, finding in the triumph of active nihilism a parallel to the then-current situation between George W. Bush, al-Qaeda, and the Iraq War.<sup>47</sup>

It is al-Qaeda that provides the perfect contemporary account of active nihilism, and one that allows Critchley to form a bridge from religious disappointment to political disappointment on his way towards a description of ethics. Critchley is clear about their active nihilism: “The legitimating logic of al-Qaeda is that the modern world, the world of capitalism, liberal democracy and secular humanism, is meaningless and that the only way to remake meaning is through acts of spectacular destruction.”<sup>48</sup> Critchley links the organization to other “extreme

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<sup>47</sup> See Apostolidis as well, as he goes into greater detail about the film’s historical context than Rancière does, with an eye towards bolstering Rancière’s account.

<sup>48</sup> Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 5.

revolutionary vanguards”<sup>49</sup> like those advocated by Lenin, Mao, and Baader-Meinhof. It is not the case, however, that Critchley admires or even sympathizes with radical Islam. Instead, he argues “we have to recognize the force of al-Qaeda’s position and their diagnosis of the present.”<sup>50</sup> Which is to say that they find the current world meaningless and attempt to reinvest the world with meaning through violence. Al-Qaeda is important, but less so than the light they throw on their opposite number, “secular liberal democracy,”<sup>51</sup> and it is here that Critchley finds that such structures “do not sufficiently motivate their citizens.”<sup>52</sup> Later, he is even more forceful: “there is a motivational deficit at the heart of liberal democratic life, where citizens experience the governmental norms that rule contemporary society as externally binding but not internally compelling.”<sup>53</sup> Al-Qaeda, whatever one thinks of its political content, does an effective job of motivating (at least some) of its followers, through what Critchley calls “frameworks of belief that call [the] secular project into question.” In other words, there is something very powerful about appeals to a metaphysical or theological framework.

Crucially, at this point Critchley laments what he sees as the “metaphysical or theological symmetry between George W. Bush and Osama bin Laden.”<sup>54</sup> Though the content of their arguments differ, both leaders share a common form – “My God said we should rid the world of non-believers”<sup>55</sup> that is legitimated by an appeal outside the secular frame. This argument should sound familiar, as it is very similar to the one that Rancière makes about *Dogville*. For him, the

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Depending on how far down the rabbit hole one wants to go, non-believers in this context might include non-Christians on the side of Bush, or if we want to stick with avowed secularism, then non-believer becomes “one who doesn’t believe in secular liberal democracy.” In either case, it’s a war of believers and non-believers.

film justifies this theological/metaphysical contest by depicting “infinite evil” and therefore endorsing “infinite justice.” Though Rancière doesn’t explicitly link *Dogville* to a theological framework, his discussion of the “infinite” implies an appeal to a metaphysical absolute that shares a structure with the theological, at least in the terms under discussion here. Returning to *Dogville*, we can see that beyond passive (Dogville’s citizens) and active (The Big Man and his gangsters) nihilism, *Dogville*’s melding of ethics and politics concerns precisely the question of the “motivational deficit.” We see this most explicitly when Tom enumerates the citizens for Grace, describing their occupations and their foibles. The final pair – Ma Ginger and Gloria – run the country store, “where they exploit the fact that nobody leaves town” as an excuse for their high prices. This leads Tom to note “We used to leave to go vote, but since they put in the registration fee... Dogville didn’t feel the democratic need anymore.” Politically, this is precisely what Critchley refers to as the “motivational deficit at the heart of liberal democracy” – the citizens of Dogville consider themselves American and the laws of America to be “externally binding” but feel no internal compulsion to be involved with democracy. This motivational deficit is not simply political in *Dogville*. Rather, Grace’s fortunes make it clear that the citizens of Dogville have some conception of the good, but refuse to apply it to Grace. We can see this in everything from Ben’s attempts to justify his rape of Grace, to the way that both Chuck and Tom admit their faults at various points in the story. But whatever conception they have of the good is not compelling enough – they are not ethical enough – to follow through on that good by treating Grace with the same dignity they reserve for their fellow citizens.

The film, then, is about the imbrication of ethics and politics, but not in the dour way that Rancière would have us believe. Instead, the film is a diagnosis, and it would take von Trier’s

grouping, the Depression Trilogy<sup>56</sup> of *Antichrist* (2009), *Melancholia* (2011) and *Nymphomaniac* (2013)<sup>57</sup> to fully explore the implications of this diagnosis. The question of motivational deficit leads von Trier and Critchley on different but related trajectories. The remainder of *Infinitely Demanding* is concerned with outlining an “empowering conception of ethics that can face and face down the drift of the present, an ethics that is able to respond to and resist the political situation in which we find ourselves.”<sup>58</sup> This process starts, for Critchley, with a description of “ethical experience,” which “furnishes an account of the motivational force to act morally, of that by virtue of which the self decides to pledge itself to some conception of the good.”<sup>59</sup> Central to such an account is an “ethical subject,” which is “the name for the way in which a self binds itself to some conception of the good.”<sup>60</sup> Such an ethical subjectivity leads us back to conscience. For Critchley, “the experience of conscience is that of an essentially divided self, an originally inauthentic humorous self that can never attain the autarchy of self-mastery,”<sup>61</sup> and immediately makes us question “what is the link between conscience and political action.”<sup>62</sup> Through a detour with Laclau’s conception of hegemony, Critchley argues that “at the heart of a radical politics there has to be what I call a meta-political ethical moment that provides the motivational force or propulsion into political action.”<sup>63</sup> As we will see, the relationship between ethics and politics plays out in von Trier’s later work as well.

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<sup>56</sup> Here we should note that *Dogville* is the first in an intended trilogy dubbed “USA: Land of Opportunity.” Von Trier completed the second film (*Manderlay*), but at the moment the trilogy is incomplete. After *Manderlay*, von Trier directed a non-trilogy feature and a segment of an anthology film

<sup>57</sup> For a number of reasons, *Nymphomaniac* was released in two parts – *Volume 1* and *Volume 2* – though there are numerous indications that von Trier’s sees them as a single film.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

At the moment, however, it is worth pausing on some of the details of Critchley's argument as they will help us limn the details of von Trier's particular expression of the political in the "Depression" trilogy. Most important is Critchley's structure of ethical experience – that it consists of a demand that is approved, and this demand (at least partially) demands approval (it can demand other things as well), and that we cannot, for a variety of reasons, assume either demand or approval is prior to the other. For this reason we need a notion of the ethical subject that is capable of approving a demand and is in some way constituted by its approval of a demand, a demand for approval (it is, as Critchley suggests, "virtuously"<sup>64</sup> circular). This idea of the subject must necessarily challenge "the sufficiency of autonomy in our ethical thinking."<sup>65</sup> Ethical subjectivity, in this account, emerges from three important insights. The first, following Alain Badiou, is that it emerges from a fidelity to a situated universality, where "the subject commits itself ethically in terms of a demand that is received from [a particular] situation...but this demand is not reducible to that situation."<sup>66</sup> As "universality" implies, there is also something about ethical experience that is "too much." The ethical demand that constitutes subjectivity is always asymmetrical and impossible to fulfill.<sup>67</sup> Since this radical, universal unfulfillable demand helps to constitute the subject as such, it constitutes a subject who is always already sundered by the demand of the ethical.<sup>68</sup> This divided subjectivity leads Critchley to dub us "*dividual[s]*."<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 42. We should here start to see a way around the problem of "motivational" deficit through a notion of commitment that is outside oneself, but rooted in and felt interiorly.

<sup>67</sup> Critchley develops this insight with respect to the Christian theologian Logstrup, and his example of Jesus' commandment to "love thy neighbor as ourselves" as unfulfillable is appropriate.

<sup>68</sup> Which Critchley owes to Levinas, for whom the Other is making the ethical demand, and the Other always exists prior to our own subjectivity.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 11.

With a notion of ethical subjectivity in place, Critchley can describe the “normative” portion of an ethics, one that leads to a politics. He states his view simply in his description of “ethics as anarchic meta-politics.”<sup>70</sup> The relationship between ethics and politics becomes clear when Critchley describes his dissatisfaction with “political thinking.” He writes: “what must be continually criticized...is the aspiration to a full incarnation of the universal in the particular, or the privileging of a specific particularity because it is believed to *incarnate* the universal.”<sup>71</sup> We can already see that Critchley’s conception of the political has been influenced by Rancière and Laclau. In their terminology, Critchley is expressing a dissatisfaction with those who would look to populist *dissensus* as a moment of totality rather than the transitory re-distribution of the sensible. *Dissensus* may allow, for instance, the claims of factory workers to be heard, but we should avoid criticizing political organization by factory workers because they don’t articulate demands about migrant workers as well. Moreover, the emphasis on “incarnation” reminds us of Critchley’s discussion of ethics, wherein the individual subject is never fully incarnated, but is instead always constructed as a dividual. Therefore, to hope that a group, comprised of subjects, would deny that hetero-affective constitution created by the very demands of the other being articulated is fruitless.

Instead, Critchley claims that “at the heart of radical politics there has to be a meta-political ethical moment.”<sup>72</sup> For Critchley, “ethics and politics can be analytically distinguished, [but] we always face an ethical, political and indeed socio-cultural manifold, a synthesis if you will.”<sup>73</sup> Moreover we should be careful not to imagine a clear line from ethics to politics, no

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. Emphasis in original.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.



formula that would compute our ethical relation to the other to a relation to “all others.”<sup>74</sup> Our task, then is to think the ethical and the political together. For this task, Critchley returns to Levinas. The ethical subjectivity that Critchley has developed (with, we should remember significant contributions from Levinas) is further augmented by Levinas’ claim that “the heteronomous ethical experience of the relation to the neighbor is anarchical.”<sup>75</sup> In Critchley’s reading of Levinas, “[a]narchy should not seek to mirror the archic sovereignty that it undermines. That is it should not seek to set itself up as the new hegemonic principle of political organization, but remain the negation of the totality and not the affirmation of a new totality.”<sup>76</sup> Thus anarchy does not oppose the state as such, but rather engages in “the continual questioning from below of any attempt to establish order from above.”<sup>77</sup> Later, Critchley makes the debt to Rancière clear: “Although Rancière would doubtless disagree, I think this manifestation [of the people in *dissensus*] is anarchic in the sense in which Levinas speaks...of ‘the anarchy essential to multiplicity.’”<sup>78</sup> Put in terms familiar from earlier, “anarchy is the meta-political disturbance of the anti-political order of the police.”<sup>79</sup>

Returning to von Trier’s films, I want to argue that there’s something of this anarchic meta-politics at work in his Depression Trilogy. Moving away from the depiction of the police order in *Dogville*, these films retreat away from even the minimally-depicted “state” of direct democracy to instead interrogate those moments before the establishment of a political order. I

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid. It’s worth noting here that in the chapter on violence in *Faith of the Faithless* (to which we’ll return anon), he develops the Benjaminian image of the plumb-line as a guiding principle. Not an exact measuring device, the plumb-line instead gives us an inexact guide we can use but should not rely on as absolute. See especially pages 217-221.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 122-3.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid 129. I am, I think, on Critchley’s side here.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

don't use "retreat" in a negative sense here, but rather to describe von Trier's move away from community (in *Dogville* and *Manderlay*) towards the "minimal social unit, the couple"<sup>80</sup> in *Antichrist*, the family in *Melancholia*, and the interlocutors of *Nymphomaniac*. Given von Trier's personal difficulties with statements about politics<sup>81</sup> it might be tempting to read the trilogy as a negative form of retreat, as the director retracting from concerns about community and politics into psychological investigations of the bourgeoisie subject (as the title of "Depression" would suggest about this trilogy). It is not wrong to refer to the trilogy as related to "domestic melodrama," as Steven Shaviro contends.<sup>82</sup> That, however, should not be seen as a dismissal, but rather an acknowledgement of the shift for von Trier. These narratives, I want to argue give us a picture of an infinite ethical demand made on subjects who are divided by them, while the form of the film suggests a political articulation of an anarchic fiction.

*Antichrist* perhaps makes the clearest case of the three films. It concerns an unnamed couple (played by Charlotte Gainsbourg and Willem Dafoe) whose son steps out of the window of their house and plummets to his death while his parents are having sex. The film opens on a series of slow-motion shots, cutting between the couple having sex and shots of the young boy escaping his crib, arranging furniture to make the window accessible, and then falling. Wracked with guilt, She<sup>83</sup> feels overwhelming anxiety in the face of the death of her son. He,<sup>84</sup> a therapist

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<sup>80</sup> Abstract to "Anti-Christ: Tragedy, Game, or Farce?" by Jan Simons *Film-Philosophy* 19 (2015) <http://www.film-philosophy.com/index.php/f-p/article/view/263>.

<sup>81</sup> See for instance his comments at the Cannes film festival while promoting *Melancholia*: "Lars von Trier's Nazi speech at Cannes – video," *The Guardian*, May 19, 2011. <http://www.theguardian.com/film/video/2011/may/19/lars-von-trier-nazi-cannes?intcmp=239>.

<sup>82</sup> Shaviro specifically says "All in all, *Melancholia* is best described as a kind of domestic melodrama." in his essay "Melancholia, or the Romantic Anti-Sublime" *Sequence* 1.1 (2012), 6. His claim is based on the fact that *Melancholia* eschews a focus on the planetary disaster that drives the plot to give us the story of a family, especially sisters Justine and Claire. Similarly, *Antichrist* eschews the psychological realism of grief to focus on its couple, while *Nymphomaniac* bucks the trend to give equal weight to interlocutors Joe and Seligman and the sex they describe.

<sup>83</sup> As the film credits Charlotte Gainsbourg.

suggests that she face her fears and so the two decamp to the suggestively-named Eden, a cabin in the woods. There, the pair engage in therapeutic talk and exercises that He develops to get She “over” her guilt and anxiety. Though they initially appear successful – She claims she’s cured – the specter of sex and the loss of their child still come between them. While these character moments occur, the film is also interspersed with several scenes of hallucinatory images, including a scene where He encounters a deer running through the forest, a still-born baby fawn half-emerged from her. When He discovers that She has her incomplete thesis in the cabin – replete with misogynist analysis of witchcraft – He begins to turn on her before She ultimately turns on him. During sex, she attacks his genitals and then affixes a grindstone to his leg before performing a clitoridectomy on herself. Though He initially escapes, She carries him back to the cabin where She has a vision that implies She might have let her son die before He frees himself and strangles her. After burning her on a pyre he limps away, a phalanx of faceless female bodies trailing in his wake.

We might initially dismiss the film as a horror film that revels in excessive symbolism and too-little psychological realism. There is certainly a compelling weirdness to the encounters He has with nature, both the previously-mentioned deer as well as a fox that simultaneously disembowels itself while telling He that “chaos reigns.” As critic Tom Long puts it, the film “gets a bit carried away with symbols and surreal images,” but he ultimately concludes “if ever evil saturated the big screen, it is with this movie.”<sup>85</sup> I remain unconvinced by appeals to “evil” in the film. Rather, I think the film depicts the failure of She in response to the competing

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<sup>84</sup> As the film credits Willem Dafoe.

<sup>85</sup> Tom Long, “‘Anti-Christ’ Review” in *Detroit News*, November 13, 2009. <http://toomuchtomlong.blogspot.com/2009/11/anti-christ-review.html>. He also tellingly refers to the film as “the best film ever that you’d recommend to absolutely no one.”

demands of, on the one hand, her (infinite) guilt towards her son and, on the other, the demands He makes of her to become whole again. An early scene as the pair hike to Eden is suggestive. After leading Her through an hypnotic session designed to prepare her to confront (her fear of) nature at Eden, the pair walk through the woods to the cabin. We see a wide shot that encompasses the two pausing before a bridge (seen in profile) over a small creek. She tentatively climbs and the shot is from the perspective of the bridge, slowly zooming in on her as she climbs. Close-ups show She's trepidation as she approaches the bridge. A longer shot moves forward as she breaths raggedly, eyes closed before she can cross. From the background He asks "Scared?" He then exhorts her to "Stay awake for me." She is unable to move and he tells her to "Stay...stay in it" as she runs across the bridge and into the woods. A long shot captures her running through the woods before he follows her more slowly, arriving at the cabin to find her already there.

The scene is short, and almost dismissible but for the way that She's panic and He's exhortation fit into the larger pattern of the film. She is riven by grief over the death of her son, and arguably the entire film is a flight away from that guilt, an attempt to make manifest the lack of co-incident of herself with herself. Put in Critchley's terms, grief has split her subjectivity, and this hetero-affectivity motivates her anxiety. As her therapist, He seeks to unite her subjectivity, removing this guilt from her. His is a rational approach that seeks to tell her that her guilt isn't real, and if she could only return to herself then she would see there's no rational basis for her fear. This is the significance of his command to "stay in it." He wants her to dwell in her fear/anxiety to heal the rift in her subjectivity that grief opened up. What the rest of the film reveals is not that She was always crazy (what we might call the misogynist interpretation of the film) but rather that she was always split from herself as evidenced by her attitude towards the

material in her thesis and her simultaneous investment in and alienation from her son (as evidenced by both her grief at his death and her possible complicity in it as demonstrated by her carelessness with respect to his shoes). The film is therefore less about evil than it is about the contingency of subjectivity in the face of the infinite demand of grief. That She goes mad and attacks He is less an indictment of She than it is a demonstration of the fragility of subjectivity and the difficulty of maintaining it in the face of apparently rational claims to autonomy (made especially by He).

*Melancholia* shows a similar structure, but instead of the internal force of grief the film exteriorizes the infinite demand in the shape of the planet Melancholia that promises to destroy Earth in a cataclysmic collision. Justine (Kirsten Dunst) is the protagonist of the film, and after a brief opening that shows the Earth colliding with the planet we learn is Melancholia, the first half concerns the reception for Justine's wedding to Michael (Alexander Skarsgard) at Justine's sister Claire's (Charlotte Gainsborg) estate.<sup>86</sup> Justine moves about the party, seemingly disconnected, refusing to have sex with her husband before seducing a co-worker. Michael leaves her at the end of the party. The second half finds Justine staying with Claire on the estate, apparently depressed and catatonic about how her life has unravelled. In this half Claire becomes obsessed with the apocalyptic properties of Melancholia, afraid that the world will be consumed even as those around her try to assure her that won't happen. Ultimately, Claire is right, and Melancholia collides with earth, consuming Claire, Justine and her nephew in fire before the credits roll.

Once again we are confronted by characters alienated from themselves. As Steven Shaviro points out, the opening reception that consumes the first half of the film is a failed one:

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<sup>86</sup> Which is, as Steven Shaviro notes, actually the estate of Claire's husband, John (Kiefer Sutherland) and is the sole location for the film (outside of the planetary shots).

“it is unable to contain, and reconcile, the overt tensions and contradictions among the people whom it unites.”<sup>87</sup> As he notes, “Throughout the evening, Justine repeatedly tries to do what is expected of her. As she tells Claire, ‘I smile, and I smile, and I smile.’ But she is incapable of saving the appearances.” She is alienated from herself by the (admittedly finite) demands of the wedding reception. In the second half, we find her even more sundered, barely able to get a cab to her sister’s estate and unable even to dress herself. Eventually, like She in *Antichrist*, Justine concludes that “the earth is evil,” “life on Earth is evil,” and we “shouldn’t mourn it.” Here she seems less troubled by eccentricity from herself, as if the Earth’s evil explains her own alienation. What the film does rather masterfully is to connect Justine’s social alienation, her distance from herself at the wedding, to her alienation from herself in the face of total destruction. Though the appearance of Melancholia exteriorizes and motivates this alienation, the first half of the film makes clear that we can’t separate the causes of Justine’s alienation, that it seems constitutive of her subjectivity. Claire, as Shaviro once again notes, is contrasted to Justine. For Claire Melancholia is an object of knowledge, and that knowledge leads her to an entirely rational despair. It’s clear that if John and the “real scientists” were right about Melancholia passing Earth by harmlessly, Claire would entirely recover, while Justine would still be left sundered by the rift in her subjectivity.<sup>88</sup>

*Nymphomaniac* returns us once again to the interior, but instead of grief, this time the protagonist Joe (Charlotte Gainsborg) is sundered by her sexuality. The film opens on Seligman (Stellan Skarsgard) encountering Joe, who has been beaten up. He takes her back to his place to

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<sup>87</sup> Shaviro, “Romantic Anti-Sublime,” 18. Here we might suggest that the party is like bad politics, seeking to unite but failing at every turn to plausibly unite the differing individuals into the whole of a family.

<sup>88</sup> And, as Shaviro notes, the film “de-pathologizes” depression, indicating that this rift is not some aberration in consciousness but a form of consciousness itself.

nurse her. He asks her what happened, and she claims that it's her fault because she's a "bad human being." Seligman denies the possibility, and urges her to explain. She does, warning him the tale will be "long." She begins with "discovering" her "cunt" at "two years old" and then the pair discuss her sexual history (and indeed it is a long tale, taking five and a half hours in von Trier's preferred cut). Joe's tale is intercut with Seligman's commentary and numerous discourses on diverse subjects like angling and Bach's polyphony. In one episode, Joe becomes an-orgasmic, and seeks to reignite her sexuality by engaging with K (Jamie Bell), a sadomasochist who likes to beat women. Joe finds herself increasingly drawn to K and unable to keep her home life in order. She is able to orgasm again during a beating from K, but in so doing loses her domestic arrangement. This seems to be the final straw, and she descends into sex addiction, performs a self-abortion, and becomes a "debt collector" for organized crime. The film ends with Joe's story concluded, after which Seligman attempts to rape Joe before she shoots him.

It's clear that her sexual drive presents a demand that Joe is unable to meet, one that divides her subjectivity and leads to the situation that finds her bed-ridden in Seligman's apartment. The opening of her story is key in this regard. Though it might be obvious that she faces an insatiable demand by the time she enjoys her beating with K, the film is also clear that this is a constitutive part of her subjectivity. When Joe tells Seligman that she was a nymphomaniac at two, he replies that it must be normal behavior, not anything sinful (as nymphomania is assumed to be). He responds, over an image of a sonogram, that fetuses often touch their genitalia in the womb. If it is a sin, it must be an "original sin." Thus Joe's nymphomania is constitutive of her subjectivity, even though it doesn't manifest overtly until she's two. Later in the film, her sexuality even divides herself from herself literally, as her sexual

activity injures her genitalia, “and made even masturbation impossible.” Even in the film’s closing moments, when it seems that Joe is at peace with herself after concluding her tale, she is once again forced by sexuality (this time Selig’s, manifested in his assertion of power through rape) to act, shooting him in the film’s final moment.

All three films thus show us an ethical world, one in which subjectivity is divided from itself by an unfulfillable demand, one prior to any of the supposedly motivating events of the narrative. All three films also end in cataclysmic violence<sup>89</sup> that shatters the world we’ve seen on screen. Rather than a commentary on the “evils” of the world – as numerous characters across the trilogy insist – I think this violence is instead an indication of the fragility of the ethical framework the characters inhabit and the contingency that goes along with it. Here is where the “anarchy” that Critchley speaks about appears. It is not that von Trier wants to create a political film that would lay out some program for social change or justice. No, as with *Dogville*’s diagnosis, his examples in the Depression Trilogy are not guidelines. Nor, indeed, are they simply provocations (despite the unsimulated sex, the genital mutilation, the hallucinatory images). Instead, these films present an anarchic vision – nature isn’t evil, it is simply without mastery. Grief, depression, sexuality all instantiate and divide the subject, and von Trier’s trilogy shows us this. As Critchley says anarchy must “remain the negation of the totality and not the affirmation of a new totality.”<sup>90</sup> Such an anarchic world is what von Trier sets up in his films.

The properly political nature of these films is not to be underplayed either. By this I mean that the films engage in their own kind of “distribution of the sensible,” and though it may not be

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<sup>89</sup> Though *Nymphomaniac*’s final violence is “only” one person shooting another (overhead on a black screen rather than seen), I would contend it is just as apocalyptic as the more elaborately-rendered endings of the other two films since it destroys the world created by Joe’s Scherezade-like telling of her story to Seligman. Indeed so violent is this ending that it may only be rendered in a black screen.

<sup>90</sup> Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 122.



*dissensual* in the Rancièrian sense, the films do show us ways of “partitioning” that are themselves, as we have seen, precisely “political” in this sense. In this way the Depression Trilogy breaks from *Dogville*, and indeed von Trier’s entire oeuvre. We should recall here that prior to the Depression Trilogy, von Trier’s name was consistently associated with the Dogme 95 movement, a filmmaking “collective” that stressed a “vow of chastity.” This vow included tenants like shooting on location, only using diegetic sound, natural light, and hand-held cameras.<sup>91</sup> Though *Dogville* abandons most of these conventions in ways new to von Trier’s work, he still seemed broadly committed to a kind of hand-held aesthetic that would allow the action to unfold in front of the camera. I hesitate to call it realist, but for the most part von Trier used the camera to show us a world that the characters inhabited. With the Depression Trilogy, von Trier adopts the use of special effects in a new way that announces a new kind of seeing of the world, one not quite so tied to a realist aesthetic.

Von Trier announces this change immediately at the opening of *Antichrist*: the stark, black-and-white image, a hand turning a faucet that cuts to a shot of Willem Dafoe’s inscrutable face on the left, and the water drops he’s just unleashed on the right. Though the effect calls to mind some of the famous experiments in focus seen in *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941), the image looks resolutely composited, the water appearing like a special effect. On the soundtrack an aria by Handel (“Lascia ch’io pianga”) accompanies the various shots of the couple and their son as they go about their fateful business. Whatever von Trier’s previous purity in relation to

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<sup>91</sup> Of course, as with most manifestos, it was more provocation than plan of action. Indeed, since it was written in 1995, von Trier’s films have been frequently measured against it and found wanting in one way or another (and von Trier seems to care very little about adhering to the vows). *Dogville*’s use of a spare, modernist stage and voice-over seemed to announce his leaving the manifesto behind, and the Depression Trilogy looks like a Dogme 95 film in only the rarest of instances. See, for instance, Shaviro’s claim that many of the reception scenes in *Melancholia* have a Dogme 95 vibe.

Dogme 95, he has resolutely left it behind with the prologue to *Antichrist*.<sup>92</sup> Though the prologue announces a new set of tools for von Trier as a filmmaker, it is the later scene where He encounters a deer that is suggestive of von Trier's strategy as a whole. He wanders away while She rests on the trek to the cabin. He encounters a deer in the woods – the wide shot where we see the deer looks odd. The deer appears to be lit with a warm, soft light that touches nothing else in the forest and has no obvious source. He continues to approach, and in the counter-shots the deer continues to look like it doesn't quite belong, like an oddly composited special effect. When He gets close enough to startle the deer, the film returns to slow motion, watching the deer startle and turn away, the stillborn fawn now visible from behind. We see the reaction shot of He (also in slow motion) before the deer starts to run away. The final shot of the scene is He's reaction before a fade to black and the title card of "Chapter Two." The fact that the scene isn't stitched into the overall narrative gives it a sense of un-reality. In the next scene, She finds He laying on the ground, apparently troubled, but by what is unclear. We can't be sure that the encounter with the deer actually happened or is instead somehow indicative of the character's mental state. The same strategy is repeated later, when, after She announces that she's cured and is annoyed at He for not believing her, He wanders into the woods and encounters a fox. Again the slow motion as He reaches through the underbrush to uncover the fox, who we realize is tearing at its own belly. He's reaction shot is again in slow motion before we cut back to what looks like a digital puppet version of the fox moving its jaws as "Chaos...reigns" comes on the soundtrack in a distorted voice. Again we're left not entirely sure how much of this scene might be hallucination. That the film is so otherwise freighted with symbolism only intensifies this effect. So strong is this effect that we can't ever trust what we see in the film, which culminates

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<sup>92</sup> And, if we understand the film to be a horror film, von Trier has further violated the Dogme 95 interdiction on genre films.

in the ambiguity of She's responsibility for the death of their son. The two images we see – while she is masturbating after having injured He – suggest that she saw her son going toward the window and did nothing. However, the film's visual strategy makes it utterly impossible to determine if this is an authentic recollection or instead indicative of the guilt she feels.

Similarly, *Melancholia* utilizes digital effects to create a visual scheme in which it is impossible to distinguish the film's world from the character's subjectivity. *Melancholia*'s effects open the film, as Kirsten Dunst appears in close-up, her face still as dead birds fall in the background. It is here we realize this is slow-motion, and the effect is again of an obviously composited frame. I emphasize this not to deride von Trier's use of special effects (though they're not 'perfect' by Hollywood standards), but rather to draw attention to the fact that the effect appears intentional and easily becomes a part of reading the film's overall strategy. In a second tableaux, all the objects in the frame have a second shadow that appears impossible – only retroactively do we realize that they're the effect of light reflecting off of Melancholia as it approaches Earth. Eventually, we see the two planets – Earth and Melancholia – interspersed with other tableaux before a final vision of Earth crashing into Melancholia before the film's first chapter opens. Though we'll eventually understand most of the locations we see in the prologue – they're almost all from John's family estate<sup>93</sup> – it is utterly unclear where they fit into the narrative and how. Instead, the film's "distribution of the sensible" puts us on alert to the ways in which the unfulfillable demand of Melancholia will impact the characters, especially Justine, the character most featured in the prologue. Shaviro describes these images as creating a sense of

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<sup>93</sup> And the one that isn't – an image from Brueghel – is obviously a painting. Of course the images of Melancholia/Earth are not a part of John's estate either, though I suspect there is a link there in that John's estate seems to constitute its own world, with a particular gravity.

“churning suspension” such that “everything feels unstable, on edge, and out of whack.”<sup>94</sup> Again the visual strategy mirrors Justine’s sense of herself as divided and depressed. Fundamentally, we are unable to determine what images belong to the world of the film and what images belong to the characters.

In contrast to the previous two films in the trilogy, *Nymphomaniac* feels the most realistic. However, the film is only the proverbial exception that proves the rule. The use of special effects, for instance, is as (if not more) extensive in *Nymphomaniac* than the other two films, as von Trier uses CGI to composite the genitals of “stunt” performers on to the bodies of the actors involved in the film. The seamlessness of this compositing suggests that the heavy-handed use of the techniques earlier in the trilogy is an intentional choice rather than an amateurish “mistake” on von Trier’s part.<sup>95</sup> Moreover, since the film is itself framed as a single character’s recollection of her past, the film has more license to be subjective about some of its shots. This is evident when we see a young Joe during a flashback lying the grass in an image that precisely recalls the way She laid in the grass during hypnosis by He, swallowed up by the ground. But the film doesn’t entirely abandon the visual strategy of ambiguity. Early in the film’s second volume, Joe has reached the point in her tale where she is unable to orgasm. Seligman doesn’t seem to understand. In that moment we see a shot of a naked woman (who plays the younger version of Joe) from above spinning over a shot of a body of water as if she were lying in bed. Again, there is no attempt at “realism,” the body and water obviously composited together. Selig says “Wagner. ‘Das Rheingold’ The descent into Nibelheim. Was it that bad?” As he speaks, the body of the woman grows transparent. Joe replies “Try to imagine

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<sup>94</sup> Shaviro, *Melancholia*.

<sup>95</sup> Or, even less, an appeal to a kind of Dogme 95 style “purity” in the use of digital technology.

that in one fell swoop, you lost all desire to read.” As she says this, the image cuts to a semi-transparent Seligman arrayed similarly to the naked woman but composited against a background of open books. Joe continues “and all your love and passion for books and letters.” Seligman says “I don’t even know if I can imagine that,” as his image fades to total transparency, leaving just a shot of open books. Again, what is significant is the way in which the film makes clear that this isn’t a realistic shot, and moreover the ambiguity of the moment is extended in that we’re not sure where the image originates. Is this Joe’s vision or Seligman’s? A shared hallucination of sexual desire? It’s not clear.

I want to understand these visual strategies with reference to what Critchley calls “fiction” in *The Faith of the Faithless*, the book that follows *Infinitely Demanding*. Here, Critchley is concerned with two interrelated ideas. The first is to continue his project from *Infinitely Demanding* in outlining the relationship between ethics and politics. The second is to understand the relationship between theology and politics. If we recall that “what seems to motivate subjects are frameworks of belief that call that secular project into question,”<sup>96</sup> then it is to belief that Critchley turns in *Faith of the Faithless*. The book doesn’t argue for returning theology to the political, but rather looks at how the structures that animate theology might similarly animate the political. Though he detours through discussions of faith, mystical anarchism, and violence, I’m most interested in his claim that “[t]he relation of politics to religion raises the question of the necessity of *fiction* in the political realm.”<sup>97</sup> As he states elsewhere, “the essence of politics is a fiction, an act of creation that brings a subject into

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<sup>96</sup> Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 7.

<sup>97</sup> Simon Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology* (London: Verso, 2012), 25.

existence.”<sup>98</sup> Here, Critchley is careful to note, he is not opposing fiction and fact, “where the former is adjudged false in the face of the latter’s veracity.”<sup>99</sup> Instead, Critchley opposes fiction to what he calls, after Wallace Stevens, “supreme fiction,” which is a fiction that allows us “to see the fictiveness or contingency of the world.”<sup>100</sup> Critchley is aware that the concept is strange: “Paradoxically, a supreme fiction is a fiction that we know to be a fiction... but in which we nevertheless believe.”<sup>101</sup> Moreover it is “self-conscious of its radical contingency.”<sup>102</sup> It thus avoids the possibility of ossification into dogma and violence that seems to plague so many otherwise well-meaning political programs. It is therefore a kind of mirror to Critchley’s description of the ethical, where a subject’s strength is in the radical non-simultaneity of the self with the self. In politics it is a form of belief that knows itself to be believable, in the sense that a story is believable (or not).

Retroactively, the Depression Trilogy suggests to us that *Dogville* lays the groundwork for a kind of fictioning. *Dogville* takes a particular kind of fiction – the fiction of individual power and self-mastery – to its logical conclusion. It reveals, as we’ve already seen, that even apparently absolute power has an outside that must be reckoned with. The dissatisfaction many critics displayed toward the film is less a dissatisfaction with von Trier and *Dogville*, and more a dissatisfaction with this brand of fiction. As Critchley suggests, it makes bedfellows of apparent enemies like George W. Bush and Osama Bin Laden. In that sense, we can read the Depression Trilogy as offering a kind of response to *Dogville*, offering new kinds of fiction to avoid the circular trap that feeds individuated notions of power.

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 91

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

Though Critchley would likely object, I want to argue that there's something of the supreme fiction at work in von Trier's Depression Trilogy. Leaving behind his diagnosis in *Dogville*, the director sets out to deepen our understanding of the ethical and its relationship to the political. To do so he shows us a world of individuals divided from themselves by an unfulfillable demand – grief, depression, sex – and concludes with a kind of anarchic sense of non-mastery over these elements. To do so he utilizes a visual strategy that foregrounds its own contingency, never resolving the tension between what “happens” in the narrative and what is the subjective experience of the characters. Though the films don't engage with politics in the traditional sense, the vision they offer shows us one possible way to fiction the relationship between ethics and politics. Moreover, von Trier's films suggest that there might be something other than demand and affirmation at the heart of the ethical. Rather than being sundered by some demand that the character's approve, von Trier shows us characters as utterly undone by what they can't approve. The films therefore suggest an ethics based as much on what should be avoided as by what should be affirmed, which itself mirrors Critchley's description of the relation between politics and religion as a kind of “profession of faith,”<sup>103</sup> at least insofar as such a profession includes those things which are expressly not believed in.

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 22.

## 5.0 'SOMETHING THAT'LL BREAK THROUGH' POLITICAL RUPTURE AND NOVELTY IN CRONENBERG

The question of politics haunts the cinema of David Cronenberg in the same way that the machinations of Spectacular Optical haunt Max Renn (James Woods), the protagonist of *Videodrome* (1983): omnipresent, but opaque and vaguely sinister. The analogy doesn't end there if we take Cronenberg's critics seriously, as the political content of Cronenberg's film, like the fictional Spectacular Optical, doesn't exist for its own sake but rather points to some other phenomena. In *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, Fredric Jameson understands *Videodrome* as embodying the paranoid narratives of conspiracy that are paradigmatic of postmodernism. For him, "a host of political readings...also compete for the surface of the text...A residual atmosphere of global 60s and 70s politics also shrouds the narrative."<sup>1</sup> For Jameson, the film "owes its remarkable political polysemousness to the space freed by the end of traditional ideas" but must also "participate in that reduction to the body everywhere present in the postmodern."<sup>2</sup> In contrast, Steven Shaviro reads *Videodrome* as the perfect example of his claim that Cronenberg's films understand that "social forces permeate [the body] right from the beginning," making it a site of "political conflict."<sup>3</sup> This understanding culminates in the claim that "*Videodrome* makes us obsessively aware that it is cultural and political technology – not natural

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<sup>1</sup> Frederic Jameson. *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995). 27.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>3</sup> Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). 134.



necessity – that imposes the restricted economies of organicism, functionalism, and sexual representation.”<sup>4</sup> In both of these significant (and early) appraisals of politics in Cronenberg’s work, the political content of the films is located in the approach to bodies and that approach is largely the point of discussing politics at all.

Though politics in Cronenberg’s films hasn’t been ignored since these early approaches, they point to the larger lacuna in Cronenberg studies: for all the apparent omnipresence of politics, it is relatively under-discussed in relation to Cronenberg’s films. This shortage is likely due to Cronenberg’s association with ‘body horror’ and the numerous discussions of the body in his work. As Dylan Trigg puts it, “the much vaunted notion of ‘body horror’ associated with his films depends on the idea that self is an embodied subject, who is now experiencing bodily disturbance.”<sup>5</sup> This disturbance is “the sense of the body dissolving boundaries between inside and out, self and other, and the living and the dead.”<sup>6</sup> Trigg goes on to claim that “[i]n each of these dyads, Cronenberg has crafted an account of identity torn asunder by what he terms ‘flesh undergoing revolution,’”<sup>7</sup> a reference to Cronenberg’s claims about his own cinema. Despite the political suggestion inherent in Cronenberg’s reference to revolution, I want to claim that this is a fairly typical way in which his work is discussed. The body is obviously central to his films, and the treatment of those bodies relies on something like an individual subjectivity. Trigg brings up “Cartesian” dualism (and he’s hardly the first), which assumes that Cronenberg’s films are about individual subjects undergoing the psychic trauma of (as in the case of *The Fly* [1986]) being fused with an insect.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>5</sup> Trigg, Dylan. “The Return of the New Flesh: Body Memory in David Cronenberg’s *The Fly*.” *Film-Philosophy* 15, no 1 (2011), 83.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Indeed it is *The Fly* that offers the most direct discussion of politics in Cronenberg's work, and perhaps the best place to begin. Protagonist-scientist Seth Brundle (Jeff Goldblum) has already made haste to test his teleportation device in which a fly has joined him. This sets Brundle on a path to merging with the fly to create the "Brundefly" that is neither completely the old Seth Brundle, nor the errant fly. The index of this change is Brundle's relationship with a journalist, Veronica Quaife (Geena Davis), and the pair begin a relationship that mixes the business of her exclusive access to his research (in exchange for her silence until that research is "ready") and the pleasure of their romantic union. He is eager to explore the changes to his body (increased strength, the occasional odd hair), while she is more concerned by his transformation. When Quaife learns she is pregnant – perhaps by Brundle, but perhaps by the hybrid Brundefly – she confronts him, and struggles to articulate both that she wanted to see him before her abortion and why. Brundle responds in a medium shot that she has to "leave and never come back here" before a reverse shot shows an upset Quaife. The shot comes back to Brundle who launches into a monologue:

You have to leave now and never come back here. Have you ever heard of insect politics? Neither have I. Insects don't have politics. They're very brutal. No compassion, no compromise. We can't trust the insect. I'd like to become the first insect politician.

When Quaife expresses confusion at Brundle's claims – the question of politics is apropos of little in the film, unlike the quasi-political associations of Spectacular Optical in *Videodrome*<sup>8</sup> or the campaign at the center of Cronenberg's previous film *The Dead Zone* (1983) – Brundle continues that he's an "insect who dreamt he was a man...but now the dream is over and the insect is awake." As the shots get tighter on Brundle, Quaife responds to his monologue in the same medium shot, denying Brundle's claims to insecthood. In response, Brundle tells her "I'll

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<sup>8</sup> Who make, we're told, "missile guidance systems" and have government cont(r)acts.

hurt you if you stay.” Quaiife turns around to exit before we cut back to Brundle, apparently distraught at his state. The scene ends when Quaiife emerges from Brundle’s apartment, resolute in her desire for an abortion.

The utterly conventional shot/reverse-shot structure of this scene belies the utter weirdness of what is happening. Leaving aside the non-sequitur nature of raising the question of politics, and insect politics at that, to convince a partner to leave, and the fact that (at least some) insects have complicated hierarchical structures and relationships with other species, Brundle’s conception of politics is difficult to clarify. The logic seems to be that insects don’t have politics because they’re “brutal” and have “no compassion.” This ignores (or necessarily erases) centuries of human politics that have been demonstrably both brutal and without compassion – the 20<sup>th</sup> century might as well be a catalog of brutal, compassionless regimes that have nevertheless expressed some politics. In this sense, the monologue might be meant ironically. With the Cold War still raging, the Berlin Wall still up, and a steely-eyed B-movie actor re-elected as the president of the United States, calling insects “brutal” with “no compassion” has a morbid irony that is both sad and funny.

If, instead, we understand “politics” as Leo Strauss does, as a “directedness towards knowledge of the good,”<sup>9</sup> then Brundle’s comment becomes more baffling. At least from our human perspective, the insect conception of the good seems uncomplicated. Much like us, they amass resources and procreate. In that way, they’re not any more or less complicated than us in

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<sup>9</sup> Leo Strauss, “What is Political Philosophy” in *Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 3.

their conception of the good,<sup>10</sup> making insect politics no more or less mysterious than human politics.

Perhaps, instead, Brundle is a dedicated Habermasian, and can't conceive of a politics without "compromise," which in Brundle's account, insects lack. Despite this lack, Brundle expresses the desire to be an "insect politician," the first of its kind. We are left to imagine what role an insect politician like Brundle might play – would he rule the insect world, dragging his "dream" of a man into their relations, or would he become a politician like *The Dead Zone*'s Greg Stillson, applying the brutality of insects to the realm of human politics? What nags about this scene – and why I've lingered on it – is that something seems to lie behind Brundle's claims. The phrase "insect politician" has traction. However, I would argue that rather than an insect politics – a claim about the content of relations between different insects without compassion – what Brundle is grasping at is the sense of what the new perceptions afforded by the intrusion of insect DNA might be. If, as we have so far argued, the political is about the distribution of the sensible, then it is little wonder that the merger of human and insect DNA would produce new sensations. Though we would have to speculate about what political reality might emerge from such sensations, it doesn't take much imagination to understand that an insect (let alone a "Brundlefly") would experience the political differently than a human.

Scott Wilson opens his book *The Politics of Insects: David Cronenberg's Cinema of Confrontation* with a (too-brief) discussion of the scene. For Wilson, Brundle's predicament "functions as a discussion of this state [of "alterity"] and the implications of transformation in

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<sup>10</sup> Though of course humanity adds self-consciousness to the equation, or so we like to believe, which fundamentally alters our relationship both to the good, and to success.

general.”<sup>11</sup> Transformation is Wilson’s theme here, and he recognizes that “most critical commentary about the film tends to focus on the superficial fact of this activity.”<sup>12</sup> In contrast, Wilson hopes to transcend this limitation. For him, “what is often overlooked and yet hinted at by Brundle’s dialogue (as scripted by Cronenberg) is the relationship between transformation (in any form) and the host of ideological structures that exist to legislate such transformation.”<sup>13</sup> Wilson’s concern, then, is that the wish that Brundle’s dialogue expresses can never be realized, and he quotes William Beard’s claim that “insectness is so intractably and horrifyingly evil in human terms that it cannot be mediated.”<sup>14</sup> Moreover, Beard continues “There may be shades of humanity, signified by various degrees of trust, compassion, compromise – but there are no shades of insectness.”<sup>15</sup> On Wilson’s reading of Beard, Brundle’s claims actually provide a kind of “limit point”<sup>16</sup> because his dreams can never be fulfilled – his humanity must disappear for his insect nature to emerge. Following from that is Wilson’s larger claim in the book, namely that “insect politics” is a metaphor for the end-point of human transformation, and “Cronenberg’s cinema is one of transformation, but...of transformation as it intersects with those legislative and necessarily disciplinary structures that move to limit, control or prevent outright such alterations.”<sup>17</sup> We should hear echoes of Foucault in Wilson’s choice of “disciplinary structures,” and indeed Foucault (the Foucault of “The Subject and Power”<sup>18</sup> rather than earlier work) and

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<sup>11</sup> Scott Wilson, *The Politics of Insects: David Cronenberg’s Cinema of Confrontation* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013). 1.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> William Beard. *The Artist as Monster: The Cinema of David Cronenberg* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006). 220.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* Recent trends in ecological and speculative realist thought should encourage us to be a bit more circumspect about claims like this – though we say it pejoratively, we refer to people as “drones” and others as “queen bees” and recognize the kinship that certain insect hierarchies share with human ones.

<sup>16</sup> Wilson, *Politics of Insects*, 2.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>18</sup> Michel Foucault. “The Subject and Power” *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 1 (1982): 777-795.

Zizek (who provides, among other things, the “heretic” who inhabits the “disciplinary structures”<sup>19</sup> while challenging them) who provide Wilson’s theoretical focus.

Several things seem off about Wilson’s analysis. The first is the swift move from transformation to “disciplinary structures.” Though *The Fly* is obviously about transformation, perhaps even about the limits of transformation (as Brundle goes through three “phases” as described by Beard, from augmented human, to human-fly, to humanless-fly), it is difficult to credit the move to “disciplinary structures” from there. Though Brundle names an “insect politics” and expresses his desire to become “the first insect politician,” there’s no sense of what kind of platform or control such a figure would exert. The film’s plot is largely unconcerned with such structures either. Though Quaipe is broadly representative of the media, her *not* reporting is more significant than whatever control she exercises, and a film more overtly concerned with disciplinary structures would be more likely to focus on something other than a fairly standard heteronormative relationship for most of the film.

Wilson gets closer to something fruitful when he argues that cinema itself is one of those disciplinary structures. For Wilson, “cinema is active in the production and articulation of these discourses [of power] in a social setting that extends, necessarily, beyond the fact of immediate consumption.”<sup>20</sup> I don’t necessarily disagree, but Wilson’s error seems to be his willingness to jump immediately to discourse – a consequence of his reading of Foucault, no doubt – rather than attending to the sensible aspects of (for instance) cinema that might allow a particular set of discourses to be articulated, and “count” as we have seen. Put another way, Wilson’s analysis seems to lack an articulation of what he means by “politics.” Though “actions/decisions in the

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<sup>19</sup> Wilson, *Politics of Insects*, 3.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

social realm” seems to be what he has in mind, Wilson doesn’t develop this thinking explicitly, relying on his citation of Zizek and Foucault to do the heavy lifting. What this failure highlights is just how much Wilson is leaving on the table – there’s a distinct oddity (and therefore richness) to Brundle’s claims about “insect politics” that Wilson’s heretical examination of disciplinary structures doesn’t ever get at.

As a text, *The Fly* doesn’t help us get much closer to what Cronenberg’s engagement with the political might be, but it does raise the issue of the political as it relates to questions of *aesthesis*, as this is the only way in which Brundle’s claims about insect politics are really legible. However, we will have to turn to other Cronenberg films to get a more secure sense of how his work engages with the political.

Perhaps the problem, however, does not lie with Cronenberg’s films or their obsession with bodies. Rather, our understanding of what constitutes ‘the political’ is often too nebulous to allow a firm grasp. This is why Rancière’s notion of the political as an “intervention into the visible and sayable”<sup>21</sup> is useful for thinking Cronenberg’s connection to the political. To recap, his account begins with ‘the police order’. Here is the business-as-usual world that has been regimented so that everything has a place and is placed into it. In contrast, we have the properly political, what Rancière calls “*dissensus*,” where the part of the populace that has no part in the community comes to be identified with the community as a whole. *Dissensus* is enacted through a (re)distribution of the sensible, where what previously had no right to be seen is now visible

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<sup>21</sup> Jacques Rancière, “10 Theses on the Political” *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 37.

and capable of making demands. In Rancière's formulation there is a clear line from police order to distribution of the sensible, to *dissensus* and therefore to democracy.<sup>22</sup>

We can see an analogous moment in *Videodrome*. Max Renn has brought home radio personality Nikki Brand, and after a bit of banter, the pair sit down to watch a pirated cassette of the "Videodrome" broadcast that has so far obsessed Renn. The scene plays out in a typical shot/reverse-shot fashion, though we know that the off-screen space is occupied by the "Videodrome" broadcast because the light of the TV creates a warm glow on their faces. Then Brand asks Renn "You wanna try a few things?" There's a cut that brings us to a mobile camera looking elsewhere from Renn's small apartment, behind the couch where he and Brand were sitting. We can see his dining room table in the foreground and the TV showing the "Videodrome" broadcast in the background. In the middle, on the floor, are a naked Renn and Brand. The camera pushes forward – in a move so far not characteristic of the film's cinematic language – into the space until the pair are in the center of the frame, their nudity and sexual embrace now obvious (and contrasted with the "Videodrome" imagery still very visible in the background). After the pair's sexual exploits, which include graphic shots of Renn piercing Brand's ear with a needle, the scene ends on a pair of enigmatic shots between Renn's face and a screen. These final shots are in slow motion (another new addition to the film's cinematic language), adding to the sensation that this moment breaks with what has come before.

This scene is significant because it's the moment in the narrative after which it will become impossible to tell what is happening in the diegetic world, and what is a "hallucination" brought on by the effects of the "Videodrome" broadcast on Renn. The film will make it

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<sup>22</sup> Obviously, however, the previous two chapters have troubled the clarity and direction of that line.



increasingly difficult to determine what is and is not a hallucination, up to and including the film's final moments, with Renn's apparent suicide rendered on a television screen before being suggested sonically in the off-screen space of the screen we are watching. What's easy to miss about the scene between Renn and Brand is that it is inaugurated with a simple cut. We are watching Renn and Brand banter about her sexual cutting, and then they are entwined on the floor as the camera glides through Renn's apartment. There are some previous odd cuts that foreshadow this moment, as when the film opens on a pre-recorded "wake up" tape before a shock cut to Renn frothing milk for his morning cup of coffee. But these moments only build to the cut that separates Renn and Brand's conversation from their sex, and this moment is all the more significant because the cut doesn't announce some new reality immediately. Instead, the warm light that bathes the bodies of Renn and Brand isn't quite right. It might take several more scenes to learn that Renn has been infected by the Videodrome signal and is hallucinating due to the tumor the signal causes, but we know from this moment on that things aren't quite as they seem.

Though this moment isn't political *per se*, it shares a structure with Rancière's description of the political. More significantly, it highlights a lacuna in Rancière's description. In the same way that we (and by extension, Renn/Brand) do not know quite how things moved from a flirtatious conversation on a couch into an alternate world of hallucination, Rancière is somewhat opaque on the transition from the police order to the (re)distribution of the sensible. *Something* happens, but Rancière is mum on the subject. There simply is a police order, then a (re)distribution of the sensible that results in *dissensus*. Though I agree that this description of the political is useful – it possesses descriptive powers for real-world situations – it lacks a

certain depth in explaining exactly what the “something” is that happens when the switch flips from “police” to “the political.”

But that’s exactly what we see enacted in this moment in *Videodrome*. The narrative and visuals of *Videodrome* before this moment are ordered clearly into standard narrative patterns. The scene between Renn and Brand on the ground clearly redistributes what we thought of as the sensible. From that point on, what “counts” in the film’s narrative is up for grabs. That simple cut, the one that takes us from the couch to the couple writhing on the floor, inaugurates a new distribution of what is sensible in the film (crucially, for both viewer and protagonist). I don’t want to argue that this is an instance of what Rancière means by the political – that we’re witnessing a police order that is superseded by the democratic *dissensus* of *Videodrome*. Rather, I think the structure of the scene is analogous to the structure of the political, and opens up several avenues that we’ll explore in terms of what the political tells us about Cronenberg’s films and what Cronenberg’s cinema can tell us about the political.

Though Rancière largely ignores the transition from the police to the political, the subject is treated elsewhere. Paul Eisenstein and Todd McGowan dub this “moment” rupture, and in their book *Rupture: On the Emergence of the Political*,<sup>23</sup> they describe how rupture and the political are inextricably entwined. Rupture “occurs when the coordinates that organize existence undergo a shift, such as when culture emerges out of the natural order.”<sup>24</sup> More significantly, it “is the occurrence of the impossible, when the very ground under our feet shifts in order to transform the point from which we see.”<sup>25</sup> We should hear echoes of Rancière. We can easily

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<sup>23</sup> Paul Eisenstein and Todd McGowan, *Rupture: On the Emergence of the Political* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2012).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

reformulate *dissensus* in terms of rupture – the distribution of the sensible makes the “impossible” speech of workers count as an argument, shifting the grounds of political debate. Eisenstein and McGowan can help us elaborate the lacuna in Rancière’s thinking with respect to the transition from police order to the political. What I want to argue, then, is the dual relevance for rupture to the cinema of David Cronenberg. The concept of rupture helps us to understand how Cronenberg’s cinema enacts the political, while Cronenberg’s cinema helps us to add depth to the concept of rupture. Specifically, Cronenberg engages with the value of the “inhuman” as Eisenstein and McGowan describe it, while also adding to their list of “values” an interest in the new. Many of Cronenberg’s films demonstrate that a commitment to the new is essential for something like the political to be possible.

First, a bit more about rupture and its significance. Rupture, for Eisenstein and McGowan, is the “point where politics begins and ends, and our political task consists in finding ways to inhabit this point without falling back into a secure sense of identity.”<sup>26</sup> In terms we are more familiar with, rupture is that which demands the distribution of the sensible that leads to *dissensus*, and though Rancière is not explicit about this, any moment of *dissensus* must necessarily figure out how to prolong the moment of *dissensus* or risk falling back into the police order that democracy interrupts with dissensual demands. By interrupting the police order – what Eisenstein and McGowan call “tradition” – rupture creates the opportunity for “values to emerge.” Indeed, rupture is the “creation of value out of nothing”<sup>27</sup> in a way that echoes Rancière’s claim that *dissensus* allows that which had “no reason to be seen” to be seen as essential to the community. Crucially, rupture allows us to see that there are moments when the

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

old order is suspended, and “[w]ithin the logic of rupture, all subjects are irreducibly singular and free.”<sup>28</sup> Within this freedom, however, subjects are also made equivalent, as rupture “introduces a principle of equality that binds subjects to one another in an experience of human solidarity.”<sup>29</sup> This equality inaugurates a series of values that are “the product of the rupture that causes culture to arise out of nature or the rupture that causes a new social order to emerge from an older one.”<sup>30</sup> These values include items like “solidarity, equality, freedom singularity, and humanity.”<sup>31</sup>

I have turned to rupture, and Eisenstein and McGowan’s account specifically, because I think it offers a compelling supplement to Rancière’s useful, but ultimately limited, account of the political. Eisenstein and McGowan’s account foregrounds that moment in the political where the police disappears and *dissensus* has its day. Moreover, the main body of Eisenstein and McGowan’s text elaborates what they call the “values” of rupture, offering a significantly more satisfying account of the relationship between aesthetic objects and the political than we generally find in Rancière.<sup>32</sup>

It helps that Cronenberg has also consistently constructed cinematic worlds that are obsessed with rupture. Rupture of the body, yes, but also of signification (through narrative), and are therefore properly political objects. Though much has been made of *Videodrome*’s rallying cry of “Long live the new flesh,” the assumption of body horror’s focus on the flesh has kept critics from thinking through the implications of the “new” that precedes the flesh. Cronenberg’s

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> As even a cursory reading of his work would suggest, Rancière does not always attend to the formal characteristics of films, instead referring to them more generally or giving a kind of phenomenological account of watching them (as with the long, slightly depressing films of Pedro Costa he so often addresses).

films – and *Videodrome* especially – help us to think through the relationship between novelty (what’s “new”) and rupture. That insight will further illuminate our understanding of the relationship between cinema and the political more generally, while shoring up Rancière’s account of *dissensus* by filling in the gap left between police and *dissensus*.

We don’t need to look hard for evidence of rupture in Max Renn’s life. From the first moment of video-induced hallucination (during his encounter with Brand), Renn finds it increasingly difficult to separate reality from video hallucination and he must dwell in this zone of indistinction. Indeed, Eisenstein and McGowan could be talking about *Videodrome* and Max’s “surgical-vaginal opening”<sup>33</sup> when discussing the difficulties inherent in the rupture:

The rupture is always a traumatic cut. Though the rupture gives birth to political values like freedom and equality, it does so through disconnecting individuals from the bonds of tradition through which they receive a sense of identity and belonging. To remain within the rupture is to exist without the security of a place in the world. One is traumatically cut adrift, and even the solidarity one experiences with other subjects does not provide the assurance of a collective identity....The values that are worth fighting for are also the ones that would destroy us.<sup>34</sup>

The “cut” that opens in his stomach severs Renn from his “sense of identity and belonging” as we see him distance himself from others, especially his assistant Bridey (Julie Khaner).

Moreover, despite the fact that Renn is hardly the only one suffering from the effects of video hallucination, he finds no “assurance of collective identity” at the Cathode Ray Mission nor from Brian O’Blivion (Jack Creley). Finally, it’s worth noting that the rallying cry that seems to wake Renn up – “Long live the new flesh” – is also Renn’s last words before apparently killing himself. The new flesh, figured as a future necessity, is also what seeks to kill Renn.

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<sup>33</sup> Caitlin Benson-Allot *Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens: Video Spectatorship From VHS to Filesharing* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013), 92.

<sup>34</sup> Eisenstein and McGowan, *Rupture*, 36.

As spectators, we share in Renn's inability to parse hallucination and reality, and it is here that we discover Cronenberg's commitment to cinematic rupture. Speaking of a number of films that connect the violence of rupture to the freedom of the subject, Eisenstein and McGowan claim "violence directed toward the self becomes not just part of the film's content but also a way that this content spills over into the form and thereby challenges any possible mastery in spectatorship."<sup>35</sup> Similarly, the rupture that Renn experiences in his body is not simply a narrative conundrum to be solved (and it isn't (re)solved by the narrative), nor a figural representation of rupture in the "surgical-vaginal opening." Instead, it "spills over into the form" of *Videodrome*. As Caetlin Benson-Allot notes, "*Videodrome* turns Renn's hallucinatory world into the spectator's reality by both engaging and reinterpreting classical Hollywood editing techniques."<sup>36</sup> She cites William Beard's description of *Videodrome*'s intentional confusion of the subjective experience of Renn's "opening" with the (apparently) objective view of the scene in "shot-counter shot vocabulary," which makes "[a]ny distinction between subjective and objective introduced by the 'first-person' editing' unhelpful."<sup>37</sup> We are, as spectators, unable to distinguish Renn's reality from the "objective" world of the film's narrative. The film follows Brian O'Blivion's claim that images are more real than reality, but even within this regime of images it is often impossible to tell who, or what, is responsible for any given set of images.

Rupture itself, however well-represented in Cronenberg's cinema, does not exist for its own sake. Instead, rupture is the point at which old values are shed and new values emerge, and most of Eisenstein and McGowan's text is concerned with elaborating those values. Eisenstein and McGowan address seven values, acknowledging "[o]bviously, there are more than seven

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>36</sup> Benson-Allot, *Killer Tapes*, 92.

<sup>37</sup> Beard, *The Artist as Monster*, 54.

political values, and one could easily add to them.”<sup>38</sup> Perhaps just as obviously, no single instance of rupture immediately inaugurates every value. For our purposes, the most pertinent of the values that Eisenstein and McGowan identify is what they dub “the inhuman.” This value, the most recent to emerge, is “recognized...through Freud’s discovery of [humanity’s] dislocatedness in the animal world.”<sup>39</sup> A bit later they are more emphatic: “The inhumanity of the human manifests itself in the human capacity for finding satisfaction in – and repeating – failure.”<sup>40</sup> And so subjects repeat failure, and thus any subject “fails to coincide with itself”<sup>41</sup> as a subject. This insight is the foundation of the possibility of the political for humans: “While other animals are just animals and live out their instincts instead of relating to them, the human fails to coincide with itself” and it is only “because of this interruption in its biology” that “the human is a political animal.”<sup>42</sup>

Cronenberg’s obsession with the body, read with rupture and its values in mind, is less about the body as such than using the body to explore the limits of the human and its relation to the inhuman. His films ruthlessly interrogate the humanity of their protagonists, simultaneously questioning the integrity of bodies and the limits of their status as human. *Videodrome* asks us to consider how Renn’s humanity has been transformed (Benson-Allot would say “adapted”) by video technology. Though it might be hyperbolic in a couple of instances (*M. Butterfly* [1993], *Eastern Promises* [2007]), it’s a productive question to consider if any of Cronenberg’s protagonists are human by the end of their films. Even less obvious examples like *Dead Ringers* (1988), where twin gynecologists gradually succumb to jealousy and madness before one twin

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<sup>38</sup> Eisenstein and McGowan, *Rupture*, 29.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 193

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

commits suicide, raises the question of whether the remaining twin (Beverly, played by Jeremy Irons) is completely human without his twin (he doesn't seem to think so, as he dies in his twin Elliot's, also Jeremy Irons, arms). Or even *Crash* (1996), where protagonist James Ballard (James Spader) gets involved in the increasingly dangerous escapades of a group of car-crash enthusiasts who get sexual satisfaction from car crashes. By the end Ballard and his wife are intentionally crashing, attempting to merge human and machine in a sexual union.

This thread of pushing on the limit of the human is inaugurated in Cronenberg's first feature, *Shivers* (1975). The film concerns the denizens of Starliner Towers, an apartment building into which a scientist, Hobbes (Fred Doederlein) has released an organism that combines a human aphrodisiac and a venereal disease. Once infected, hosts are overcome with the desire to have sex, which also transmits the organism's infection to others. The previously-ordered middle-class lives of the inhabitants of the Towers are ruptured and they emerge as an increasingly orgiastic, undifferentiated mass of people. The film's protagonist, Roger St. Luc (Paul Hampton) who has resisted the infection for most of the film while trying to stop the parasite, eventually succumbs and the film ends on shots of the residents leaving the building, presumably to infect the world with their lust. The parasite ruptures the previously stable relationship between both the characters and their bodies and the characters with themselves until they are all essentially zombies without individual character. The film's ending suggests that they will go on to rupture the larger social fabric in the same way that the apartment's inhabitants disturb the order of the building.

The film takes the split between human and animal as its explicit subject. We learn of Hobbes' plan for the parasite he created from one of his colleagues, Rollo Linsky (Joe Silver): "Hobbes thought that man is an animal that thinks too much, an animal that has lost touch with



his instinct, his ‘primal self’ ... in other words, too much brain and not enough guts.” This is legible entirely in the terms of “inhumanity” as we’ve seen it. Though neither Hobbes nor Linky make the debt to signification specifically, there is a thread of excess rationality as the cause for this split and its attendant problems. In essence, Hobbes hopes to heal the rupture between human and animal by re-introducing animality to the human. Linky continues: “And what [Hobbes] came up with to help our guts along was a human parasite that is...” a combination of aphrodisiac and venereal disease, a modern version of the satyr’s tongue.” Hobbes thus hopes to use this animal parasite to circumvent rationality in the human inhabitants of Starliner Towers.

Hobbes shares an ironic relationship with his double, philosopher Thomas Hobbes, whose *Leviathan* offers one of the more compelling early modern accounts of politics. Both the Hobbes of *Shivers* and the Hobbes of *Leviathan* share a dedication to science. It is through science that Hobbes develops his parasites, and it’s the method of “geometry,” what Hobbes calls “the only science that it hath pleased God hitherto to bestow on mankind,”<sup>43</sup> that grounds *Leviathan*. There the similarity ends, for science takes the two men down remarkably different paths. As we have seen, in *Shivers*, Hobbes dedicates his scientific pursuits to robbing humans of their intellect in the hopes of returning them to a “state of nature.”<sup>44</sup> In *Leviathan*, Hobbes’ scientific conclusion is the “natural condition of mankind”<sup>45</sup> is to be embroiled in the cliché of “a war as is of every man against every man.”<sup>46</sup> Though it is not made explicit in *Shivers*, Hobbes must see this “war of all against all” as preferable to the then-contemporary humanity, so he replaces it with a “fuck of all against all,” taking to a certain extreme Hobbes’ claim that in the

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<sup>43</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Cambridge: Hackett, 1994), 19.

<sup>44</sup> Or as Hobbes puts it in the title of XIII: “The Natural Condition of Mankind.”

<sup>45</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 74.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

state of nature, “every man has a right to every thing, even to one another’s body.”<sup>47</sup> In

*Leviathan*, however, Hobbes’ solution is the sovereign:

*[O]ne person, of whose acts a great multitude, by mutual covenants one with another, have made themselves every one the author, to the end he may use the strength and means of them all, as he shall think expedient, for their peace and common defence.*<sup>48</sup>

It follows, for Hobbes, that the sovereign stands in for the “commonwealth,” and therefore the stronger, healthier, etc., the sovereign, the stronger, healthier, etc., the commonwealth. Were Cronenberg inclined to join more closely the Hobbes of *Leviathan* with the Hobbes of *Shivers*, then the goal of the scientist of Starliner Towers would not have been to remove intellection from his neighbors, but to use his scientific means to install a more effective sovereign for the apartment building.

Cronenberg, however, maintains a certain dedication to rupture rather than its recovery. Put another way, it’s not as if the introduction of the parasites returns anyone to a prelapsarian state of animal innocence. As Eisenstein and McGowan make explicit, the rupture with signification has always-already happened, making the idea of a return not only impractical, but nonsensical. Nor is it the case that Cronenberg’s film is overly concerned (as Wilson would have it) with the “Cartesian mind/body dialectic.”<sup>49</sup> Though Cronenberg himself has used this vocabulary, and Wilson claims that Cronenberg’s films are an “exploration of these terms”<sup>50</sup> and an attempt to destabilize them, I think the film is better understood as exploring the link between human(ity) and animal(ity). What indicates Cronenberg’s investment in rupture is precisely the

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 80. There is something of De Sade in this claim. Lindsay Anne Hallam connects De Sade and Cronenberg in *Screening the Marquis de Sade: Pleasure, Pain, and the Transgressive Body in Film* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011). Though I agree with her claim that Cronenberg (especially in *Crash*) explores new sexual possibilities like de Sade does in his work, I disagree fundamentally with her claim that Cronenberg’s films, like the work of de Sade, “provid[e] a cold, almost medical approach to observing and exploring the possibilities of the human body” (93).

<sup>48</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 109. Both the italics and the spelling of “defence” are in Hackett.

<sup>49</sup> Wilson, *Politics of Insects*, 36.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

way in which he refuses to entertain the possibility that his characters might be folded back into the animal world. Instead, what we see is that the parasite actually makes them more subject to the drive rather than restoring them to some instinctual, embodied simplicity. The parasitic infection puts the denizens of the Towers into a cycle of repetition that finds them fucking to infect others in a cycle without apparent end. Just as significantly, it's not a repetition with any chance of success – sure, each individual succeeds in infecting someone else, but there's no metric of success or ultimate goal, only endless repetition. Though the parasitic infection threatens the humanity of those it comes into contact with, there is no chance that the human characters will lapse back into some uncomplicated, instinctual animality, one that would be marked by sex, sure, but not the driven, repetitious, indeed rapacious appetites displayed by those infected. Even if the infected at the end of the film represent Hobbes' intention, it's difficult for viewers to imagine them as any kind of "success."

Moreover, the infected show a remarkably canny approach to infecting others that does not suggest a simple, instinctual relationship to the process of infection. Though many of the infected show a zombie-like dedication to propagating the infection – recall the hands jutting out from the walls at protagonist St. Luc in the corridor or the way that the infected emerge from over a rise when St. Luc finally gets outside the Towers<sup>51</sup> - the infected are not monolithically reduced to mindlessness. In the moment just prior to St. Luc's brief outdoor escape, he walks through the Towers' pool room. Three women are already there when he tries to walk past, frolicking not-unlike a Classical painting of water nymphs. The camera tracks along the side of the pool, following St. Luc's POV as two of the women turn to him and follow him to the edge

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<sup>51</sup> Which Adam Lowenstein has succinctly connected to the zombie film in *Shocking Representations: Historical Trauma, National Memory, and the Modern Horror Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 154-55.

of the pool, one of them shyly dragging her hair across her face in a coy gesture. The shot reverses to show a horrified-looking St. Luc from a low angle, then back to the two women leaning against the edge of the pool before we see another angle of St. Luc looking frantically to escape. If anyone looks like an animal in the scene it is the uninfected St. Luc – the two women who approach him look calm and in control, while the third ignores him completely. When St. Luc opens the door, we see another shot of the two women pushing away from the edge of the pool their prey gone for the moment – hardly the actions of someone given over entirely to instinctual appetite. St. Luc goes outside, seeing the mass of infected, and returns to the pool room where he is finally grabbed by one of the women. Though she grabs him, St. Luc doesn't get into the pool until he is pushed by another infected and overwhelmed. Though it's hardly a masterful plan executed flawlessly, the infected show a rudimentary ability to both plan their attack – the women wait to spring on St. Luc until he is at the edge – and work together – the infected that pushes St. Luc in even uses a tool to help push him. If Hobbes' goal is to reduce rationality completely in favor animal instinct then he has failed, and only committed more faithfully to the rupture between human and animal, installing the infected even more completely in the drive.<sup>52</sup>

Even *The Fly*, which provides the perfect opportunity to deal with the line between human and animal, continues Cronenberg's commitment to rupture. Though Brundle claims a desire to become the first "insect politician," it's also equally clear that he's not exactly an insect,

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<sup>52</sup> I am aware that we are treading on very slippery ground here, as our knowledge of what constitutes "the animal" is changing rapidly. Though psychoanalysis finds some value in splitting off the human from the animal (and psychoanalysis may be right), science has continually produced more and more evidence that those domains – communication, cooperation, compassion – that were considered exclusively human are increasingly recognizable in other species. I don't think this hurts my point about failure. Rather, Hobbes' attempts are even further doomed by his failure to recognize where the boundary between human and animal might lie, making any uncomplicated return to animality less, not more, likely.

which he acknowledges by dubbing himself “Brundlefly.” Though Brundle displays numerous insectoid behaviors – like vomiting on his food to aid digestion – he’s not actually becoming an insect as such but the hybrid creature that is neither human nor insect. And, as we saw with the infected in *Shivers*, Brundle’s transformation doesn’t lead to some kind of successful self-awareness or self-mastery. Though his human abilities are initially enhanced by his “accident,” – as witnessed by his new-found gymnastic ability and sexual charisma – it doesn’t take long for him to literally begin to fall apart, starting with a loose tooth and ending in a final moment of skin-sloughing as he attempts to put Quaiife in the teleportation pod. But Brundle is still human enough to be subject to the compulsion to repeat failure. As Wilson notes, Brundle attempts to justify his transformation, but “each rationalization, coming as it does after the specific change it seeks to explain has already occurred, must necessarily fail because Brundle does not know his own body.”<sup>53</sup> His failure extends beyond his ability to explain what’s happening and is repeated in his scientific endeavors. The first experiment with the pods that uses a live specimen becomes a gory tribute to the pod’s inability to work. Despite this failure he continues, successfully transporting a baboon a bit later. But then failure again as the fly contaminates Brundle’s attempt to teleport himself. Even once it is clear that this teleportation went horribly awry, Brundle remains committed to the machine, hoping that further teleportations will “purify” him. With those hopes dashed, he still doesn’t give up on the dubious machines but instead focuses on using the telepods to “fuse” himself, QUaiife, and their unborn baby into “the perfect family.” This process seems likewise doomed to failure – both technologically because the pods haven’t been shown to be that reliable but also ideologically as Brundle has no clear idea of what “the perfect family” might look like. Thus, despite the apparent attempt at continuity between human

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<sup>53</sup> Wilson, *Politics of Insects*, 61.

and animal/insect, *The Fly* makes the case that whatever hybridity occurs on the cellular level doesn't change Brundle's all-too-human relationship to failure.

The other reason to draw attention to the relationship between Cronenberg and the political value of the inhuman is the temporal boundaries on the human that Cronenberg draws. For Eisenstein and McGowan – as for psychoanalysis in general – the rupture of signification that produces the subject has always-already occurred. They claim rupture “does not magically happen one day during infancy when a child acquires language. From the beginning, the child is inserted in a signifying structure, even before it gains the capacity to speak or even to breathe.”<sup>54</sup> This is a claim, then, about the temporality of subjectivity – that any particular subject exists always-already as an “after” of some previous rupture of significance. But it is always an ambiguous past – we are unable to point to a particular historical moment and say “here is where signification emerged, and therefore we changed from animal to human.” This ambiguity helps account for the stubbornness of rupture to be overcome. As Eisenstein and McGowan point out, we might paper over the rupture, attempt to heal the wound that is constitutive of subjectivity, but such attempts are doomed to failure. Indeed other films will attempt to demonstrate the continuity of human and animal – recently *Jurassic World* (Colin Trevorrow, 2015) attempts to recuperate the villainous velociraptors from *Jurassic Park* (Steven Spielberg, 1993) by making protagonist Chris Owen the “alpha” of a pack of trained dinosaurs. Cronenberg, however, will have none of it – as monstrous as the human body appears in his films, there is never an attempt to return to animal innocence or any reliance on the continuity between animal and human.

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<sup>54</sup> Eisenstein and McGowan, *Rupture*, 276 n. 13.

However, the genius of Cronenberg's cinema lies not in his acknowledgement of rupture in the past, but rather his emphasis on, and awareness of, the rupture to come. Though *Shivers* and *The Fly* are decisive in their awareness that we cannot return to a prelapsarian innocence, his other films are just as aware that the rupture that inaugurated the human might be repeated. Not that a new humanity will emerge, but rather that subjects will cease to be human on the way to something else. In the same way that Eisenstein and McGowan are careful not to fall into "specism" by claiming a superiority of human over animal, I don't want to claim (and I don't think Cronenberg's films claim) that what is to come will be superior to the human. But such a possible rupture will be as decisive as the one between human and animal – good, bad or indifferent it will be a fissure over which nothing can effectively bridge. This is the insight that Cronenberg adds to Eisenstein and McGowan's notion of rupture. Though they are clear that rupture is the space for new values to emerge, they don't emphasize the importance of novelty to our understanding of the political. Cronenberg's engagement with the political is precisely on this question of the new, of the way in which rupture can and must produce something other than what has come before.

This emphasis brings the ending of *Videodrome* into sharper relief. Having killed Barry Convex (Leslie Carlson), Renn retreats to a rusty ship docked in a disused harbor. In another series of shot-countershot moments, Brand appears on a TV set to "guide" Renn since she has learned "that death is not the end." She exhorts him to "go all the way" into a "total transformation." Renn agrees after Brand tells him "it's easy." We see Renn's face in the same close-up from before, but when the shot turns back to the TV, we now see Renn on the screen as the camera pushes in. He puts the flesh-gun to his head and intones "Long live the new flesh" before shooting himself. As he does, we see a scene of flesh exploding out of the console before

a reaction shot of Renn. He then stands up, unzips his jacket, and performs the actions we've seen already on the console. This time after his "Long live the new flesh," the scene cuts to black and we hear a gunshot before the credits roll.

As Scott Wilson suggests, there are two broad ways to read this scene. The first is that Renn has committed suicide. He rejects this idea: "To assume that [Renn] has died effectively locks out any other interpretation, including any discussion of what the 'new flesh' might be and how it fits into what we have seen."<sup>55</sup> This would reduce his hallucinations to being "merely" hallucinations rather than an indication of some larger difficulty or project. The other option is to assume the ending is ambiguous, which frees us to be more open with interpreting the film's "political...content."<sup>56</sup> I disagree – though I think that the film's ending is ambiguous, I don't think the possibility of Renn's suicide necessarily obviates the film's political content. Instead, I would argue that the film's ending is on the side of rupture – the repetition of Renn's actions up to his slogan is a repetition of failure. Renn has unambiguously involved himself in the new flesh, as the flesh-gun indicates, but what's important is what is coming, the *new* part of the new flesh. The film engages in rupture formally by denying us Renn's second (possible) death on screen as he has become something new.

The formal, of course, is what is most often ignored in discussions of Cronenberg's cinema. One of the major exceptions is the work of Adam Lowenstein, and here I'm especially interested in his discussion of *eXistenZ* (1999) in "Interactive Spectatorship: Gaming, Mimicry, and Art Cinema: Between *Un chien andalou* and *eXistenZ*."<sup>57</sup> Lowenstein opens the chapter with

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<sup>55</sup> Wilson, *Politics of Insects*, 197.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Adam Lowenstein. *Dreaming of Cinema: Spectatorship, Surrealism, and the Age of Digital Media*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).



a question that resonates with our discussion so far: “How do we go about mapping the complex network of connections and disconnections between ‘old’ media, such as cinema, and ‘new’ media, such as video games?”<sup>58</sup> The question of the “new” in new media isn’t quite the same as the question of the “new” in Cronenberg, but it’s a fruitful place to start. To begin to answer the question, Lowenstein relies on an approach to new media indebted to Marsha Kinder, who formulates “digital experimentation”<sup>59</sup> as a kind of emphasis in narrative that chooses particular “data” (idea, characters, tropes) from the “database”<sup>60</sup> of stock material to instantiate a particular narrative. Lowenstein, however, shifts Kinder’s discussion from narrative to “the interrelated subjects of gaming and art cinema.”<sup>61</sup> Lowenstein draws together *eXistenZ* with *Un chien andalou* (1929) to outline “a shared commitment to a surrealist-inflected cinematic form perhaps most accurately described as interactive art cinema.”<sup>62</sup>

The scene of *eXistenZ* that first engages Lowenstein occurs when Ted Pikul (Jude Law) and Allegra Geller (Jennifer Jason Leigh) are inside the game world of *eXistenZ*. The pair are seated at a Chinese restaurant where they are served a mass of mutant amphibian parts. Pikul, despite finding the meal disgusting, starts eating. Geller tells him it’s a “game urge” that his character within the game must perform, not actually something that he, Ted Pikul, wants to do. Once he’s eaten, Pikul assembles an organic “gun” from the pieces and aims the gun at Geller in a moment that mimics an earlier attempt to assassinate the controversial game creator. The two scenes share the gun and the slogan “Death to the demoness Allegra Geller.” Lowenstein tells us that “this transfer of power from player to game [evidenced by Pikul’s inability to control

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 45.

himself] simulates a common formal feature of video games called ‘cut-scenes,’” and these cut-scenes are “interludes in the gamic action where the player does not control what occurs onscreen but instead becomes a spectator to what the game itself presents.”<sup>63</sup> This is significant because “what Cronenberg does by inserting this moment that resembles a cut-scene within *eXistenZ* is to invite spectator participation in a game of medium definition” where “Cronenberg asks spectators to associate their experiences of cinema with their experiences of video gaming.”<sup>64</sup> Which, I probably don’t need to add, is a new phenomenon relative to the cinema. This is not, however, video game as cinema. Lowenstein is clear to point out that “[v]iewers of *eXistenZ* must grapple with the questions of just how gamic cinema can really be and just how cinematic video games can really be.”<sup>65</sup> It’s not a cut-and-dried distinction, but one that requires spectator involvement. Spectators are offered another level of play with the realization that *eXistenZ* is indebted to *Videodrome*: “Pikul imitates Renn, *eXistenZ* imitates *Videodrome*, viewers ‘play’ across a number of Cronenberg films.”<sup>66</sup>

Lowenstein’s emphasis on the formal is crucial for our analysis here. It is both a corrective to Cronenberg scholars who ignore the formal aspects of Cronenberg’s work, but also a concrete example of Cronenberg’s engagement with the “new.” Though what, exactly, is meant by “the new flesh” in *Videodrome* might be unclear – is it the slit in Renn’s stomach? the gun that grows from/into his arm? the Videodrome tumor that catalyzes his hallucinations? all of the above? – the notion of new formal elements, borrowed from video games, offers us a concrete example of the ways that Cronenberg engages with novelty. We can’t, and shouldn’t, separate Cronenberg’s commitment to new configurations of the body – the sex-zombies of *Shivers*, the

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 62.

blood-draining phallus of *Rabid* (1977), the rage-monsters of *The Brood* (1979), the slit and flesh-gun of *Videodrome* – from Cronenberg’s commitment to new configurations of the cinema. The use of videogame techniques in *eXistenZ* might be the most obvious, but the overwhelming (and Oscar-winning) make-up effects in *The Fly*, as well as the relatively-early use of Steadicam in *Fast Company* (1979) suggest a commitment to formal novelty that both complements and extends the narrative and philosophical engagement with the new that runs through Cronenberg’s films via their focus on rupture.

Which returns us to the ending of *Videodrome*. The repetition of the gunshot and the black screen act as a formal recognition of rupture and an acknowledgement that something new has happened (even if the film isn’t entirely clear on what that new might be). But as with the continuity that Lowenstein highlights between Buñuel and Cronenberg, the final moments of *Videodrome* encourage us to find continuity in the film’s narrative world and to focus on the repetition. There is no before and after with rupture because all rupture is a repetition. Rather, it is a repetition that *Videodrome* acknowledges narratively and formally in its final moments. This is the structure of the political – not a single moment of all-encompassing *dissensus*, but a repetition of *redistribution* that constantly augments a community.

This moment of rupture is echoed in *Cosmopolis* (2012), where questions of novelty and rupture arise perhaps most forcefully in Cronenberg’s work. Adapted from Don DeLillo’s novel, Cronenberg’s film follows Eric Packer (Robert Pattinson), a billionaire asset manager as he takes his limousine across Manhattan to get a haircut. Throughout the day he has a series of episodic meetings with various characters, including his “head of theory,” Kinky (Samantha Morton) and an art dealer (Juliette Binoche) before coming to meet his fate in the rundown apartment of a former employee and fellow currency speculator Benno Levin (Paul Giamatti). The plot, thin as

it is, concerns the way that Packer has leveraged his billions of dollars on the assumption that the Chinese Yuan cannot get any stronger. Packer's attempt to "short" the currency fails, wiping out his fortune, which leads him to Levin's door and something like a cathartic realization.

Packer, and by extension the film, is obsessed with novelty. The first half of the film follows a series of meetings Packer takes in his limousine as it crawls across Manhattan, mostly with his employees. He asks them inscrutable questions ("Why are they called airports?") or makes gnomic remarks ("The logical extension of our business is murder.") as they engage in elliptical dialogue about the business of currency speculation. At one point, in meeting with his Systems Analyst Michael (Philip Nozuka), Packer asks "Why am I seeing things that haven't happened yet?" It's the nature of currency speculation, the film slowly reveals, to suck up as much information as possible in the hope of converting that information into a usable model for predicting what a given currency will do. It is more significant that Packer is obsessed with the Yuan, a currency for China, which is always, because of the International Dateline and the agreements structured around it, always in the future with respect to Packer in New York City. The film isn't shy about linking Packer to capitalism more generally, and the film makes clear that capitalism in its most pure, abstract, and virtual form exists to exploit the future, its very potentiality.

Which is precisely where Packer missteps, because he is obsessed with the future and with what is new but without any means to account for rupture. In fact, in the film's conception, capitalism is a machine for converting the unknown future into the known present. The variability of the Yuan can (theoretically) be tamed and converted into profit because Packer has no concept that something unpredictable, some rupture, may occur. Packer's head of theory,

Kinsky, blames the Yuan's behavior on "human rationality" but she could just as easily be talking about capitalism when she connects it to the future:

It pretends not to see the horror and death at the end of the schemes it builds. This is a protest against the future. They won't hold off the future. They want to normalize it, keep it from overwhelming the present. The future is always a wholeness, a sameness.

Though Kinsky identifies this flaw (and Packer seems to agree), this awareness does not appear to inform their behavior. The very nature of currency speculation is to bet based on the past, to measure the future by the past and create profit in the present. In Packer's case, it fails spectacularly, and his meeting with Levin demonstrates exactly why: he's completely unopen to rupture. Levin's central monologue makes this clear:

You try to predict movements by drawing on patterns in nature. Yes, of course, the mathematical properties of tree rings, sunflower seeds, the limbs of galactic spirals. I learned this. I loved the cross harmonies between nature and data. You taught me this. You made this form of analysis horribly and sadistically precise. But you forgot something along the way...The importance of the lopsided. The thing that's skewed a little. You were looking for balance - beautiful balance, equals parts, equal sides.

But Packer's world is a world without rupture, without room for rupture,<sup>67</sup> where rupture must be ignored in favor of the quantifiable and the convertible, where the fungible rules all.

Cronenberg, however, is no less obsessed with rupture in *Cosmopolis* than he has been in his other films. The difference is that this time he's obsessed by *withholding* rupture, both narratively and visually, from the audience. The film moves, episodically, from scene to scene and nothing that happens in one scene seems to have much impact on the scenes that follow. Packer has a conversation with his wife (Sarah Gadon), but he can't convince her they should consummate their marriage. Packer has sex with several women, his wife notices this, but doesn't seem interested in letting it affect anything. Packer meets with his employees/advisors,

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<sup>67</sup> His asymmetrical prostate notwithstanding, as Levin points out.

but doesn't change his course on shorting the Yuan. Packer loses his fortune, but not even that appears to have any material effect on his life. His wife says, in the same flat voice she's used throughout the film, that he'll be supported even as their marriage is mostly over, but Packer still has his bodyguard, his limousine, and his eventual haircut. The moment of the film that should feel like rupture, when Packer shoots his bodyguard Torval (Kevin Durand) with no apparent justification, also has no consequences. This murder is mirrored by Packer's encounter with the "pastry assassin" (Mathieu Amalric) who hurls a confection at Packer. It all adds up to nothing, even unto the final scene, which finds Levin, in full Brando-in-*Apocalypse-Now*-mode, holding a revolver on Packer before a cut to black, the film ending.

This moment, of course, echoes the final moments of *Videodrome*. However, while the ending of *Videodrome* kept open the door to rupture, the ending of *Cosmopolis* refuses to acknowledge the possibility. While Levin could hold Packer to the consequences of his meddling, indeed to the consequences of his murder in an eye-for-an-eye way, the film refuses to offer us that possibility. *Videodrome*'s apparent suicide offers the space for an interpretation that change has and will continue. Levin's threat, and the cut to black that occurs before Levin can consummate the gesture, suggest instead that the film will continue on, with Packer facing no significant consequences for his actions. By refusing rupture in *Cosmopolis*, Cronenberg only highlights how significant it has been in his previous films.

## 6.0 “A NICE TOUCH”: AFFIRMATION AND THE POLITICAL IN TARANTINO’S HISTORICAL FILMS

The most potent example of the political in Quentin Tarantino’s work is the circulation of the so-called “Lincoln letter” in *The Hateful Eight* (2015). The film itself plays out as part Western, part parlor-room mystery. Bounty hunter John “The Hangman” Ruth (Kurt Russell) has hired a special coach to get him to Red Rock before an impending snow storm makes travel impossible. He needs to get to Red Rock to hand over Daisy Domergue (Jennifer Jason Leigh) for execution. As the film opens, Ruth’s coach stops for Marquis Warren (Samuel L. Jackson), a fellow bounty hunter with a couple of dead bodies and a horse that’s gone lame, stranding him in the snow. Despite his general distrust, Ruth agrees to let Warren ride with him to Minnie’s Haberdashery, the original goal of Red Rock proving impossible given the volume of snow. The coach then encounters a man claiming to be the new sheriff of Red Rock, Chris Mannix (Walton Goggins). Ruth takes Warren as an ally against the racist Mannix as the quartet arrives at Minnie’s, only to find it occupied by another quartet of stranded travelers. The rest of the plot unfolds as we learn about the inhabitants of Minnie’s and the deadly game of cat-and-mouse being played by the Domergue gang.

After Marquis Warren has joined John Ruth and Daisy Domergue in the couch headed for Minnie’s Haberdashery (but crucially before they are joined by Mannix), the pair converse about their respective approaches to bounty hunting. This establishes a sense of trust, and so Ruth asks,

elliptically, for the letter. Warren is reluctant, but pulls it from an inner coat pocket. In close-up we watch Ruth read the letter, with close-ups of a smirking Warren and a perplexed Doumergue before returning to Ruth, who looks pleased at what he's read. The letter complete, Ruth reads aloud "Ole' Mary Todd's callin', so I guess it must be time for bed...Ole' Mary Todd... that gets me." Ruth then explains that the letter is "a letter from Lincoln. It's a letter from Lincoln to him" and points to Warren. Moreover, "they shared a correspondence during the war. They was pen pals. This is just one of the letters." As Ruth completes his explanation, Domergue spits on the letter in a two-shot before we cut to a surprised Warren, who punches Domergue so hard she falls out of the coach. Since she's chained to Ruth, this creates a kind of farcical moment as the pair fall into the snow, the coach has to stop, and the letter is recovered. Ruth tells Domergue "You ruin that letter of his, that nigger's gonna' stomp your ass to death. And when he do, I'm gonna' sit back on that wagon wheel watch and laugh."

This scene serves a number of important functions in the film – it establishes the casual, violent misogyny directed at Domergue, cements the historical setting, and puts Warren and Ruth on the same proverbial "team." But for our purposes it establishes the importance of the Lincoln letter. What could be seen as just another prop, a way to get some exposition out of the way by establishing the post-Civil War time period that would undergird the film's subsequent treatment of race and racial tension (already signaled by the repeated reference to Warren as "nigger"), is instead revealed to be something more. Ruth, despite his nickname, is almost bashful as he asks for the letter, and his eyes appear to well up, if not outright spill, as he reads the letter. Perhaps more significantly, in his final exchange with Domergue he tells her that he would be willing to sit by and let Warren kill her if the letter were damaged. Considering that the previous dialogue scene was all about establishing Ruth's reputation for bringing fugitives in



alive to see them hang, that he is willing to forego that pleasure for the hypothetical loss of the Lincoln letter signals its importance.

The next appearance of the Lincoln letter is during a brief moment as the denizens of Minnie's Haberdashery get to know one another. The British hangman Oswaldo Mobray (Tim Roth) asks Mannix "Are you the chap with the Lincoln letter?" Mannix looks totally confused and asks "the Lincoln what?" Mobray continues to explain, and Mannix is increasingly incredulous at the very idea of the letter. Mobray ends with "I heard someone in your party had a letter from Abraham Lincoln, and I assumed it was you" before gesturing to Mannix. Ruth answers after a cut, "Not him, the black fella in the stables." In the reverse shot Mobray asks "The nigger in the stable has a letter from Abraham Lincoln?" before his incredulity is echoed exactly by Mannix: "The nigger in the stable has a letter from Abraham Lincoln." This scene, obviously played for laughs between the foreigner and the Southern Other, further establishes the significance of the Lincoln letter. While the racial implications of the letter were latent in the scene where it was introduced – obviously the white Ruth asking for a letter from a black man who corresponded with the author of the Emancipation Proclamation will have some racial overtones – the relationship between the letter's status as an object and the race of its owner is cemented. Not only does Warren's racial status open Mobray's salvo about how "Minnie's Haberdashery is about to get cozy over the next few days," he also assumes that the owner of the letter is the white Mannix. This, despite the fact that Mannix speaks with a decidedly Southern drawl and would therefore be unlikely to appreciate a letter from President Lincoln. Perhaps more significantly, both Mobray and Mannix share an incredulity that "the black fella" would possess the letter. The film reinforces this connection between the letter and its bearer's race by

cutting immediately to a shot of Warren putting away tack in the stables after Mannix's incredulous question.

In fact it is Mannix's incredulity that drives the letter's next appearance, and establishes it as a fundamentally political object. The entire crew in Minnie's has assembled around a table to dig into the stew prepared, supposedly, by Bob the Mexican (Demián Bichir). Ruth has relieved everyone of their guns but Warren, and an uneasy truce has been established between the initial party (headed by Ruth) and those already present at Minnie's on their arrival. Mobray has, in fact, established his own distribution of the sensible by designating half the room for Ruth and company and half for those there when Ruth arrived. The neutral zone is the table that serves as a dining spot as the whole company gathers over the stew that was cooking on arrival.<sup>1</sup> It is at the table over stew that Mannix inquires after the Lincoln letter to Warren: "John Ruth says you gotta Lincoln letter." Despite Warren's affirmations, Mannix's continues his inquiry, building up to "The Abraham Lincoln...the President of the United States...Wrote you a letter personally?" Warren continues his affirmations until Mannix makes the point that, as Ruth tells, Warren wasn't "just some random nigger soldier picked from a pile of letters" but rather Warren and Lincoln were "practically pen pals." The *coup de grâce* is Mannix's assertion that "and a pen pal's practically a friend." Though everyone is calm throughout this exchange, Mannix reaches a crescendo, turning from Warren to Ruth: "John Ruth, I hate to be the one to break it to ya, but nobody in Minnie's Haberdashery has ever corresponded with Abraham Lincoln – least of all

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the stew that will provide part of Warren's case against Domergue's accomplishes, as the stew tastes like it was made by Minnie, not Bob.

that nigger there.” It’s a damning accusation, and it registers on Ruth’s face as he slowly turns to Warren.<sup>2</sup>

After turning to Warren, Ruth asks him “was that all horseshit,” which Warren confirms as Domergue and Mannix laugh. Ruth seems genuinely hurt by this revelation, his initial investment in the Lincoln letter earlier in the film coming back, causing him to declare “So I guess it’s true what they say about you people. You can’t believe a fuckin’ word that comes outta your mouths.” Warren is unmoved, responding “What’s wrong? I hurt your feelings?” to which Ruth responds in the positive. And it is Warren’s response to Ruth’s pain that reveals just how significant the letter is as an instance of the political:

Now I know I’m the only black son-of-a-bitch you ever conversed with, so I’m gonna cut your ass some slack. But you ain’t got no idea what a black man starin’ down America looks like.<sup>3</sup> Only time black folks is safe, is when white folks are disarmed. And this letter had the desired effect of disarming white folks.

This is a classic instance of the political in the terms that Rancière describes. As we have seen, for Rancière the political occurs when some previously uncounted part of a community suddenly comes to count through a (re)distribution of the sensible. Though Warren doesn’t use Rancièreian language – he doesn’t tell Ruth he has “redistributed the sensible so that the part with no part (aka the “black man”) can be identified with the whole of the community – but that’s exactly what the Lincoln letter does. Warren says white people are “disarmed” instead of “white people have their sensible redistributed,” but it amounts to the same thing. In the first scene, where Ruth asks to see the letter, it gives Warren credibility, allows Ruth to see Warren as

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<sup>2</sup> Tarantino’s screenplay suggests “Frankly, now that [Ruth] thinks about it, the letter’s authenticity does seem unlikely.” Quentin Tarantino, *The Hateful Eight: A Screenplay* (New York: Hachette, 2015), 89.

<sup>3</sup> I hope I needn’t stress the unfortunately evergreen validity of Warren’s claim.

someone who *counts* because he is someone who corresponds, or corresponded,<sup>4</sup> with President Abraham Lincoln. And if his company is good enough for Lincoln, then Warren becomes part of the community, and Ruth is more inclined to trust him. Though the letter is a fiction,<sup>5</sup> it causes Ruth (and presumably others) to see Warren anew – the sensible, for the readers of the letter, has been redistributed.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, it’s a successful gesture. As Warren asks “You wanna know why I lie about something like that white man? Got me on that stage coach, didn’t it?”

Mannix, however, is having none of Warren’s revelation: “Well I’ll tell you like the Lord told John, a letter from Abraham Lincoln wouldn’t have that kinda effect on me. I might let a whore piss on it.” This might seem like yet more incredulity on Mannix’s part, used by Tarantino to establish his true-blue (or perhaps true-grey) Confederate leanings. No Rebel would take a letter from Abraham “Freed the Slaves” Lincoln as anything other than an insult. But Tarantino has more than that in mind, and it is in the letter’s final appearance that its political status is reinforced, and moreover the film makes it clear that as an example of the political, the letter is fundamentally aesthetic as well.

The Lincoln letter makes its final appearance in the film’s last scene, but in the interim, it is revealed that Doumergue’s brother Jody (Channing Tatum) has been hiding under the floorboards of Minnie’s since before the arrival of Ruth’s party. In fact, Mobray, Bob, and Joe Gage (Michael Madsen) are all working for the Domergue gang, and in a flashback we see that they slaughter everyone in Minnie’s with the exception of General Smithers (Bruce Dern). Ruth drinks poisoned coffee before dying, Gage and Bob are killed quickly, leaving Mobray and

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<sup>4</sup> And “correspond” should take on multiple valences here, as identification and counting are related to corresponding as well.

<sup>5</sup> A thought to which we will return.

<sup>6</sup> And here we might pause and wonder how the political, for Rancière, might emerge and not only create non-progressive possibilities, but might also emerge from a patent lie, benevolent (as Warren’s is) or not.

Domergue against Warren, who has been shot in the crotch by Jody, who was also shot to death. This leaves Mannix in the middle, against Warren because he's black, but reluctant as a law man to join Domergue's side. The film generates significant tension by suggesting that Mannix, who was also shot in the kerfuffle that killed Bob and Gage, will join Domergue for the promise of getting to collect the bounties on the already-dead members of the Domergue gang. With Warren crotch-shot and bed-bound, the film cuts between close-ups of Warren's worried face and a relaxed Mannix as he negotiates with Domergue and Mobray. Once it's clear that Mannix won't side with Domergue, a scuffle ensues in which Mannix threatens to shoot her. But Warren insists:

John Ruth was one mighty, mighty bastard, but the last thing that bastard did before he died was save your life. We gone die white boy. We ain't got no say in that. There is one thing left we do have a say in. And that's how we kill this bitch...When the hangman catches you, you hang.

To this, Mannix responds by repeating Ruth's phrase from earlier, "You only need to hang mean bastards, but mean bastards you need to hang." During this exchange we see Mannix and Warren in a two shot that has a deep focus quality to it – the space between them is blurry, as if a kind of compositing has been done,<sup>7</sup> while in the reverse shot Domergue is laid on her side parallel to the length of the frame.

The scene cuts to another frame higher in Minnie's Haberdashery, into which is hoisted Domergue, now vertical and dangling from the end of a rope. Mannix and Warren, sharing a frame in the reverse shot, are hoisting her up, struggling because of their injuries. They succeed in tying the rope off, killing Domergue in the process. With nothing to do but wait to die, or perhaps help to come once the storm has passed, the camera slowly tracks up the bloody body of

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<sup>7</sup> The effect will be familiar to anyone who has seen *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941), though it was no-doubt achieved slightly differently by Tarantino's 70mm process.

Mannix, taking in Warren in the background as Mannix opens his eyes some unspecified time after Domergue's death. He startles Warren with "Hey, can I see that Lincoln letter?" Struggling, Warren retrieves it, handing it to Mannix in the same frame, which has now shifted higher, leaving only Mannix' hand visible. Mannix grasps the letter, and a cut brings it in front of him as he starts to read. Here, the contents of the letter are revealed in full, where "Lincoln" writes about wishing "there were more hours in the day."<sup>8</sup> The camera pulls out to take in both men in the background and the hanging body of Domergue in the foreground as Mannix reads. As with Ruth, Mannix notes the letter's "Ole' Mary Todd," calling it "a nice touch." Warren acknowledges the compliment before Mannix crumples the letter, almost gently, and throws it away before the film cuts to black and the credits.

Two things are significant about this final scene. The most obvious is that it brings together the film's most opposed ideological enemies. Though Warren displays little regard for Mannix – with almost none of the rancor he heaps on General Smithers, the rancor that results in Smithers pulling a gun and Warren shooting him – Mannix is against Warren from the moment they meet in the coach. Mannix's general racism and particular animus towards Warren are reiterated in almost every scene they share, and some they don't. But they are united, first by the killing of Domergue, and then by the Lincoln letter. It's impossible to say that the Lincoln letter persuades Mannix – he knows it's a fraud – but with death nearing it's hard to imagine him choosing to read the letter if he wasn't looking to be "disarmed" in some way. Mannix's desire to see the letter further emphasizes its effectiveness, its power. More significantly, Mannix's observation simultaneously reinforces Ruth's sense of the letter – "Ole' Mary Todd – gets me

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<sup>8</sup> It's perhaps worth noting that the published screenplay does not list the text of the letter – it simply suggests "Chris reads" Tarantino, *Hateful Eight: A Screenplay*, (New York: Grand Central, 2015) 165.

every time” – while specifically making an aesthetic claim for the letter. While it was obvious that the letter as a sensory object – and one crafted by Warren to have an appeal – was always-already aesthetic, it’s important that Mannix’s final comment on the matter is to say “Ole’ Mary Todd – that’s a nice touch.” This moment acknowledges the constructed, aesthetic nature of the letter. Which, of course, accords with what we know of the political, which is always a redistribution of the sensible through something aesthetic. In its final moments, and indeed the final moments of the film, the letter is reinforced as a potent political object, one that is grounded in aesthetics, in a “nice touch.”

To really limn the significance of the Lincoln letter from the perspective of the political, we must first detour through the background from which Rancière’s notion of the political emerges. Though Rancière is careful to ground his conception of the political in the history of political philosophy, he is very urgently arguing against other notions of “politics” that were (and perhaps still are) ascendant. Rancière opens his discussion in “Ten Theses on Politics” with Plato, who in *Laws* offers “a systematic inventory of the qualifications required for governing and the correlative qualifications for being ruled.”<sup>9</sup> These include rule by those with strength, age, knowledge, etc. As Rancière tells us, “The list ought to stop there. However, Plato lists a seventh possible qualification for determining who is able to exercise the *arkhè*.”<sup>10</sup> This “qualification” is said to be “the choice of God” or “the drawing of lots.”<sup>11</sup> This is where everything begins for Rancière, as the “choice of God” is another term for democracy: “Democracy is the specific situation in which it is the absence of entitlement that entitles one to

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<sup>9</sup> Jacques Rancière, “10 Theses on the Political” *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 30-31.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* Emphasis in original.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

exercise the *arkhè*.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, rather than specific superiority – the right to rule because of superior knowledge, for instance – democracy is that regime in which what entitles someone to rule is the fact that they possess no such superiority. And so a community might be separated into those who have a “right” to rule by dint of “seniority, birth, wealth, virtue, or knowledge”<sup>13</sup> and the “demos,” or those who have no such right to rule. Rancière dubs these “the poor,”<sup>14</sup> who are not the economically disadvantaged, “but simply the people who do not count, who have no entitlement to exercise the power of the *arkhè*, none for which they might be counted.” But this paradox – rule by those with no right to rule – “exists only as a rupture with the logic of *arkhè*,”<sup>15</sup> as “[t]he people is the supplement that disjoins the population from itself, by suspending all logics of legitimate domination.”<sup>16</sup>

Rancière is at pains to make clear that the political “is an exception in relation to the principles” that lead “people to gather in communities.”<sup>17</sup> For Rancière, “[t]he ‘normal’ order of things is for human communities to gather under the rule of those who are qualified to rule and whose qualifications are evident by dint of their very rule.”<sup>18</sup> This ‘normal’ order is what Rancière dubs “the police” (as we have seen) because the “police” is that order which emphasizes the “natural” quality of rule by those who are entitled by some superiority – wealth, birth, knowledge, etc. – to rule. Opposed to this state of existence is the political, which exposes the existence of those with no right to rule. But we are not yet done with Rancière’s catalog of what the political *isn’t*.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.



Though Rancière is loath to name names, he is willing to outline the positions of his opponents. For him, “Political conflict does not involve an opposition between groups with different interests. It forms an opposition between logics that count the parties and parts of the community in different ways.”<sup>19</sup> For Rancière, then, it is less significant that two groups have differing goals than it is that they have different ways of understanding – or making visible – those to whom those goals are addressed. The question still lingers why this must be so, why political conflict isn’t simply an instance of oppositional opinions in the realm of the social. Rancière addresses this a bit later in the essay when he tells us “politics cannot be identified with the model of communicative action.”<sup>20</sup> This is an example of Rancière’s reticence vis-à-vis his sources, but it’s a clear reference to Habermas, who founds “communicative action” on a kind of rational exchange between individuals. At the center of this is argumentation, which is “that type of speech in which participants thematize contested validity claims and attempt to vindicate or criticize them through argumentation.”<sup>21</sup> Though “communicative action” has obvious validity in parliamentary procedures<sup>22</sup> and certain specific sites, Rancière finds it lacking as a foundational principle for the political as such. His reasoning is convincing: “This model presupposes partners that are already preconstituted as such and discursive forms that entail a speech community, the constraint of which is always explicable.”<sup>23</sup> But for Rancière, these “partners are no more constituted than is the object or state of discussion itself.”<sup>24</sup> Thus, if one has cause to not hear the speech of someone, that person is barred *a priori* from the space of “communicative action.”

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>21</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*. Trans. Thomas McCarthy. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 18.

<sup>22</sup> To which Rancière makes a dismissive reference elsewhere in the essay.

<sup>23</sup> Rancière, “10 Theses,” 38.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

Thus Rancière perfectly expresses why Warren needs the Lincoln letter and why it works. Rancière begins by discussing how his view differs from that of Aristotle. In Aristotle, “The sign of the political nature of humans is constituted by their possession of the *logos*, which is alone able to demonstrate a community in the *aisthesis* of the just and the unjust.”<sup>25</sup> Here, Rancière means something like “sensibility” by *aesthesis*, and more significantly, this sensibility can be established and verified only by speech that is obviously in possession of the *logos*, “in contrast to the *phôné*, appropriate only for expressing feelings of pleasure and displeasure.”<sup>26</sup> The trick, however, is in understanding the difference when one hears it – a parrot may mouth words, but it does not necessarily possess the *logos*. Rancière puts it quite pointedly:

The only practical difficulty lies in knowing in which sign this sign can be recognized; that is, how you can be sure that the human animal mouthing a noise in front of you is actually articulating a discourse, rather than merely expressing a state of being?<sup>27</sup>

But really, it’s not about being sure that the person in front of you is offering political discourse to you that must be recognized. Rather, it is the opposite case, as Rancière makes clear:

If there is someone you do not wish to recognize as a political being, you begin by not seeing him as the bearer of the signs of politics, by not understanding what he says, by not hearing what issues from his mouth as discourse.<sup>28</sup>

In the context of this essay, Rancière uses “domestic” examples:

Traditionally, in order to deny the political quality of a category – workers, women, and so on – all that was required was to assert that they belong to a ‘domestic’ space that was separated from public life, one from which only groans or cries expressing suffering, hunger or anger could emerge, but not actual speech demonstrating a shared *aisthesis*.

Elsewhere,<sup>29</sup> however, Rancière’s example is the slave, and it’s not hard to navigate from the example of the slave to the example of the “black Major.” What the Lincoln letter does for him is

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

establish his utterances as discourse rather than simple “groans or cries,” and while it’s a stretch to say that it is a document that creates equality between Warren and Ruth (or Warren and anyone else), by “disarming white folks,” the Lincoln letter legitimates Warren in the eyes of Ruth, and eventually, Mannix.

*The Hateful Eight* is also dismissive of the typical renderings of the political as Rancière describes them. This is most evident in the scene where Mobray articulates his view on justice. The scene opens, *in media res*, on a discussion between Mobray (on one side of the table) and Ruth (on the other side of the table, shackled to Domergue). From the outset, Mobray stipulates that Domergue is guilty, and then suggests the following:

John Ruth wants to take you back to Red Rock to stand trial for murder. And if you’re found guilty, the people of Red Rock will hang you in the town square. And as the hangman, I will perform the execution. And if all those things end up taking place, that’s what civilized society calls justice.

There is, one imagines, very little to object to here, as it is a fairly uncontroversial statement of legal precedent.<sup>30</sup> But Mobray continues:

However if the relatives and loved ones of the person you murdered were outside that door right now. And after busting down that door, they drug you out in the snow and strung you up by the neck – that would be frontier justice.

Again, nothing particularly controversial. This would seem to be an instance of what Rancière criticizes in so-called “political conflict,” where the interests of two parties must be mediated. In this case the demands of the “relatives and loved ones” for satisfaction weighed against the state’s demand for or interest in hanging the correct person. And in fact Mobray seems to come down on the side of the state in this instance, as his summation of the conflict is precise: “Now

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<sup>29</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 13.

<sup>30</sup> Irrespective, of course, of what one thinks of the justice of the death penalty.

the good part about frontier justice is it's very thirst quenching. The bad part is it's apt to be wrong as right." The equivocation – "apt to be [as] wrong as right" – may stand as a larger critique of "communicative action," which in argumentation between two parties is similarly as "apt to be as wrong as right," but Mobray's next move founds his opposition to the political as Rancière describes it.

Justice, in Mobray's reading, stems from the decision of a trial, while frontier justice stems from the feelings of the aggrieved. The difference, for Mobray, perhaps narcissistically, is "the hangman" (who Mobray refers to explicitly as "me"). More specifically, the hangman's apparent "dispassions":

To me, it doesn't matter what you did. When I hang you, I will get no satisfaction from your death. It's my job. I hang you in Red Rock, I go to the next town, I hang somebody else there. The man who pulls the lever that breaks your neck will be a dispassionate man. And that dispassion is the very essence of justice. For justice delivered without dispassion is always in danger of not being justice.

What Mobray demonstrates for us is that the model of negotiated interested – where we must take account of the interest of different parties – devolves into what Rancière dubs "the police." Recall that under the police, "society...is made up of groups tied to specific modes of doing, to places in which these occupations are exercised, and to modes of being corresponding to these occupations and their places."<sup>31</sup> In Mobray's account, the Hangman is one such occupation, his dispassion a guarantee of the justice he provides. But by tying the Hangman to his specific occupation this view also ties everyone else to their occupation, if only negatively, as they lack the dispassion of the Hangman's occupation. My argument, following Rancière, is that the "model of communicative action" of the negotiation of interests (or disinterests in the case of

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<sup>31</sup> Rancière, "10 Theses," 36. Note that "corresponding" here should make us think of the Warren/Lincoln "corresponding."

Mobray/Mobray as Hangman) presupposes partners (as Rancière dubs them) who belong to specific modes and occupations. Which is to say that “communicative action” is on the side of an order with pre-established understandings of its participants. In other words, the police order.

A key intertext for the *Hateful Eight*'s discussion of justice and passion is John Ford's *Young Mr. Lincoln*. The film's plot – which follows the titular figure (played by Peter Fonda) through an early legal triumph which will set him on his way towards immortality as President Lincoln – features an episode in which a pair of brothers from out-of-town are involved in a murder. The members of the town try to lynch the brothers, but it is Lincoln who bars the door to jail and persuades the townsfolk “to give the boys a fair trial – a jury trial – before you hang ‘em.” It's an odd moment because Lincoln doesn't attempt to dissuade the mob of the boys' guilt, but rather attempts to redirect it in the form of the state-sanctioned violence of hanging after trial-by-jury. The editors of *Cahiers du Cinema*, in their famous analysis of the film, make it clear why this must be:

Lincoln's action, insofar as he represents Law, can only be the, if necessary violent, prohibition of any non-legal violence. Since the whole film is meant to manifest Lincoln's absolute superiority to all those who surround him, the scene of the lynching provides the opportunity for a masterly demonstration.<sup>32</sup>

Lincoln, then, is using this opportunity to spurn lynching and re-legitimize the state, the state of which he will become the main symbol when “young” is no longer appended to the Mr. Lincoln. The film attempts to be uncomplicated in its establishment of justice through trial-by-jury, but it's not a terribly satisfying moment nor a convincing argument. *The Hateful Eight*, in part, is a kind of response to this moment.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> “John Ford's *Young Mr. Lincoln*” A Collective Text by the Editors of *Cahiers du Cinema* in *Movie and Method, Volume 1*, ed Bill Nichols, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 515.

<sup>33</sup> I don't think it's a specific rebuttal, but Tarantino is both aware of Ford's Western legacy and rejects it: “One of my American Western heroes is not John Ford, obviously. To say the least, I hate him. Forget about faceless Indians

It would be reasonable to ask at this point where the film seems to stand on the question of justice. The issue, however may be hopelessly muddy. On the one hand, Daisy Domergue ends the film being hanged by the neck as one of the final acts of two dying men, Warren and Mannix. This is not justice as described by Mobray in the slightest. On the other hand, however, the question for both men is less about justice *per se* than it is about rational self-interest. As Mannix points out, Domergue actively colluded in the attempt to poison Mannix, and with both Mannix and Warren in danger of passing out due to blood loss, there's little in the way of justification for keeping Domergue alive when she poses such a significant threat. The question of justice is then left undecided by the film. Mobray, however, seems persuasive in explicating his theory, but that will only lead us astray. Later, the film reveals to us that Oswaldo Mobray may indeed be the hangman headed for Red Rock, but the man speaking words of justice is not Oswaldo Mobray but "English Pete," and a part of Domergue's gang. His enthusiasm for justice is then just a smoke-screen to cover up the fact that he isn't really a hangman and has a vested interest in keeping Ruth occupied.

This goes part of the way towards explaining why his discussion of justice is unsatisfying. It's a constitutive dissatisfaction, because satisfaction is "as apt to be wrong as right." The other part of it that I would highlight is that Mobray's conception of justice is essentially privative – justice is doubly marked by an absence. An absence of passion on one hand, and an absence of satisfaction on the other. To deliver justice there must be an absence of

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he killed like zombies. It really is people like that that kept alive this idea of Anglo-Saxon humanity compared to everybody else's humanity — and the idea that that's hogwash is a very new idea in relative terms. And you can see it in the cinema in the '30s and '40s — it's still there." "Tarantino Talks to Gates" *The Root*, December 2012, [http://www.theroot.com/articles/history/2012/12/django\\_unchained\\_trilogy\\_and\\_more\\_tarantino\\_talks\\_to\\_gates/5/](http://www.theroot.com/articles/history/2012/12/django_unchained_trilogy_and_more_tarantino_talks_to_gates/5/). This interview is unavailable at the time of defense, but this quote opens an essay by Kent Jones: "Intolerance," *Film Comment*, May 2013, <https://www.filmcomment.com/article/intolerance-quentin-tarantino-john-ford/>, where he offers a rebuttal to Tarantino's description of Ford. <https://www.filmcomment.com/article/intolerance-quentin-tarantino-john-ford/>

passion on the part of the hangman (otherwise he acts out of revenge), and an absence of satisfaction for those who would see the guilty hang immediately. Justice, as a politics, is founded on the model of “*this* and not *that*.” According to Mobray the “this” is dispassion and the “that” is the heated desires of “relatives and loved-ones.”

Such a privative understanding of the political returns us to the Lincoln letter. In contrast to the “*this*, not *that*” discussion of justice, the Lincoln letter makes clear that the political is fundamentally affirmative, with a structure of “this *and* that.” Here, we should recall the almost overburdened content of the political instances of Troma films. In scene after scene we saw instances where the films made “interventions into the visible and sayable,” as Rancière characterizes the political. But while the films were distributing the sensible in particular ways, they were also articulating arguments about how those interventions should be understood – the scene outside the Chicken Bunker in *Poultrygeist* (2005) intervenes in the visible and sayable with a song-and-dance number, but it also articulates arguments about the social – including commentary on obesity and wage rights. So frequent are the film’s insinuations on women’s equality, the corruption of corporations, and the dangers posed to the environment that it risks becoming nothing more than a joke. In contrast, the political moments in *The Hateful Eight* are almost austere. I would argue, then, that the Lincoln letter is an instance of the political in its purest form, one that simply says “and this also.” From Warren’s perspective, the goal of the letter is to “disarm white folks” by getting them to see him as a fellow human. The letter says “you’re a person, see me as a person too.”

What makes the Lincoln letter interesting is that its “purity” reflects on Rancière’s conception of the political as well. Though Rancière never formulates it this way, his conception of the political is always-already affirmative. It says “this *and* that.” What the Lincoln letter

highlights is that Rancière is utterly unconcerned with depriving some of rights to promote others. He doesn't dismiss the "rightful" rule by the wealthy. However, by "supplementing" them with the *demos* (to which the wealthy can never belong), he renders them equal. Though equality has long been seen as the underlying concern of Rancière's project,<sup>34</sup> I think it's worth noting that it's an affirmative equality rather than a privative one. The Lincoln letter does not scold white folks for being white supremacist, but instead attempts to promote Warren to their ranks. It doesn't try to remove the stain of racism, but instead affirm the humanity of a black man. Thus a purely political gesture – like the Lincoln letter – first and foremost makes a demand that is essentially devoid of content. This is what Rancière means when he says that the political is an "intervention in the visible and sayable" that makes a particular group count. This counting is the minimum qualification for the political, and the Lincoln letter makes Warren count. But the film makes clear that that counting, and thus the political, is always an affirmative process.

In that sense, the Lincoln letter is metonymic for Tarantino's entire project with his recent turn towards historical films. Here, he is offering various kinds of affirmation that reify the political and comment on cinematic history.

We have so far ignored at least two significant aspects of *The Hateful Eight*. Perhaps the most obvious is the film's status as a Western in the generic sense. In terms of setting – Wyoming a few years after the Civil War – and iconography – vast expanses of snowy mountains traversed by a horse-drawn coach ridden by men with guns and dusters – *The Hateful Eight* traffics in ideas and images familiar to 100+ years of cinema audiences. This is significant

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<sup>34</sup> See Todd May's *The Political Thought of Jacques Rancière* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008) and *Contemporary Political Movement and the Thought of Jacques Rancière: Equality in Action* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010).



because of the way(s) in which the Western has been bound up with the politics and perception of America. In that sense, *The Hateful Eight* acts as a kind of reverse *Stagecoach* (John Ford, 1939), a film that finds a stagecoach full of social misfits (including John Wayne in his first star turn as the Ringo Kid) escaping across the landscape. As Marcia Landy describes is, *Stagecoach* “unlinks the epic from its role as universal founding narrative; instead, it becomes a form of *refounding* in its focus on conceptions of justice in conflict with institutional morality and legality.”<sup>35</sup> In its way, *The Hateful Eight* is *post-foundational* – the film recognizes legality (in the figures of the bounty hunter and ersatz hangman), and in the discussions between these characters a line is drawn between legality and morality. Nothing, however, is founded in *The Hateful Eight* except the contingent pact between Warren and Mannix, no explicit suggestion made about the larger myth of America. More interesting, though, is the contrast with the narrative of *Stagecoach*:

[The film] contrasts the cramped and ungenerous world of the town against the expansiveness of the social outcasts associated with an awesome vision of the natural landscape – still a vital element, signifying openness of space versus its closure in the settled towns.<sup>36</sup>

*The Hateful Eight* moves in the opposite direction – from the expansive landscape to the cramped confines of Minnie’s. And rather than turning the coal of the social outcasts into the diamond of community (as in the justifiably-famous dining scene in *Stagecoach*, where Ringo defends the social standing of Dallas [Claire Trevor]), the pressure-cooker of Minnie’s causes more problems than it solves. The difference undoubtedly arises from a different conception of nature. As Landy suggests, the natural, vital landscape of *Stagecoach* is one in which it is possible to find a means of escape, to flee the “stultifying” aspects of civilization. This is the

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<sup>35</sup> Marcia Landy, *Cinema and Counter-History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 11-12.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

narrative of Manifest Destiny and much of the Western. But in *The Hateful Eight*, nature is vast, but it owes as much to the landscapes of H.P. Lovecraft as those of John Ford.<sup>37</sup> The snowy mountains are beautifully framed, but they cut off the characters from society, foreclosing the possibility of “the elevation of singular protagonists against the social-class constraints of the urban community.”<sup>38</sup>

My point here is two-fold. The film obviously inherits concerns that we might dub “political” from the Western. But more significantly, the film inherits an awareness of those conventions, which influence the ways in which the film is presented to us. Those conventions are traced through other genres as well. One obvious intertext for *The Hateful Eight* is Howard Hawks’ *Rio Bravo* (1959), a film about a sheriff attempting to hold onto a criminal against his brother’s gang with only the town drunk, a young boy, and an older man to help him. But Hawks was also responsible for *The Thing from Another World* (1951).<sup>39</sup> Both these films were essentially remade by John Carpenter – *Rio Bravo* as *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976) and *The Thing from Another World* as *The Thing* (1982). What’s fascinating about Carpenter’s adaptations is that they take the Western tropes of the besieged heroes<sup>40</sup> and remove them from the West as such, turning the urban environment into a kind of frontier.<sup>41</sup> Tarantino’s adaptation of these Hawksian elements, as filtered through Carpenter, allows the director to keep all the mythic Western tropes and the more modern, environment-as-threat/horror of Carpenter’s chilly vision. It is absolutely a “this *and* that” approach to influence.

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<sup>37</sup> Especially the arctic Lovecraft of *At the Mountains of Madness*, available in *The New Annotated H.P. Lovecraft* ed. Leslie Klinger (New York: Liveright, 2014), 457-572.

<sup>38</sup> Landy, *Cinema and Counter-History*, 12.

<sup>39</sup> Though the film is credited to Christian Nyby as director, there is evidence for Hawks’ involvement at both the script and production phases, and he is credited as producer.

<sup>40</sup> And arguably *The Thing From Another World* is a Western set in the Antarctic.

<sup>41</sup> For more on this, see Kendall R. Phillips *Dark Directions: Romero, Craven, Carpenter, and the Modern Horror Film* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012), especially 127-136.

Which is another way to address the fact that *The Hateful Eight* might be Tarantino's most conventional-looking film.<sup>42</sup> He has fully absorbed, and fully re-creates, many of the shots that viewers familiar with the Western will recognize, from the opening shot of the snowy crucifix to the lone building inhabiting a clearing in an otherwise-forbidding mountain range. There are the usual Tarantino flourishes – a penchant for putting “chapter” titles in, as well as a significant flashback that calls to mind *Pulp Fiction*'s (1994) puzzle-box structure – but many of his visual tics have been reined in significantly.

Despite this discrepancy, we have not strayed so far from the political in cinema as a redistribution of the sensible. However, instead of treating us to a moment of *dissensus* via the film's narrative or film language, Tarantino effects a (re)distribution of the sensible through the film's format and distribution. The film was conceived and then shot in Super 70mm, with the film's published screenplay's first description reading “70mm SUPERSCOPE WIDESHOT OF WYOMING.”<sup>43</sup> Moreover, the film was released in a “roadshow” format first. As a contemporary issue of *American Cinematographer* describes it, “The movie's launch is being produced, packaged and sold as a ‘roadshow’ event, beginning its life exclusively as a 70mm film presentation— including a program, musical overture and intermission — in a special two-week engagement limited to approximately 100 theaters.”<sup>44</sup> The film was then released – in a slightly modified form – in a now-standard digital package for projection. I'm hesitant to make specific claims about the effects of the “roadshow” presentation as such; this isn't a phenomenological study of Tarantino's cinema. However, I think it's absolutely worth noting

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<sup>42</sup> The only other serious contender is *Death Proof*, but the slow-motion car crash that divides that film's two parts is too self-indulgently Tarantino to avoid notice. And in the film's *Grindhouse* configuration, the self-conscious “weathering” of the film calls significant attention to itself, especially as it disappears as the film continues.

<sup>43</sup> Tarantino *Hateful Eight: A Screenplay*, 2.

<sup>44</sup> *American Cinematographer* December 2015, 96, no. 12, 37-8.

that Tarantino's production and distribution strategy is intended to make *The Hateful Eight* feel special. As *American Cinematographer* describes it, "Tarantino's virtually singular goal from day one has been to make a splash with a high-profile, large-format, projected-film extravaganza."<sup>45</sup> Though I don't think that Tarantino has a particular political motivation behind his use of 70mm and film projection, his choices demand that we as viewers engage with the material in a particular way. Even if we don't see the "roadshow" version, Tarantino has still framed the film (figuratively and literally) in such as to make us aware of the new aesthetic order heralded by the switch to 70mm. Moreover, the 70mm format harkens back to the both the question of "spectacle" in the Hollywood era<sup>46</sup> but also to the roadshow format that characterized classical-era exploitation cinema. Though Tarantino didn't have to four-wall his presentation of *The Hateful Eight*, the film's presentation owes as much to the atmosphere of exclusivity that Eric Schaefer describes in sex-segregated screenings of medical films as it does to the stage-indebted theatricality of Hollywood films using 70mm like *Ben-Hur*.

I also want to argue that the film's production and release strategy continues Tarantino's focus on a kind of affirmation. The idea of a 70mm "roadshow" engagement has the initial whiff of elitism – only those who live within a reasonable distance of the ~100 theaters at which the 70mm version screened<sup>47</sup> were able to take advantage of Tarantino's offering as intended. However, I would argue that the release strategy of *The Hateful Eight* has the affirmative structure we see in the film itself. It's not an exclusively 70mm film – unlike, say, the history of

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>46</sup> In films like *Ben-Hur* (William Wyler, 1959).

<sup>47</sup> Though there were reports that the 70mm projectors would occasionally breakdown, and theaters would switch to a digital projection of the 70mm version of the film, sometimes without informing audiences. See, for instance, Dave McNary "Hateful Eight' 70mm Projection Issues 'Rare and Far Between,' Weinstein Company Says," *Variety*, December 28, 2015, <http://variety.com/2015/film/news/hateful-eight-70mm-projection-problems-1201668461/>.

much experimental media, where access to prints remains difficult – and so the wider digital release maintains the integrity of the 70mm presentation and adds to it the ability for more people to see the film.<sup>48</sup> Because of this strategy, Tarantino doesn't need to rely on the more outré visual and narrative devices of his previous films because viewers come to *The Hateful Eight* already primed to experience it in a particular way. With the sensible ready to be redistributed, we might say.

*The Hateful Eight* is Tarantino's most clear presentation of this structure of affirmation, but this clarity comes at the end of his turn towards historical subjects with *Inglorious Basterds* (2009) and *Django Unchained* (2012). As Oliver Speck describes it in his introduction to *Quentin Tarantino's Django Unchained: The Continuation of Metacinema*,<sup>49</sup> these films “belong to a unique genre that this American *auteur* himself has invented, the historical revenge fantasy.”<sup>50</sup> These films are united by their insistence on affirmation as a tool of cinema and the political. This argument overturns much of the thinking about the films, which sees them as either instances of working through history (and/or historical trauma) or as films that fail to engage meaningfully with history as such. As Speck describes it, “most assessments critical of Tarantino's two most recent films take offense with the basic plot idea of pairing a tired Hollywood cliché, the vigilante taking revenge, with a historical crime.”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> And this is before we take into account the film's home-video release, which includes the non-70mm version in multiple formats (DVD, Blu-ray, iTunes, etc.).

<sup>49</sup> Oliver Speck, ed, *Quentin Tarantino's Django Unchained: The Continuation of Metacinema* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 1. Italics in original. We might ask if *The Hateful Eight* belongs in this genre, and my answer would be yes. Though it doesn't insist on historical details that contradict history (as the killing of Hitler at the end of *Inglourious Basterds* does) or strain credibility (there's little evidence that to-the-death “mandingo” fights occurred historically, especially as they are depicted in *Django Unchained*), the film does address historical subjects (the American Civil War) and the tension between Warren and Smithers acts as a kind of 2<sup>nd</sup> act revenge fantasy, righting the wrongs that Smithers delivered on the battlefield by Warren's humiliating and then killing Smithers' son.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

In the case of *Django Unchained*, that historical crime is chattel slavery in the U.S., and the revenge is taken by the titular hero, Django (Jamie Foxx). As the film opens, Django is a slave and is bought by the German bounty hunter King Schultz (Christoph Waltz) to aid him in the capture of a bounty (since Django can identify the men Schultz needs to kill). The pair share an alliance and then a friendship, where Schultz eventually offers to free Django and help him to rescue his wife, Broomhilda (Kerry Washington) from the psychopathic plantation owner Calvin Candie (Leonardo DiCaprio) and his scheming housemaster Stephen (Samuel L. Jackson). The revenge portion includes Django killing most of Candie's compatriots and blowing up his plantation before riding off with Broomhilda on a white horse.

Part of Oliver Speck's goal in his introduction "A Southern State of Exception" is to demonstrate simultaneously the worth of *Django Unchained* as a critical object, and to redeem it by complicating the relationship the film has to notions of "politics." Speck argues that taking on "slavery and the Holocaust is a move to be taken seriously as a real *auteur*."<sup>52</sup> More importantly for our purposes, "this seriousness stems from a political/critical impetus."<sup>53</sup> For Speck, "some of the most shocking attributes of *Django Unchained* are the implicit political assumptions about slavery and race that carry the film." These assumptions are what make the film "political":

[S]lavery in *Django Unchained* is linked to capitalism and, in turn, the absolute ownership of slaves is on a par with fascism and the Holocaust. In other words, *Django Unchained* seals the political turn the work of Quentin Tarantino has taken.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid. Speck doesn't seem to have much evidence for this claim, as Tarantino has obviously had a strong presence as an authorial voice in his films since the start of his career, as the numerous books of collected interviews suggest. In fact, the several books – both academic and popular – about the director would suggest no need for him to change tack with *Inglourious Basterds* to be taken seriously.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 1-2.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 2.

We should be by now used to this deployment of “political.” For Specks, *Django Unchained* is a kind of allegory that, through the fictional depiction of some aspect of social life, illuminates our current social landscape.

For Speck, the allegory that *Django Unchained* provides is one that shows us Giorgio Agamben’s *homo sacer*. For Agamben, on Speck’s reading, *homo sacer* is one “banned from the community,” one who “lives in a permanent State of Exception.”<sup>55</sup> The *homo sacer* is “literally an outlaw,” and “does not enjoy any legal protection and can therefore be killed with impunity.”<sup>56</sup> Finally, *homo sacer*, has been reduced to “sheer biological existence.”<sup>57</sup> In this way, “the slave appears as the shadowy companion to the *homo sacer*.”<sup>58</sup> By showing us repeatedly that slaves are reduced to “bare life” rather than any intrinsic or monetary value – as when a slave is torn apart by dogs – “*Django Unchained* shows an astute awareness of the mechanisms of biopolitics.”<sup>59</sup> This redeems the film as a serious object of study, while also demonstrating how “astute” *Django Unchained*, and by extension Tarantino, really is.

In contrast, I want to argue that there’s something at work in *Django Unchained* that models Rancière’s discussion of the political as an affirmative gesture. Speck (along with other critics) assumes two categories exist prior to *Django Unchained*: the fact of chattel slavery in the U.S.<sup>60</sup> and the unseriousness of Tarantino’s cinematic quotation of Spaghetti Westerns and Blaxploitation films.<sup>61</sup> Recall Rancière’s critique of “communicative action”: “This model

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. “Shadowy companion” is about as far as Speck goes in elaborating the actual relationship between the slave and the *homo sacer* – it seems clear they’re distinct categories, but feature significant overlap.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. Later, however, Speck points out that “To paint Quentin Tarantino now only as an avid reader of Agamben would not do the political analysis of the film, or the filmmaker, justice.” 4.

<sup>60</sup> And more than that, it’s overwhelmingly pernicious effects.

<sup>61</sup> Especially, though there are other kinds of borrowing going on as well.

presupposes partners that are already preconstituted as such and discursive forms that entail a speech community, the constraint of which is always explicable.” Similarly, these critiques assume that chattel slavery and genre filmmaking are *a priori* “always explicable.” But as Rancière argues, these “partners are no more constituted than is the object or state of discussion itself.” However, instead of the “communicative action” model, which suggests that political actors are always capable of rational exchange leading to some efficacious action, much criticism of *Django Unchained* assumes the opposite. Namely, that the “historical weight” of slavery is always-already incompatible with “Hollywood ‘shoot-em ups.’”<sup>62</sup> In contrast, Speck has no compunctions about the compossibility of historical wrong and contemporary genre. Yet his analysis still assumes that the combination is “explicable” only in the way he describes it – namely by reading the film as an instance of the representation of biopolitics.

*Pace* Speck, I want to argue the film is precisely political for the combination of genre and history that authorizes the film’s political dimension, but without redeeming the film as such. The film dramatizes this difficulty in the final meeting between Schultz and Candie, where the papers transferring ownership of Hilde and freeing her are to be signed. From the opening moment – a push in on Schultz’s back that cuts to a reverse shot of Candie coming into the library with two pieces of “white cake,” one of which he will offer to Schultz – the scene is about pitting Candie’s Southern hospitality against Schultz’s cosmopolitan Europeanness. After Schultz refuses the gesture of hospitality – the loaded “white cake” – Candie inquires after Schultz’s thoughts, to which Schultz replies he’s thinking about what Alexander Dumas would make of the dogs being set loose on D’Artagnan. Condescendingly, Schultz implies that since Candie named his slave after the protagonist of *The Three Musketeers*, Candie must be a fan.

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<sup>62</sup> See Perry in *The Continuation of Metacinema*, 206.



Candie, obviously ignorant, suggests that he “doubts” Dumas would “approve.”<sup>63</sup> Schultz replies it’s a “dubious proposition at best.” Candie attempts to take the upper hand rhetorically by replying “Soft-hearted Frenchy?” before Schultz delivers the coup: “Alexandre Dumas is black.”<sup>64</sup>

With the first encounter over with and the point going to Schultz, Candie appears to retreat. The papers are signed by both Schultz and Candie, and Schultz tells Hilde she is a free woman. Everything appears to be over as Schultz moves to depart with Django and Hilde, offering Candie a goodbye. Here, Candie tries another tack, calling to Schultz’s back “One more moment, Doctor.” He stands and tells Schultz “It’s a custom here in the South once a business deal is concluded that the two parties shake hands. It implies good faith.” Schultz demures, citing his lack of Southern heritage, to which Candie responds by insisting on the gesture, claiming “Here in Chickasaw County, a deal ain’t done till the two parties have shook hands. Even after all that paper signin’, don’t mean shit you don’t shake my hand.” Schultz, reluctant to grant Candie a final victory<sup>65</sup> is incredulous, but Candie doubles down by telling his companion, Mr. Pooch (James Remar), to kill Hilde if they try to leave without a handshake.

This is precisely the kind of impasse that Rancière is trying to address in his dismissal of “communicative action.” What we have is two actors (Schultz and Candie) operating from rational principles – Candie’s insistence on Southern hospitality, Schultz’s on a kind of

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<sup>63</sup> This is a call-back to an earlier moment, when Candie’s businessman tells Schultz that Candie prefers Monsieur Candie to Mister Candie. Schultz replies, in French, “whatever he prefers.” The business manager is quick to correct Schultz, telling him that Candie doesn’t know French and hates it being spoken in front of him, as it reveals his ignorance.

<sup>64</sup> It’s worth noting here Schultz’s excellent French accent. While those around him drawl out “Mee-sure” Candie, Schultz pronunciation is precise and un-accented meter of French pronounciatoin.

<sup>65</sup> We are, I think, supposed to believe this is a principled stance – Schultz is willing to go along with the business necessities of buying Hilde’s freedom, but he wants nothing more to do with Candie personally. Another way to read the scene is as a petty attempt to show himself as better than Candie one final time, unwilling to grant him the hand-shaking victory after so soundly thumping him with the Dumas observation.

cosmopolitanism that puts him above Candie's (empty) gesture of parochialism. Only one of them may "win" and no compromise is possible – the pair either shake or they do not. Candie either exerts his will one final time on the retreating Schultz, or Schultz maintains his steadfastness in the face of another challenge.<sup>66</sup> Perhaps more pointedly, more damningly, this moment occurs after compromise itself: the selling of Broomhilda to Schultz and Django. It is a compromise because Candie, an inveterate racist, has no desire to see Hilde free or Django rewarded for his daring behavior, while Django and Schultz gain the object of their quest, but must part with \$12,000 after failing to fool Candie about the object of their intentions and stealing away Hilde without paying. Now, no more compromise is possible. Schultz appears to capitulate, offering his hand to Candie. But from his coat emerges the small handgun we've seen before, and Schultz shoots Candie in the flower on his lapel, a symbol of the Southern "civilization" that Candie prides himself on. In turn, Mr. Pooch wheels and blasts Schultz, but not before the German can tell Django and Hilde (but really us, the audience) "I couldn't resist."

Compromise, the film tells us, is impossible. The two sides of the argument are incommensurable, and it is only by annihilating each other that anything is solved. But it's not much of a solution. The film instead seems to be proposing Django as the alternative to the impasse between Schultz and Candie. Though Mr. Pooch's shotgun blasts Schultz improbably across the room, it is Django who controls the scene. Schultz's acrobatic death, where he flies across the room before crashing into the bookcase he was previously admiring during the Dumas exchange, fits into the visual scheme of the film as we see Stephen cradling Candie in the foreground, wailing at his master's death, with Schultz in the background under the ruin of the

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<sup>66</sup> As he had before against the slavers transporting Django in the film's opening, and again against the proto-KKK riders after Django kills the ersatz sheriff earlier in the film.

“learning” he represented in the destroyed library shelves and rain of books. The moment seems to consciously evoke other combinations of apocalyptic violence and slow-motion death, as in Sam Peckinpah’s innovative editing in *The Wild Bunch* (1969) or the death of Elias (Willem Dafoe) in *Platoon* (Oliver Stone, 1986). This moment also shifts the scene’s register, from a series of shot-reverse-shots in medium and close-ups, to a wider perspective emphasizing the violence of Django’s display.

Though Mr. Pooch undoubtedly kicks off the excessive<sup>67</sup> violence, its avatar is equally-undoubtedly Django. After Schultz’s death, Django immediately liberates Mr. Pooch’s pistol from his belt. In contrast with Mr. Pooch’s killing of Schultz – which featured a series of quick edits and a slow-motion interlude of Stephen running to Candie before speeding up to grant Schultz his final line – the camera is stately, almost staid in its view of Django as he immediately turns the pistol against Mr. Pooch, a plume of blood spraying out of his back in a gush of red. We’ve seen this excess before in the film – the blood spraying across the cotton when Schultz shoots one of the brothers early in his partnership with Django – but it takes on a new tempo and duration in this scene. Django immediately follows up his killing of Mr. Pooch by shooting a fleeing Moguy (Dennis Christopher) as he cries that a “nigger’s gone crazy in the house.” After that it’s a free-for-all as Django emerges into the body of the house, killing Candie’s men indiscriminately. Though Candie’s men enter the house to challenge Django – and their bullets offer the same improbable violence to bodies, though only dead bodies or each other – the scene resolutely belongs to Django. He mows down gunman after gunman before a rap song joins the soundtrack and Django heroically brandishes his pistols, apparently unable to miss. The song on

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<sup>67</sup> I mean “excessive” here not as a judgment but in the most literal sense – in the following scene the guns affect bodies in ways that contravene physics and anatomy in the most basic ways.

the soundtrack even quotes Jamie Foxx as Django, reinforcing his domination of the scene. His humanity, which has been held up as an alternative to both Candie's atavistic racism and Schultz's more progressive European tolerance,<sup>68</sup> is here affirmed by his skill in redressing the grievances between Schultz and Candie.<sup>69</sup> The film only returns to its shot-reverse-shot structure once Stephen emerges to challenge Django by threatening Hilde.

Here the film seems to suggest simultaneously that Django is the alternative to Schultz and Candie – affirming his status – while also addressing that status cinematically by having him dominate this scene of violence physically (through his prowess), visually (he moves the most balletically, the most assuredly, through the space of the house) and aurally (as his voice is featured in the soundtrack via a sample of Jamie Foxx's voice as Django). The film is making an argument for itself, as cinema, to affirm Django as an alternative by a combination of cinematic references<sup>70</sup> and techniques. The film is less concerned with realism – and even less with any “weight” of history – than it is with making an argument for cinema itself as the role of mediator. This is an instance of the political, and it is only possible by affirming Django's status alongside Schultz and Candie. The film is in this sense unconcerned with the historical realities of chattel slavery (as Django is too, once he's freed Hilde), but nor is it redeemable as a politically astute representation of biopolitics. Instead, the film is making an argument qua film that cinema has the power of combination and affirmation – it can put together history and genre and this itself is analogous to the fundamental gesture of the political.

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<sup>68</sup> I don't think that Schultz is entirely intended as a positive rebuttal to Candie's position. Though Schultz is preferable in just about every way to Candie, he is still willing to keep Django in metaphorical chains until he has proven his worth, and likens his profession of bounty hunting to slavery without much apology.

<sup>69</sup> That he redresses them with violence, and is unsuccessful (insofar as he is temporarily outmaneuvered by Stephen), is one of the film's failing. It is a theme of this dissertation that political needn't mean progressive, and the tools of democracy may allow tyrants as easily as other political articulations.

<sup>70</sup> *Platoon* (Oliver Stone, 1986), *The Wild Bunch* (Sam Peckinpah, 1969), but also to Tarantino's *oeuvre*, and especially the blood-ballet of the Crazy 88 scene in *Kill Bill Volume One* (2003).

This is no more evident in Tarantino's *oeuvre* than in *Inglourious Basterds*, the director's tale of a band of U.S. soldiers out to take down Hitler at a film screening. Though the merry band of misfits is largely unsuccessful,<sup>71</sup> Shosanna (Mélanie Laurent), a Jewish theater owner whose family was murdered by a bloodthirsty (but effective) S.S. Colonel Hans Landa (Christoph Waltz), succeeds in killing Hitler and his high command by locking the doors to her theater and burning her collection of nitrate prints. We are once again in the world of Hollywood-style revenge fantasy perpetrated in the milieu of an historical catastrophe. Working backwards from *Django Unchained* it seems like Tarantino is doubling down on the historical tragedy by being explicitly counterfactual.<sup>72</sup> Much like *Django Unchained*, *Inglourious Basterds* was the subject of controversy. In his essay "Inglourious Criticism, Basterd Fantasies: Rancière, Tarantino, and the Intellectual Spectacle of Hope,"<sup>73</sup> Jason Haslam summarizes the film's detractors:

Some have viewed Tarantino's film as the most simplistic kind of cinematic wish fulfillment, through which the audience loses its own critical engagement with material history and its horrors in exchange for an apolitical, counter-historical fantasy of revenge...while yet others have viewed it as a purely anti-Semitic film that presents the Nazis sympathetically and Jews as sadistic controllers of media, while reading the plot as tantamount to Holocaust denial.<sup>74</sup>

These objections should be familiar, as they rhyme perfectly with the criticism leveled at *Django Unchained*. But as with *Django Unchained*, critics are stuck either assuming the superficiality of Hollywood genre filmmaking or diving too deeply into the "material history" of the tragedy of the extermination of the Jews.

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<sup>71</sup> Technically they get into the screening and mow down a number of Nazis, but their plan seems doomed to failure without the (coincidental) conjunction of Shosanna's plan.

<sup>72</sup> *Django Unchained* is no less a fantasy than *Inglourious Basterds*, but the notion of a former slave attempting to buy his wife isn't outside the realm of possibility, nor is a former slave exacting some kind of revenge, even if the scale of Django's resistance is outside the historical record. Hitler and his high command, however, definitely were not killed at a screening of a film.

<sup>73</sup> Jason Haslam, "Inglourious Criticism, Basterd Fantasies: Rancière, Tarantino, and the Intellectual Spectacle of Hope," *The Public Intellectual and the Culture of Hope*, Joel Faflak and Jason Haslam, eds. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 178-204.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

As his title suggests, Haslam turns to Rancière to avoid this difficulty. From the start he is suspicious of critiques that come from the Birmingham School that posit cinema as merely a product of the culture industry as well as those emerging from the assumption that visual pleasure disengages spectators.<sup>75</sup> Though he acknowledges that these figures have largely abandoned the more polemical versions of these positions, “the foundational conceit of these original positions – that popular or mass culture functions first and foremost in the realm of ideological (re)production, by which an audience can either be passively enthralled, or against which it can agentially resist – remains.”<sup>76</sup> This situation is analogous to the criticism of *Django Unchained* and *Inglourious Basterds* – in criticizing the films, those objecting assume the films “passively” enthrall viewers with a superficial “Hollywood revenge fantasy,” when what viewers need is to be displeasurefully reminded of the horrors of history. The issue, as Haslam reminds us, is that there is no transcendental position from which to judge if the spectator (or film) is sufficiently engaged in critical resistance.

For Rancière,<sup>77</sup> the whole premise is a non-starter:

What makes it possible to pronounce the spectator seated in her place inactive, if not the previously posited radical opposition between the active and the passive? Why identify gaze and passivity, unless on the presupposition that to view means to take pleasure in images and appearances while ignoring the truth behind the image and the reality outside the theatre?...These oppositions – viewing/knowing, appearance/reality, activity/passivity – are quite different from logical oppositions between clearly defined terms.<sup>78</sup>

Beginning from the position that spectatorship is *a priori* passive, we can never arrive at a spectatorship that is anything other than a tool for ideology. In contrast, what Rancière argues

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<sup>75</sup> Here, of course, the term “visual pleasure” is an explicit nod to Laura Mulvey, Haslam’s avatar for this position.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>77</sup> This is, I should note, a Rancière we have so far not been introduced to, the Rancière of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* and *The Emancipated Spectator*. These projects lie adjacent to his work in politics and aesthetics.

<sup>78</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2011), 12.

for, in Haslam's words, is "a vision that instantiates as its presupposition the notion of the spectator's intellectual engagement with culture, predicated on culture's formal separation from its material surroundings." Aesthetic objects, then, by virtue of being aesthetic objects, open up a space for spectators to have the freedom to react to those objects in ways outside a predetermined schema of activity/passivity. As Haslam summarizes, "the answer lies in understanding spectatorship itself as an *active* and *freeing* engagement in...redistribution." Thus spectatorship has a political valence in the "redistribution" of activities and sensibilities.<sup>79</sup>

I am, however, less interested in Rancière's engagement with spectatorship than I am with the parallels that Haslam draws between Rancière's description of spectatorship and Tarantino's engagement with culture in *Inglourious Basterds*. For Haslam, "Tarantino echoes Rancière's vision...of a (mechanical) culture that is socially efficacious precisely because it is set at a remove from social relevance as an aesthetic object."<sup>80</sup> Haslam makes the case that the film isn't reducible to a simple narrative about the film's redemptive or condemnatory political content:

Rather than deny either the political possibilities or the aesthetic values of mass culture, *Inglourious Basterds* forces us to recognize that popular culture constitutes its own public intellectual space insofar as, as a set of aesthetic objects that migrate between varying media and audiences, it is irreducible to any given parallel set of material surroundings.<sup>81</sup>

Though the question of spectatorship prompts Haslam's insights, he moves away from individual spectators quickly to point out that the film "doesn't necessarily lend itself to or resist specific readings, as much as it thematizes, through the film's intradiegetic refraction of both audience

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<sup>79</sup> Here we might engage with *Young Mr. Lincoln* again, especially the way the *Cahiers* editors draw a straight line from Lincoln's representation as Law to the spectator's enmeshing in ideology.

<sup>80</sup> Haslam, "Inglourious Criticism," 186.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 188

and screen, activity of a spectator's translation and interpretation."<sup>82</sup> I don't want to disagree with Haslam's analysis of the film. Rather, I'd like to keep a number of Haslam's terms in play, but re-inflect them to make a point about the political.

Haslam's critique of the "culture industry" dismissal of the film (and by extension *Django Unchained*) seems decisive. His mobilization of Rancière is similarly significant. However, I'm not sure that turning to the question of spectatorship captures what's most significant about *Inglourious Basterds*.<sup>83</sup> Moreover, the possibility of a valedictory reading leads Haslam too quickly to dismiss valid criticism of the film's tendency to gloss over the very real tragedy of the Holocaust in favor of a pat scene of cinematic revenge. However, rather than an activation of spectatorial power through spectacular images, I want to argue that *Inglourious Basterds* – and most particularly the famous scene of Shosanna setting fire to the theater – activates some of the Rancièreian terminology Haslam uses, but rather than being focused on the spectator, it provides Tarantino's own theory of cinema.

In his introduction to *Quentin Tarantino's Inglourious Basterds: A Manipulation of Metacinema*, Robert von Dassanowsky, draws a parallel between Tarantino and Godard: "While Tarantino's filmmaking at this stage is not intentionally meant as...counter-cinema in the sense of his idol Jean-Luc Godard's complete rupture of dominant film, it is a counter to the aesthetic materialism of cinematic snobbery that surrounds most of his models."<sup>84</sup> Godard's influence on Tarantino is, according to von Dassanowsky, "very specific" insofar as "Tarantino certainly gives spectators quotations of the traditional cinematic elements they have come to expect and

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Nor does it aid us in understanding the rest of Tarantino's historical films, since both *Django Unchained* and *The Hateful Eight* lack the "intradiegetic refraction of both audience and screen."

<sup>84</sup> Robert von Dassanowsky, *Quentin Tarantino's Inglourious Basterds: A Manipulation of Metacinema* (New York: Continuum, 2012) viii.



desire, and sutures them in such a way that they cheat the uncritical audience-screen relationship.”<sup>85</sup> Von Dassanowsky is careful to point out that Tarantino does not simply ape his mentor, and “does not need to so observably deconstruct to make the revolutionary point.”<sup>86</sup> In contrast to Godard, Tarantino “reconstructs, overcodes, and subverts signifiers to shock and create the illusion of melodrama.”<sup>87</sup>

It’s not clear exactly what the difference might be between “melodrama” and “the illusion of melodrama,” but von Dassanowsky makes several important points about Tarantino’s recent cinema. The notion of “quotation” is significant for Tarantino – from *Inglourious Basterds* on, quotation has taken on a different valence from the cinematic love-letters to genre of *Jackie Brown* (1997) and *Kill Bill* (2003,2004). Similarly, though I’m not sure that “shock” is the most effective term, there is something to *Inglourious Basterds, et al.*, being concerned with the “over” in “overcoding.” The most obvious example might be Tarantino’s use of music. *The Hateful Eight*, in addition to its own masterful score from Ennio Morricone, features music from *The Last House on the Left* (Wes Craven, 1972), the Roy Orbison cowboy musical *The Fastest Guitar Alive* (Michael D. Moore, 1967) and *The Exorcist II: The Heretic* (John Boorman, 1977). Add these to similar choices in *Inglourious Basterds* and *Django Unchained* and we can see a clear pattern of Tarantino using intertexts in his films, stuffing the films full of both references and other texts. If this is excess, it’s excess in terms of affirmation – genre *and* history (or genres *and* histories).

Von Dassanowsky’s biggest mistake, however, is in comparing the Godard of the 60s (especially of *Weekend* [1967]) to Tarantino’s post-*Death Proof* films. Perhaps more

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., viii-ix.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., ix.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

specifically, von Dassanowsky takes Peter Wollen's assessment of Godard in "Godard and Counter-Cinema: *Vent D'Est*"<sup>88</sup> too much at face value. In his influential essay, Wollen sets up an opposition between the "old cinema, Hollywood-Mosfilm, as Godard would put it"<sup>89</sup> and the "counter cinema" of Godard. Wollen does an important job of highlighting the values of Hollywood cinema – which include pleasure, unitary diegesis, and closure – and comparing them to the "counter cinema" values evinced by Godard's work, especially *Vent d'Est* (1970). These values are, perhaps unsurprisingly, the opposite of Hollywood-Mosfilm, and include "unpleasure," "multiple diegesis," and "aperture."<sup>90</sup> Wollen's path-breaking analysis holds up surprisingly well, as Godard's work of the period is illuminated by understanding it as oppositional to the dominant discourse of Hollywood-Mosfilm. But we can't take the schematic drawing of Godard's work too seriously, especially as a tool to bludgeon Tarantino. This is most obvious under Wollen's heading of "pleasure/displeasure," which he glosses as "Entertainment, aiming to satisfy the spectator vs. provocation, aiming to dissatisfy and hence change the spectator."<sup>91</sup> Wollen is careful to smudge the line between these two forces, but he ultimately sees them as distinct. If Godard, following Wollen, smudges the line between unproductive, fantasy entertainment and provocative, realist art, then Tarantino continues his political gestures with his recent trilogy by having it both ways. *Inglourious Basterds* et al want to affirm both sides of the divide Wollen highlights. As an example, *Inglourious Basterds* distantiates

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<sup>88</sup> In *Film Theory & Criticism: Introductory Readings, 7<sup>th</sup> Edition*. eds Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 418-426.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 418.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 424.

spectators with its chapter headings<sup>92</sup> but is equally willing to go full-blockbuster in the scene where the Basterds mow down the Nazi High Command in their exclusive theater box.

Though I don't doubt the influence of Godard on Tarantino's 90s output, Tarantino seems to be doing something different with his recent run of historical films. Rather than taking 60s Godard as his model, I would argue that the best way to understand Tarantino's "historical" trilogy is through Godard's *Histoire(s) du Cinema* (1988-1998). Godard's epic video project weaves images and audio from throughout the history of cinema – along with images of Godard himself, often at a typewriter – and the title has several valences. The film is an idiosyncratic "history" of cinema, but also offers a history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century through the images of cinema. Unsurprisingly in the context of *Inglourious Basterds*, the key event for Godard in the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is the Holocaust. As Daniel Morgan describes it, the most essential scene in the project juxtaposes imagery from the liberation of Auschwitz and Ravensbrück with scenes from *A Place in the Sun* (George Stevens, 1951).<sup>93</sup> The thread that connects them is George Stevens, the director who trained his camera on both the liberation of the camps and Elizabeth Taylor cradling Montgomery Clift. Unsurprisingly, Godard's images have been the subject of controversy. As Morgan describes Claude Lanzmann's critique of the film, "Godard effectively belies the scale of the genocide perpetuated by the Nazis. Since no image can possibly represent the entirety of what happened, images should not be presented at all."<sup>94</sup> Morgan argues that Lanzmann's position has force because it rhymes with representational theories about cinema more generally, "on the model of the index."<sup>95</sup> Morgan, however, argues that Godard is up to

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<sup>92</sup> One of the techniques in Godard that Wollen notes.

<sup>93</sup> Daniel Morgan, *Late Godard and the Possibilities of Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 180.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

something different. The scene shows Godard's "project to be one of teaching an audience how to discern the history within the images, how to read the way history enters into and is mediated by cinema." It is, in short "a user's manual of sorts."<sup>96</sup>

Morgan's reading of Godard is decisive, but more than that is it instructive for thinking about what Tarantino is doing with *Inglourious Basterds* (and by extension with *Django Unchained* and *The Hateful Eight*). Rather than a "user's manual" that attempts to teach viewers how to read history in images, *Inglourious Basterds* is a "user's manual" for cinema history as such. Rather than treating cinema as a kind of representational mechanism that can only produce certain kinds of knowledge negatively,<sup>97</sup> for Tarantino the function of cinema is to proliferate and affirm different possibilities. This is why the final scene in the movie theater features a film-within-a-film (*Nation's Pride*) that is interrupted by Shosanna's film. These represent two traditions of film – *Nation's Pride* recalling both the editing of Eisenstein's films and the camera angles of German Expressionism, while Shosanna's direct address to the camera feels more experimental, like a take on Andy Warhol's *Screen Tests* (1964-66). These films are embedded within a narrative that is titled after a war film (*The Inglorious Bastards* [Enzo G. Castellari, 1978]) which is itself a take on a genre of war films that includes *The Dirty Dozen* (Robert Aldrich, 1967) and goes back at least to *Seven Samurai* (Akira Kurosawa, 1957). That the combination of the remaining Basterds and Shosanna engineer the killing of Hitler and his High Command adds to this cinematic legacy is more significant than the film's (mis)use of history as such. The glee in these moments is less about overturning history than in proclaiming "this is what cinema does."

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>97</sup> Which is the position of cinema vis-à-vis the Holocaust. We have no direct cinematic evidence of it, and so a kind of negativity is the only approach for dealing with it, as Lanzmann suggests.

And what cinema does is affirm: this *and* that. The act of affirmation is a political one in the terms that Rancière has laid out for us. In this way, Tarantino's recent films are political not because they take as their subject politically-charged historical tragedy, but because they yoke genre cinema and historical tragedy *together*. Whether this is defensible as good politics or not is beside Tarantino's point because it is the yoking that cinema exists to perform, and what his recent films do as an examples of the political.

## 7.0 CONCLUSION

With four chapters behind us, we can see *The Belko Experiment* in a new light. The parallels with Lloyd Kaufman's Troma films are overwhelming. In both cases we have films that satirize contemporary corporate practices using spectacular visual effects focused on the disintegration of the human body. In both cases, we also have critical treatment that simultaneously argues that the films are empty and overly full (of ideas, themes, violence, etc.). In both cases it's because the film's presentation of the political (i.e. the films' attempt at redistribution of the sensible) seem at odds with the immediate "politics" of the films. Put another way, viewers are looking for the films to be saying something clever, while the films are less concerned with what they say (a simple "corporations are bad" will suffice to paraphrase their positions) than with *how* they make their relatively-simple statements. In the same way that workers are not saying anything revolutionary when they demand rights – in fact their refrain will be familiar because they are appealing for rights that already exist, even if only for a different class – but what is revolutionary is the way that they make their utterances heard. So too with *The Belko Experiment* and Troma films.

Similarly, the difficulties with community that plague *Dogville* are present in *The Belko Experiment*. In both cases, attempts to constitute a community and understand who gets to determine its membership are thwarted by interference from the outside. In the case of *Dogville* it's the gangsters. In the case of *The Belko Experiment* there is a double outside, as Mike's

attempts to create a community of communication and consent are attacked by both Barry's counter-community and by the unseen voice that threatens immediate death. In the same way that critics were dissatisfied with *Dogville*'s portrayal of politics and community, *The Belko Experiment* disappointed critics for the same reason. In both cases, the films take a particular fiction (of self-determination) to its logical conclusion. Critics are less unhappy with the films as films than they are with the way in which they puncture the comfortable bubble of self-mastery. von Trier perhaps earns distinction for following up *Dogville* with the Depression Trilogy, which offers a way out of the impasse of *Dogville* through an anarchic sense of non-mastery.

Though *The Belko Experiment* has little of the emphasis on novelty that marks the cinema of David Cronenberg, it does share with his oeuvre an interest in rupture. The opening moments of *The Belko Experiment* establish an atmosphere of routine as the office workers arrive to the building and undergo a series of security checks. These security checks help maintain a sense of order even as tension ratchets up due to the absence of native co-workers. Then, of course, the moment of supreme rupture arrives as the voice informs the office workers they must kill one another to survive. Thereafter, rupture of bodies becomes as significant as the rupture in the fabric of day-to-day reality, and *The Belko Experiment* shares Cronenberg's interest in mangling flesh (even if, I'll grant, it doesn't show his inventiveness). In the case of Cronenberg and *The Belko Experiment*, rupture is what makes the presentation of the political possible. *Belko* gives every sense that, without the intervention of the experiment, that the business-as-usual corporate hierarchy would have continued, with no room for the election scene and its hints of democracy. Moreover, thinking about rupture (and the significance of final moments in Cronenberg) adds

weight to the film's otherwise lackluster ending, where it is revealed that the events of the film are in fact taking place on a global scale<sup>98</sup> – a rupture of unprecedented proportions.

Affirmation would seem to be the last thing that *The Belko Experiment* would share with the work of Quentin Tarantino, if critics were to be believed. Time and again the film is called out for its apparent nihilism and failure to affirm anything. In this way, critics read the film's final image – which repeats the horrors of the film's office space on a presumably-global scale – as a confirmation of the worst possible case. Instead, I argue the film works to make affirmation the center of the film. Mike, the film's lone survivor, is the “leader” of those who seek to found an affirmative community within the logic of the film, one not based on the exclusion of killing. Though the film doesn't really give him an opportunity to see if his affirmative gesture would have meaning in the context of the experiment, Mike does survive, and with him his tendency towards affirmation. Though it's hard to read all the images that comprise the film's final shot, many of them feature survivors similar to Mike, and though we hear that “Stage 2” will commence, there's no reason to believe that the survivors won't be as committed to affirmation as Mike.

Not, of course, that *The Belko Experiment* is the arbiter of exploitation films or of the political. In that way, it is exemplary for its non-exemplarity. It offers no special insights, but as an example it demonstrates that even a mediocre film<sup>99</sup> – one that doesn't seem to offer a coherent remedy for the problems it diagnoses – can still be a rich text for thinking through the

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<sup>98</sup> It is also significant that this moment also inaugurates a new aesthetic dimension to the film, as we see CCTV footage of the various experiments to indicate the scale of the operation. Though it is presumed that the voice has visual access to the characters throughout the film, that visual regime is not shared with the audience until this moment. The political, to repeat, is inextricable from the aesthetic.

<sup>99</sup> The film, I would argue, is mediocre largely for those moments where it doesn't engage with the political, as it does in its most exciting moments. The tendency to lean on ironic juxtapositions of classical/opera music and slow-motion violence is a perfect example.



ways in which the political is imbricated in exploitation. However, the film does something important that we might otherwise lose in the discussion of exploitation and the political – it foregrounds the importance of time and temporality. The temporal dimension is essential to the plot of *The Belko Experiment* – without the pressure applied by the time-based deadline, there is little reason to believe that the characters’ attempts at non-violent resolution would fail quite so easily. Moreover, the film’s setting doesn’t offer distinct temporal markers – it takes place in a present that feels present but without completely coinciding with that of viewers.<sup>100</sup> This temporality suggests that it’s worth looking at time and temporality in exploitation films more generally.

Should we undertake such an examination (which, to be thorough, would be another dissertation), we would find much that is suggestive. Troma films tend to take place in Tromaville, New Jersey, a kind of utopia that is outside the “normal” flow of time (if for no other reason, the split with our timeline occurs when Tromaville experiences its first encounter with a “hideously deformed creature of superhuman size and strength”). Similarly, David Cronenberg’s films take place in settings that feel contemporary but are distinct from the present as experienced by viewers. The flesh gun of *Videodrome* or the immersive, bodily VR of *eXistenZ* both take place in a recognizable present that is nevertheless not the present of the viewer. Lars von Trier might seem, initially, to break this mold. However, rather than a concern with a non-present present, von Trier is more willing to play with disjunctions of time and temporality within a narrative. This is why *Melancholia* can open with a series of “impossible” images, then dedicate its first half to a single night, skip ahead, and then dedicate its second half to several days

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<sup>100</sup> The most obvious way in which this disjunction appears is in the technology of the exploding tracker. The spectacular blood geysers don’t seem accounted for by the size of the supposed tracker.

in the life of its protagonist before showing us the end of (human) time. The case of Quentin Tarantino is perhaps too obvious, as he manipulates history to alter the experience of time. But tellingly his narrative manipulations, in and out of his “historical” films, also alter the flow of time as characters crisscross the diegetic space. In each case, these filmmakers demonstrate a particular, and particularly suggestive, relationship to time and temporality.

This dissertation leaves much work to be done. There are other auteurs to argue for inclusion,<sup>101</sup> other periods in film history to examine,<sup>102</sup> but by far the most suggestive vein is offered by the relationship to temporality that is offered by presenting these directors together. Perhaps it is unsurprising, given that cinema is a time-based medium, that these directors would all do something interesting with temporality. But it is surprising that the insights derived from thinking about the political valence of their work also relates temporality to the political. What the preceding chapters suggest, and what demands further analysis, is the relationship between the temporal and the political. *Poultrygeist* helps us see that the demands that constitute the content of a moment of *dissensus* are temporally bound, and fleeting. *Dogville* suggests that community can be maintained, but it has a beginning and an end. Cronenberg’s focus on rupture and the new reminds us that the beginning and end are significant moments, pointing towards the always-already past and the possibility of the new. Tarantino shows that affirmation, and thus the political, is an historical phenomenon, one that combines the past and the present. What is needed, then, is a fuller analysis of the ways that the political may be understood in temporal terms. More important for us, what is needed is a fuller understanding of the ways in which

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<sup>101</sup> John Waters comes to mind most immediately. David Lynch is suggestive.

<sup>102</sup> The earliest film treated here is from the early 1970s, while Schaefer’s analysis ends in 1959. That leaves a decade of rich texts to be mined, especially with respect to the changing fortunes of New Hollywood filmmakers.

cinema, a temporal medium, might have a special relationship to the political precisely because it is a temporal medium.

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