

**Irredeemable: Céline, Extreme Cinemas, and the Opacity of Trauma**

by

**Maxime Bey-Rozet**

B.A. English and Spanish Literatures, Université Catholique d'Angers, 2010

M.A. Film Studies, Université Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne, 2013

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

University of Pittsburgh

2020

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH

DIETRICH SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

This dissertation was presented

by

**Maxime Bey-Rozet**

It was defended on

May 29, 2020

and approved by

Dr. Adam Lowenstein, Professor, Department of English

Dr. Todd Reeser, Professor, Department of French and Italian

Dr. Nancy Condee, Professor, Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures

Dissertation Director: Dr. David Pettersen, Associate Professor, Department of French and Italian

Copyright © by Maxime Bey-Rozet

2020

# **Irredeemable: Céline, Extreme Cinemas, and the Opacity of Trauma**

Maxime Bey-Rozet, PhD

University of Pittsburgh, 2020

This dissertation examines the legacy of French novelist Louis-Ferdinand Céline in recent so-called “extreme cinemas.” It is structured around the concept of “opacity,” which signals the resistance to knowledge, clarity, and discursivity that extreme films and Céline’s novels have in common. This dissertation discusses the political implications of opacity, particularly as it pertains to representations of systemic and French historical trauma, and to what Leo Bersani has described as a “culture of redemption.” The first two chapters focus heavily on Céline, first by analyzing the formal and rhetorical similarities that exist between his novels and extreme films, and second by fleshing out what opacity entails in the specific case of Céline’s notoriously deplorable politics. The last two chapters focus on extreme films: Chapter 3 pairs *I Stand Alone* (1999, Gaspar Noé) and *In My Skin* (2002, Marina de Van) in a discussion of the systemic traumas of, respectively, French post-Occupation patriarchy and corporate culture. Chapter 4 discusses *Caché* (2005, Michael Haneke) and the massacre of 17 October, 1961, and argues that historical opacity and uncertainty can be rehabilitated into a position of critical introspection. The dissertation ends with a reconsideration of the aesthetic tradition of extreme cinemas, and concludes on the implications, in film and literature, of the shift away from victims of trauma, onto perpetrators instead.

## Table of Contents

Preface.....	vi
1.0 Introduction.....	1
2.0 A Tyrannical “I”? Céline, Sartre, and the Aesthetics of Extreme Cinemas .....	16
3.0 Céline, Trauma, and the Irredeemable.....	43
3.1 Bataille, Céline, and Extreme Cinema Studies: The Case for Opaque Materialism .....	48
3.2 Systemic Trauma in <i>Death on the Installment Plan</i> .....	56
3.3 Céline’s “Exile Trilogy:” The Politics of Opaque History.....	69
4.0 Slaughterhouse France: Systemic Trauma in <i>I Stand Alone</i> and <i>In My Skin</i> .....	81
4.1 I Stand Alone.....	85
4.1.1 The Butcher’s Opaque Materialism .....	89
4.1.2 The Butcher’s Trauma .....	95
4.2 In My Skin.....	105
4.2.1 Esther’s Trauma .....	111
5.0 Michael Haneke’s Ethics of Uncertainty in <i>Caché</i> .....	118
6.0 Afterword.....	147
Bibliography .....	153

## Preface

This dissertation was written with the generous help of many people who, over the past seven years, have made it possible for me to see this project through. I want to thank my dissertation committee, my advisor David Pettersen, Adam Lowenstein, Nancy Condee and Todd Reeser, who each uniquely contributed to the development of my research: Nancy, whose words of encouragement in the margins of my chapter drafts would keep me going for months, and whose support from the prospectus stage gave me some much needed confidence to continue this strange project; Todd, whose healthy skepticism about the involvement of Céline urged me to constantly return to and interrogate the premises of my work; Adam who, unlike Todd, thought there should be not one, but two chapters about Céline, and whose insights and comments were always energizing; and of course my chair, David, who patiently read through every embarrassing iteration of this dissertation with a saintly patience, and whose guidance and mentorship about every aspect of academic life has been both a source of help and comfort in navigating higher education in the United States.

I would also like to thank the many friends I have made while at Pitt for their camaraderie and the sense of community and belonging they created here in Pittsburgh, Jennifer Boum-Make, Brendan Ezvan, Ellina Sattarova, Robin and Laila Lee, Adam Hebert, John Taylor, Kuhu Tanvir, Jordan Bernsmeier, and many more whose friendship have made the past seven years pass through all too quickly.

Lastly, I must thank my wife, Sonia Lupher, although a simple “thank you,” or any other expression of gratitude would be severely underselling the considerable support she has given me over the years. Sonia has read every possible version of this dissertation, as well as every email I

have sent about this dissertation, and I could not have overcome the anxieties and insecurities that are part of pursuing a doctorate without her sharp insights, her grim humor, and her ever thoughtful companionship.

## 1.0 Introduction

The titular character in the novel *Elizabeth Costello* (J. M. Coetzee, 2003) is a renowned Australian writer living the twilight years of her literary career. Riding on the heels of past successes, she is invited to give formal addresses on various topics (called “lessons” in the novel), from the rights of animals to the Humanities in Africa. One of these lessons takes place in Amsterdam, where she is invited to speak at a conference, on the topic “Witness, Silence and Censorship.” Unsure of where to begin, she decides to focus her talk on a particular case study, *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg* (Paul West, 1980), a semi-fictional account of an assassination attempt on Hitler. She chose this particular book on account of what she can only describe, repeatedly, as “obscene:” the minute descriptions, at the end of the novel, of the final torture and indignant suffering of the conspirators at the hands of Hitler’s executioner. “Obscene:” Coetzee writes, “not just the deeds of Hitler’s executioners, not just the deeds of the blockman, but the pages of Paul West’s black book too. Scenes that do not belong in the light of day, that the eyes of maidens and children deserve to be shielded from.”<sup>1</sup> These scenes of unthinkable cruelty, Costello intends to argue, should not have been written; they are dangerous for the writer and for the reader; their very existence imperils what makes us human. Whether such a thing happened or not is irrelevant: it should not be represented, it is ob-scene and should be kept off-stage.

The argument Costello prepares herself to make, with self-aware prudishness, is that there are zones of opacity in experience and in history that are best left untouched by literature. The

---

<sup>1</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 154.



repetitive use of the word “obscene” in this context of representing the unrepresentable is a reminder of filmmaker Claude Lanzmann’s pronouncement in 1991: that trying to understand the causes and motivations behind the Holocaust would be obscene.<sup>2</sup> Although they both speak from different contexts and mean different things - Costello fears the contagiousness of evil, Lanzmann fears its normalization and rationalization - they both agree on the ethical imperative to leave certain horrors outside of representation. Their positions tie into some of the foundational questions of the field of trauma studies: Can we, and should we, represent traumas, whether individual or collective? What are the ethical risks associated with such acts of representation? Are narrative arts, especially film and literature, uniquely equipped to make these representations possible, even helpful? Should these zones of opacity be enlightened, or should their obscurity be preserved?

In recent years, a wave of provocative and confrontational arthouse films at times seemed to have thrown these cautionary questions to the wind, in favor of representing rapes, gruesome murders and other violent acts in unprecedented details. Clustered around the early 2000s, these films, most of them French, appeared intent on breaking representational boundaries, in transgressive gestures that were sometimes called bold, and at other times denigrated as cynical attempts to *épater le bourgeois*. What was perhaps most unique and disturbing about many of the films of the “New French Extremity”<sup>3</sup> was their resistance to discourse and interpretation: whether

---

<sup>2</sup> Claude Lanzmann, “The Obscenity of Understanding: An Evening with Claude Lanzmann,” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 200-219.

<sup>3</sup> The expression is James Quandt’s, who in a now seminal article berated what he saw as the base and gratuitous sensationalism of these previously respectable French auteurs. See James Quandt, “Flesh and Blood: Sex and Violence

in sex or in violence, they showed an amount of gratuity that could not be neatly recuperated into an economy of meaning that would justify their excesses. Or to put it differently: past a certain point, the violence of a film like *Irreversible* (Gaspar No  , 2002) stops making sense. It is simply obscene.

These extreme films have since spawned a global trend of confrontational films distributed on the arthouse circuit, though many of them have abandoned the sensational strategies of the New French Extremity. Carlos Reygadas, Michael Haneke, Lars Von Trier and Cristian Mungiu are all filmmakers whose films have a reputation for being manipulative and for producing intense discomfort, without necessarily relying on spectacular images of sex and gore (although they too have sometimes employed these strategies).<sup>4</sup> Most of the existing scholarship on extreme cinemas have focused on the sensational films that gave the corpus its namesake, though the names may vary. Martine Beugnet writes of a French “cinema of sensations” that is violently affective, and that creates what she calls a “third [discursive] path” between sensation and intellection.<sup>5</sup> The “Feel-bad films” of Nikolaj L  becker’s eponymous monograph mostly include extreme films and, as the name suggests, designates confrontational films that aim to provoke spectators into positions

---

in Recent French Cinema,” in *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe*, eds. Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendal (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 18-26.

<sup>4</sup> Even among the films of the New French Extremity, different trends emerge. The trashy, ultra-violent *Baise-moi* (Virginie Despentes & Coralie Trinh Thi, 2000) is as different from the restrained *Battle in Heaven* (Carlos Reygadas, 2005) as it is from the quasi-essayistic *Anatomy of Hell* (Catherine Breillat, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Martine Beugnet, *Cinema and Sensation: French Film and the Art of Transgression* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2007).

of critical introspection.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, Tim Palmer wrote of a (again, mostly French) *cinéma du corps* that, similarly to Beugnet's "cinema of sensations," comprised arthouse films invested in transgressive representations of the body (sex, violence) and in stimulating (unpleasant) bodily reactions in the audience.<sup>7</sup> The designation "unwatchable film" has also been used by several scholars and refers to a broad media phenomenon that includes extreme films.<sup>8</sup> Still, each of these unique phrases usually refer to a relatively narrow corpus of films and directors that all fall within a field most commonly designated as "extreme cinema studies."<sup>9</sup>

Yet the multiplicity of these phrases and the diversity of films included under the label "extreme" would suggest that the category of "extreme cinema" is inappropriately singular, or at least defies expectations of formal continuity across the corpus. Indeed how can we explain that the grotesque and hyper-violent *A Serbian Film* (Srdjan Spasojevic, 2010) belongs to the same,

---

<sup>6</sup> Nikolaj Lübecker, *The Feel-Bad Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Tim Palmer, *Brutal Intimacy: Analyzing Contemporary French Cinema* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> The expression "Unwatchable film" in relation to extreme cinemas first circulated through Asbjørn Grønstad's monograph *Screening the Unwatchable: Spaces of Negation in Post-Millennial Art Cinema* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), and was recuperated more recently in the anthology volume *Unwatchable* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2019).

<sup>9</sup> See among others Horeck and Kendall, *Ibid*; Mattias Frey, *Extreme Cinema: The Transgressive Rhetoric of Today's Art Film Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016); Alison Taylor, *Troubled Everyday: The Aesthetics of Violence and the Everyday in European Art Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017); Troy Bordun, *Genre Trouble and Extreme Cinema: Film Theory at the Fringes of Contemporary Art Cinema* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Aaron Kerner and Jonathan L. Knapp, *Extreme Cinema: Affective Strategies in Transnational Media* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017).

monolithic category of cinema as the restrained *The White Ribbon* (Michael Haneke, 2009)? I do not want to suggest that only one of these films is “extreme.” Rather, the category of extreme cinema has, since the spectacular excesses of the New French Extremity, expanded to include formal strategies different from explicit sex or ultra-violence. Furthermore, there is immense diversity of form, content and mode of address even within the New French Extremity itself to warrant being suspicious of the singular in “extreme cinema.” To reflect this diversity, I use the plural “extreme cinemas” throughout the dissertation.<sup>10</sup> The fact that many of these films are so different from one another does not mean we should not group them under a single label. The category of extreme cinemas may appear looser than other generic groups like the Western or the Musical, but several patterns still emerge that justify such categorizing. Taking into consideration what this denomination has meant to the aforementioned scholars, we can safely say that the expression “extreme cinemas” refers to a broad, international corpus of arthouse films that employ a variety of shock tactics and confrontational strategies, and that make a point of skirting visual pleasure.<sup>11</sup> Many of these films have attained these goals through gratuitous and controversial use of sexual and violent imagery. Three examples of such films, *Carne*, *I Stand Alone* (Gaspar Noé,

---

<sup>10</sup> Elena del Río made a similar move in her own monograph *The Grace of Destruction: A Vital Ethology of Extreme Cinemas* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016). Although she does not comment on the pluralization of her title, I suspect it is to justify her turn away from sensational films, in favor of less spectacularly violent or sexual films like *Beyond the Hills* (Cristian Mungiu, 2012) and *Battle in Heaven* (Carlos Reygadas, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> A lot of metafilmic elements also unite these films. Frey discusses at length the abrasive and provocative rhetoric of directors, producers and distributors, and Simon Hobbs looks at the common paratextual strategies utilized across the corpus (see Hobbs, *Cultivating Extreme Art Cinema: Text, Paratext, and Home Video Culture*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018).

1990 & 1999 respectively) and *In My Skin* (Marina de Van, 2002) are discussed in Chapter 3. Others, such as *Caché* (Michael Haneke, 2005, discussed in Chapter 4) avoid such sensational stratagems and instead, as Elena del Río writes, “ground [their] controversial, shocking effects less in sensationalist physicality and more on a sustained practice of intensity that already pervades the everyday body and its inherently aberrant movements and affects.”<sup>12</sup>

Regardless of the film discussed, scholars have overwhelmingly turned to affect theory to explain the often violent ways in which the spectator is implicated. One likely reason for this scholarly response is in the name of the corpus: the gruesomely violent and sexually explicit among these films acted as a lightning rod for scholarly attention, with the films of Haneke, Reygadas and Mungiu only belatedly joining the corpus. A common thread in films as formally disparate as *Sombre* (Philippe Grandrieux, 1998), *Trouble Every Day* (Claire Denis, 2001) and *Intimacy* (Patrice Chéreau, 2001) is that they all seem invested in stimulating the spectator’s body (for someone like Palmer) and sensations (for someone like Beugnet). Indeed in some cases, like in *Twentynine Palms* (Bruno Dumont, 2003) or *La Vie Nouvelle* (Philippe Grandrieux, 2002), two films with barebones narratives, stimulating (unpleasant) sensations seems to be the only point. Even the films that would appear to be on the polar opposite of spectrum (*Caché*, *Beyond the Hills*, *The White Ribbon*) have earned the label “extreme” by virtue of the intense discomfort they supposedly elicit. In one of the first book-length study on the corpus, Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall argued that a defining feature of the films of the “new extremism” is that they “heighten[ed] the sensory and affective involvement of audiences.”<sup>13</sup> Much like Beugnet, James

---

<sup>12</sup> Elena del Río, *Ibid*, 4.

<sup>13</sup> Horeck and Kendall, “Introduction,” *Ibid*, 3.

Williams has argued that the use of such graphic imagery is meant to “unite the intellectual and the visceral.”<sup>14</sup> The locus of these affect-driven studies has been to examine the ethics of such forms of self-reflexive, confrontational spectatorships. For Scott MacKenzie, the films of the New French Extremity “profoundly question the complicity of the spectator in the acts of voyeurism and desire surrounding the representation of violence and sexuality.”<sup>15</sup> However, in some cases, the emphasis on the production of affects has had tautological results, because it so closely paraphrased the discourses of directors and distributors around these films (i.e. this disgusting film produces disgust).<sup>16</sup> This focus on sensations has been so instrumental in shaping the identity of the field of extreme cinemas studies that the term “extreme” itself, in spite of the vast array of meanings this adjective can entail, has been more or less curtailed to a singular signification.

Rather than contributing another stone to an already hefty scholarly edifice, and with the goal of both challenging and expanding on the term “extreme,” this dissertation turns instead to psychoanalysis and the intersection of cinema and trauma theory to draw attention to the unique ways in which extreme films register and engage with catastrophic experience. The move away from affect theory is also meant to compensate for the absence of scholarship on the connections between extreme films and trauma, in spite of the fact that both fields of study centrally interrogate

---

<sup>14</sup> James Williams, “His Life to Film: The Extreme Art of Jacques Nolot,” *Studies in French Cinema* 9, no. 2 (2009), 188.

<sup>15</sup> Scott MacKenzie, “On Watching and Turning Away: Ono’s *Rape*, *Cinéma Direct* Aesthetics and the Genealogy of *Cinéma Brut*,” in *Rape in Art Cinema*, ed. Dominique Russell (New York: Continuum, 2010), 159.

<sup>16</sup> This criticism has especially been leveraged against Aaron Kerner and Jonathan L. Knapp and their monograph *Extreme Cinema: Affective Strategies in Transnational Media*. I return to this criticism in the Afterword of the dissertation.

the limits of representation. I would contend that the corpus of extreme cinemas has included some of the most relevant films to current debates on trauma and cinema, a fact that affect-driven studies have so far failed to recognize.

Narrative arts such as literature and cinema have long been thought to have a privileged access to the zones of psychic opacity left by the overwhelming force of trauma on subjectivity. Dominick LaCapra argued in *Writing History, Writing Trauma* that “narratives in fiction may [provide] insight into phenomena such as slavery or the Holocaust by offering a reading of a process or a period [...] which may be difficult to arrive at through restricted documentary methods.”<sup>17</sup> But because trauma has mainly been thought of as an absence - a memory that cannot be accessed, an event too horrific to imagine - it follows that narrative representations of trauma should eschew head-on figurations, favoring instead misdirection, allegory, and presence-absence. Hence, for example, Cathy Caruth’s take on the archetypal trauma text *Hiroshima mon amour* (Alain Resnais, 1959): “In his refusal to make a documentary on Hiroshima, Resnais paradoxically implies that it is direct archival footage that cannot maintain the very specificity of the event.”<sup>18</sup> Likewise, Adam Lowenstein has argued that modern horror films register and mediate historical traumas through what he has called “allegorical moments,” defined as “a shocking collision of film, spectator and history where registers of bodily space and historical time are disrupted, confronted, and intertwined.”<sup>19</sup> What all of these scholarly discourses have in common is a focus

---

<sup>17</sup> Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 13-14.

<sup>18</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 27.

<sup>19</sup> Adam Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 2.

on the victims of trauma, on facilitating access to traumatic memories, and on documenting and witnessing testimonies. Film and literature are tasked with illuminating the dark recesses of the traumatized psyche, and carry with them the promise of a reparative and healing function, however risky such a promise can be.

I argue throughout this dissertation that what makes many extreme films relevant to trauma studies is what I call their opacity: the traumatic systems and events at the heart of their narratives pose representational and discursive problems that manifest themselves as gratuitous, nonsensical violence, chaotic and disorienting formal and narrative structures, and indeterminate open-endedness. I call these films “irredeemable” for three reasons: first, for the ways in which their opacity makes them exist outside of what Leo Bersani has called a “culture of redemption;”<sup>20</sup> second, because I argue that their controversial strategies and politics are largely owed to an unacknowledged, and very much irredeemable influence, the infamous French writer Louis-Ferdinand Céline; and third, because they enact a significant turn away from the victims of trauma, and either focus on perpetrators or blur the lines between perpetrator and victim. They are more intent on hurting than on healing, and whether such hurt can be productive is once of the central questions of this dissertation.

What Bersani calls “redemption” refers to an “aesthetic morality” whereby art (especially, for him, literature) has an inherent ability to “repair inherently damaged or valueless experience.” The repetition and recasting of such experience in art is expected to repair, order, and make sense of it, in a manner that “uniquely gives value to, perhaps even redeem [the material of

---

<sup>20</sup> Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).



experience].”<sup>21</sup> *The Culture of Redemption* is also an indictment of this process: by presuming that art is equipped with such a reconstructive function, the culture of redemption devalues art (by rendering it utilitarian) and “historical experience,” insofar as “the catastrophes of history matter much less if they are somehow compensated for in art.”<sup>22</sup> What Bersani describes here overlaps significantly with debates in the field of trauma studies, even though strangely, Bersani does not mention this connection at all, and neither do most trauma scholars.<sup>23</sup> Yet a central concern of trauma studies is precisely the risk of diminishing the value of survivor experience when recasting it in a narrativized form - or, in other words, of redeeming that experience by ordering and narrativizing it. Because so much of what Bersani means by “redemption” revolves around operations of meaning-making and discursivity - of making sense in art of what was senseless in experience -, an irredeemable work is one that does not perform such operations. It is a film or novel that reproduces the senselessness of catastrophic experience, a work that honors the fundamental opacity of trauma.

Extreme cinemas, with their widely noted excessive imagery and/or their narrative and discursive indeterminacy, are well-positioned to exist outside of the culture of redemption. Yet extreme films have hardly been praised for avoiding the ethical risks Bersani describes; in fact, the critical reception of most extreme films, especially those affiliated with the New French Extremity, has been lukewarm at best, incendiary in many cases, with mass theater walkouts having become a fixture of the corpus.<sup>24</sup> I argue throughout this dissertation that Céline is an instructive

---

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>23</sup> With the exception of Lowenstein in the aforementioned book, 8.

<sup>24</sup> See for the most famous (and influential) criticism of the New French Extremity, Quandt, *Ibid*.

predecessor to extreme cinemas, and that paying attention to the style, structure and reception of his novels can help us understand the ethical merits and dangers associated with the opacity of extreme cinemas.

I turn to Céline, rather than other, more frequently cited French theorists of the same period (especially Georges Bataille and Antonin Artaud<sup>25</sup>) for a few reasons that I discuss in detail in Chapter 2. First, Céline deserves to be placed in conversation with extreme cinemas for the striking stylistic, rhetorical and thematic similarities that can be found in his body of work and in many extreme films, especially those that have come out of France. His assaultive style that seeks to prey on emotions, his avowed desire to take the reader hostage, his obsession with the base, the gruesome and the sexually explicit, the outraged and perplexed reception of his novels, all are elements of Céline's literary career that uncannily mirror the qualities of extreme cinemas, and of the New French Extremity especially, in ways that far surpass the literary productions of Bataille, Artaud, or any other French novelist of the 20th century. Measuring Céline's influence on contemporary French cultural production is not an exact science. In 2005, Philippe Roussin described it as "exorbitant" and chose Céline as the *ur*-influence of what he sees as the

---

<sup>25</sup> For the relevance of Artaud (especially *Theater of Cruelty*) to extreme cinemas, see Lübecker, *Ibid.* and Beugnet, *Ibid.* Bataille is much more frequently cited as a theoretical figure across the field. See, among others, Kendall, "Reframing Bataille: On Tacky Spectatorship in the New European Extremism," in Horeck and Kendall, *Ibid.*, 43-54; Steven Shaviro, "Come, Come, Georges: Steven Shaviro on Georges Bataille's *Story of the Eye* and *Ma Mère*," *Artforum* 43, no. 9 (May 2005), <https://www.artforum.com/print/200505/georges-bataille-s-story-of-the-eye-and-ma-mere-8826> (accessed March 11, 2020); Victoria Best and Martin Crowley, *The New Pornographies: Explicit Sex in Recent French Fiction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005).

unprecedented pessimism and violence of contemporary French literature.<sup>26</sup> My point is not to claim that Gaspar Noé clearly had *Death on Credit* in mind when he made *I Stand Alone* (1999), however tempting such a claim may be. Rather, I would argue that extreme films are some of the latest iterations of a genealogy of artworks that are provocative, confrontational and opaque, and that they owe as much, and sometimes more, to Céline as they do to Bataille or Artaud. Whether this is primarily a French cultural phenomenon is a different matter, although the sheer number of extreme films to come out of France would certainly suggest as much.

Second, as a physician who was also a vocal supporter of psychoanalysis in the 1920s and 1930s, Céline was arguably one of the first major novelists to explore the ties uniting trauma and literature, and the potential of narrative arts to be redeeming or not. As early as 1936 with the publication of *Death on the Installment Plan*, he recognized and laid out a relationship between literature and trauma that is not based on healing and ordering overwhelming experience, but that seeks to “confront,” to borrow Lowenstein’s terminology, what is opaque in such experience. In other words, the aesthetic position we find in films like *Baise-moi* of refusing to offer easy justifications for excessive violence could already be found in remarkably accomplished form in *Death on the Installment Plan*. In this respect, Céline is an informative predecessor, and observing the transition between a distinctly redemptive first novel (*Journey to the End of the Night*, 1932) and a distinctly irredeemable second one (*Death on the Installment Plan*) can help articulate some of the new ways in which extreme films have registered trauma.

---

<sup>26</sup> Philippe Roussin, *Misère de la littérature, terreur de l’histoire: Céline et la littérature contemporaine* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), 13.

Finally, an analysis of the interconnectedness of Céline's style and deplorable politics can explain both the controversial reception and the provocative politics of some extreme films. Especially towards the end of his literary career, Céline turned his attention towards recent history, which for him was the fall of Vichy France and the defeat of Germany. The novels of the "Exile Trilogy" - comprising *Castle to Castle* (1957), *North* (1960) and *Rigadoon* (1969) - show what is politically and ethically dangerous in the proposition that experience and history are opaque. Many extreme films - with special attention in this dissertation to *I Stand Alone*, *In My Skin* and *Caché* (Michael Haneke, 2005) - have adopted a similar aesthetic position in the form of narrative and hermeneutic indeterminacy. One of the questions this dissertation poses, then, is whether the ethics and politics of extreme cinemas (unwittingly) follow in Céline's footsteps, or whether they recuperate his opacity to turn it into something more productive.

One of the questions this dissertation is structured to answer is therefore "Why Céline?" The first chapter discusses the stylistic and rhetorical devices employed by both Céline and extreme cinemas, as a way to gauge the extent to which we can speak of a genealogy. I especially pay attention to one of Céline's lesser-known works, *Conversations with Professor Y* (1955), a short, manifesto-like novel that discusses as much as it satirizes elements of Céline's own "emotional" style. In addition to conducting a comparison between Céline's avowed goal of browbeating the reader and extreme cinemas' famously assaultive style, I argue that both Céline and extreme cinemas challenge the democratic model of readership put forth by Jean-Paul Sartre in *What is Literature?* (1947). Like Sartre, Céline and extreme filmmakers indirectly believe in the stimulation of the freedom of the reader/spectator, albeit in the guise of a terroristic mode of address. What is challenged in Sartre's model is the promise that this freedom will be emancipating.

Chapter 2 focuses on Céline's approach to registering trauma, both systemic and historical, and lays out the theoretical framework for the following two chapters. I argue that comparing *Journey to the End of the Night* and *Death on the Installment Plan* reveals a shift from a resolutely redemptive aesthetic to an irredeemable one. Over the course of this shift, Céline engages with what I call "systemic trauma," drawing from the recent theories of Greg Forter and Jeffrey Alexander about non-punctal, traumatogenic systems like patriarchy and capitalism. The second part of the chapter engages with the "Exile trilogy" and Céline's contention that history is disorderly and opaque. I finish the chapter with a consideration of the ethical and political risks that such a conception of history entails, especially when considering historical traumas like the Holocaust.

The third chapter mobilizes my discussion of systemic trauma in Chapter 2 in the context of two sensational extreme films: *I Stand Alone* and *In My Skin*. I argue that the characters in these films are at the center of traumatogenic systems that drive their obsessions with base matter and obscures their articulation of ideals. I call this interconnectedness of materialism and trauma "opaque materialism," as a variant of what Bataille defined as "base materialism." I conclude with the observation that both films ultimately reject empathy by centering on characters that are either detestable (*I Stand Alone*) or who explicitly refuse to be portrayed as victims (*In My Skin*). By diverting attention away from empathizing with their main characters, both films serve as critiques of traumatogenic systems.

The fourth and final chapter is centered around a "restrained" example of extreme cinemas, *Caché* and the historical trauma its narrative arguably revolves around, the Paris massacre of 17 October 1961. In what I describe as Haneke's "ethics of uncertainty," the film reproduces with surprising fidelity Céline's articulation of opaque history in the Exile trilogy. However, I argue

that the final indeterminacy of *Caché* serves a didactic purpose that construes remembering as a critical process, and that dodges the ethical risks of redemption that Bersani laid out.

I conclude the dissertation by challenging both the term “extreme” and the notion that extreme cinemas are a relatively recent phenomenon initiated by the films of the New French Extremity. While the latter were undoubtedly influential in spawning a global trend of confrontational films, they also closely follow films like *Hiroshima mon amour* (Alain Resnais, 1959) and *Come and See* (Elem Klimov, 1985) that also showed that there is something in violence, in history and in trauma that simply cannot be recuperated in representation.

## 2.0 A Tyrannical “I”? Céline, Sartre, and the Aesthetics of Extreme Cinemas

When *Artforum* critic James Quandt wrote his now seminal piece on what he called “The New French Extremity,” he set out to condemn, in the harshest of terms, what he considered to be the empty provocations of a few upstart filmmakers, in some of whom he expressed a sort of fatherly disappointment.<sup>27</sup> Yet for all the disdain he had for *Twentynine Palms* (Bruno Dumont, 2003), *Irreversible* (Gaspar Noé, 2002) and *La Vie Nouvelle* (Philippe Grandrieux, 2002), he still recognized in them the (unworthy) descendants of venerable European avant-garde filmmakers like Pasolini and Fassbinder. Some six years later, prompted to write a follow-up essay reflecting on the influence of the first one, Quandt doubled down on his initial opinions, and briefly suggested that this French extremity may be literary as well, a “short-lived resurgence of the violational tradition of French culture, also reflected in contemporaneous literature (e.g. Michel Houellebecq, Catherine Millet, Marie Darrieussecq, Jonathan Littell).”<sup>28</sup>

Although Quandt is one of few critics to have observed an affinity between French literary and cinematic productions, the idea that extreme cinemas may have (French) literary roots, especially in Georges Bataille and Antonin Artaud, was present in the first studies of the corpus.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> James Quandt, “Flesh and Blood: Sex and Violence in Recent French Cinema” in *The New Extremism in the Cinema: From France to Europe*, eds. Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 18-25.

<sup>28</sup> Quandt, “More Moralism from that ‘Wordy Fuck’,” *Ibid.*, 213.

<sup>29</sup> See for example Martine Beugnet, *Cinema and Sensation: French Film and the Art of Transgression* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008); Victoria Best and Martin Crowley (eds.) *The New Pornographies: Explicit Sex in*

That Louis-Ferdinand Céline has not been considered in such studies, even though he is arguably the most “violational” of French writers, is surprising, although we may attribute this oversight to the omnipresence of Bataille in scholarly discourses on transgression. What follows then in this chapter is an examination of the aesthetic and rhetorical similarities that exist between Céline’s work and extreme cinemas. Specifically, I discuss the confrontational strategies employed both by Céline and by filmmakers like Gaspar Noé and Michael Haneke, and I place them in conversation with what Jean-Paul Sartre described as a democratic model of readership in *What is Literature?* (1949). If the harmonious, idyllic relationship between reader and author is, according to Sartre, a microcosm of democracy, does Céline’s antagonistic style reproduce, in literature, his fascist politics? And what does this say about films like *I Stand Alone* or *Funny Games* (Michael Haneke, 1997/2007), whose director famously claimed he wanted to “rape the viewer”?<sup>30</sup> In other words, what is political about these films’ and novels’ confrontational aesthetics? In the following pages, I argue that the terroristic, sensational relationship the narrative voices in *Journey to the End of the Night* (1932), *Death on the Installment Plan* (1936) and *Conversations with Professor Y* (1955) maintain with their readers uncannily anticipate the assaultive spectatorship that has become typical of extreme cinemas. Ultimately, I argue that the mutual recognition of freedom dear to Sartre is maintained in Céline’s novels and in extreme cinemas, but its accompanying promise of emancipation is unfulfilled.

---

*Recent French Fiction and Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012); Tina Kendall, “Reframing Bataille: On Tacky Spectatorship in the New European Extremism,” in *The New Extremism in the Cinema: From France to Europe*, *Ibid*, 43-55.

<sup>30</sup> See Peter Conrad, “Michael Haneke: There’s No Easy Way to Say This...,” *The Guardian*, November 3, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2012/nov/04/michael-haneke-amour-director-interview>



Céline was certainly not the first or the only one to insist on the importance of assaulting the reader by targeting their emotions. Philippe Roussin situates him amidst different avant-garde and artistic movements of the time, in particular surrealism and dadaism, which also turned to the stimulation of sensations and emotions as one of the new core principles of art: “Although art’s ultimate purpose was no longer to exist for its own sake [*faire oeuvre*], its function was now to be a vital stimulant; as much as it was a form one could perceive and aesthetically appreciate, it was also a stimulus destined to a receptor, a machine whose purpose was to produce sensations and emotions.”<sup>31</sup> In the second half of the 1930s, around the time *Death on the Installment Plan* was published, French poet Paul Valéry was one of many intellectuals and writers to debate what he identified as the modern turn of the arts, the progressive abandonment of “duration” [*la durée*], and the general exploitation of what he called “sensory sensitivity,” as opposed to the “intellectual dimension of art.”<sup>32</sup> Likewise, Theodor Adorno lamented this “sensationalizing” of modern art for its manipulation of consumers: “Making works of art is refusing the opium that great sensory art has become since Wagner, Baudelaire and Manet; it is defending oneself against the shameful spell which turns artworks into media and the consumers into victims of a psychotechnic manipulation.”<sup>33</sup> In this sense, Céline’s attacks on the nervous system, as he liked to think of them, were part of a contemporary landscape of artistic experimentations with sensations.

What he did differently is both the notion that these sensations should be assaultive, and his refusal to let this assault be conducive to emancipation, whatever form it takes. Both Bataille

---

<sup>31</sup> Phillippe Roussin, *Misère de la littérature, terreur de l’histoire: Céline et la littérature contemporaine* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), 414.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Valéry, *Degas. Danse. Dessin* (Paris: Gallimard, 1938), 176-181. Cited in Roussin, *Ibid*, 416.

<sup>33</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Notes to Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991) p. 80. Cited in Roussin, *Ibid*.

and Artaud, who were contemporaries of Céline, have been mentioned in relation to extreme cinemas for their emphasis on appealing to the bodies and the sensations of spectators, rather than to their reasons:

Infused with the idea that the masses think with their senses first and foremost and that it is ridiculous to appeal primarily to our understanding as we do in everyday psychological theater, the Theatre of Cruelty proposes to resort to mass theater, thereby rediscovering a little of the poetry in the ferment of great, agitated crowds hurled against one another, sensations only too rare nowadays, when masses of holiday crowds throng the streets.<sup>34</sup>

For both Bataille and Artaud, attempting to provoke and overwhelm the spectator (or the reader) was a necessary step to producing a new form of subjectivity. Only in such confrontations can liberation occur and emancipation be attained. One recognizes in this type of logic the common connection between breakdown and truth, transgression and revitalization. It is this alleged connection filmmakers refer to, for example, when they exhaust their actors in order to obtain an “authentic” performance. Céline’s own transgression is the severing of this link: there may not be a great truth behind the assault, or a grand horizon of new perspectives. There may be nothing at all.

As far as Céline’s legacy is concerned, he is now especially remembered for his efforts to give a literary existence to oral-popular French. Though he certainly was not the only one to try and distance himself from “literary” French at the time, he is now regarded as the most successful. Nathalie Sarraute is one of many who talked about feeling of liberation she experienced at reading *Journey*:

---

<sup>34</sup> Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and its Double* (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 65.

The academic language is lifeless. It is [just] pretty. (...) When I read *Journey to the End of the Night* for the first time, it was (...) a liberation [*une délivrance*]: all of a sudden, spoken language stormed literature. For some of us, Céline was a savior (...) emptiness [*le vide*] is when you're outside, chatting and drinking a cocktail. But writing is not emptiness. It is full. It is life itself.<sup>35</sup>

The rigidity, and to an extent the oppression, of “literary” French effectively shuttered alternative forms of literary expressions, and *Journey*’s resounding success was felt by most as a grand opening. Influential figures at the time, from fellow novelist Raymond Queneau to Sartre, shared their enthusiasm for what they saw as the emergence of a powerful, polemical voice on the literary scene, and the political undertones of Céline’s style quickly came under scrutiny by both the right and the left, creating divisions among nearly all political formations. The Communist Party, then rising in popularity, lauded the novel’s ostentatious anticapitalism and satirical condemnations of bourgeois values. Even prominent Catholic intellectual and writers, like Georges Bernanos and François Mauriac, vocally defended *Journey* against its detractors, who could also be found across the entire political spectrum.

Yet where many found in *Journey* the singularity of a writing style in full bloom, Céline saw the stutters of a new language he wished to polish. This language, in *Death on the Installment Plan* and all his subsequent novels, is challenging: French syntax is torn apart; obscure, often specialized, slang obfuscates the narration; endlessly recurring ellipses and exclamation points make Céline’s prose sound like an inarticulate rant. Céline’s publisher, Robert Denoël, expressed strong reservations about this new style, but also in particular about the many obscenities and

---

<sup>35</sup> Marianne Alphant, interview with Nathalie Sarraute, *Libération*, September 28, 1989, 23.

graphic descriptions of sex that punctuate the novel, so much so in fact that the first edition of *Death on the Installment Plan* had numerous passages left blanked out in the body of the text.

There are a number of surprising similarities between extreme films and Céline's works, specifically in their respective critical receptions. The outraged film critic of today could have been the livid literary critic of yesteryear. Indeed, unlike *Journey*, Céline's second novel was poorly received, though it was successful in creating another polemic. None of its defenders had the prestige or the enthusiasm of those who favored the first novel. Queneau, unconvinced by this new style of writing, would call it "asthmatic." Léon Daudet and Lucien Descaves, two of Céline's most illustrious champions, became quiet in 1936. Most of the criticism was directed at the writing style on the one hand, the pessimistic and degrading image of humanity on the other. Critics would use such words as "vile," "monstrous" or "filthy." The journal *La Liberté* called it "Twenty-five francs of ignominy and abjections" (May 21, 1936). *Combat*, in June, saw in it "the greatest garbage producer in the world, the Ford equivalent of the sludge industry." Some of these criticisms accused Céline of being gratuitous, among many other things: "[...] under this debauchery of bestial images and triviality, this exaltation of trash, this opulent eruption of sewer vocabulary, this compendium of filth, [...] what is there that justifies the nausea? Nothing." (*L'Ordre*, May 25) Another journalist even boasts about not finishing the book, as some would about leaving the theater: "[A book that] should not enter any family, and should even be banned from the hell of the most secret of libraries. [...] I have read the first fifty pages, they made me feel so sick I tossed it in the range where it has been smoking for the past two days. [...] We should forbid the right of some individuals to putrefy others. Give us back censorship..." (*Marseille-Matin*, June 3).

In the same vein, Céline showed a certain taste for provocation and scandal, in a manner reminiscent of those affectionately called the *enfants terribles* of arthouse cinema. Although Céline had shown during the success of *Journey* that he was far from indifferent to the critical reception of his work, writing letters to journalists and reviewers in response to their articles, he writes in a letter to his manuscript corrector, Marie Canavaggia, that critics are only here to help the book sell anyway, and the greater the scandal, the better:

The articles are excellent. They make you want to go and see. That's all you should ask of critics. They only ever write nonsense. They avoid effort with gossip and small-time blackmail. Journalists first. They're gossipers. You'll quickly get used to only reading them in this light. But what they're writing now is still far too favorable. I would like it if someone decided to spit in my face. This relative moderation is banal.<sup>36</sup>

Regardless of whether Céline was more affected by these negative reviews than he lets on here, we can begin to recognize in him a taste for provocation and scandal that has become typical of the rhetoric of extreme cinemas. And unsurprisingly, though it was not quite as commercially successful as *Journey*, *Death on the Installment Plan* sold many copies in Céline's lifetime; the scandal, evidently, paid off.

While there is little dispute over the appeal to emotions in Céline's works, the political ramifications of writing in oral-popular French always were, and are still, objects for discussion. Contemporaries of Céline have called him a leftist as often as a fascist, before settling on the latter after he displayed his sympathies for the Nazi regime in spectacular fashion. Until then, and especially before the *Death on Credit* controversy, his choice to give a written form to oral-popular

---

<sup>36</sup> Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Textes et documents*, Vol. 1 (Paris: Bibliothèque L-F Céline de l'Université Paris 7, 1979), 72.

French was seen as transgressive, liberating even: “good” French, with its rigid codes, was seen as an emanation of the power of the ruling class, who would impose it as the only “proper” French; those who did not respect its intricacies, either out of ignorance or indifference, would be seen as belonging to the bottom of the social ladder.

However, the opposite claim, that this language is transgressive and emancipating, is also problematic. True, Céline’s famously meticulous craftsmanship and laborious efforts are a testament to the “dignity,” as Henri Godard would put it, of oral-popular French: this language requires the same amount of attention as conventional French to be molded into literature. And as Alain Robbe-Grillet wrote of the political engagement of writers: “Rather than being political in nature, engagement, for a writer, is the total consciousness of the current problems with their language, the conviction of their extreme importance, and their desire to solve them from the inside.”<sup>37</sup> In other words, the most important political contributions of a writer can only stem from language itself, in making apparent the presence of political power within it. From this angle, Godard argues that although Céline is a borderline case, “his work on the French language let him escape the limits within which his ideology seemed to confine him. [...] His language is fully itself when it is oriented against discourse-as-power, and against any power afforded by this discourse.”<sup>38</sup> However negative and challenging, Céline’s works after *Death on the Installment Plan* undermine the hierarchy structuring registers of language in French.

---

<sup>37</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Pour un nouveau roman* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), 46-47.

<sup>38</sup> Henri Godard, *Poétique de Céline* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), 208.

Many, on the other hand, have pointed out the powerlessness of this revolt, insofar as it is only verbal.<sup>39</sup> Slang in particular, from this perspective, is no longer a means to oppose the systems in place, but rather the expression of a frustrated and powerless existence within those systems. Furthermore, Céline's entrance in the pantheon of the Pléiade in 1981 – a prestigious collection of expensive, annotated volumes of France's greatest novels – was a surefire sign that his “corrosive style” was progressively being absorbed by the ruling class – so much so that hardly anyone today would deny that he was a “great writer,” despite his “controversial personality.” Whatever revolt was once embedded in his writing, Céline's works are now more likely to be found in a respectable library than in the hands of a worker on strike.

Céline himself, especially towards the end of his life, would resent political affiliations of any kind in his novels, choosing instead to paint himself as a stylist whose only literary goal is to capture emotions – and the surest way of doing so, according to him, was to use oral-popular slang, which he considered to be the essence of life.<sup>40</sup> When André Rousseaux, journalist at *Le Figaro*, wrote that “writing a book in slang might sound more natural for a few months. But it means preparing a text which, soon enough, will merely document the history of our language,” Céline wrote back to him, arguing that the “literary style” simply cannot capture emotion:

I do not want to tell, I want to make one FEEL. It is impossible to do so with the academic, conventional language – the literary style.

---

<sup>39</sup> See for example Danielle Racelle-Latin, *Subversion et négativité dans Voyage au bout de la nuit* (doctoral thesis, University of Liège, 1976) and “*Voyage au bout de la nuit* ou l'inauguration d'une poétique argotique” in, *L-F Céline 2: Ecriture et esthétique*, *La Revue des lettres modernes*, ed. Jean-Pierre Dauphin (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 1976), 53-77.

<sup>40</sup> Although he claimed to be apolitical after the Second World War, his novels were anything but, whether by style or subject matter. I discuss the politics of his style in the “Exile trilogy” in Chapter 2.

[...] The language [of conventional novels] is *impossible, it is dead*, as unreadable (emotionally speaking) as Latin. Why do I borrow so much from [...] slang? *Because you said it, this language dies quick*. Which means it has lived, it LIVES for as long as I use it.<sup>41</sup>

This letter provides some of Céline's rare insights into his own poetics; later, a few years before his death, he would write *Conversations with Professor Y*, a strange text that resembles a stylistic manifesto, and in which he speaks of his intention to create a "direct channel to the reader's nervous system." This language suggestive of an active relationship between author and reader is reminiscent of the similar "collaboration" outlined by Sartre in his essay *What is Literature?*. There is however a crucial difference: the collaboration Sartre envisioned is an idyllic one, a "pact of generosity" likened to the dance of a "spinning top," in which reader and text complete each other:

Thus, the author writes in order to address himself to the freedom of readers, and he requires it in order to make his work exist. But he does not stop there; he also requires that they return this confidence which he has given them, that they recognize his creative freedom, and they in turn solicit it by a symmetrical and inverse appeal. Here there appears the other dialectical paradox of reading; the more we experience our freedom, the more we recognize that of the other; the more he demands of us, the more we demand of him.<sup>42</sup>

In other words, according to the Sartrean model, literature is about reciprocity, communication, empathy; a perfect, functioning democracy encased in an artistic bubble. Yet Céline seems to offer a very different model, and a power relationship that seems more vertical than horizontal. His novels, especially from *Death on the Installment Plan* on, are difficult,

---

<sup>41</sup> Céline, *Romans I*, my translation (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), 1119-1120.

<sup>42</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*, my translation (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), 38.



unpleasant even, and in his own words, the sensational connection he wishes to create with the reader is not based on reciprocity and exchange, as much as it is on confrontation and antagonism.

*Conversations with Professor Y* presents a comically exaggerated image of what Céline's style is supposed to accomplish. In it, the narrator, Céline himself, is interviewed by the Colonel Résédat, at his publisher's request, to talk about Céline's style. Céline insists on the importance of "thrusting oneself" in the reader's nervous system, on hijacking their attention and pushing them on the "train of emotions."<sup>43</sup> As the interview goes on, itself written in this oral-popular style, the Colonel is more and more uncomfortable, falling prey it seems to the "dangerous" style, losing control of himself and acting more and more confused. Eventually, he suffers from a seizure and collapses, drenched in a puddle of his own urine, as if to suggest that his nervous system was indeed no longer his own. Godard recognizes that Céline's writing aims to disorient the reader, chiefly because the shattered syntax makes it impossible to get a sense of where or when each sentence will finish or what direction it will take. Often, sentences will be broken down in little bits, separated by ellipses or exclamation marks; signs normally used to indicate the beginning or the end of a sentence, such as periods or capital letters, appear whimsically and without apparent logic; the narrative voice is essentially a narrative rant, always on the brink of inarticulate bursts of sentence fragments, insults and onomatopoeia. The grammatical logic structuring more "conventional" literature, Godard argues, allows for a less challenging interaction with the text, by virtue of the assumed familiarity of the reader with that language: "[The reader] needs to constantly stay on their guard and mobilize everything they know about the language and its resources."<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> Céline, *Entretiens avec le professeur Y* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955).

<sup>44</sup> Godard, *Ibid*, 258.

Indeed, reading Céline means accepting a certain opacity of the narration, as the narrator juggles between different, often specialized sorts of slangs; between doctor's slang and jeweler's slang, sailor's and soldier's. For Godard, this means that the reader must submit oneself to the play of sounds and rhythms and let oneself be carried along the current of the narration, in a sort of playful submission to the text.

Although Godard shares the sentiment that Céline's prose "gives the reader on the one hand a vague feeling of being assaulted, on the other the intuition that there is in oneself the desire to assault," he only dedicates a few, underdeveloped pages of his voluminous work on the subject.<sup>45</sup> Yet it is one of the richest points of contact between Céline's work and extreme cinemas, whose mode of spectatorship is also often confrontational and opposite the Sartrean model. Likewise, Roussin identifies in Céline's use of slang the basis for an antagonistic relation to the reader:

Insofar as slang constitutes for Céline the crux [*le fond*] of spoken language, verbal interaction is necessarily built upon the logic of *polemos*. Slang gives strength to a voice and organizes emotion on the basis of a tense relationship [*une relation tensive*]. The "I" is not only the lyrical pronoun [*la personne du lyrisme*], as Céline will often say, but that which build the utterer [*l'énonciateur*] into the logic of a reviling interlocution [*une interlocution agonistique*].<sup>46</sup>

Céline, in other words, uses slang and oral-popular French in general not just as a means of representing the language of the popular class, but also as part of an apparatus that pits the narrative "I" *against* the reader, rather than with them. We can begin to recognize in this apparatus some of the strategies used in films such as *Irréversible* or *La vie nouvelle*. In his recent study on the "feel-bad film," Nikolaj Lübecker examines such a corpus of recent films that actively stray

---

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Roussin, *Ibid.*, 426.

from visual and narrative pleasures. He argues that the violence of these films, and more importantly the cathartic desire they build up and then deny, make up an overall unpleasant viewing experience. Lübecker turns to Sartre and *What is Literature?* to start thinking about spectatorship in the feel-bad film, arguing that feel-bad films represent a radical turn away from the idyllic conception of artistic collaboration Sartre muses about, by targeting and confronting their spectators with difficult, frustrating experiences:

[Sartre's essay] provides us with an exemplary theory about how the artistic experience stimulates a humanist ethics and a progressive, democratic politics. In this theory, art seems inherently ethical; it offers a model for democratic relations. Art is about communication, understanding, empathy, recognition, respect, reciprocity, democracy, co-creation and the understanding of oneself and of the other.<sup>47</sup>

For Lübecker, feel-bad films appear to go against everything narrative art is supposed to be about. Rather than being about “communication” and “understanding,” they remain obtusely opaque and confrontational. Céline, a contemporary of Sartre, also goes against the grain of this model. If *Journey to the End of the Night* was so widely praised at the time of its publication, it is also because the burgeoning Celinean style was still palatable enough, literary enough to be recognized as “great” writing, and yet original enough to be considered transgressive. But all of his subsequent novels would be written in the “asthmatic” language of *Death on the Installment Plan*, and as a result, the success of *Journey* would never be repeated. The vocabulary and images he employs in *Conversations with Professor Y* is telling of his terroristic intentions: “thrusting oneself” in the nervous system of readers is indicative of an assault, and suggestive of a rape, in a

---

<sup>47</sup> Nikolaj Lübecker, *The Feel-Bad Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 9.

manner reminiscent of Haneke's now famous statement that he wishes to "rape" viewers into a position of critical spectatorship.<sup>48</sup> Likewise, pushing readers onto the "train of emotions" suggests a passive submission to the narrative voice and its promises of an emotional ride.

In *Literary Polemic*, Suzanne Guerlac returns to *What is Literature?* to argue against the common reading of the essay as marking a separation between literature-as-poetry and prose-as-action: "Far from being a means to an end, something in the service of higher values, literature is absolute for Sartre. As such, it exceeds the economy of utility or project that Bataille identifies with Sartrean engagement."<sup>49</sup> She turns to Hegel's analysis of the Master-Slave relation, specifically what he calls the "dialectic of recognition": the process by which, should the slave choose defeat over death, s/he validates the master's powers. The master then achieves self-consciousness through recognition by the slave. But for Guerlac, Sartre grafts a Husserlian reading of consciousness-as-intentionality onto the Hegelian dialectics: "Instead of following Husserl towards the ideality of meaning associated with the expressive sign, Sartre invokes the Hegelian master/slave dialectic in his elaboration of an intentionality (deictic force, or the capacity to indicate or refer) of the indicative sign."<sup>50</sup> The word "intentionality" is key here: rather than being a struggle to the death, the master-slave relation is turned inside out to be about a mutual recognition of freedom. She concludes that this mutual recognition of freedom is the only point of literature, its only and absolute political engagement:

---

<sup>48</sup> John Wray, "Minister of Fear," *The New York Times Magazine*, September 23, 2007. <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/23/magazine/23haneke-t.html?ref=magazine&pagewanted=all>

<sup>49</sup> Suzanne Guerlac, *Literary Polemics: Bataille, Sartre, Valéry, Breton* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 71.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 59.

Sartre's theory of engagement is usually read as a theory of literature in the service of some higher value. Yet there is no higher value evoked in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* than freedom. What the writer requires from the reader is not subservience to any goal or value, but his or her freedom. [...] It is the mutual recognition of freedoms that establishes value as such. The work of art is value as call to freedom.<sup>51</sup>

Insofar as the interaction between Céline and the Colonel Résédât in *Conversations with Professor Y* serves as a theoretical model for Céline's own relation to those who "listen" to him, then the master-slave dialectic is once more overturned. The narrative "I" in *Death on the Installment Plan*, and even more so in later novels, with its defensiveness, aggressiveness and opacity, reinstates a tyrannical relation to the reader. Hijacking the "nervous system" is akin to an injunction to listen, rather than a mutual recognition of freedom.

This overturning of the Sartrean model has everything to do with Céline's choice to write in oral-popular French, rather than literary French. For Roussin, the turn to emotion, along with the strong narrative "I," is indicative of an effort to capture attention: "Perhaps the writing of speech aimed less at communicating the emotion of a speaker than at mobilizing in discourse the emotion of speech, in order to make it the mean to an 'injunction to listen.'"<sup>52</sup> Céline's transgression is that all these efforts to seize attention do not crystallize into communication: the language of *Death on the Installment Plan* remains opaque, its main character is no closer to emancipation at the end than at the start.

This does not necessarily mean that the ideal of freedom envisioned by Sartre is eradicated. Although Céline's injunction to listen is akin to a submission, rather than a harmonious recognition

---

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 69.

<sup>52</sup> Roussin, *Ibid*, 411.

of the other as equal, this submission remains willful nonetheless. The similarities with extreme cinema spectatorship are obvious enough: films like *Baise-moi*

(Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi, 2000), *Martyrs* (Pascal Laugier, 2008) or *A Serbian Film* (Srdjan Spasojevic, 2010) are marketed as harrowing experiences meant to test the endurance of even veteran movie-goers. In both cases, the reader/spectator's engagement with the text is one based on willful submission to unpleasant emotions. But the word "submission" is key here: the democratic Sartrean model is not replaced, with Céline and extreme cinema, by an autocratic one; Alex's "therapy" in *A Clockwork Orange* (Stanley Kubrick, 1971) is possibly the only example of a truly tyrannical experience of spectatorship. Reviewers boasting about how they burned *Death on the Installment Plan* fifty pages in, and Cannes attendees reporting how many people left the theater when *Irréversible* was screened, all indicate an engagement with the text that is based on freedom: freedom to leave, freedom to stay. In other words, Sartre's model is not as dismantled as one might initially think when it comes to extreme cinemas or Céline; the idea of a collaboration between spectator and creator is still there, but its parameters have shifted dramatically.

This change of dynamics in one's relationship to the text can be noticed in the most banal circumstances: what spectator of extreme films, or even of horror films, has not been asked the question "But why do you watch these things?" The assumption there essentially encapsulates Sartre's theory; that watching a film, or reading a book, should be beneficial, or at the very least, offer some sort of "return on investment." The candid concern behind the question "why are you watching this?" is that watching such films may yield nothing, or at least nothing that would adequately compensate the discomfort of their viewing. Céline, especially from *Death on the Installment Plan* on, vocally rejects this literary contract, as the aforementioned letter written to

Marie Canavaggia reveals: not only does he express satisfaction at the deluge of criticism targeted at his novel, he ostensibly regrets that this criticism is merely vocal, that no one has spat at his face yet. Behind Céline's bravado is a literary posture undermining the Sartrean model: where the latter speaks of enlightening, the former's opaque language means to obscure.

This confrontational relationship to the reader did not start with *Death on the Installment Plan* however. The hostile narrative "I" has been a staple of Céline's writing since *Journey to the End of the Night*. As Godard points out, the correlate of writing in an oral-popular style, of capturing speech in written form, is that of the narrator is talking *to* someone. There is always, in the narration of *Journey* and *Death*, an "invisible interlocutor" whom Bardamu and Ferdinand, respectively, are addressing. But these narrators always seem to assume that this other they are addressing is not benevolent; that it is hostile or accusatory. The very first lines of *Journey* dictate the tone: "Here's how it started. Me? I'd never said a word. Not one word. It was Arthur Ganate that made me speak up. Arthur, he was med student too, a comrade."<sup>53</sup> Right away, the narrator is defensive, tries to justify himself. The emphatic "Me?" is both a device for the oral popular style and a sign of defensiveness. The repetition "Not one word" implies a suspicious interlocutor, someone who might not believe that Bardamu said nothing; therefore, just to be sure, he repeats: not one word. And next is a logical follow-up to the narrator's defensive attitude: he accuses someone else. It was Arthur Ganate, not him. And yet Arthur, he continues, was a med student, just like him, a "comrade;" of course, he trusted him. How could he be blamed for speaking? These first few sentences suggest the presence of an "other," and more importantly, Bardamu assumes that this other is an opponent, and their curiosity carries ill intentions. In another sense, the act of

---

<sup>53</sup> Céline, *Romans I*, 7.

speaking up, of telling, is placed under inauspicious signs for the rest of the novel; it is the voice of someone who is being accused, and who already begins to frame himself as a victim - and of course, one of the singularities of *Journey* is that it denounces the cruellest manifestations of modernity not from a distant, righteous standpoint, but from the position of a victim: Bardamu, grunt in the army, neither smart nor strong nor brave.

Already, we are far from the very masculine imagery Sartre employs to talk about prose. For him, naming and writing are acts of power upon the world: “Speaking is acting: anything that we name is already not quite the same, it has lost its innocence.”<sup>54</sup> Writing is an act of “unveiling,” of transformation of the world, and words are “loaded guns.” The writers envisioned by Sartre are (male) orators whose powerful voice booms across the world and enlightens it. In another essay, this time about Jean Genet, Sartre praises his “virile” use of slang and of popular French, going so far as to compare the male voices pronouncing such “forbidden words” with “erect rods,” and concluding that the use of slang is “the permanent exercise of rape.”<sup>55</sup>

Céline himself used similarly masculine and sexual language to describe his style, and called the “academic” language of conventional literature “powerless, castrated, precious and effeminate” opposed to the “standing” language he adopted.<sup>56</sup> But as Racelle-Latin has shown, the power of this “erect” language is merely that of indignity for Céline, the expression of a powerless existence within oppressive systems. The ambition to assault the reader’s nervous system is itself, at least in intentions, evidence that the oral-popular style *is* a mode of writing intimately

---

<sup>54</sup> Sartre, *Ibid*, 26.

<sup>55</sup> Sartre, *Saint-Genet, comédien et martyr* (Paris: Gallimard, 1952), 323-24.

<sup>56</sup> Céline, *Bagatelles pour un massacre* (Paris: Denoël, 1937), 121.



preoccupied with power - power to reach out to the reader's emotions, power to shock or offend. But this power also oddly moot, it is more political bark than bite: what it translates is the rage and constant disappointment at the unchangeability of things. In spite of the fact that the narratives of both *Journey* and *Death* span multiple years and see their respective protagonists go through many trials, they are novels fundamentally concerned with immobility. From the deathscapes of World War I to the impoverished Parisian suburbs, through the hardships of colonial life and the frenzy of Manhattan, Bardamu's journey is the kind that would turn green with jealousy any Balzacian character on a quest of self-discovery; yet at the end of the day, he is still the same defensive, cowardly man we identify in the first sentences of the novel. What most closely resembles hope at the end of *Journey* is the promise of oblivion, in the final description of a boat leaving the harbor: "From afar, the tug whistled; its call went past the bridge, then an archway, then another, the lock, another bridge, further, further... It called to itself all the barges of the river, all of them, and the entire city, and the sky and the countryside, and us, it took everything, and the Seine too, everything, let's not speak of it anymore."<sup>57</sup> The "end of the night" here is not a sunrise, but the image of a tug disappearing in the darkness, and taking quite literally everything with it, finishing with the act of speech itself, this very act that Bardamu reluctantly conceded to at the beginning.

Likewise, Ferdinand's trajectory in *Death* is mired in disappointment and immobility. From his childhood to his early adult life, his parents made sure to teach him the bourgeois values through which they lived and hoped to better their own situation; values of hard work, sense of duty and self-sacrifice. But one of the most difficult challenges Ferdinand has to face is the fact that these values are constantly undermined by his own experiences: his hard work as an apprentice

---

<sup>57</sup> Céline, *Romans I*, 505.

is met with scorn, persecution and deceit by his superiors, and the figures he regards as mentors, save for his Uncle Édouard, meet mediocre or otherwise grisly ends. Although both *Journey* and *Death* feature tropes of self-discovery narratives, they are also devoid of traits usually associated with them – the power of the individual will, and the notion that hardships and obstacles ultimately strengthen one’s character. Instead, both Ferdinand and Bardamu, in spite of their many encounters and adventures, remain the same mediocre individuals: *Journey* finishes at the “Place de Clichy,” where it started, and *Death* starts with an adult Ferdinand, bitter, angry and misanthropist, denying right from the start the hope that his misfortunes as a youth will eventually be compensated in adulthood.

In a model where writing is an act of power, style, for Sartre, should be unnoticeable. Though he concedes that “style gives prose its value,” he adds: “But it must be unnoticed. Since words are transparent, and our eyes go through them, it would be absurd to insert unpolished glasses between them. Beauty here is only soft and imperceptible strength.”<sup>58</sup> It is significant that Sartre, in this essay, is concerned with the importance for writers to be politically engaged, to assume strong positions and stand by them; in fact, the preface is a short inventory of the scorn and criticism he allegedly attracted for defending “*l’art engagé*.” It is in this context that he claims words are tools of power. The Celinian style, of course, is not “imperceptible,” quite the opposite; it is forceful and aggressively noticeable. What Sartre is describing here is, in many ways, the literary French Céline writes against; the impressive, seamless language of Marcel Proust and André Gide, that is also the literary language endorsed by the ruling-class, legitimized as “proper.”

---

<sup>58</sup> Sartre, *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?*, 32. Sartre cites a phrase by Valéry, who said that there was prose when our eyes go through words as glass through sunshine.

That is not to say that Céline proves Sartre wrong; rather, by choosing to write in this oral-popular style, he symbolically relinquished the power Sartre is describing, and conceded to a language best fit to express the hardships and indignities of those who speak it, even if it meant foreclosing the possibility of change. Words, in *Journey* and *Death*, recurrently show their inadequacy to meaningfully change a situation; they are, to keep Sartre's imagery, guns loaded with blanks: at best, they will do nothing, at worst, the noise will bring more trouble.

In a passage that could have been an implicit reference to Céline, Sartre dismisses writers who specifically target emotions, in a context where the act of reading is an act of co-creation:

If I depend on my reader to finish the work I started, it goes without saying that I consider [reading] to be pure freedom, pure creative power, unconditional activity. Therefore, I could never address [my reader's] passivity, that is to say try to *affect* him or her, to immediately communicate emotions of fear, desire or anger. Surely there are authors who only preoccupy themselves with provoking these emotions, because they are predictable, controllable, and they know surefire means that will elicit them. [...] In passion, freedom is alienated; since it is abruptly engaged in half-baked purposes, it loses sight of its task, which is to reach an absolute goal. And the book merely becomes a means to perpetuate hatred or desire.<sup>59</sup>

Eliciting emotions, for Sartre, should not be the end-all be-all of reading; they matter inasmuch as they flesh out characters. For example, the judge in *Crime and Punishment* (Fyodor Dostoyevsky, 1866), is incarnated by the hatred that Sartre's ideal reader pours into him; but the end goal of *Crime and Punishment*, for Sartre, is not "just" to elicit that hatred. Insofar as the act of reading is supposed to complete the act of writing, "passions" are a distraction from this collaboration and lead to the unproductive lingering of emotions. In other words, they get in the

---

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 62.

way of political engagement, when they should merely support it. By making emotions the very point of his style, Céline concedes to the vainness of political engagement, preferring instead the cultivation of “hatred and desire.”

Over a half-century later, a number of filmmakers have stirred these debates anew by crafting an explicitly antagonistic relationship to the spectator, mainly by preying on their sensations and even on their bodies.<sup>60</sup> More recently, Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall reaffirmed the importance of studying films that “share a desire to viscerally confront spectators.”<sup>61</sup> Asbjørn Grønstad writes about “unwatchable films” and Lübecker of “feel-bad films;”<sup>62</sup> all these different denominations point to films that challenge solidly entrenched notions of visual and narrative pleasures, and usually rely on violent emotional effects. The Celinian style is a useful model to discuss these confrontational spectatorships, not only because of its glaring similarities, but also because it frames their sensational pessimism as expressions of political powerlessness.

The association Sartre made between “imperceptible” style and political and social acuity has resurfaced in discussions of extreme cinemas. James Quandt lamented the violence of the New French Extremity as much as what he saw as its empty formalism. The stylistic transgressions present in the films of Pasolini and Fassbinder, for Quandt, are superior by virtue of their moderation, relative to the excess of the New French Extremity. Films like *Irreversible* and *Baise-moi*, flashy and tasteless, seem gratuitous in comparison, and their excess inadequately masks their

---

<sup>60</sup> See respectively, Beugnet, *Ibid*, and Tim Palmer, *Brutal Intimacy: Analyzing Contemporary French Cinema* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2011).

<sup>61</sup> Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall, “Preface,” *Cinephile* 8, no. 2 (2012): 6-10.

<sup>62</sup> Asbjørn Grønstad, *Screening the Unwatchable: Spaces of Negation in Post-Millennial Art Cinema* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

vacuity.<sup>63</sup> Quandt's value judgement on form is similar to Sartre's: "real" political transgression needs not be obscene and brutal, but measured and composed.

From this, we can begin to consider the affectivity of extreme cinemas as an expression of political powerlessness, as it is for Céline. One of the most often encountered criticisms towards extreme films, either implicitly or explicitly, is that their violence and, more generally their affectivity, is gratuitous. What is generally implied in this statement is the accusation that whatever extreme imagery these films promise is only there for the shock value, to be used as a marketing ploy by the producers; that these images should not exist by themselves; their existence needs to be justified, as they often are, by progressive interpretations made by the filmmakers themselves or academics rushing to their defense (e.g. this rape scene is important because it denounces rape). Mattias Frey categorized what he saw as typical responses to extreme films under two different labels: advocates of the "cynicism criticism" describe the violent and sexual imagery of extreme films as opportunistic, produced by cynical filmmakers who merely hope to garner exposure at international film festivals, and try to paint their films with a gloss of sophistication and pretentious intellectualism; at the other end of the spectrum, practitioners of the "aesthetic embrace" seek to differentiate extreme films from the "low-brow" genres they share affinities with – porn, horror – by assigning them with profound meanings.<sup>64</sup> Frey, of course, condones neither of these approaches and finds them equally misleading; and indeed, they are reductive for different reasons.

---

<sup>63</sup> Some thirty years earlier, on the occasion of the screening of *Salò* (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1975) at the New York Film Festival, film critic Vincent Canby determined that "ideas get lost in a spectacle of such immediate reality and cruelty," effectively anticipating Quandt's criticism of the New French Extremity.

<sup>64</sup> Mattias Frey, "The Aesthetic Embrace and the Cynicism Criticism. Reception Discourses," in *Extreme Cinema: The Transgressive Rhetoric of Today's Art Film Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 30-45.

It may be unfair to think of Catherine Breillat, Michael Haneke and the like as money-hungry con artists eager to buy themselves an edgy reputation, but it can also be misguided to treat them as enlightened, disinterested philosophers. There *is*, at some level, gratuity in the violence and nudity of extreme cinema; when Milos (Srđan Todorović) unwittingly rapes his six-year-old son (Luka Mijatovic) in *A Serbian Film*, it *may* be part of a larger statement on the corruption of the Serbian government, as the filmmaker claimed.<sup>65</sup> But it is also an act of grotesque, utterly unnecessary violence whose brutality far exceeds its purported meaning. There is only so much that can be recuperated in discourse. No matter how convincingly these images may be interpreted, and this affectivity processed, there will always be lingering gratuity. What a comparison with Céline's novels shows is that this excess is a hermeneutic impossibility that serves to complete, and give an emotional texture to, the powerlessness found in the narratives of extreme films.

Therefore, when it comes to Céline or extreme cinemas, the collaboration described by Sartre is not a spiritual encounter whose ultimate purpose is a mutual enrichment. Yet in another sense, these confrontational, confusing and frustrating experiences sublimate the “freedom” that is so important to Sartre. For him, the novel is an exercise in freedom; it requires, as the same time as it realizes, the freedom of an author and that of a reader, citing fascist author Drieu la Rochelle as the definite example that literature, and art more generally, will only suffocate in regimes where freedom is compromised. He concludes, rather flamboyantly: “Whether [the author] is an essayist, a pamphleteer, a satirist or a novelist, whether he speaks of individual passions or attacks the

---

<sup>65</sup> Eric Kohn, “A *Serbian Film* Shocks Midnight Audiences at SXSW,” *The Wall Street Journal*, March 10 2010, <https://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2010/03/15/a-serbian-film-shocks-midnight-audiences-at-sxsw/>

regime of a society, he only has one topic: freedom.”<sup>66</sup> He adds that as a result, the art of prose is irremediably connected to democracy, the only political regime where it can be meaningful, and argues that novels expressing non-democratic ideologies are merely “bad” novels. As he insists, the act of reading does not come without a few expectations. The “generous dance” between author and reader is composed of mutual demands: the reader demands engagement from the author and vice-versa. The vocabulary employed by Sartre, of “pledges” and “oaths,” evidently suggests that this freedom of engagement is conditional on the promise of a prize of some sort. He writes: “Thus reading is an act of generosity; and what the writer asks of the reader is not the application of an abstract reality, but to be given his whole self, with its passions, its sympathies, its sexual preferences, its value system. Only this person will give oneself with generosity (...). The man who reads has elevated himself at his highest.”<sup>67</sup> The parameters of what constitutes a “good” novel for Sartre are clear enough: in exchange for the reader “giving him or herself” entirely, the novel should elevate.

In these circumstances, a novel like *Death on the Installment Plan* unexpectedly becomes a model for this “literature of demands.” The tyrannical and defensive narrative “I” demands a listening reader; it demands attention to follow the difficult syntax, and it demands a surrendering of the nervous system. Yet it offers nothing in return; the harrowing six hundred or so pages of *Death* are inconclusive, offer no clear insight or cathartic resolution. Ferdinand ends up as frustrated and confused as at the beginning. Likewise, Lübecker argues that one of the determining qualities of feel-bad films, of which many are considered “extreme,” is that they create a cathartic

---

<sup>66</sup> Sartre, *Ibid*, 81.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, 65.

desire that is then deadlocked. Part of the reason why they feel bad is that they offer no resolution, no happy ending, no liberating experience. And yet they also require abandonment; they request of the ideal spectator that he or she submits themselves to what promises to be an unpleasant experience; films like *A Serbian Film* or *Baise-moi* are even marketed as difficult films, and challenge potential viewers to watch them without flinching.

But behind this bravado is a distinction from the Sartrean model: the fact that these films promise transgressions without emancipation, demand submission but offer no reward, also suggests that they engage the ideal spectator in their freedom, arguably even more so than with the promise of a spiritual prize. Reading Céline, and watching these films, is also an exercise in democracy, but a democracy whose parameters have shifted: in 1947, as France needs to recover from the damage of war and the occupation, and at the dawn of the *Trente Glorieuses*,<sup>68</sup> democracy is an ideal regime of giving and returning, particularly bright against the shadow of fascism. Fifty years later, when most of these films were made, Europe is in a period of economic recession, and notions of democratic reciprocity, of demands and rewards, may not be as promising as they used to be. Yet these films are still very much about a mutual recognition of freedom, they do not oppose to the Sartrean model an autocratic model of spectatorship. Rather, freedom shifts from being synonymous with possibility to signifying impossibility; the vast deserts of *Twentynine Palms* (Bruno Dumont, 2003), and the liberty they might suggest, do nothing to improve the domestic problems of the main couple, and even ends up bringing them savagery and lawlessness; Marcus (Vincent Cassel) in *Irreversible* freely roams the Parisian streets in search of his girlfriend's rapist,

---

<sup>68</sup> The phrase refers to the thirty-year period that followed WWII and that was the stage of significant economic growth and prosperity.



only for his hyper-masculine quest to end in miserable failure. *I Stand Alone* goes so far as to include, at the end of the film, an intertitle with a 30-second countdown and the warning “You have 30 seconds to leave the screening of this film,” promising untold horrors to those who dare stay. Because extreme films require the ideal spectator’s willful submission, they recognize, and even actively stimulate, their freedom; but because this willful submission is only met with pessimism and what seems like hollow violence, freedom is understood in terms of what *cannot* be done, in spite of it.

Sartre’s *What is Literature?* starts a fruitful conversation on the topics of readership and spectatorship for *Journey* and *Death on the Installment Plan*, and what these novels can tell us about extreme cinemas. Sartre’s dismissal of the focus on “emotions” is a little too quick, but that is because his theory of literary engagement is, in a sense, a theory of power: words are tools whose signifying powers can and will change the world, and as such, the (good) writer should uphold a political position, whether it be proved right or wrong down the line. “Emotions” should be a means to an end, and treating them as the goal is merely an avowal of sterility; but this is disregarding the fact that both *Journey* and *Death* are very much *about* sterility, about immobility and the impossibility of change. By explicitly focusing on the nervous system, Céline and extreme filmmakers have an idealized reader/spectator in mind, much as Sartre does, but the terms of “collaboration” are vastly different: “generous dance” in one case, submission and confrontation in the other. Either way, *Journey*, *Death* and extreme films all recognize the reader’s freedom, and in that sense, realize the democratic exchange Sartre envisioned. But this democratic freedom is not fertile; it does not yield possibility or elevation, and negates the idea of fruitful reciprocity. What is highlighted instead is the limitations of what one can do given unbounded freedom; powerlessness becomes a function of this freedom.

### 3.0 Céline, Trauma, and the Irredeemable

Many twentieth-century thinkers have tended to associate extreme states of being with “truth.” Karl Jaspers described “limit situations” supposedly conducive to moments of profound revelation;<sup>69</sup> Georges Bataille wrote about convulsive ruptures that can lead to authentic experience;<sup>70</sup> and more recently, Jean-Luc Nancy in *The Ground of the Image*, similarly observes that Western thought tends to associate violence with authenticity.<sup>71</sup> In line with this tradition, extreme cinemas have often shared in such correlations. Filmmakers like Lars Von Trier, Catherine Breillat or Abdellatif Kechiche, for example, readily talk of the way they push their actors and actresses to exhaustion in order to extract “authentic” performances out of them. Common to all these theories is the assumption that there exists a “truth” hidden from common perception and that requires exceptional circumstances to uncover.<sup>72</sup> Film and literature are two artistic media that

---

<sup>69</sup> The concept of “limit situations” appears throughout Jaspers philosophy, and is described as “moments, usually accompanied by experiences of dread, guilt or acute anxiety, in which the human mind confronts the restrictions and pathological narrowness of its existing forms, and allows itself to abandon the securities of its limitedness, and so to enter new realm of self-consciousness.” Thornhill, Chris and Miron, Ronny, “Karl Jaspers”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/jaspers/>

<sup>70</sup> Georges Bataille, *Eroticism* (New York: M. Boyars, 1987).

<sup>71</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

<sup>72</sup> The semantic overlap between “truth” and “authenticity” for these authors and filmmakers is difficult to parse, and at times the two words seem interchangeable, or at least co-dependent. “Authenticity” would appear to be a state of

have especially been endowed with the power to facilitate access to this truth: from Marcel Proust's lengthy meditations in *In Search of Lost Time* (1913) to André Bazin's reflections about the revelatory powers of photography, the idea that cinema, literature, and art broadly conceived have privileged access to the secret underside of things has become a sort of truism.

Leo Bersani has convincingly named the propensity to endow art with the power to order and make sense of overwhelming experience, thereby revealing its hidden meanings, as the "culture of redemption." He writes:

A crucial assumption in the culture of redemption is that a certain type of repetition of experience in art repairs inherently damaged or valueless experience. Experience may be overwhelming, practically impossible to absorb, but it is assumed [...] that the work of art has the authority to master the presumed raw material of experience in a manner that uniquely gives value to, perhaps even redeems, that material.<sup>73</sup>

He considers that this only applies to art that purports to be "realistic" and that recasts actual events. As such, one of Bersani's chief examples for redemptive art is Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, in which the narrator Marcel labors to unravel the meaning of past experiences when he sits down to write. It follows that the kind of art Bersani writes about, in the culture of redemption, is uniquely equipped to uncover the "truth" of experience, hidden under layers of phenomena, in a monumentalization of meaning. Bersani's theorization of the culture of redemption is also a critique of it: ascribing art with such a utilitarian function, he argues, devalues both experience and art itself, insofar as a redemptive aesthetic would necessarily be based on "a

---

being stripped of social conventions (as if diluted); achieving this state of being, for someone like Kechiche for example, is necessary to the access of a metaphysical "truth."

<sup>73</sup> Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 1.

nihilism that invents a ‘true world’ as an alternative to an inferior, depreciated world of mere appearance.”<sup>74</sup>

To a large extent, Bersani is targeting the ability of art to be discursive, in the broad, Foucauldian sense of the term; that is, of artworks’ processes of meaning-making, specifically in this case of art’s unique ability to draw meaning out of the meaningless or the inarticulate. The culture of redemption is therefore also a critique of this discursivity, inasmuch as it is discursivity itself that “devalues” overwhelming experience and history by purporting to elucidate or extract meaning out of them. It should also be noted that, although Bersani berates this aesthetic phenomenon, only one of his case studies seems to be irredeemable (Georges Bataille’s 1957 erotic novel, *Blue of Noon*), suggesting that Bersani’s argument is less remedy than diagnosis. His critique perhaps implies that art should be irredeemable, but he leaves little indication about what such art should be or look like.

Extreme cinemas arguably begin to answer this question. As many have already observed, films like *I Stand Alone* (Gaspar Noé, 1999), *Twentynine Palms* (Bruno Dumont, 2003) or *Baise-moi* (Virginie Despentes & Coralie Trinh Thi, 2000) seem to resist, through their graphic excesses, interpretation and discourse. Because their scenes of violence are so gratuitous and violently affective, the films do not lend themselves easily to discursive readings and always remain at least partly opaque to interpretation. Martine Beugnet in particular has suggested that although the “cinema of sensations,” as she calls it, deserves to be analyzed, their visceral extremity means that there will always remain “something” in excess of discourse, opaque to interpretation and

---

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

redemption.<sup>75</sup> My goal in this chapter is to provide a theoretical framework for these irredeemable films by teasing a theory of opacity first out of Louis-Ferdinand Céline's literary production. I turn to Céline on the one hand for the striking stylistic similarities between his novels and extreme films, as discussed in Chapter 1 – works that are confrontational, graphic and provocative – and on the other because I consider his literary production to be both a precursor to, and a definite example of, irredeemable art. I use the word “irredeemable” in two ways: first, in the conventional sense of “rescuing” an artwork from its unfortunate politics, or those of its author, by arguing that artistic merit outvalues reactionary politics. Whatever their literary worthiness, Céline and his novels remain irredeemable in their antisemitism and fascist sympathies. And second, I use the word “irredeemable” in the Bersinian sense, not of elucidating meaning in art, but of clouding it further – a “meaning-masking” operation that I see as being replicated in extreme cinemas.

A few questions are therefore guiding this chapter: If redemption devalues experience and history, does un-redemption return value to both? What exactly is opaque in extreme films and Céline's novels? Are there any political implications to this notion of an opacity of/to discursivity? If Céline and extreme cinemas have so much in common, are their politics equally deplorable?

In order to answer these questions, I will bring together different strands of thought that have been adjacent to one another, but seldom put in dialogue. First, I turn to Céline as a theoretical alternative to Bataille, whose voluminous writings on excess, transgression and eroticism have been influential for studies on extreme cinemas, including Beugnet's. However, Bataille sometimes falls short of shining light on the more radically materialistic among these films, since

---

<sup>75</sup> Martine Beugnet, *Cinema and Sensation: French Film and the Art of Transgression* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press), 46.

his theories have a tendency to circle back to, for lack of a better term, his more “immaterial” concerns, especially what he likes to call “*l’expérience intérieure*” or “inner experience.”<sup>76</sup> Yet the radicality of films like *Irreversible* (Gaspar Noé, 2002) or *In My Skin* (Marina de Van, 2002) comes partly from the notion that nothing exists besides matter, especially not something akin to an “inner experience.” Céline’s novels in this respect, particularly *Death on the Installment Plan* (1936) and the “Exile Trilogy” (comprising his last three novels, *Castle to Castle* [1957], *North* [1960] and *Rigadoon* [1969]) have much more in common with, and much more to say about, these films. One concept I will therefore articulate in this chapter, in direct response to Bataille’s “Base materialism,” is what I term “Opaque materialism,” an undialectical form of materialism where the supremacy of base matter blots out discourse and interpretation.

Second, I argue that these films are opaque because they are ultimately concerned with trauma, and art’s inability to express or draw meaning from trauma. Here again, Céline’s novels are useful frameworks. In this chapter, I will not be addressing trauma in the most common sense of an individual psychic concussion, even though a number of extreme films are certainly concerned with this type of trauma. Rather, I will look at historical traumas (in Céline’s case, World War II and the defeat of Nazi Germany) and, following Jeffrey Alexander and Greg Forter, socio-economic trauma, which refers to systemic structures of oppression (such as patriarchy and capitalism writ large) whose operations are both immensely violent and impossible to articulate. As such, this chapter will be broken into four parts: I begin by articulating my theory of opaque

---

<sup>76</sup> Bataille himself was reluctant to offer a clear definition of what this inner experience was exactly, since it is supposed to exist beyond human limits and therefore beyond language. What the inner experience emphatically is not, however, is spiritualism or mysticism, however tempting it may be to apply these terms to his writings on the subject. See Georges Bataille, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), 15, and the extensive endnote, 427.

materialism, which I understand as a variant on Bataille's own base materialism, itself a mere blip in the history of materialist theory. My intention in proposing a "new" type of materialism is therefore not to add to or nuance existing materialist theories, but to put forth a unifying concept for my analysis of extreme cinemas, and their resistance to discursivity. I will then start my analysis of Céline's novels, beginning briefly with *Journey to the End of the Night* as, I argue, the sole example among his works of a redemptive novel. This detour through *Journey* serves to better exemplify the turn Céline will take towards irredeemable aesthetics in *Death on the Installment Plan*, which will be the focus of my third part. I will argue that the narrative of *Death* is an early articulation of trauma as a non-punctual, socio-economic process, rendered through the delirious and homogenizing voice of the narrator Ferdinand, and the subtheme of the failure of language. The chapter will end with an examination of the "Exile Trilogy" where Céline sketches a theory of history-as-opaque. Profoundly concerned with the historical trauma of World War II, Céline's last novels strongly imply that history is fundamentally chaotic and therefore cannot be told, a proposition that ultimately serves his dreadful politics. Such a conception of history nonetheless sheds light on extreme films such as *Salò* (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1975), *Caché* (Michael Haneke, 2005) or more recently *Monkey, Ostrich and Grave* (Oleg Mavromatti, 2017), which all subscribe to the idea that (national) history contains areas impenetrable to language and reason, although the politics of these films are quite different from Céline's.

### **3.1 Bataille, Céline, and Extreme Cinema Studies: The Case for Opaque Materialism**

Chief theorist of transgression, excess, violence and eroticism, himself the author of several novels that could easily serve as blueprints for extreme films, Bataille has been an influential figure

for extreme cinema studies.<sup>77</sup> Beugnet makes an especially compelling case for what she calls a “third path.”<sup>78</sup> This third path takes shape when “shock and ‘excess’ [...] need not be a system and an end in themselves (as in genre movies), nor merely one aspect of a pre-existing discursive strategy (as in traditional art movies).” Instead, she contends that Bataille’s defense of excess and the wasteful (notably, for Beugnet, in *The Accursed Share* [1949]) helps define a “gateway” and “interstices” in extreme films between sensation and intellection, which “engage us emotionally as well as aesthetically,” and where lies these films’ true “critical edge.”<sup>79</sup> Likewise, Anna Powell cites Deleuze to describe an “affection image,” whose excess “suspends or breaks down [our] sensory-motor function,” therefore yielding “deeper insight.”<sup>80</sup> Both Beugnet and Powell are invested in finding a compromise between affect and discourse, and between materialism and idealism, suggesting that extreme films are invested in both, while acknowledging that there remains a “something” that resists interpretation. In other words, Beugnet and Powell still believe firmly in extreme cinemas’ capacity for redemption: in this third path, affect and discourse need not be opposites, but a function of one another. Yet this assumes, as do several other studies on

---

<sup>77</sup> See for example, in addition to Beugnet, Brian McNair, *Striptease Culture: Sex, Media and the Democratization of Desire* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Victoria Best and Martin Crowley, *The New Pornographies: Explicit Sex in Recent French Fiction and Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007); Tina Kendall, “Reframing Bataille: On Tacky Spectatorship in the New European Extremism” in *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe*, ed. Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 43-54.

<sup>78</sup> She borrows this expression from another thinker of transgression, Antonin Artaud, but most of her argument is guided by Bataille.

<sup>79</sup> Beugnet, *Ibid*, 106.

<sup>80</sup> Anna Powell, *Deleuze and Horror Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 119.



the subject, that extreme cinema (singular) is monolithic, that *Trouble Every Day* (Claire Denis, 2001) and *Anatomy of Hell* (Catherine Breillat, 2004) can be as equally redeemed by Bataille as *Baise-moi* or *The House that Jack Built* (Lars Von Trier, 2018). Yet for a number of these extreme films (especially the films of Gaspar Noé, but also *In My Skin*, *Antichrist*...), Beugnet's third path and Powell's affection image are misleading, insofar as they imply discursivity where the object of these films is emphatically the opaque, the inarticulate, the non-discursive -- largely because they are ultimately about trauma, and art's inability to redeem it.

In addition to my own reservations about Bataille's systematic application to extreme cinema studies, a few scholars have expressed doubts about his contemporary relevance, in particular Steven Shaviro, who goes so far as to declare the intellectual bankruptcy of Bataille's writings of transgression, caused by the widespread commodification of transgression in our age of late capitalism. For Shaviro, "we live in an age in which transgression has lost its sting, when it has become trivial, boring, and irrelevant. [...] There's no more 'inexpressible' to bear witness to; it's all been shown already on cable."<sup>81</sup> Likewise, Tina Kendall implicitly recognizes a mismatch between Bataille and extreme cinemas when she proposes to pay attention instead to his "tackiness," to take Bataille not literally, but ironically, and focus not just on shock and terror, but also on cringe and "tackiness," in order to account for and make sense of the eye-rolling pretentiousness of films like *Ma Mère* (Christophe Honoré, 2004).<sup>82</sup> However compelling

---

<sup>81</sup> Steven Shaviro, "Come, Come, Georges: Steven Shaviro on Georges Bataille's *Story of the Eye* and *Ma Mère*," *Artforum* 43, no. 9 (2005).

<sup>82</sup> Kendall, *Ibid.*

Kendall's argument is, her invitation to read Bataille ironically also points to the inadequacy of "literal" Bataille, as if *Eroticism* needed a sarcastic reader to remain worthwhile.

One of Bataille's most influential contributions to extreme cinema studies is his articulation of what he called "Base Materialism," notably in a 1929 essay entitled "The Big Toe," and another, published one year later, titled "Base Materialism and Gnosticism." According to Benjamin Noys, Bataille's intervention in the field of materialist theory seeks to unhook materialism from its metaphysical moorings, claiming that "materialism is tied together with idealism as its opposite, but it still remains trapped within this structure."<sup>83</sup> By placing the emphasis on "base" matter and on its contamination of "high" values and ideals, the separation of high and low, and of matter and ideal, no longer makes sense, since both are presumably co-dependent. Base materialism indeed posits that what we are accustomed to regarding as base, disgusting or vile also forms the foundation of what we consider elevated and ideal, in a (typical with Bataille) dichotomy enmeshing "high" and "low." However, as Noys explains, "the contamination [that this dependence] produces is systematically denied by the ideal, which splits off base matter as whatever is disgusting, vile, sub-human, etc."<sup>84</sup> To illustrate his argument, Bataille cites the big toe as the necessary component of our ability to stand erect, and of all that symbolically flows from the erect position and separates us from animals (knowledge, technology, humanity...). The big toe, grotesque and disgraceful, is the epitome of base matter, in the sense that we allegedly

---

<sup>83</sup> Benjamin Noys, "Georges Bataille's Base Materialism," *Cultural Values* 2, no. 4 (1998), 513.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, 500.

look down on it, despite our dependence on it, therefore denying the importance of the “low” for the “high.”<sup>85</sup>

In this sense, some extreme films, especially those of Catherine Breillat (*Romance* [1999], *Anatomy of Hell* [2004]) where the graphic display of base bodily functions generates discourses on love and gender relations, seem to explicitly draw from Bataille’s legacy. Others, like the films of Gaspar Noé, *A Serbian Film* (Srdjan Spasojevic, 2011) or *L.A. Zombie* (Bruce LaBruce, 2010) seem on the contrary to be anti-discursive, and to promise nothing beyond base matter. As important as it is, Bataille’s emphasis on the low does not untether him from the high. The grim materialism of Céline’s novels breaks this binarism by questioning the very existence of a “high.” A novel like *Death on the Installment Plan*, for example, certainly recognizes the day-to-day prevalence of base matter in the life of its protagonist Ferdinand, whether because he keeps defecating in his own pants, or because his sexual experiences somehow always end up in disgust, or more generally because he and his parents live in dismal, unsanitary conditions. But the base never yields “deeper insight”; nor does it indicate the existence of a “high” it supports. The low is just that: there is nothing but a big, filthy toe.

In this sense, Céline’s materialism is base, but more importantly it is opaque: it blots out discourse and ideals, and renders processes of meaning-making (and of redemption) difficult. For these reasons, “opaque materialism” is a more pertinent concept than base materialism to extreme cinemas, not only because it more accurately reflects their oft-commented on pessimism, but also because it speaks directly to these films’ affinities with trauma, as I will explain below, whether

---

<sup>85</sup> Georges Bataille, “The Big Toe,” in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 20-24.

as systemic (as in *I Stand Alone* or *In My Skin*), or as historical (as in *Salò* or *Caché*). The concepts of opaque materialism, redemption and trauma therefore form an interconnected triangle: these films are *irredeemable* because they are opaque, and they are opaque because they are about trauma. Taken together, Céline's novels and extreme cinemas have ramifications with all three ends of the triangle.

Oddly enough, and despite being based exclusively on a literary corpus (most of it French), there is not a single mention of Céline in all of *The Culture of Redemption*; nor of film or of trauma studies, although Bersani's work has had currency in film studies. Nikolaj Lübecker briefly alludes to *The Culture of Redemption*, arguing that the unpleasure one experiences when watching feel-bad films comes in part from the expectation that art (and in this case, cinema) should be ordered and cathartic.<sup>86</sup> Likewise, Adam Lowenstein draws a distinction between redemptive "compensation" and "confrontation" of history, arguing that "the films [of his corpus] do not redeem traumatic experience through art; instead, they call into question this very desire for redemption."<sup>87</sup> More recently, Elena del Río goes so far as to call the extreme film/filmmaker "a diagnostician, in the sense that [Gilles] Deleuze attributes to the function of the writer/physician: to make a diagnosis of the world, to follow its illnesses step by step, to assess its chances of health, always with a view toward 'the possible birth of a new man.'"<sup>88</sup> Unlike Lübecker and Lowenstein, del Río explicitly condemns anti-discursivity and excess, warning the reader that "just like an

---

<sup>86</sup> Nikolaj Lübecker, *The Feel-Bad Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 12.

<sup>87</sup> Adam Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 8.

<sup>88</sup> Elena del Río, *The Grace of Destruction: A Vital Ethology of Extreme Cinemas* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 23.

animal or human body, a film can take itself to the limit of what it can do and think while remaining aware that surpassing this limit may entail the risk of falling into nonreproductive absurdity, total formlessness, or destructive chaos.”<sup>89</sup> In other words, del Río emphatically believes in the power of film to be redemptive and to articulate “diagnoses,” suggesting that opaque films, by contrast, fall into “nonreproductive absurdity.” But as trauma studies have shown, opacity and non-discursivity are not necessarily synonymous with “destructive chaos.”

The field of trauma studies, especially when involved with literature and cinema, has had close ties with questions of redemption, particularly with art’s potential to access or unlock meaning from traumatic events. In the face of the inexpressible, art seems like a privileged mode of communication and expression poised to bear witness to, and even perhaps make sense of, the traumatic and the unthinkable. In particular relation to the Holocaust, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub write that we live in an age of testimony, “an age whose writing task (and reading task) is to confront the horror of its own destructiveness, to attest to the unthinkable disaster of culture’s breakdown.”<sup>90</sup> For Cathy Caruth, literature offers an interest “in the complex relations between knowing and not knowing at the heart of trauma,” pointing to the existence of epistemological interstices that literature can presumably access.<sup>91</sup> More recently, Michael Richardson sits uneasily between the fundamental opacity of survivor experience and what he believes to be literature’s

---

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*, 24.

<sup>90</sup> Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (eds.), *Testimony: Crises of Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 114.

<sup>91</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 4.

ability to “bridge the impossible gap of experience between victim, perpetrator and bystander.”<sup>92</sup> Literature’s relation to trauma is therefore a tense one, torn between a perceived ability to unlock meaning from it, and the fear of devaluing experience by doing so. As James Dawes notes, “atrocities get turned into something else, something lesser, when put into words.”<sup>93</sup>

Likewise, as E. Ann Kaplan points out, cinema has been “singled out [...] as involving a special relationship to trauma in the ‘shock’ experience of modernity.”<sup>94</sup> As in literary studies, cinema has been confronted by the ethical problem of whether trauma should be expressed, at the expense of preserving the authenticity of experience. As mentioned before, Lowenstein is aware of the dangers of the redemptive logic, preferring the term “confrontation” to “redemption.” Yet he is also wary of the move that makes survivor experience unrepresentable, thereby locking it in the past, and expresses regret that “what is lost [in such a move] is the full possibility of that experience shaping our contemporary world.”<sup>95</sup> Still, he acknowledges that the promise to communicate trauma via art is a “risky” one.

The opaque materialism of Céline’s novels withdraws this promise, and obsesses instead over the absences and gaps in knowledge that trauma leaves behind, making no room for the possibility of redemption. I will be paying attention to two different forms of trauma: the first, which I call “systemic” trauma, is inspired by the recent work of Greg Forter and Jeffrey C.

---

<sup>92</sup> Michael Richardson, *Gestures of Testimony: Torture, Trauma, and Affect in Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 105.

<sup>93</sup> James Dawes, *Evil Men* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 30.

<sup>94</sup> E. Ann Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 24.

<sup>95</sup> Lowenstein, *Ibid.*, 5.

Alexander, who suggest that our understanding of the phenomenon of trauma be expanded to non-punctual, social and economic processes of oppression such as racism or patriarchy. With this in mind, *Death on the Installment Plan* can be read as an early example of systemic trauma, in the guise of capitalism's slow exclusion and psychic erosion of its more vulnerable subjects. At the end of his life, Céline's opaque materialism manifests in his exploration of historical trauma, and the notion that history is fundamentally chaotic and disorderly, which is the author's own backhanded way of writing his negationist views into his novels.

### 3.2 Systemic Trauma in *Death on the Installment Plan*

The extreme violence of *I Stand Alone* and *In My Skin*, which will be the objects of Chapter 3, is not just in their vivid depictions of beatings or self-mutilation, but in the socio-economic processes that underpin them, and yet remain unarticulated. The butcher of *I Stand Alone* (Philippe Nahon) stands at one pole, uneducated, unemployed, humiliated on a daily basis, while Esther in *In My Skin* (Marina de Van) stands at the other pole, an ambitious and educated woman who expertly navigates the corporate world. Yet the former gets caught in a spiral of self-destruction inspired by extreme right-wing rhetoric, while the latter starts obsessively self-mutilating and self-cannibalizing. Both characters' self-destructive behaviors are direct symptoms of, and were slowly shaped by, their specific socio-economic milieu, whether in the ruthlessness of unemployment, or the cutthroat competitiveness of (being a woman in) corporate culture. *Death on the Installment Plan* is both a precursor to, and a useful model for, such evocations of systemic trauma through opaque materialism. Henri Godard, as well as others, credited Céline's anti-Semitic pamphlets (published in 1937, 1938 and 1941) with signaling a decisive shift in Céline's authorial identity –

and it is true that the aesthetic style of the pamphlets is closer to that of the last novels than *Death on the Installment Plan* ever is. But *Death* marks just as important a change for my purposes: Céline's turn to irredeemable aesthetics and anti-discursivity. To make this clear, I will start with a brief discussion of *Journey to the End of the Night*, which I see as Céline's only redemptive novel.

*Journey* can be compared to a bleak *Bildungsroman* thwarting the expectations habitual to the genre that the various experiences of Bardamu, the protagonist, will be formative. The novel starts with Bardamu's impulsive enrollment in the French army at the onset of World War I. There begins the eponymous journey, which takes him to the Front, to a French colony in Cameroon, onto a boat destined for New York, and finally back to Paris, where he works as a doctor in impoverished suburbs. Along his travels, Bardamu paints an ever more grim, pessimistic, and monstrous portrait of mankind, and as such, *Journey* is often received as glum and depressing. Yet the very premise of *Journey* is redemptive, regardless of what might have been Céline's intentions when he started writing it.<sup>96</sup> Like all of Céline's protagonists, Bardamu is a proxy for Céline himself, retracing the author's steps some fifteen years earlier, with more or less honesty. With *Journey*, Céline would begin his grand, lifelong project of injecting the emotion of speech in written form. The novel was received and acclaimed as the furious, revolted scream of the victims of modernity. It denounced nationalism, capitalism, colonialism, and crucially, it did so in a writing style that aimed to reproduce the speech patterns of its most vulnerable victims, the working

---

<sup>96</sup>In the preface to the second edition of *Journey*, published in 1949, Céline, then in bitter exile, wrote: "If I wasn't so constrained, obligated, I'd get rid of it all...especially Journey...the only truly nasty book I wrote is Journey..." (my translation). See Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Romans I* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), 1113.



classes. Whether it had been his intention or not, Céline's first novel powerfully recast, in literature, the suffering of those most oppressed by modernity. In so doing, he endowed Bardamu's travels and tribulations with the redemptive power of political denunciation.

Besides the overarching effect of *Journey* as a whole, there are many individual excerpts in the novel that exemplify the redemptive logic of ordering, overwhelming experience and monumentalizing its meanings. One example is particularly striking: early in the novel, in the midst of the war and having amply witnessed its horrors, Private Bardamu is assigned to bring back meat for the rest of his regiment. He arrives on the site of a makeshift butcher store, where eviscerated animals lie in the sun, and soldiers hack away and haggle for morsels:

The meat for the whole regiment was being distributed in a summery field, shaded by cherry trees and parched by the August sun. On sacks and tent cloths spread out on the grass there were pounds and pounds of guts, chunks of white and yellow fat, disemboweled sheep with their organs every which way, oozing intricate little rivulets into the grass round about, a whole ox, split down the middle, hanging on a tree, and four regimental butchers all hacking away at it, cursing and swearing and pulling off choice morsels. The squadrons were fighting tooth and nail over the innards, especially the kidneys, and all around them swarms of flies such as one sees only on such occasions, as 14 self-important and musical as little birds. Blood and more blood, everywhere, all over the grass, in sluggish confluent puddles, looking for a congenial slope. A few steps further on, the last pig was being killed. Already four men and a butcher were fighting over certain of the prospective cuts.<sup>97</sup>

This passage illustrates a topos of Céline's novels: violent, visceral sensations and graphic descriptions whose horror has been hypertrophied in memory. So overwhelmed are Bardamu's senses that he passes out shortly after. At this point in the novel, he has already seen the headless

---

<sup>97</sup> Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Journey to the End of the Night*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: New Directions, 1983),

corpse of a cavalryman, freshly decapitated by an artillery shell, “with blood in it bubbling and glugging like jam in a kettle.”<sup>98</sup> Here, the redemptive process is one of grotesque allegorizing through which Céline makes sense of the senseless: what Bardamu witnesses is a reiteration of what he saw on the Front, in a nightmarish unmaking of pastoral imagery. The shading “cherry trees” in the “summery field” set the stage not for peace and quiet, but for gruesome butchery, under the inauspicious buzzing of “swarms of flies,” sinister parodies of “musical little birds.” Where there were dead, mutilated soldiers are now disembodied farm animals, in a simple and, in 1932, derivative equivalence, whereby soldiers sent to the Front are quite literally sent to the slaughter. Finally, in anticipation of his later formulation of the death drive (“To kill and get killed, that’s what they wanted”<sup>99</sup>), Bardamu sees the men fighting for “choice morsels” as unwitting cannibals, whose hunger for meat extends well beyond the “summery field.”

Even so, there are already traces of irredeemable aesthetics. Redemption, for Bersani, comes in the form of “truth liberated from phenomena” – as if sensations got in the way of truth, and art’s purpose was to strip it from them.<sup>100</sup> It is a reformulation of an observation made by many attackers of extreme cinema, for whom visceral sensations can only get in the way of intellection: “Ideas get lost in a spectacle of such immediate reality and cruelty,” Vincent Canby wrote of *Salò* when it screened at the New York Film Festival in 1977.<sup>101</sup> Except ideas do not get lost in the above excerpt, quite the opposite. Bardamu/Céline, in his remembering, deforms, bloats specific

---

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*, 130.

<sup>100</sup> Bersani, *Ibid*, 2.

<sup>101</sup> Vincent Canby, “Film Festival: ‘Salò’ is Disturbing...,” *The New York Times*, October 1, 1977, <https://www.nytimes.com/1977/10/01/archives/film-festival-salo-is-disturbing.html>

details up to quasi-farcical dimensions. The language is both vague and hyperbolic: “pounds and pounds of guts,” “organs every which way,” “oozing intricate little rivulets [...] round about,” “blood and more blood, everywhere,” and so on. Yet this remains a highly legible scene: the slaughtered animals allegorize the fate of soldiers sent on the Front; with this in mind, the men’s fighting for morsel acquires cannibalistic connotations; *ergo*, the war makes brutish animals of men. This is a denunciatory passage, one of many. However horrifying and overwhelming this experience might have been when/if Céline himself lived it, it is redeemed in literature through an allegorical, political meaning – and a noble one at that: an anti-war statement. It was excerpts like this one that instantly earned Céline the admiration and political courting of his peers, especially on the left.

Published four years after *Journey* in 1936, *Death* was received with a great deal of perplexity. Those who had seen in Céline a great political writer were confronted with a disgusting, scatological book, wallowing in misanthropy and seemingly written in a gaudy, self-indulgent style. It is also of autobiographical inspiration, but there are no wars, no spectacular bombings or picaresque odyssey: only the childhood and adolescence of “Ferdinand” in the impoverished “*Passage des Bérésinas*.” Over the course of the long narrative, we read about Ferdinand’s experiences in middle school, his first jobs, his stay in England, and his apprenticeship with the extravagant inventor Courtial des Pereires. In the same vein as *Journey*, Ferdinand’s narrative voice paints a world of pettiness, dishonesty, and misery.

Many reasons can explain the coldness with which *Death* was received: the off-putting prose, pervasive scatology and unrelenting hopelessness are certainly among the main offenders. But I would argue that it is also because *Death* is more opaque and irredeemable than *Journey* was

and, for these reasons, it is a compelling example for understanding socio-economic processes as traumatic.

Turning to trauma when reading Céline can create a few issues. The combination of the author's abrasive personality, sickening politics and literary genius has led many to suggest that Céline suffered from some kind of mental disability. Milton Hindus, a Jewish-American academic who admired Céline, was the first to suspect he suffered from paranoid schizophrenia, and repeatedly said as much in *The Crippled Giant* (1950).<sup>102</sup> Since then, as Isabelle Blondiaux reports, numerous commentators have conducted medicalized readings of Céline, as a backhanded way of evacuating his noxious ideology from his novels. As Blondiaux writes, the recourse to psychological discourse when analyzing Céline "involves a conscious or unconscious repression of the ideological issues at stake in his writings. The end result is an elision of the central critical problems raised by the author's political argumentation."<sup>103</sup> By turning to trauma, I do not intend to provide Céline with another psychological alibi; rather, the vocabulary of trauma studies offers a useful framework to discuss opacity in Céline's oeuvre, and through him, extreme cinemas.

By all accounts, Céline himself was never formally diagnosed with a traumatic disorder, nor should we be inclined to believe that he was simply an undiagnosed victim. His abundant correspondences, as well as his novels, make it clear that his involvement in WWI marked him for

---

<sup>102</sup> *The Crippled Giant* is the result of Hindus's three-week-long encounter with Céline during his exile in Denmark. An avid defender of the French writer, even after the war, Hindus and Céline corresponded abundantly before meeting in person. Their friendship quickly soured, and Céline even tried to sue Hindus after *The Crippled Giant* was published, though he was unsuccessful.

<sup>103</sup> Isabelle Blondiaux, "A Critical or a Clinical Case?" in *Céline and the Politics of Difference*, eds. Rosemarie Scullion, Phillip H. Solomon and Thomas C. Spear (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1995), 14.

life, but he only ever complained about two of its effects: his official status as a “70% disabled” veteran, and permanent damage to his eardrums that caused constant buzzing in his ears and made sleeping difficult.<sup>104</sup> However scarred Céline may have been by his experience of the war, he never seemed to be afflicted by any of the clinical symptoms of trauma. He almost certainly did, however, have a good theoretical understanding of traumatic disorders: as a practicing physician for all of his adult life, Céline was an ardent defender of psychoanalysis, and Bardamu’s aforementioned formulation of the death drive owes much to Freud’s influence on the writer. On October 1, 1933, in a speech given on the anniversary of Émile Zola’s death, Céline stated his belief that “if literature has a purpose [*une excuse*] [...] it is to tell our delirium [*nos délires*]. There is only delirium, and our master, to all of us right now, is Freud.”<sup>105</sup> The famed delirious narrative voice of Céline’s novels is a direct result of his personal interest in psychoanalysis, and has strong affinities with trauma theory, especially in *Death on the Installment Plan*.

Yet the narrative of *Death* has little to do with the war, and Ferdinand’s youth, albeit violent in a myriad of ways, is not punctured by any single traumatic event, save perhaps for the gruesome suicide of his mentor at the end. Instead, trauma in the novel is pervasive and, in Forter’s words, “non-punctual.”<sup>106</sup> Forter is part of a “new wave” of trauma theorists who built upon the pioneering work of Caruth, Felman, Laub and others, while taking issue with some of their limitations – such

---

<sup>104</sup> Ever the compulsive liar, Céline also constructed and kept up the rumor that he had been trepanned and suffered from side effects his whole life. In truth, he was indeed officially recognized as a disabled veteran, following a bullet wound in his right arm that resulted in a partial paralysis.

<sup>105</sup> Louis-Ferdinand Céline, my translation, “Hommage à Zola,” *Cahiers Céline I* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 88.

<sup>106</sup> Greg Forter, “Freud, Faulkner, Caruth: Trauma and the Politics of Literary Form,” *Narrative* 15, no. 3 (2007): 259-85.

as their Western-centrism or, in his words, their “difficulty accounting for those forms of trauma that are not punctual, that are more mundanely catastrophic than such spectacular instances of violence as the Holocaust.” Forter writes specifically about racism and patriarchy, which he views as trauma in the sense “of having decisive and deforming effects on the psyche that give rise to compulsively repeated and highly rigidified social relations.” These traumas are not usually discussed as such because they are not shocks, but “chronic and cumulative, woven into the fabric of our societies” (Forter 2007, 260).<sup>107</sup> Where the dramatic crux of *Journey* was Bardamu’s confrontation with the shocks of modernity, *Death* centers instead on the “mundanely catastrophic:” daily humiliations, anxieties and insecurities, the symptoms of a life in the working-class in a capitalist economy. Ferdinand is no victim of racism or sexism, Forter’s focal points in his argument; rather, his entire existence, and all of his troubles, stem from his parents’ financial insecurities, in a world designed to restrain social mobility. In other words, Ferdinand’s delirious voice is simply the product of his being a child, in a working-class family in early 20th century Paris.

Although the narrative is mostly of autobiographical inspiration, it is likely Céline himself did not grow up in conditions as harsh as those depicted in *Death*. As François Gibault points out, Céline’s parents may not have been wealthy, but they made a decent living, especially after their inheritance from Céline’s grandmother. Actual events may provide the basis for the narrative, but they are systematically made grimmer in writing. The first sign pointing to Ferdinand’s trauma is his relationship to language. The most common symptom of trauma is the inability of the subject to articulate it, to talk about the traumatic event. The same is true for non-punctual forms of trauma:

---

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid*, 260.

their effects are internalized by the subject and turned into “ongoing, systemic practices and patterns of behavior,” out of the reach of language.<sup>108</sup> In *Death*, this is most visible in Ferdinand’s narrative voice. Céline’s style has not quite reached the level of fragmentation of the pamphlets and the later novels, but it has made a definite leap in that direction: compared to *Journey*, sentences are shorter, and often nominal. Ferdinand’s narrative is not as coherent as Bardamu’s, with a greater number of *non sequitur* and unfinished thoughts. Céline’s trademark ellipses are not omnipresent, as they would later be, but they are more numerous, and form part of a narrative apparatus that is choppy, irregular, and overall difficult to follow. The confrontational style I discussed in Chapter I starts to take shape with *Death* and is largely a product of Ferdinand’s often incoherent narration.

At the core of this incoherent language is an absence: something beyond the sweat, the dust, the vomit and feces that was detectable in *Journey* but remains indeterminate in *Death*. Here, rotting meat is not sublimated into an allegory about the human condition; it only portends bad odors and sickness. The obsession with base matter, whether in the form of bodily fluids or of the characters’ petty material concerns, is what most perplexed the critics who reviewed *Death* when it was published, not just because the novel had entire paragraphs about vomit – after all, there were plenty of those in *Journey* as well – but because there seemed to be nothing else. In other words, what seemed to upset these reviewers so much was also the perception of an absence, the sense that there *should* be a high to counterbalance the obsession with the low. But this absence is Ferdinand’s trauma: all he can express are its material symptoms, set in motion by his father’s bouts of anger, the neighbors’ jealousy, the constant pressure to earn money and become

---

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

respectable, and so on. All of these social disturbances are generational, and Ferdinand is merely perpetuating toxic patterns of behavior that his parents internalized. And so, when Auguste and Marguerite break the bank to send their son to England for a few months, in the hope that he would learn English in order to find a respectable job, he fails, memorizing just a few phrases instead. Ferdinand's failure is not the product of some kind of learning disability; rather, his difficulty in learning English signposts his inability to find a language fit to express his trauma. He is stuck with the indeterminate, plurivocal language of the narration: an unlikely amalgamation of popular French, flowery speech, and various specialized forms of slang that, for Godard, was a sign of Céline's semantic indeterminacy. It was this kind of indeterminacy that Geoffrey Hartman opposed to "the 'pointing' or 'bullseye' pretension of language," and that he argued was the defining characteristic of poetic language.<sup>109</sup> In this sense perhaps, Ferdinand's hysterical ramblings are poetic: they gesture towards, but never quite express, the never-ending, systemic violence of his life.

At the very beginning of *Death*, Ferdinand's narrative of trauma is itself gated by a grotesque performance of traumatic repetition, this time in the form of a reliving of World War I. This excerpt is located at a key moment of the narration, and is a good example of irredeemable aesthetics, so I will analyze it in full. As in most of Céline's novels, there are two temporalities in *Death*: the "present" which coincides with the time of writing, and the "past," the object of the narrator's remembering. The vast majority of *Death* takes place in the past, but the novel starts in the present, with an adult Ferdinand, physician and WWI veteran. In short, Céline (the author) writes about Ferdinand (the character) remembering his youth (which is also largely Céline's). The

---

<sup>109</sup> Geoffrey Hartman, "On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies," *PsyArt* 8 (2004), 541.



following excerpt takes place in this interstitial time prior to remembering, when Ferdinand is an adult. He flirts with a lover, Mireille, in the *Bois de Boulogne*; they exchange lewd comments and, before long, start having sex right then and there. Soon, other couples emerge from nearby “thickets and copses” to get a better look at them, “their cocks in hand, the ladies with their skirts hiked up front and back.”<sup>110</sup> More and more come out, until they become a formidable crowd. As the voyeurs “encourage” Ferdinand, Mireille “squeals” and runs away, and thus begins a formidable race of “thousands.”<sup>111</sup>

The grass is full of them, thousands are pouring down the drive. More and more of them come stepping out of the darkness... The women’s dresses are in tatters, tits torn and dangling... little boys without pants... they knock each other down, trample each other, toss each other up in the air... some are left dangling from the trees... along with smashed-up chairs... An old bag, English, comes along in a little car and sticks her head out the window so far it almost falls off... (...) When we got to the Arc de Triomphe, the whole crowd began to whirl like a merry-go-round. The whole mob was chasing Mireille. The square was littered with corpses. The living were tearing off each other’s pricks. (...)The Englishwoman flings herself on the kid, claws at her breasts... trickling, pouring, red all over. We fall, we writhe all together, we strangle each other. Pure bedlam. The flame under the Arc de Triomphe rises, rises higher, breaks, scatters through the sky... The whole place smells of smoked ham... (...)The flames rain down on us, everyone picks up a big chunk... We stuff them sizzling and whirling into our flies. The ladies put on bouquets of fire... We fall asleep inside each other. Twenty-five thousand policemen clear the Place de la Concorde. It was too much for us inside each other. It was too hot. There was smoke coming out. It was hell.<sup>112</sup>

---

<sup>110</sup> Louis-Ferdinand Céline, my translation, *Romans I* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), 534.

<sup>111</sup> The ellipses that follow are part of the original text, unless they are in parentheses.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid*, 535.

Just as in the excerpt from *Journey*, the narrator describes an oversaturation of sensations that eventually results in his passing out. The style is still hyperbolic: “thousands are pouring down the drive,” “more and more of them,” “it was hell.” But where the butcher shop from *Journey* lent itself well to an allegorical reading, the spontaneous orgy of thousands from *Death* seems gratuitous and nonsensical. Yet the great violence of the scene, its location – under the Arc de Triomphe, which has sheltered the highly symbolic Tomb of the Unknown Soldier since 1920 – and its fiery images all serve to make increasingly present the Front of WWI, and a narrator who falls prey to a traumatic episode.

What starts as an orgy on the Place de l'Étoile quickly turns into a warrish hellscape. Much of the hyperbolic language is a throwback to the excerpt from *Journey*, and Ferdinand, in his lustful pursuit of Mireille, returns to the battlefields of yesteryear, where he comes across mauled bodies (“tits torn and dangling”), panicked crowds (“they knock each other out, trample each other”) and an all-consuming fire (“the flames rain down on us”). Snapshots of apocalyptic warscapes become superimposed on Ferdinand’s experience (“some are left dangling from the trees,” “the ladies put on bouquets of fire”), with some reminding scenes from *Journey*, such as the English “old hag” being nearly decapitated (reminiscent of the “glugging” stump of the headless cavalryman) or the smell of “smoked ham” in the air (reminiscent of the butcher shop). In a meta-literary move, Céline conjures up images common to the WWI novel to describe the orgy: characters dehumanized by their animal savagery, mind-numbing heat, and the final, declamatory statement “it was hell.” All of these had become commonplace metaphors and comparisons in the many WWI novels that had been circulating for twenty years, to the point where they had become clichés: soldiers are like cattle sent to the slaughter; corpses pile up in unlikely positions; the heat and fire from the artillery shells make up an image of hell. The fact that these tropes found their way in the description of an

orgy signals the performance of traumatic repetition, in a character whose perception of the world is determined by his past as a veteran.

Shortly after Ferdinand loses consciousness, he is taken to a hospital, feverish and crazed, where we expect he will take us to the Front, and the origins of his trauma. After all, Céline had proven himself a great writer of the war just four years earlier. But instead, the narrative takes us to the early 1900s, in the unsanitary and evocatively named “Passage des Béréasinas,” as if Ferdinand’s trauma had earlier origins. As a result, the entire narrative of *Death* is ushered in by a vivid evocation of traumatic repetition; *the* trauma of the first half of the century. But for Ferdinand, the war is merely the culmination of a traumatic existence, whose most remarkable episodes can only be described in delirium. The desecration of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier is a symbolic assault on the futility of the act of memorializing, since trauma is, by definition, a painful black spot for memory. The narrative of *Death* starts with delirious remembering because trauma has locked Ferdinand out of coherent remembering. All that remains is a tale of baseness, of violence and opacity, and the distinct impression that Ferdinand’s trauma is systemic.

Céline’s storytelling in *Death* greatly informs films like *I Stand Alone* and *In My Skin*, as I will elaborate on in the next chapter. His belief that the base is not part of a dichotomy in which it can be redeemed, but self-sufficient and oppressive, anticipates the Butcher’s sordid mutterings, and Esther’s silent and obsessive self-mutilations. Like these two films, and many more in extreme cinemas, the politics of *Death* are indeterminate, except in one place: much work has been conducted to trace a continuity in Céline’s racism and anti-semitism in the books he wrote before

his pamphlets, most convincingly by Philippe Alméras and Marie-Christine Bellosta.<sup>113</sup> But his political allegiances, if he held any, were hardly detectable in *Death* – a problem that caused so many to withdraw their support for Céline, at a time when political indeterminacy was suspicious at the very least. This would not last, as Céline resolutely turned to political and polemical writing with the pamphlets, culminating with the less abrasive, but still reactionary “Exile Trilogy.” He never lost interest, however, in trauma and the opaque, but this time as it pertains to history.

### 3.3 Céline’s “Exile Trilogy:” The Politics of Opaque History

The notion of historical trauma – of a collective psychic wound shaping a community’s identity – has been just as eagerly scrutinized in the fields of literary and film studies as that of individual trauma. The dilemma is still the same: can we hope to draw meaning from the more horrific lessons of history, without devaluing history by shrinking its incommensurability? Once again, the argument that there exist zones of opacity in our history, and that art may be equipped to shine light on them, strikes close to Bersani’s articulation of the culture of redemption. A few films have been singled out as toeing the line of trauma, as expressing the inexpressible: films like *Hiroshima, mon amour* (Alain Resnais, 1959), *Eyes Without a Face* (George Franju, 1960) or *Monsieur Klein* (Joseph Losey, 1976). Likewise, extreme films like *Salò*, *Caché*, *The White Ribbon* (Michael Haneke, 2009) or *Monkey, Ostrich and Grave* have deployed their confrontational strategies to brush against past and present traumas. Yet I argue that they reject the

---

<sup>113</sup> See Philippe Alméras, *Sur Céline* (Versailles: Éditions de Paris, 2008); Marie-Christine Bellosta, *Céline, ou l’art de la contradiction: Lecture de Voyage au bout de la nuit* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1990).

promise of redemption, and instead embrace the idea of an opaque history, regardless of the political risks it entails. Céline's "Exile Trilogy" lets us map out a theory of opaque history, as well as the deplorable political implications such a theory can carry with it.

The "Exile Trilogy" refers to Céline's last three novels: *Castle to Castle* (1957), *North* (1960) and *Rigadoon* (published posthumously in 1969). *Death on the Installment Plan* was the last novel he wrote before the Second World War, switching to the pamphlet as his genre of choice. He wrote four: *Mea Culpa* (1936), a short text covering his (negative) impression of the U.S.S.R., following a short trip there;<sup>114</sup> *Trifles for a Massacre* (1937), *School of Corpses* (1938) and *A Fine Mess* (1941) are all virulent, rambling antisemitic pamphlets displaying fascist sympathies and calling for the death of Jews. In 1944, shortly before the liberation of France and fearing for his life, Céline, his wife Lucette and their cat Bébert fled France and embarked on a journey to Denmark, where Céline had hidden a significant amount of money.<sup>115</sup> Their trip was toilsome and dangerous, and shortly after crossing the Danish border, Céline and his wife were arrested, following a warrant issued by the French embassy. He spent roughly two years in prison there. In 1951, he was able to return to France, but not before a drawn-out legal battle, since many still called for his imprisonment, if not his outright execution.

---

<sup>114</sup> The Soviet Union would often invite prominent French writers and intellectuals at the time to "visit," in the hopes that they would return to France charmed by what they saw. Céline was not invited and paid for his travel expenses himself, though he was still assigned a guide and translator upon his arrival.

<sup>115</sup> Unsurprisingly, Céline's pamphlets, along with a few letters published in collaborationist journals, put him at the top of Résistance hitlists after the Liberation. Shortly before the collapse of the Vichy government, he began receiving miniature coffins in his mail – the theatrical, but very serious, death threat Resistance fighters would send to collaborators.

As soon as he settled in France – in Meudon, a suburb of Paris, where he would stay until his death in 1961 – Céline tried to rebuild his former literary success.<sup>116</sup> *Fable for Another Time* (1952), *Normance* (1954) and *Conversations with Professor Y* (1955) were all commercial flops, probably owing in no small part to Céline's unpopularity. As usual, these were all a mixture of true and made-up facts drawn from his past experiences. *Castle to Castle* would mark Céline's return to the center of the French literary stage.

The "Exile Trilogy" is known as such because all three novels tell the story of Céline's year-long journey across Germany, from June 1944 to March 1945, albeit in discontinuous chronological order. *Castle to Castle* takes place in Sigmaringen, a town in Southern Germany that served as the temporary enclave of the exiled Vichy government for seven months. Céline, along with a number of other notorious collaborators, stayed there and even worked as a doctor for a few months; *North* details Céline's three-week stay in the small German domain of Zornhof; and *Rigadoon* concludes the trilogy by telling the tale of his journeying across bombarded Germany in the hopes of reaching Denmark. The success of *Castle to Castle* can be explained by a renewed interest, in the late 1950s, in this little-known side of French recent history. Furthermore, the publication in 1954 of Charles de Gaulle's three-volume *Mémoires de guerre* reignited interest in the aftermath of the war, which Céline and his publisher Gallimard took advantage of.

The trilogy is obviously not the first novel of Céline's to directly engage history – *Journey* already did in spectacular fashion. However, it is the first time that the narrator (Céline himself, this time without the slight ambiguity of a differently named narrator as in *Journey* or *Death*) refers

---

<sup>116</sup> During his exile, two of Céline's novels were published, but barely received any attention: *Guignol's Band* (1944) and *Cannon-Fodder* (1949).

to himself as a “chronicler,” one who had the rare privilege of physically being at the right place at the right time, and who intends to correct historical inaccuracies. However, Céline’s ostensible posturing as would-be historian is mired in irony, and his goal is ultimately to claim that history is opaque.

Céline’s relationship to history has been the object of much scholarly attention, a lot of which awkwardly evacuated the writer’s awful ideology to better focus on his literary inventiveness. The most influential of these scholarly groups was the *Tel Quel* generation, led by Julia Kristeva, who shifted the focus away from rationality and political responsibility in literature (which were Sartre’s priorities), and onto delirium, irrationality, schizophrenia, and *jouissance*. In practice, this meant separating the political and aesthetic fields, on the pretext that Céline’s novels “permit neither divinity nor morality [...] neither revolutionary challenge [...] nor skeptical doubt.”<sup>117</sup> For Kristeva, the predominance in Céline’s postwar novels of “the effervescence of passion and language we call style” is opposed to any “ideology, thesis, interpretation, mania, collectivity, threat or hope.”<sup>118</sup> Phil Watts rightly finds this position problematic, and contends that it signals a moment when “stylistic innovation replaces political discourse,” a stance that is “very close to Céline’s own insistence on the primacy of style in the postwar years.”<sup>119</sup> Along with Watts, Rosemarie Scullion takes issue with the tendency in Celinian studies to practically disregard the author’s politics, and laments the “dichotomous view among Céline scholars that ritually lauded the novelist’s literary talent and demonstrated his considerable influence on subsequent

---

<sup>117</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 135-36.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

<sup>119</sup> Phil Watts, “Postmodern Céline” in *Céline and the Politics of Difference*, 207.

generations of novelists while treating his cluster of anti-Semitic pamphlets as a freak political sideshow in an otherwise stellar literary career.”<sup>120</sup> Both Watts and Scullion set out to correct the *Tel Quel* rupture, and shed light on the politics of Céline’s aesthetics.

Watts’s own reading of the “Exile Trilogy” is a critique of Robert Llammbias’s essay, *Guerre, histoire et langage dans le récit célinien*, in which he argued that Céline’s radical style turned history into a spectacle, therefore detaching the novels from historical representation. Watts, by contrast, chooses to take Céline’s own claims to historicity at face-value, and argues convincingly that the author’s insistence on the crimes and bombings of the Allied forces, as well as the comparisons Céline makes between history and spectacle, are part of the collaborationist rhetoric used during the Purge trials by the accused. For Watts, “Céline’s references to the operetta in *Castle to Castle*, his dependence on the language of simulation, and his eclectic and anachronistic historical borrowings, far from decontextualizing the novel and far from transforming history into spectacle, serve to reinscribe the novel into the historical context.”<sup>121</sup> I have only one disagreement with Watts: in restoring the links between spectacle, history and politics, Watts assumes that Céline’s claims of meaninglessness were apolitical in the first place. But this assumption seems to be a result of Llammbias and Kristeva’s readings of the texts, more than a fixture of the texts themselves. In fact, the notion that history is opaque and meaningless is political in and of itself, and does not exculpate Céline in any way.

As Marie Hartmann has shown, Céline articulates in the trilogy his own sense of history that runs counter to what he identifies as the “History of historians”: linear, ordered, coherent, and

---

<sup>120</sup> Rosemarie Scullion, introduction to *Céline and the Politics of Difference*, 1.

<sup>121</sup> Watts, *Ibid*, 215.



pivoting around key, momentous events. Instead, he articulates what Hartmann has called a “messy” history [*une Histoire fouillis*]: history is written, in the trilogy, as a succession of sketches and absurdities, out of chronological order, and from a faulty memory.<sup>122</sup> Céline even draws attention to this “hodgepodge history:” “From this point on, I have to warn you, my chronicle is a little chopped up, even myself, who lived through what I’m telling you, can hardly follow... [...] even myself telling you now, twenty-five years later, I quibble, I get lost... hodgepodge! you’ll forgive me...”<sup>123</sup> Furthermore, there are countless examples throughout the trilogy of narrative digressions: Céline, blaming his old age or lack of rigor as a historian, often interrupts the main narrative and goes on tangents about his plight, how no one buys his books anymore, how everyone hates him and life has been unfair, before “realizing” his own narrative meandering, apologizing to the reader, and going back to the main narrative. If anything, Céline, flags his own unreliability as a chronicler, performing the lack of rigor that separates him from academic historians. For Hartmann, this disorder of the narrative is meant to mimic the disorder of history. Céline wants to offer a counter-history of sorts, not just by focusing on the history of those he calls, in a particularly devious show of bad faith, “the defeated” and “the weak” (i.e. collaborators and Nazi sympathizers), but also by altering the conventional ways in which history is told and understood -- as an exhaustive and ordered analysis of political, economic and social currents.<sup>124</sup> Hence a

---

<sup>122</sup> Marie Hartmann, my translation, *L’envers de l’histoire contemporaine: Étude de la “Trilogie allemande” de Louis-Ferdinand Céline* (Paris: Société d’études céliniennes, 2006), 176.

<sup>123</sup> Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Romans II* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), 823.

<sup>124</sup> This choice is not just rhetorical, but also steeped in Céline’s (fascist) aversion to progress and the notion that Reason governs history. Insofar as Céline describes a world altogether abandoned by Reason - a fixture of his extreme cynicism - history is no exception and should be disorderly.

historical “chronicle” that mostly sidesteps history, yet constantly reclaims it by emphasizing the narrator’s position as physical witness of tales mistold (especially in *Castle to Castle*, where the narrator often overplays the “true history of Sigmaringen” card).

Other than for the sake of being a contrarian – which, for Céline, might be reason enough – why, then, tell this alternate history? It is difficult to simply accept that Céline genuinely believed the “defeated” needed their history told and their memory defended, given how little sympathy he had for them.<sup>125</sup> Nor is it convincing to simply consider the entirety of the trilogy as a lengthy defensive plea to rehabilitate himself. For Hartmann, Céline designs this counter-history not only for the reasons mentioned above, but also because he believes a disorderly history is “truer” than the orderly one, owing to its fundamental chaos. Compiling facts, ordering them and analyzing them into a narrative would be, for Céline, a travesty of actual history, which he sees as incoherent, chaotic and unreasonable. There is good evidence to support this claim, notably a passage from *North*. The narrator overhears a conversation between two German women, following the rumor of an assassination attempt against Hitler, and addresses the reader to explain his disorderly narration:

You need not be surprised, reader... at the time of this attack facts incidents *quiproquos* intermingled, even now you often find yourself in parallel disagreements [*mésententes parallèles*]... [...] the best I think, imagine a tapestry, top, bottom, sideways, every topic at once and every color... every pattern!... everything topsy turvy!... pretending to present all this to you flat, erect, or laid down, would be lying... the truth: no order in anything at all after this attack...<sup>126</sup>

---

<sup>125</sup> And then for him. Even before the Liberation, Céline was a harsh critic of the Vichy government – as well as of everything and everyone else – and was profoundly disliked by its executives. The ambiguity of the relations between Céline and collaborating organs is the reason why his status as a collaborator remains a nuanced issue today.

<sup>126</sup> Céline, *Ibid*, 318.

History is a mess, and those who do not present it as such are “lying.” It follows that the “truth” of history is in the topsy-turvy of the poetic chronicle, a genre whose presence in the trilogy is summoned through abundant references to other literary chroniclers: Joinville, Villehardouin, Plutarch (in a mention of *Parallel Lives* in *North*), Pliny, Tacitus. Céline at times also references Chateaubriand, Montaigne, Abélard, Mme de Staël, Pascal; the list goes on. He situates himself among a legacy of writers who displaced History into a space between dream and reality, and which allowed room for poetry. In turn, this particular passage would suggest that, rather than a mere unrigorous account of history, Céline’s chronicles tap into its fundamental truth by virtue of the disorder of his writing.

It should be remembered that the chaos of Céline’s text is always the product of meticulous calculations: the apparent spontaneity of the Celinian voice is all but spontaneous, as an examination of his manuscripts reveals. Céline was an obsessive worker, drafting and correcting over and over again – the disorder of the trilogy is in fact very orderly. After many twists, it seems Céline’s trilogy would presume to redeem history by uncovering its profound truth. But he gets to this point through sophistry: insofar as “flat” and factual history is dishonest, invented and chaotic history is honest. Therefore, the truth of history is restored in untruth.

But Céline is ever the ironic writer: he spares few people from his sarcasm, certainly not himself, and there is also irony in this claim of truthful History -- an irony that I believe Hartmann and Watts do not acknowledge enough. Céline’s irony is invasive, and acts as an umbrella for all of his contradictions to exist without being refuted, since he ridicules all rational discussion. In *North*, in one of the many passages where he mocks his “enemies” – often those other French writers who criticized and (sometimes falsely) accused him of crimes – he brags about his integrity

as a chronicler. Insofar as everyone hates him, whether among the victors or the defeated, he is an unbiased historian, since he is in nobody's "camp." He writes: "I can brag about being in a straight thread [*dans le droit fil*], equally hated by the people at either end... I can say, without bragging, that the thread of History runs right through me, top to bottom, clouds to head, to the anus..."<sup>127</sup>

These two sentences exemplify Celinian irony, and the contradictions it generates. First, he "brags" about his impartiality in ironic terms, since it is conditioned upon his being hated by everyone, which would presumably be nothing to brag about. Second, he claims that he has a privileged connection with history, "without bragging," which is a backward way of still bragging about it. Finally, and most importantly, this credible claim to history is immediately disarmed by scatological humor. However ironic it may be, being hated by everyone, hating everyone in return, and not having stakes in defending one camp or another, is a relatively convincing way to claim impartiality.<sup>128</sup> But Céline is not duping himself into thinking he is an unbiased chronicler, nor does he want to dupe the reader. The cliché metaphor of history as a tapestry whose thread runs through him is a pastiche of Bataille's base materialism *avant la lettre*: it starts off in "the clouds," as if to suggest divine communication, and positions Céline as an unlikely prophet. From the clouds, it goes to the head, the center of knowledge, humanity and ideals. And from there, it goes to, and ends with, the anus, the center of all that is vile and vulgar. It is a reversal of sorts of Bataille's big toe essay: if, for Bataille, the vile is the beginning, the base, of the high and the elevated, it is the end for Céline. As I have discussed in *Death*, there is nothing beyond base matter.

---

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid*, 525.

<sup>128</sup> Of course, it is not entirely true, since Céline is very much invested in defending a camp in the trilogy: his own. And in the late 50s, he might not be in anyone's camp anymore, but he most definitely was in the late 30s and early 40s.

The thread of history is presented as coming through the heavens, and going through Céline, only to be shat out. With this image in mind, it is difficult to take seriously any claims he may have made in other parts of the trilogy to be in touch with the “truth” of history.

In other words, Céline seems invested in the notion of historical trauma, but not in reference to a single, overarching event like the Holocaust; rather, history is traumatic because, according to the trilogy, it can only be summarized as a never-ending cycle of destruction, and it is doomed to remain opaque to the historian – and the historians who pretend otherwise are lying. In this sense, history is figured in the trilogy in the leitmotif of the bombing of the Allied planes, whose relentless pursuit of collaborators and German troupes and towns forms the background of all three novels. Whether at Sigmaringen where Allied planes threaten to obliterate Marshall Pétain during his daily walk, in Zornhof where the bombing of Berlin a dozen miles away forms ominous yellow clouds and a rumbling white noise, or across Germany in *Rigadoon*, where the phosphorus bombs left their unmistakable traces on devastated landscapes and cities: Céline’s conceptualization of an opaque history coincides with his confused descriptions of the war bombings. It remains out of his grasp, because he needs to remain out of its way. And when it hits too close, it can only be represented with inarticulate sounds – onomatopoeia that paradoxically reveal the inability of language to capture history.

What then, is the object of the trilogy? Having insisted that history is chaos and destruction, Céline takes it upon himself to focus on what he sees as its interstices, as illustrated by a peculiar sentence in *Castle to Castle*: “The chancellery of the Greater Reich had procured, for the French people of Sigmaringen, a certain way of existing that was neither absolutely fictional, nor

absolutely real, and which took the past into account without engaging with the future.”<sup>129</sup> It is true: the French people of Sigmaringen were in an extremely precarious situation. They lived in the awareness that Germany was on the verge of defeat, and yet still hoped, genuinely or cynically, for a sudden reversal of fortunes that the Reich’s rumored “secret weapons” would bring about. They lived in a country that was not their own, and where they were barely welcome, knowing that they could not go back to France, where they risked being executed as collaborators. This sentence is also remarkable by virtue of its structure: several clauses following each other smoothly, no exclamation point, no ellipses. An elegant, articulate, and insightful sentence. This is possibly the only such sentence in the entirety of the trilogy, otherwise vociferating, riddled with ellipses and unbothered with basic syntactic rules. Céline describes an interstitial state of existence that emulates his own writing: narrative inventions, sometimes even involving ghosts and apparitions, are intermingled with biographical and historical data. Likewise, his systematic turn to memory enshrines the past, and his engagement with the future never entails more than preposterous doomsaying.

The trilogy purports to be concerned with the cracks of history, represented in the text by those innumerable ellipses so criticized by the detractors of Céline. One need only open one of the trilogy books at random to find a page riddled with holes, the “three dots” punctuating almost every single sentence, and figuring both the holes in the narrator’s memory and the interstitiality of his narration. Appropriately, these three dots point to something that is neither expressed nor expressible: a gap in language that is nonetheless ever-present in the trilogy. As in *Death*, the text is permeated by absences: zones of opacity that remain out of the reach of language and literature.

---

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid*, 224.

In this sense then, I agree with Kristeva, Llabias and Godard, for whom Céline's post-war novels are obsessively concerned with the collapse of meaning and of meaning-making; I disagree, however, that this renders his novels apolitical, and would argue in fact that the novels of the trilogy are Céline's most political texts since the pamphlets. Not just because, as Watts astutely demonstrated, the narrator deploys a rhetoric used by the accused during the trials of the Purge – including insisting on the crimes of the Allied forces to diminish those of the Axis, and the spectacularization of history. Unlike Watts, I believe Céline's claims of meaninglessness and opacity are precisely what renders the trilogy political. In refining his style to the brink of articulacy, Céline worked his negationist views into the fabric of his writing. The discovery of the death camps and the international unmasking of the "Final Solution" hardly made him repentant; Céline remained fiercely anti-Semitic until the very end of his life, as evidenced by his private correspondence and traces of revisionist rhetoric in the novels. More perversely, the idea that history is opaque and cannot be told or elucidated has, for someone with Céline's politics, another implication: that perhaps the death camps never existed, or they were not as bad as they have been made to be, and how will we ever know since history is opaque? Meaninglessness acquires significant political undertones in the trilogy, since it becomes another form of fascist anti-knowledge and anti-intellectualism. And if "true" history can only ever be a chimera, only arbitrary narratives remain, decided by the victors – and therefore, in Céline's typically sophistic fashion, there is only authoritarian history. His only crime was to have been in the loser's camp.

There is then considerable ideological risk in approaching history as opaque, and yet it has been picked up by films like *Caché* and *Salò*. The question of whether Haneke and Pasolini lapse into the same fascistic tendencies as Céline, or whether they rehabilitate – or redeem, as it were – the concept of opaque history will be the object of the fourth and final chapter.

#### 4.0 Slaughterhouse France: Systemic Trauma in *I Stand Alone* and *In My Skin*

In June 2013, the *Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry* published the results of an experiment on how the mind processes “intrusive images” – the name given to intruding psychic images among victims of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). In order to produce a controlled experimental environment spanning 149 participants, the authors did not work with actual victims of PTSD, but with “undergraduate students from the social sciences faculty at the Radboud University Nijmegen.”<sup>130</sup> Part of their methodology therefore implied inducing PTSD in their participants, albeit on a small and presumably harmless scale, in order to later observe the frequency and intensity with which they are hit by intrusive images. But how could they inflict a mild symptom of PTSD upon 149 otherwise healthy patients, and in a manner reliable enough that the results would not be skewed? Simply enough, by using film: they asked the participants to watch a nine-minute clip from none other than the extreme cinemas staple *Irreversible* (Gaspar Noé, 2002); specifically the nightclub scene at the beginning that culminates in a spectacular murder with a fire extinguisher.

What this experiment convincingly demonstrates is a belief in the ability of (extreme) films to communicate – even cause – trauma. Clearly, the authors of this experiment did not care for one of the central ethical questions that have long animated trauma theory, namely whether film or literature *should* be traumatic. In 1996, Cathy Caruth set out to explore how literature could offer a mode of psychic and sensuous cognition into trauma that Freud’s psychoanalytical theories could

---

<sup>130</sup> Julie Krans, Dörte Janecko, and Maarten W. Bos, “Unconscious Thought Reduces Intrusion Development: A Replication and Extension,” *Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry* 44, no. 2 (2012): 179-185.



only approximate.<sup>131</sup> Yet crucial to her theory was the notion that attempting to represent trauma, or to make it comprehensible, would betray its essence as incommensurable – and so logically, as Greg Forter points out, “the best kind of text is one that *actually induces trauma in its readers*.”<sup>132</sup> The italics are Forter’s and presumably are meant to highlight the author’s disbelief in this proposition; and yet here we are, and *Irreversible* was chosen among – one can assume – many different options to induce a symptom of trauma in its spectators. Does this mean then that *Irreversible* is an exemplary trauma text?

Albeit influential, Caruth’s study has not remained uncriticized, and scholars like Ruth Leys, Shoshana Felman and Jean Wyatt have shown that an artwork may remain faithful to the impenetrability of trauma without transmitting it directly. Much, if not all, of trauma theory has been more or less explicitly embroiled in issues of redemption and confrontation: what if, as Adam Lowenstein puts it, art could unlock “the full possibility of [survivor’s] experience shaping our contemporary world”?<sup>133</sup> And is this what *Irreversible* is doing? After all, Noé has claimed that associations of rape survivors had come forward and thanked him for the film, in reference to another scene that could just as well have found its way in the aforementioned experiment. The notion that film is a medium fit to register and communicate the horrors of trauma arguably goes back to Kracauer’s *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*. Like Bersani for

---

<sup>131</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

<sup>132</sup> Greg Forter, “Freud, Faulkner, Caruth: Trauma and the Politics of Literary Form,” *Narrative* 15, no. 3 (2007), 262. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>133</sup> Adam Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 5.

literature, Kracauer turned to the word “redemption” to describe the relationship between art and the real, whereby the latter is “revealed” or sublimated by the former. Not unlike an alchemist then, the filmmaker – especially, for Kracauer, one working with actual film – turns base matter into gold. As such, many commentators (and detractors) of Kracauer’s book read it as a heavy, verbose treatise on realism, with Dudley Andrew calling it a “huge homogeneous block of realist theory.”<sup>134</sup> For others, like Miriam Hansen, *Theory of Film* is concerned less with authenticity or verisimilitude than with “film’s ability to discover and articulate materiality.”<sup>135</sup> Finally, Hansen cites Gertrud Koch and Heide Schlüpmann who argued that the “epistemic and ethical vanishing point [of *Theory of Film*] [...] is not film as a phenomenon of late capitalism but, more specifically, the question of film after Auschwitz,” and film’s ability or inability to register the horrors of the Holocaust.<sup>136</sup> Despite their various approaches, Andrew, Hansen, Koch and Schlüpmann all home in on the hypothesized potential of film to discover and reveal; the same words used by Bersani to describe the culture of redemption.

Koch and Schlüpmann’s observations were made as commentary on a passage of *Theory of Film* that has now become a quasi-canonical quotation in trauma studies literature. In his conclusion, Kracauer retells the Greek myth of the Gorgon Medusa, whose gaze turned to stone all who beheld her directly, and who was slain by Perseus with the help of a reflective shield. For

---

<sup>134</sup> Dudley Andrew, *The Major Film Theories: An Introduction* (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), 106.

<sup>135</sup> Miriam Bratu Hansen, introduction to *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, Siegfried Kracauer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), XVII.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid*, XIV. See Gertrude Koch, “‘Not Yet Accepted Anywhere’: Exile, Memory, and Image in Kracauer’s Conception of History,” *New German Critique* 54 (1991): 95-109; Heide Schlüpmann, “The Subject of Survival: On Kracauer’s Theory of Film,” *New German Critique* 54 (1991): 111-126.

Kracauer, the silver screen of the theater is akin to Perseus's shield, in the sense that film mediates the horrors we could otherwise not stand to look at: "Hence our dependence on [the cinema] for the reflection of happenings which would petrify us were we to encounter them in real life."<sup>137</sup> This short passage entitled "The Head of Medusa" is also the only place where Kracauer mentions the Holocaust, as he turns to Georges Franju's post-war documentary *Blood of the Beasts* (1949), as an example of cinema mediating reality's horrors. Such horrors, he writes, "beckon the spectator to take them in and thus incorporate into his memory the real face of things too dreadful to behold in reality." In Franju's allegorizing of the concentration camps through the "rows of calves' head [...], we redeem horror from its invisibility behind the veils of panic and imagination."<sup>138</sup> In effect, Kracauer sketched out a paradigm for the relationship between film and trauma, and how the former can redeem the latter by bearing witness to it. Ultimately, the section entitled "Head of the Medusa" is about the promise of mediation: that trauma, whether historical or not, can be approached by art, especially cinema, while simultaneously preserving its incommensurability. After all, the head of Medusa later adorns Athena's shield, and loses none of its petrifying powers.

Yet *Irreversible*, and arguably extreme cinemas in general, have not found their way in literature on trauma studies, with a few exceptions.<sup>139</sup> I would argue that it is because, like Céline, extreme films such as *Irreversible* stray away from the promise of redemption, preferring

---

<sup>137</sup> Kracauer, *Ibid*, 305.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid*, 306.

<sup>139</sup> See for example, Kathleen Scott, "Bearing Witness to the Unbearable: Ethics and the Phallic Gaze in *Irréversible*," in *Sensational Pleasures in Cinema, Literature and Visual Culture: The Phallic Eye*, eds. Nurit Buchweitz and Gilad Padva (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 74-87; Eunah Lee, "Trauma, Excess, and the Aesthetics of Affect: The Extreme Cinemas of Chan-wook Park," *Post Script: Essays in Film and the Humanities* 34, no. 1 (2014): 33-49.

overwhelming excess and gratuity, to the possibility that violence can be recuperated into an elevating meaning. For the same reason, extreme cinemas form an important corpus to discuss the still unmined terrain of systemic traumas: to examine the violence not of punctual events like the Holocaust, but of normative systems of oppression like patriarchy. For all its merits, *Irreversible* will therefore not be part of this chapter, since it is a paradigmatic case of punctual trauma – one, single, isolated, catastrophic event causes a wound upon the psyche. Like Forter, I wish to draw attention to a blind spot in trauma theory by focusing on what he has called *non-punctual* forms of trauma – that is to say, psychic injuries inflicted upon individuals by normative, self-perpetuating systems of oppression like patriarchy, racism, and neoliberalism. With this in mind, I will look at *Irreversible*'s predecessor, *I Stand Alone* (Gaspar Noé, 1999) and *In My Skin* (Marina de Van, 2002) as case studies for the representation of non-punctual trauma. Like Ferdinand in *Death on the Installment Plan* (1936), the protagonists of both films are not so much the victims of a single, punctual shock that their psyche cannot process; rather, the films dramatize the construction of, respectively, masculinity in a French working-class environment, and femininity in an educated, corporate and international environment, as the traumatic and overwhelming intrusion of misogyny, isolation, and self-destruction.

#### **4.1 I Stand Alone**

When scholars and critics mention extreme cinema, or the New French Extremity, or “Brutalist-films,” and other various periphrases referring to the late 90s-2000s burst of violence on the stage of European art cinema, Gaspar Noé is never far from the conversation. An Argentinean-born French filmmaker, he first drew international attention with his short film *Carne*

(1991), which went on to win the Prix de la Semaine de la Critique at Cannes, thereby initiating Noé to a critical success he would arguably never renew. Since then, Noé has solidified his status as chief provocateur of French art cinema, and his second feature film *Irreversible* has become a staple of extreme cinema studies.

While all of Noé's films are extreme in one way or another – whether for their violence, their explicit sex, or simply their disorienting form – *Carne* and *I Stand Alone* are the most explicitly concerned with systems rather than individual characters (most of whom are nameless). Furthermore, both films feature an abundant, logorrheic voiceover that serves as the main character's misanthropic stream of consciousness, a stylistic choice that earned *I Stand Alone* comparisons with Céline when it came out.<sup>140</sup> Besides this striking resemblance, Noé's first feature film bears several similarities to *Death on the Installment Plan*. Both works feature a bitter, working-class man roaming the streets of Paris and struggling to find work. Both Ferdinand and the butcher (the protagonist of *Carne* and *I Stand Alone*, played by Philippe Nahon) at times seem to lock themselves into their own delirium, to the point where, as Eugenie Brinkema observes about *I Stand Alone*, “fantasy and reality [are] collapsed.”<sup>141</sup> Both make use of an omnipresent, vociferous narrative voice emphasizing the hyper-subjectivity of the narration. Finally, both *I Stand Alone* and *Death on the Installment Plan* dramatize normative socio-economic structures like capitalism, homophobia and patriarchy as traumatic, in the sense that the butcher's identity, actions and worldview, like Ferdinand's, are determined not by individual circumstances, but by

---

<sup>140</sup> Carlos Pardo, “Crime, pornographie et mépris du peuple: des films français fascinés par le sordide,” *Le Monde diplomatique*, February 2000, 28. <https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2000/02/PARDO/2096>

<sup>141</sup> Eugenie Brinkema, “Rape and the Rectum: Bersani, Deleuze, Noé,” *Camera Obscura: A Journal of Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 20, no. 58 (2005): 37.

a set of cultural and historical expectations that control and overwhelm him, but that he cannot articulate. As such, the butcher's materialism is opaque, in that his relation to ideals is obfuscated by his immediate material concerns and renders ideals unintelligible. In other words, the opaque materialism of *I Stand Alone* is a direct result of the butcher's trauma.

*I Stand Alone* is the direct sequel of *Carne*, with the same characters and the same actors. Despite *Carne*'s critical success, it took Noé eight years to gather sufficient funding for his first feature, and he claims his operating budget for *I Stand Alone* was ultimately inferior to that of *Carne*. Both films are also stylistically quasi-identical, to the point where they could be edited together seamlessly. I will be referring to the two of them, so a combined synopsis will be useful for what follows: *Carne* begins with the birth of the butcher's daughter, Cynthia, who will reveal herself to be mute and autistic. His time is spent between his trade and caring for her, in a time-lapse spanning sixteen years. One day, after he mistakes Cynthia's first menstrual blood for a trace of rape, he runs off enraged and stabs the first man he sees in the mouth. He is sent to jail, Cynthia to an institution; after two years, unemployed and bankrupt, he becomes a waiter at a local bar and begins an affair with the owner, who soon becomes pregnant with his child. *Carne* ends as they depart for Lille to "start anew."

*I Stand Alone* begins right where *Carne* left off. The butcher hates his mistress, hates that she is pregnant, and hates that he is dependent on her money to open a new butcher's shop. After working the night shift at a retirement home for some time, in a fit of rage, he beats up his mistress, probably killing her unborn baby, steals a gun and hitchhikes to Paris, with no clear plan in mind and 300 Francs in his pocket. He spends his days looking for work, begging his former friends for money, and hatching up plans to kill anyone who offends him. Finally, he decides to visit his daughter and take her out for a day, with the intention to have sex with her, then to kill her and

himself. He does just that in a long fantasy sequence, then changes his mind except for the first part, and the film ends with the butcher's confused musings about love.

Both *Carne* and *I Stand Alone* start with strong affirmations of matter over ideals. *Carne* begins with a nod to *Blood of the Beasts*, a documentary rightly celebrated for its ability to elevate the base matter of its subject – blood, guts and slaughtered animals – by allegorizing it into a discourse about the Holocaust. *Carne*, in a sense, does the opposite: we see a shot of a horse being put to death, and then being bled out, as an obscene gurgling begins to fill the soundtrack. Cut to a close up of meat on a plate – “horse again” we hear a female voice comment disparagingly, perhaps even the same horse we just saw slaughtered and skinned. As in *Blood of the Beasts*, the horse is turned into nourishment, but not of the intellectual kind an allegory purports to offer: a gruff male voice – the butcher's voice – tells the woman she needs to eat, because she is pregnant. The dead horse is just that: a steak, and one that is not even being appreciated by the person eating it. The whole time, the gurgling on the soundtrack does not stop. It carries over to the next shot, and merges into a muffled, cavernous buzzing as, for a few seconds, we cut to what seems like the inside of the woman's womb. She is at a clinic, about to give birth. A medium close up of her open legs and genitalia gives a full view of the delivery. With a short wet sound, the bloody baby is delivered. Taken together, these few introductory shots – no longer than two minutes of screen time – paint a grimly materialist picture of the beginning of life: it is mostly a matter of killing, then eating, then something not too different from shitting.

The first scene of *I Stand Alone* is somewhat more explicit in its materialism: a title card spells out “MORALITY” on a black background. Cut to a man in a bar talking with a drunken drawl: “You know what morality is?” he asks rhetorically. Another patron listens politely. The first man explains that morality is the province of the rich, and the poor must have their own

morality. Then he asks defiantly: “You want to see my morality?” before pulling out a gun, which he agitates under the nose of the other (now slightly worried) patron. For the poor, such ideals as morality are boiled down to their crudest material form; a lesson with which the butcher’s endless stream of consciousness incessantly grapples.

#### **4.1.1 The Butcher’s Opaque Materialism**

Out of the sixty minutes of the butcher’s voiceover (for a 93-minute total runtime), there are three recurring themes: morality, reaching a feverish pitch at the end of the film as the butcher ponders good and evil; love, particularly parental love, friendship, sex and incest; and the life/death dichotomy. For the better part of the film, the butcher debunks what is elevated and immaterial about these ideals and reduces them to their bare (and base) material manifestations. And so, morality literally becomes a gun. This equivalence ties into how the butcher perceives himself, in one of the more striking passages of his stream of consciousness, as he sits alone in a porno theater:

Either you’re born with a cock, and you behave like a good hard cock stuffing holes, or you’re born with a hole, and you’ll only be useful if you get stuffed good. Either way you’re alone. Me, I’m a cock. That’s it: I’m a miserable cock. And in order to get respect, I’ll have to remain hard.<sup>142</sup>

By describing himself as a cock, the butcher views the world through the lens of sexual violence, and the difference between good and evil becomes a question of sexual potency and

---

<sup>142</sup> Translations are mine, unless indicated otherwise.



impotence.<sup>143</sup> When the butcher takes his mother-in-law's gun, he therefore takes charge not only of his own morality, but also figuratively acquires a "hard cock" that will presumably earn him respect. But that is not so, and the butcher only ever makes use of the gun in his numerous power fantasies: after he is denied employment at the slaughterhouse, fantasizing about killing the director; after he is kicked out of a bar for insulting the owner's son, fantasizing about coming back to kill them both; and in his final fantasy, where he kills his daughter and commits suicide. In other words, the butcher is an overwhelmingly impotent character, whose only act of liberating violence is despicable, when he pummels his pregnant wife and frees himself from the impending burden of fatherhood. The rest of the time, his fantasies do not come to fruition: he never returns to kill the director of the slaughterhouse; when he comes back to kill the bar owner and his son, he finds himself stuck in front of a closed metal grate, kicking and yelling fruitlessly; and even in his incest fantasy, he is incapable of killing his daughter properly, and needs two bullets instead of one. It is appropriate, then, that before we even see the butcher's face for the first time, we see his flaccid penis, as imagined by his mother-in-law through his underwear, and that he shamefully tries to conceal. In short, for the butcher, morality and sexual performance are interchangeable, insofar as existence itself is determined by and conditioned upon sexual violence. The incestuous ending therefore cannot be seen as a moment of sexual redemption, but rather stands as the regressive return to sameness and non-differentiation, not unlike the ending of *Irreversible* and

---

<sup>143</sup> Phil Powrie also astutely observes that Philippe Nahon's body "emphasizes the rigidity and aggression of the hard body. He is squat; he has bulbous glaring eyes, and a belligerently protuberant nose. His body is thus constructed as a threatening forward lunge." Phil Powrie, "The W/hole and the Abject," *Paragraph* 26, no. 1/2 (2003): 222-231.

*Enter the Void* (2009), two of Noé's films that also crown violent narratives with peaceful images of pregnant wombs. What the butcher truly aspires to is not hardness, but non-existence.

The second of the butcher's obsession is with love. If there ever was a hope of redeeming him, an otherwise violent, sexist and racist character, it would have been in his love for his daughter. But right from the beginning of *Carne*, the butcher comments on his "confused feelings" for Cynthia upon her reaching puberty and "getting curves." The butcher's incestuous impulses are reiterated at the beginning of *I Stand Alone*, during the photo montage that summarizes *Carne*. Besides the butcher's confusion between parental love and sexual desire, love is one of the ideals at the heart of his ramblings. Again, it is cynically articulated in strictly material terms, in particular in the monologue leading up to the porn theater scene:

You only love your mother when she gives you milk. And you only love your dad when he lends you dough. But when your mom's breasts have dried up and there's no more milk to suck, or when your dad's pockets have emptied, then all there is left to do is to shove them in a distant closet.

For the butcher, love is merely a transaction: affection is returned in exchange for nourishment and financial agency; love is, as he concludes, "an illusion of youth." The same goes for friendship, which he sees as nothing more than a shortcut to find work. Far from exempting himself from such base transactions, the butcher embraces them: his meanderings through the streets of Paris bring him to his old friends, whom he has not seen in many years, and for whom he does not show any affection. One by one, he asks them if they have money or work, and all of them explain that they have fallen onto hard times themselves. These meditations on love fittingly end in the porn theater, a space that condenses everything we have just heard: sex and love are reduced to a financial transaction, which we see the butcher carry out as he enters the theater. The porn film itself features a heterosexual couple in action, showing sex evacuated from feelings; then

the porn film progressively gets closer to the actors' genitalia, until an extreme close up shows the penetration in all its anatomical details. Love, in the butcher's eyes, is a pair of testicles flapping limply against a vagina.

Lastly, the third recurring theme of the butcher's monologue is that of life and death, in particular for him as pure biological events. The aforementioned opening scene of *Carne* already lays out in what materialist terms the butcher sees birth; a point of view unsurprisingly confirmed in *I Stand Alone* when he states that sex is "nothing but a reproduction program in the bottom of our guts." Two different scenes bring him to ponder the nature of death, what comes or does not come after, and they eventually lead him to the conclusion that, like everything else, death is merely organic matter transitioning from one state to the next. The first of these scenes takes place in a nursing home. Because his mistress refuses to invest in a lease for a butcher shop and presses the butcher to find a job, he takes on the night shift there as a security guard. We learn little about the nursing home, other than that its occupants "smell bad." One night, as the butcher completes a crossword puzzle, a nurse runs to his booth and asks for his help with a patient who is suffocating. The butcher and the nurse arrive in a bleak room, where an old woman lies in bed, struggling to breathe. The composition of the establishing shot is meaningful: it is a medium-long shot facing the bed, slightly off center. The only source of light is a pale golden neon right above the old woman's head, while the butcher and the nurse stand in the shadow on the right. The old woman seems to stare directly at the light, whose faint but continuous buzzing makes it seem a mockery of a heavenly halo. As the nurse injects something into the woman's scrawny arm, her breathing slows down, she says a few delirious words, then falls silent. After a fast zoom in on her petrified face, the screen fades to white, as if to suggest transition to a spiritual elsewhere. But then it cuts, mercilessly, to a black title card that reads "Death opens no door." The golden neon light at the

center of the shot and above the woman's head announces no afterlife; chances are it was just a nuisance that blinded her, and whose incessant droning kept her awake.

The second scene, involving the butcher's reflections on death, is that of his final murderous fantasy. After taking his daughter to the dingy hotel room where he has been staying, and where she was conceived, with the intention to rape and kill her, the butcher has second thoughts, but then seems to carry on with his plan. They have sex, and he shoots her point blank through the neck. She falls to the ground, and gurgles pathetically, as blood oozes through the wound. The butcher botched his plan. He is forced to put her out of her misery with a second bullet, and eventually kills himself with the last bullet. After this, the film cuts back to the beginning of the scene, with the butcher and Cynthia still alive, as it turns out that this was all just fantasy.

The butcher's voiceover reaches a fevered pitch during this scene, and is unique for its constant back-and-forth between base matter and ideals. As he contemplates his dying daughter, he talks of "exits," of an "other side" and of "superior forces," before going back to his obsessions with the material: that people are "like animals," and that "under the skin, there's only meat, fat and bones." Still, as Cynthia writhes on the floor, the sight evokes the scene that started it all: the executed horse at the very beginning of *Carne*, whose throat is punctured with a knife to bleed it out. Like the horse that was so closely linked to her birth, Cynthia bleeds out from a hole in her throat, before the butcher mercifully shoots her in the head. The comparison is made explicit in the voice over, as the butcher contemplates his agonizing daughter dumbfounded, unsure of how to proceed. He recalls the days when he had been taught how to kill pigs, regrets that he did not use a knife – as for the horse – then compares Cynthia to a suffering sow.

As much as this scene stays faithful to the butcher's materialism, there remains a distinct hope for the possibility that life and death are cyclical, as confirmed when the butcher comments

that “it’s come full circle [*La boucle est bouclée*].” A horse was killed to feed Cynthia while she was in her mother’s womb, and now she dies like a horse. But this realization brings no existential comfort. Instead, Cynthia’s execution illustrates the butcher’s underlying conviction that the world is a slaughterhouse: autistic and mute from birth, sent to a cheap institution when she reached sixteen, then taken out of it to be “consumed,” it would be coherent with the butcher’s train of thought to compare Cynthia’s life to that of a horse raised for slaughter. It is fitting, then, that she should be killed by a professional. Furthermore, the fact that this turns out to be a “realistic” fantasy – at first, nothing in the editing suggests that this is merely the butcher’s imagination – allows the butcher to figuratively kill *and then* consume his daughter. After all, he had already been primed to associate meat and eroticism during an earlier, enigmatic dream sequence, which simply showed the butcher’s hands tenderly caressing the folds of ground meat. The ending of *I Stand Alone* is, in a sense, the actualization of that dream, and as close as the film gets to cannibalism. By murdering his daughter *and then* raping her, the butcher gets to kill the horse and eat it too. Indeed, why stop at one taboo?

Morality, love, life, and death: to the butcher, these lofty ideals are no more than steel, flesh and bodily fluids. But his materialism is not the result of an enlightened philosophical choice. Rather, his views are conditioned by his social and economic standing, to the extent that what is precisely lofty about these ideals remains opaque to him. Like Ferdinand in *Death on the Installment Plan*, the butcher’s opaque materialism is a product of a trauma that is both cultural and socio-economic.

#### 4.1.2 The Butcher's Trauma

By viewing the butcher's woes and behavior through the lens of trauma, I do not mean to suggest we should think about his character with pity, or even sympathy. In fact, part of what makes him and *I Stand Alone* irredeemable is the rejection of empathy as a mode of basic interpersonal communication. As the title of the film suggests – in French or in English – one of the butcher's defining traits is his own, unresolvable solitude and isolation. Yet in spite of his vociferous attempts to separate himself from any form of collective identity, and in spite of the extraordinary circumstances of his personal story, there are reasons to believe, both in *Carne* and *I Stand Alone*, that the butcher is the subject of a collective trauma.

A few years before Greg Forter, sociologist Jeffrey Alexander had begun articulating what he called a “cultural theory of trauma” (Alexander 2004) that did not centrally depend on a traumatic event.<sup>144</sup> He insists that “events do not, in and of themselves, create collective trauma. Events are not inherently traumatic. Trauma is a socially mediated attribution.”<sup>145</sup> In this sense, his intervention anticipates Forter's conceptualization of “non-punctual traumas” by creating room for collective cultural influence on individual psyches, even if it means that this influence may have the damaging effects of trauma. Alexander goes so far as to claim that “sometimes [...] events that are deeply traumatizing may not have actually occurred at all; such imagined events, however, can be as traumatizing as events that have actually occurred.”<sup>146</sup> Like Ferdinand, the butcher has

---

<sup>144</sup> Jeffrey C. Alexander, “Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma,” in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, ed. Jeffrey C. Alexander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 1-30.

<sup>145</sup> Alexander, *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*

not technically lived through one specific traumatizing event, yet his character, especially his (self) damaging hyper-masculinity, has undoubtedly been shaped by the imagined death of his father at the hands of the Nazis, and perhaps even the occupation of France writ-large. For this reason, I will discuss two different traumas and their effects on the butcher in this section: the historical, punctual trauma of the French Occupation, and non-punctual trauma of patriarchy, specifically of French patriarchy after it was shaped by the events of the Occupation.

None of this is mentioned in *Carne*, where the butcher is little more than a ball of rage with no backstory. However, *I Stand Alone* has a distinct prologue: a long photomontage summarizing the life of the butcher, comprised mostly of pictures of Philippe Nahon himself at various stages of his life, and one single archival photograph of Marshal Pétain shaking hands with Adolf Hitler. The butcher's voice drones on: "If I had to summarize my life, my life is very simple: it's the life of a poor guy, the story of a man like many others, his story is banal." He proceeds to explain that he was born in 1939, abandoned by his mother in 1941, and did not find out who his father was until after the Liberation, when he was six years old. He was informed (by whom, we do not know) that his father was a communist and Resistance fighter who died in Germany in a concentration camp. It is not clear how much this piece of news impacted the butcher: we are simply told that it marked the beginning of an "inner conflict." What follows is a brief summary of his career as a butcher, before jumping into the detailed synopsis of *Carne*, like the episode recap of a TV show – after all, *I Stand Alone* came out eight years after Noé's acclaimed short film, and it is unlikely that viewers would have been familiar with it.

This is all the backstory we are getting: as promised, aside from his seemingly heroic father, the butcher's life has been quite unremarkable. But the particular fact of his father's death, and the person the butcher imagines him to be based on the circumstances of his passing, are oddly

recurring motifs of the voiceover. Along with his daughter, his father is the only other human being for whom the butcher seems to have respect. His mother may have been a “selfish swine” for giving birth to him, but his father, whose entire imagined existence is determined by the alleged details of his death, is just a victim, much like the butcher himself, of a violent conspiracy directed by a collective enemy. Disseminated here and there in the voiceover are moments when the butcher refers to his father’s fate, in angry, fist-in-the-air rants against the *boches* (the pejorative slang to refer to Germans during both World Wars), rants that sometimes include the *collabo* (French collaborationists during WWII). It comes as no surprise that at the film’s climax, during the fantasized murder-suicide, the butcher would remember his father and occupied France in particularly graphic terms, confusingly interspersed with his own memories of stabbing the man he believed had raped his daughter. I have edited out parts of the monologue for clarity:

It’s like my dad, he was a communist. [...] He wanted the greater good. [...] And they made him pay. [...] The Germans [...] they killed him for his humanism. [...] Good thing the Americans landed with the Russians [...] and they blew the Nazis’ brains out [...] and they tore off the assholes of these human feces that were their wives. They forgot to crush the collaborationist evil that gnaws at our country. [...] They should have publicly raped and castrated all of these bourgeois dignitaries who were sucking the Germans’ balls.

The butcher also says of this mother that “she was a repulsive bitch who ratted out Jews and commies to the *boches*.” It may seem odd to hear so many references to this period of French history when the narrative of *I Stand Alone* takes place nearly forty years after the Liberation and is, on the surface at least, unrelated to World War II, the occupation, or the Nazis. If anything, the economic context of the early 1980s – a mere five years after the end of the “Trente glorieuses,” the thirty years of economic growth and prosperity that immediately followed the end of the war – should be a more pertinent framework for the butcher. Yet in spite of some vague references to



“*la crise*,” the butcher seems much more preoccupied with the 1940s than with the present. The aforementioned paragraph is packed with cultural references that allude to the French trauma of the Occupation: by obsessing over his father’s communism, the butcher taps into the post-Liberation exaggerated martyrdom of the French Communist party (which dramatically called itself the “*Parti des 75,000 fusillés*” [Party of the Executed 75,000 ], a figure that counts about 72,000 too many victims). Besides the reference to D-Day, the mention of the German “wives” likely refers not to German nationals, but to the French women who were found guilty of having intimate relationships with German soldiers. The infamous post-war “Purge” trials included these women in their loose definition of “collaboration.” Punishments included shaving, public denuding and other forms of violent humiliation.<sup>147</sup> The butcher’s misogyny is paired with another instance of anxious masculinity, in the wish for the public castration of “bourgeois dignitaries” who figuratively engaged in homosexual sex. For that matter, he might even mean it literally – this is not the first time that the butcher associates bourgeoisie with homosexuality: the director of the slaughterhouse, who rejected his application and whose suit, speech patterns, and intonations distinctly signals a class gap with the butcher, is subsequently always called a “fag” in the narration.

---

<sup>147</sup> On the topic of the Purge trials, see Peter Novick, *The Resistance Versus Vichy: The Purge of Collaborators in Liberated France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968). On the topic of female victims during the trials, see Fabrice Virgili, *Shorn Women: Gender and Punishment in Liberation France* (New York: Berg, 2002). On the topic of how the post-war French literary scene responded to the trials, see Phil Watts, *Allegories of the Purge: How Literature Responded to the Postwar Trials of Writers and Intellectuals in France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

I insist on the butcher's anxious masculinity because it is the main way his trauma manifests itself. There are two traumas at work here that are intertwined: the historical trauma of the Occupation, and the systemic trauma of Post-Occupation patriarchy. Both have had a hand in shaping the butcher's materialism and his character; both should be understood as wounds upon his psyche, wounds that made him dysfunctional and stand alone. By referring continuously to collaborators and Nazis, the butcher draws attention to a painful part of recent French history that was quite literally repressed for forty years. More than its embarrassingly quick defeat in June 1940, France's direct and substantial participation in the Holocaust proved a difficult reality to confront, so much so that the national and official post-war narrative placed the entirety of the blame on the Vichy government, which, after the Liberation, was deemed unrepresentative of the French Republic and the French people. Insofar as Vichy was never legitimate, this narrative maintained that France never had a role in the Holocaust. This was more than petty semantics: by refusing to acknowledge its guilt, the French government effectively repressed a narrative that was too troubling, too traumatic to ensure that the fabric of post-war French society would mend. Only in summer 1995 did then freshly elected president Jacques Chirac affirm the guilt of France's participation in the Holocaust, during a momentous speech that paid particular attention to the 1942 Vel d'Hiv roundup.<sup>148</sup>

---

<sup>148</sup> The Vel D'Hiv roundup was a mass-arrest operation conducted by the French police and directed by the Nazis on July 16 and 17, 1942. Over 10,000 Jews were rounded up and led to the "Winter Velodrome," before they were deported to concentration camps. Since then, the roundup has become a symbol of French collaboration with Nazi Germany. On how the memory of Vichy survived after the war, see Henry Rousso, *Le syndrome de Vichy: 1944-198-* (Paris: Seuil, 1987). For English-language studies of France during the Occupation, see Bertram M. Gordon,

This particular historical trauma is internalized and negotiated by the butcher in his own materialist, masculinist way. Faithful to his impression that one needs to be a “hard cock,” the penetration of France by German forces is akin, in the butcher’s eyes, to a rape that was allowed both by treacherous women (of which his mother is an example) and queer bourgeois men (to which his father was the opposite). There was therefore no room for heterosexual, macho masculinity in occupied France, except presumably in the Résistance. In other words, being a heterosexual macho male like the butcher *is* an act of resistance, one for which he believes he is punished on a daily basis. His masculinity is directly determined both by the death of his father and by the occupation of France: like Germany in 1940, he wants to be a “hard cock” rather than the hole that was France. Yet, whether he likes it or not, he is French; hence an ambivalence between wanting to be a cock and realistically being a hole, an ambivalence hinted at in *Carne*, where it is implied that the butcher had sex with his cellmate, and which Phil Powrie rightly identifies as the abjection of a male/female ambiguity, going so far as to suggest that “the butcher himself is the one who needs to be stuffed, the hole made whole. [...] That whole combines both masculinity, and femininity constantly repressed and represented as abject.”<sup>149</sup> The historical trauma of the Occupation, which the butcher was too young to fully experience, nonetheless becomes entwined with his socio-economic condition: being an unemployed (macho male) butcher, rejected by a (queer, bourgeois) slaughterhouse director in 1980, he becomes the same as being a (macho male) Resistance fighter who is denounced to the Nazis by (queer, bourgeois)

---

*Collaborationism in France during the Second World War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980); H. R. Kedward, *Occupied France: Collaboration and Resistance, 1940-1944* (New York: Blackwell, 1985).

<sup>149</sup> Powrie, *Ibid*, 224.

collaborators. This is how the historical trauma of the Occupation, and the more systemic trauma of post-Occupation patriarchy, has shaped the butcher: oppressed heterosexual macho men versus a cabal of cunning women and effeminate men.

This trauma is manifested in the film in much the same ways as Ferdinand's in *Death on the Installment Plan*. Like Ferdinand, whose trauma is expressed in his delirious, homogenizing narrative voice, the butcher's meditations are also at times incoherent and mix up different language registers, from working-class slang and vulgarity to, suddenly, a turn of phrase one could only describe as literary, bordering on preciousness. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, fantasy and reality seem to be intermingled. The final murder-suicide sequence is the most obvious example, but some scenes do not offer the release of an unambiguous return to reality, and leave us in doubt of what is real, and what is the butcher's imagination. I am thinking in particular of two instances where he is called "daddy" by secondary characters. The first instance is in the nursing home scene I had discussed earlier. As the butcher and the nurse stare at the dying old woman, she stutters, in what seems like an address to him. In between ragged breaths, she manages to say "Daddy, don't leave me alone," before passing away. The other instance occurs later in the film. As he spends the evening at a local bar, the butcher is approached by a woman (credited as "Junkie") who flirts with him and who, once he has followed her to a sordid little room, asks him for money in exchange for sexual favors. Her erratic speech, her tendency to briefly zone out in the middle of a sentence, and the butcher's request to take a look at her arm, all suggest that she might be a drug addict.<sup>150</sup> As she tries to arouse a rather stone-faced butcher, she reveals one breast

---

<sup>150</sup> She is also referred to as "Junkie" in the end credits.

and, after a silence, simply whispers “Daddy, you won’t hurt me, right?” in what seems like an anticipation of what the butcher has in mind for his own daughter.

It is tempting to see these two instances as brief moments of delirium inserted seamlessly in the narration, instead of simple coincidences. Rather than the benign hallucination of a dying woman, or the pitiful attempt of a sex worker to arouse a difficult customer, these two distinct moments are better understood as sudden irruptions of the butcher’s anxieties about his daughter, whom he has not seen in several months. Specifically, both characters’ pleas refer to what the butcher either has done (leaving his daughter alone in an institution) or is thinking of doing (killing her before killing himself). The context for these utterances also gives shape to what he might credibly dread for Cynthia’s future: that she will die alone, in a cheap nursing home that smells bad; or that she will become a confused drug addict who sells sex to strangers for a chance at her next hit. Either way, as soon as one considers these interpretations plausible, the entire narrative regime of *I Stand Alone* ceases to be reliable, as the editing no longer promises a clear cut between fantasy and reality. Knowing this, the brief shot of the crossword puzzle the butcher works on in the nursing home reveals what is immediately on his mind: we can make out the words “*argent* [money],” “*odeur* [odor],” and “*vétuste* [dilapidated].” Either the day’s crossword coincides strangely with the butcher’s disposition, or he simply fills the puzzle out with words tapping into his obsession with the material realities of poverty.

Like *Death on the Installment Plan*, the narrative is consumed by the damaged subjectivity of its protagonist. And like Ferdinand, the butcher’s abundant, almost diarrheic speech signals an absence, the inability to articulate his trauma, manifested visually in the dark corners that surround each shot at all times. Shot in an unusual combination of 16mm and a CinemaScope lens, each frame is embedded in a dark offscreen space that sometimes cuts off parts of the characters’ faces,

as if half of the diegetic world remains perpetually opaque to us and to the butcher, whose point of view is tyrannically imposed on us. The many extreme close ups that populate the narrative, of genitals, mouths and eyes, combined with fast and abrupt zoom ins (usually accompanied by gunshot sound effects), illustrate the butcher's materialist myopia, and his inability to "see" or conceive of what lies beyond the edges of the frame, into the dark corners of the screen. In this sense, the butcher's trauma is always present and yet permanently outside his comprehension, pressing on the edges of his short, rectangular world as he turns more and more inward, starting from an apartment, a job, and the promise, however stifling, of domesticity, and finishing in a small hotel room, inside his own psyche and, terribly, his own flesh.

There remains, finally, the question of redemption. It lies, for Forter, in the exposure by literature of the mechanics of trauma. William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* is important, Forter writes, because it "enables for readers an extraordinarily rich and empathic understanding of what it means to be traumatized by a specific set of historical processes."<sup>151</sup> This argument approximates Bersani's conceptualization of redemption. Literature – or cinema – can redeem systemic, non-punctual trauma (i.e. trauma that is, by definition, too normalized and built into social habits to be recognized as such) by exposing it for what it is: a system of normative behaviors that ultimately damage the psyche of social subjects. And by exposing this system, showing its cogs and pieces, literature and cinema can generate empathetic responses from readers and spectators.

Does this make *I Stand Alone* redemptive? Is the butcher himself redeemed at the end? Quite simply, the butcher is too uniquely monstrous to empathize with: an examination of historical and systemic trauma help define and understand his character, as well as the narrative as

---

<sup>151</sup> Forter, *Ibid*, 270.

a whole, but there remains, as in *Death on the Installment Plan*, something in excess of the economy of meaning generated by the film. The butcher's violence, his rabid sexism, racism, homophobia and incestuous desires all contribute to see him as an unrelatable brute first, a victim of trauma second. This narrative choice has led to a political ambivalence that has now become familiar: some critics and viewers saluted the leftist political bite of the film;<sup>152</sup> others, in terms eerily similar to Simone de Beauvoir's about *Death*, criticized the film's contempt for the poor, like this critic from *Le Monde diplomatique* who wrote that "[*I Stand Alone*]'s fascination for the abject and the sordid show an undeniable hatred of the people."<sup>153</sup>

We return then to the discursive uncertainty of *Death*: what makes *I Stand Alone* an irredeemable film is not its protagonist, however irredeemable he may be. Rather, it is its single-minded mania with the (base) material, and the fact that this obsession is not conducive to (immaterial) intellection or enlightenment, in a Bataillean fashion. Instead, the denouement of the film makes a mockery of redemption, as the butcher concludes that the purest, most elevated form of love is sex with his unresponsive daughter. If *I Stand Alone* falls short of empathy and discourse, there might only remain, as in *Death*, an obsession for style, unless making systemic trauma present, but absent of empathy, is redemption enough. The dark frames of Noé's film are not enlightened, and yet their opacity is visible.

---

<sup>152</sup> Olivier Père described the "incredible virtuosity" with which the film provoked a "storm in a brain" and Didier Péron called it "an experiment on the limits, the censorship and the exposure of the processes that lead to absolute indignity." ("Seul contre tous," *Allociné*, accessed April 25, 2020, <http://www.allocine.fr/film/fichefilm-105494/critiques/presse/>)

<sup>153</sup> Pardo, *Ibid.*

I will now turn to *In My Skin*, a film that can be conceived as a polar opposite of *I Stand Alone*, and yet also makes present non-punctual trauma. We leave the sordid underclass and join the corporate world; no more “hard cock” masculinity, but wounded and sophisticated femininity; violence is no longer emphatically directed at others, but at the self. And yet de Van’s film is also branded by opaque materialism, and systemic trauma.

## 4.2 In My Skin

Another New French Extremity favorite, *In My Skin* is also its director’s feature-length debut. But unlike Noé, who is mostly self-taught, Marina de Van is a graduate of the elite French filmmaking school “La Fémis,” which counts among its alumni such respectable auteurs as Claire Denis, François Ozon, or Arnaud Desplechin. In spite of the robust network the Fémis offers and her past collaborations with Ozon, *In My Skin* was made on a shoestring budget and received a limited distribution, owing probably to its graphic content. Stylistically and narratively, it is quite different from *I Stand Alone*, and resembles a sophisticated arthouse film with sudden bursts of gore that would make Eli Roth blush.

The narrative arc of *In My Skin* is not too dissimilar from that of *I Stand Alone*: it begins in domesticity, as Esther (Marina de Van herself), an ambitious young Parisian woman working for a consulting firm, discusses plans to move in with her boyfriend Vincent (Laurent Lucas), who considers accepting a cushy job at a bank. They make a handsome couple: they are in love and already well-off, with promising careers ahead of them; an ideal, heteronormative, middle-class couple on a highway to wealth. Except, one evening, as Esther goes to a party with a friend where she hopes to network, she trips and falls in the backyard. Thinking nothing of it at first, she



eventually notices bloodstains on the carpet of the bathroom, leading up to her leg, on which she discovers a gaping, nasty wound. Intrigued, perhaps in shock, not really in pain, she pokes about the injury with a troubling curiosity. From here on out, the narrative of *In My Skin* is a spiral. Esther becomes more and more obsessed with her wound, begins to mutilate herself, and even self-cannibalize, drawing obvious pleasure from it. At first, her boyfriend is worried, then angry and judgmental. Sometimes it seems Esther draws strength and confidence from her rituals, which let her move forward in her career; at others, her mania gets in the way of her professional obligations. At some point, mysteriously, she cuts off a slice of her skin, and preserves it in her wallet. In the end, she falls deeper and deeper into what Carrie Tarr fittingly called “an affair with her body,” which drives her to isolation, maybe even death – the ending of the film is ambiguous on this point.<sup>154</sup>

Unlike *I Stand Alone*, *In My Skin* has attracted its fair share of critical attention, especially for the ways in which de Van’s film interrogates conventional structures of looking and forces a position of embodied spectatorship.<sup>155</sup> Esther’s gruesome, lengthy scenes of self-mutilation are indeed uniquely difficult to watch, and her challenging stares back at the camera seem designed to

---

<sup>154</sup> Carrie Tarr, “Director’s Cuts: The Aesthetics of Self-Harming in Marina de Van’s *Dans ma peau*,” *Nottingham French Studies* 45, no. 3 (2006): 82.

<sup>155</sup> See Greg Hainge, “A Full Face Bright Red Money Shot: Incision, Wounding and Film Spectatorship in Marina de Van’s *Dans ma peau*,” *Continuum* 26, no. 4 (2012): 565-77; Romain Chareyron, “Horror and the Body: Understanding the Reworking of the Genre in Marina de Van’s *Dans ma peau*/*In My Skin* (2001),” *Imaginations: Journal of Cross-Cultural Image Studies* 4, no. 1 (2013): 70-81; Adam Lowenstein, “Feminine Horror: The Embodied Surrealism of *In My Skin*,” in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 470-487.

invite introspection, as much as judgement or empathy. And yet it is also a film that explicitly rejects interpretation, whose violence begs for and refuses translation in the same breath. As Tarr points out, “the spectator is left to puzzle over the meaning of her cutting, saving and secreting of the piece of tanned skin, for example.”<sup>156</sup> In addition to attracting theories of spectatorship, *In My Skin* has been the object of multiple, but similar, sociological readings. Tarr sees Esther’s self-cutting as “a reflection on women’s relationship with their bodies in a postmodern but still patriarchal world”;<sup>157</sup> Romain Chareyron contends that *In My Skin* features “a discourse of empowerment whose aim it is to challenge social norms of behavior and beauty”;<sup>158</sup> and Lowenstein uses Esther to articulate what he calls “feminine horror” and argues that her mutilations make visible “the typically unseen pressures that often circumscribe a late capitalist Western woman’s personal and professional experience.”<sup>159</sup>

But in the film, Esther is elusive, and repeatedly avoids the topic of explaining her strange behavior, probably because she does not know what the meaning of her cutting is herself. Systemic pressures – to be a good employee, a good friend, and a good girlfriend – indeed appear to be convincing explanations. We as spectators – even more so as film academics – are put in the same position as the people in her life: her friend, colleague and rival Sandrine (Léa Drucker) and her partner Vincent, the only two other people aware of her compulsions, are left confused, concerned and angry at her actions. Vincent, especially, from the moment when he discovers her original injury, cannot stop probing the wound – like Esther, only figuratively. “Why did you do it?” he

---

<sup>156</sup> Tarr, *Ibid*, 87.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid*, 79.

<sup>158</sup> Chareyron, *Ibid*, 70.

<sup>159</sup> Lowenstein, *Ibid*, 474.

asks several times, “you don’t like your body, is that it?” Esther, ostensibly uninterested in sociological or psychological explanations – and academic interpretations – simply replies “you always want to make sense of everything.” Rather than accepting this as a sign that *In My Skin* simply does not make sense, or that Esther is a pathological freak, I suggest reading the film not just as a strict outsider to, and observer of, her mania (like Vincent or Sandrine) but more as Esther herself, as someone who is more like the butcher than one might think, in her inability to (literally) think beyond the materialism of her life. For Esther, there is no sense to make of her cutting; the impulse is simply there, like a big toe.

Albeit at opposite ends of the capitalist spectrum, Esther and the butcher have in common their obsession with base matter. In fact, the scene of the butcher’s dream, when his hand lovingly caresses the folds of ground meat, could easily have found its way into the editing room of *In My Skin*. At the core of the film is what appears to be a contrast between what is “elevated” in Esther’s life (her professional ambition and success, encapsulated in the literally “high” skyscrapers of *La Défense*, where her office is located) and her baser instincts to play with her flesh and bones, which she sometimes indulges in subterranean spaces like the wine cellar of a restaurant. In Bataille fashion, it would seem the low contaminates the high, as it becomes clear that there is a pattern to Esther’s cutting: her urges seem to overtake her when professional or personal pressures become too much to handle. Her retreats to dark corners where she can cut herself in peace acquire an odd restorative value, as it becomes clear that she gives in to her impulses out of pleasure, but also to compose herself. A causal connection emerges quickly: if Esther is so good at her job, it is partly because she forages around her scars and injuries.

This contamination of the high and the low is made clear in several scenes, but especially comes forth in a scene where Esther is at the pool with colleagues, shortly after one of her cutting

sessions. She has no intention of bathing, however, as her elegant business outfit makes clear. But her colleagues have other plans: as Esther crouches by Sandrine's *chaise longue* and gloats that she has been promoted to *directeur d'étude* – a position long coveted by Sandrine – two male co-workers grab her from behind and start pulling her towards the pool. But Esther is not amused and resists desperately, digging her nails into Sandrine's armrests and screaming in protests. The pranksters eventually get the hint and give up, but not before having drenched her pants, and having possibly broken a few stitches on her leg. When Esther stands back up, blood visibly oozes through the brown fabric, mixed in with chlorine water. She is livid, not at the prank, or at the fact that Sandrine stared and did nothing to help, but at the sudden exposure of her intimacy. Her professional, public front has been sullied by her base, private practice, at the moment when she announces her promotion, as if to reveal the causal connection between climbing and cutting.

As we have seen, the butcher's materialism is predicated upon his socio-economic status: his views on love and morality are determined by his own poverty, and his experience growing up and living most of his life in the working-class. Esther is no different. Her materialism is also inflected by her status, and she too believes that the nature of interpersonal relationships is to be only transactional. Except unlike the butcher, she is the one holding the stick. Even before the opening credits, she puts a price on domestic bliss as Vincent's musings about moving together in a new apartment are interrupted by Esther's concerns about living on one salary. Softly, but firmly, she states that she does not want just any apartment, but one that is "big and expensive." For such an apartment, it becomes quickly clear Vincent will have to accept a job at a bank – a job he off-handedly comments might be like "whoring out." Fittingly, he tells Esther about the offer a little later, as they are in the middle of foreplay. In between passionate kissing and ragged breathing, he gives Esther comically unromantic details: "It's a bank. They contacted me through a headhunter

because they want to renew their image. They're interested in my background as economic journalist. I would work with the team in charge of finding a new communication strategy." If nothing else, Esther seems aroused by this kind of dirty talk, and even squeals with pleasure at the prospect of seeing Vincent "in a suit." For her, as for the butcher, love of any kind is inseparable from the financial exchanges that underpin it.

Logically, the same is true of her friendship with Sandrine. Their relationship, albeit cordial and even warm early on, is steeped in rivalry. They are colleagues and occupy the same rank within their company, but during an evening together, Sandrine makes a point of reminding Esther that she is her senior, that she is the one who helped Esther get her job, and that she covets the position of *directeur d'étude* that had just opened. Once again, the butcher was right: friends are only as good as the job they help you obtain. Their friendship, which soured as soon as Esther told Sandrine about her promotion, ends with a sort of severance check. The pants Esther stained at the pool were Sandrine's, and the next day at work, the latter half-jokingly tells the former that she should buy her a new pair, because they were moderately expensive. Esther does not give her a chance to clarify whether she is kidding, and takes her up to her word. She will "write her a check" that Sandrine is welcome to pick up "at the reception desk." Speaking from her new office as *directeur d'étude*, she would not have acted differently if she were firing Sandrine. And in a sense, she is: having served her purpose, Sandrine is no longer useful, and what better than a check to smooth over the rupture?

In this late capitalist world where cutthroat competitiveness is the rule, and interpersonal relations are at best collateral, Esther turns to her own body for intimacy. Her bright red blood, the irregular patterns of her scars, her deformed skin all form a striking contrast with the straight lines of skyscrapers, the pale pastel colors of her office, and the overall clinical cleanliness of her

professional environment. But this is not to highlight a discrepancy between a base (the disorder of her body) and a high (the order of her work); rather, Esther shares the materialism of the butcher (and of Ferdinand's) in that there is only a base, and her cutting can be seen as an attempt to make this materialism visible; to go beyond "skin deep," and into the ugly, bloody, primal instincts underpinning her seemingly civilized world. Having more and more trouble connecting with others, Esther finds comfort in sameness, as the butcher did before her by preying on his daughter. Towards the end of the film, she slices off a sizeable piece of skin and preserves it in a vial of saltwater, before inquiring about how to tan it. One of the last images we see is of Esther lovingly placing the tanned skin against her breast, as if she were nurturing a newborn. In this sense, the ending of *In My Skin* is surprisingly similar to that of *I Stand Alone*, for its ambivalent return to non-differentiation. But it is because both films feature characters who have been shattered by trauma, and who crave, however desperately, a return to wholeness that is ultimately denied to them.

#### **4.2.1 Esther's Trauma**

Both Tarr and Lowenstein read Esther's cutting as a response to the constraints of her personal and professional life. Tarr cites Judith Butler in commenting that Esther's mutilations are reactions against "normative constraints that not only produce but also regulate various bodily beings."<sup>160</sup> They also draw attention to Esther's fragmentation, and Lowenstein in particular contends that the scene where she preserves a piece of skin "captures how violently her concepts

---

<sup>160</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), X.

of a whole body and a unified self have been shattered, but also how much she wishes to restore or invent a sense of this sort of wholeness.”<sup>161</sup> Systemic pressures, selves shattered and made whole again: much of the language used by Lowenstein and Tarr is comprised of recurrent elements of trauma studies. Although Esther recoils at attempts to pathologize her compulsions, trauma is signposted at the beginning of the narrative, when she gets her first cut in the backyard of a co-worker’s house. However impressive the wound, the event appears to be lived by Esther as singularly *not* traumatic: she merely swears when she falls, less at the (then unnoticed) injury than at her torn stockings, then gets back on her feet and returns inside the house. Even when she finally confronts the wound, she acts neither shocked nor horrified; rather, she is intrigued, fascinated even, pokes about for a bit, then stops when she is being called from another room. This is also the first time we hear her name, and the circumstances effectively bind her identity to her newfound injury. Esther *is* her wound, at the same time as she is strangely distant from it, as if it were a foreign object.

A few hours after leaving the party, Esther goes to a hospital to have her leg examined. The young doctor assigned to her expresses surprise, with a hint of reproach, at Esther having waited so long to come for a wound so severe. He, too, becomes intrigued when she explains that she was not in pain. He simply states “It’s true that a lot of things are possible when it comes to trauma, but still, you should have felt something,” before adding, jocularly “are you sure this is your leg?”

This question, in the context of the film, is not as innocent as it seems. Esther’s estrangement from her own body begins here, and remains a recurring motif, until it culminates during a business dinner and Esther absent-mindedly contemplates her forearm on the table,

---

<sup>161</sup> Lowenstein, *Ibid*, 481.

detached from the rest of her. “A lot of things are possible when it comes to trauma,” in this case, that this singular event is emphatically *not* traumatic. Rather, it is here to signal Esther’s fragmentation, and make it visible to herself. The plot of *In My Skin* could indeed be summarized as one woman’s attempts to restore wholeness to a shattered self. The opening credits, with their split-screen composition opposing images of Esther’s workplace and their double in negative colors, already suggest not just fragmentariness, but the irresolvable split between the bland, docile everyday, and its uncanny double, made of vivid colors and blurred lines; a subterranean vernacular normally hidden from sight, here aggressively put forth under our eyes. The question is not whether one is more authentic than the other. The very fact of their division is the issue at hand; it prefigures Esther’s main conflict with her own fragmentation. As Lowenstein points out, there are several Esthers in the narrative, as “she attempts to be a certain kind of woman for Vincent, another for Sandrine, and yet another for her business associates.”<sup>162</sup> In these circumstances, her mutilation sessions are not only acts of self-destruction, but also moments of self-making, as Esther clearly takes satisfaction, even empowerment, in her cutting.

It follows that her life-defining accident appears singularly *untraumatic* because it is not a symptom of, but a reaction to systemic traumas that are just as damaging, if not as spectacular. The cutting, in a sense, is therapeutic. The spiralling of Esther’s cutting therefore mirrors the degree to which her self is shattered: the more fragmented she becomes (as her personal and professional obligations become more urgent), the more intense her cravings. Like *I Stand Alone*, the trajectory of *In My Skin* heads towards a fevered pitch where the line between dream and reality collapses.

---

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid*, 482.



Finally, Esther's fragmentation is made literal, as she sits at a business dinner, staring in disbelief at her detached forearm. In reaction, she does what we are now used to seeing her do when she is in distress: she punctures it, slices through it, which ultimately causes the arm to be reattached, as if the pain confirmed that it was hers. Cutting is explicitly represented as restoring wholeness, although it is unclear whether it ultimately saves Esther. The last images of the film show two of her: one Esther who wakes up in a hotel room, covered in blood from what we assume was last night's session, gets dressed for work, and confidently leaves; then this is followed by a cut back to the same hotel room, except Esther is lying in bed, eyes open and unmoving; in fact, she looks dead. As the camera slowly zooms out counter clockwise, starting from a close up on her eye in what looks like a nod to *Psycho* (1960), there is a dissolve half-way that returns us to the starting close-up, zooming out once more. Then it happens again, as if the film was stuck in a loop. This time, the camera zooms out all the way, until Esther's still body fits in the frame. Then the film ends.

There is, then, no clear-cut ending for Esther. She remains fragmented, both alive and dead, stuck between the urge to look outwards, to her career and personal life, and the compulsion to cut inwards, close to the skin and ever deeper. The ambivalence of this last scene, and the difficulty in making sense of it, reminds us of Esther's reluctance to pathologize and explain her behavior. It is an ending that rejects redemption in this sense: Esther's compulsions can easily be tied to aspects of her life whether professional or personal, as if *In My Skin* dangled a hermeneutic carrot in front of us and in front of other characters (primarily Vincent, who is in many ways a surrogate for the puzzled viewer). Just as she feels compelled to slice and dice herself, we and Vincent are compelled to interpret and order the gore and the scars. When Lowenstein and Chareyron compare Esther's many scars to a "bodily record," they imply that her compulsions produce a semi-textual

document fit to be deciphered and, effectively, redeemed.<sup>163</sup> But as Tarr concludes in her own essay, Esther appears to be neither monster nor victim, and her last, defiant gaze to the camera, either a living gaze calling for empathy, or a dead gaze empty of meaning, seems a warning against facile readings.

What remains is a shattered character, who never demonstrates understanding, or interest in understanding, her self-destructive behavior. Surrounding characters, aside from Vincent, also show a peculiar indifference to Esther's well-being, none more so than a pharmacist at the end of the film, whom she consults to inquire about the best method to tan skin. Although bruised and battered (and making no secret of the fact that the skin she wishes to preserve is her own), the man enthusiastically answers her question, and does not show any concern for this odd customer. As Tarr notes, "it is as if society refuses to see and acknowledge either the pressures it exerts on individuals or the reactions of those unable to meet its demands."<sup>164</sup> It is precisely "society," as a damaging amalgamation of systems that has pushed Esther to these extremities, and turned her into a traumatized subject.

Following the harrowing dinner with business associates, Esther isolates herself in a hotel room and gives in to a long session of self-cutting. After chewing on her wrist for some time, she lies on her back and brings her legs up, so her knees are directly above her head. Arranged in this way, she begins to lick and bite a freshly opened wound on her leg, which causes blood to drip on her face and ooze into her eyes. Few images better encapsulate Esther's plight: alone in an impersonal space, obeying a compulsion to probe under the surface of things, to explore and taste

---

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid*, 481.

<sup>164</sup> Tarr, *Ibid*, 90.

what lies beneath, only to have her vision obstructed by base matter. Like the butcher and Ferdinand before her, Esther makes visible normative systems of oppression, but does not offer means of redemption. Instead, because the extremity of her reaction demands deciphering from others, she indirectly invites a consideration of those normative systems *as* traumatogenic. This is perhaps what could reconcile Esther's happy-go-lucky attitude, and Vincent's alarm, at these gruesome cuts: that "normal" and "trauma" may not always be oxymoronic.

In the recent edited collection *Unwatchable*, which garners a host of short-form pieces on the meaning of the eponymous word, Jack Halberstam's contribution has some unexpected ties to my discussion of *I Stand Alone* and *In My Skin*. Writing an impassioned diatribe against the critically acclaimed *Manchester by the Sea* (Kenneth Lonergan, 2016), he especially takes issue with what he identifies as the narrative's urging of the audience to empathize with the main character, a mediocre "white man behaving sadly."<sup>165</sup> Although Halberstam's rejection of spectatorial empathy towards him is meant as an ideological criticism against a film (and for him, a culture) that too easily forgives repentant white men, I would argue that *In My Skin* and *I Stand Alone* actively discourage empathy for their main characters. Esther's dilemma may indeed be "relatable," as Lowenstein argues, but her deflection of Vincent's concerns, and her explicit refusal to pathologize or even explain her cutting, strongly suggest that she looks for neither pity nor empathy – at most does she ask for witnessing. As for the butcher, he may be a victim of what is (self) destructive in white masculinity, but he is also, emphatically and repeatedly, an agent, disarming in the process any sustained empathy for him.

---

<sup>165</sup> Jack Halberstam, "White Men Behaving Sadly," in *Unwatchable*, eds. Nicholas Baer, Maggie Hennefeld, Laura Horak and Gunnar Iversen (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018), 274-280.

This rejection of empathy is where de Van and Noé seem to part ways with Céline, even though they have inherited his opaque materialism. For all its pessimism, *Death on the Installment Plan* relentlessly portrays Ferdinand as a victim, something that Noé and de Van's films actively rebuff. Furthermore, Ferdinand's victimhood becomes all the more salient when one considers the fact that his story is largely inspired from Céline's own life, a writer who would later raise a few eyebrows by incessantly presenting himself as the victim of a vast conspiracy. Instead, Noé and de Van's repudiation of empathy decenters the focus of their films on suffering individuals, to leave more room for the systems that oppress them. No one is expected to care for the butcher, and Esther is certainly not looking for understanding, let alone for pity. After all, the fact that both films end with a symbolic return to sameness (in incest for the butcher; in the nurturing of her own preserved slice of skin for Esther) signals characters who have no interest in the comfort of others, especially not of spectators. But by diverting attention away from themselves – something Céline was never capable of doing – it becomes clear that *In My Skin* and *I Stand Alone* are not just about traumatized characters, but about traumatogenic systems.

## 5.0 Michael Haneke's Ethics of Uncertainty in *Caché*

In this chapter, I turn to one of the more restrained examples of extreme cinemas, *Caché* (2005), shot in French by the Austrian director Michael Haneke. Like *I Stand Alone* and *In My Skin*, *Caché* - as its title suggests - pays attention to what is opaque in trauma, especially the historical trauma of the massacre, on October 17 1961, of over 200 Algerian demonstrators in the streets of Paris at the hands of the French police. Rather than attempting to shed light or reconstruct what has remained a notorious and embarrassing blindspot in recent French history, the plot of *Caché* remains largely indeterminate and even strongly implies, like Céline, that history is opaque. Unlike Céline, however, I argue that what I call Haneke's ethics of uncertainty invite a constant and endless critical probing of what is opaque in the traumatic past.

On September 21, 1991, former center-right French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing expressed controversial views on (North African) immigration in the conservative newspaper *Figaro-Magazine*, saying that "the kind of problem we are facing is changing from one of immigration... towards one of invasion"<sup>166</sup>, and arguing that French citizenship should only be granted on the basis of the "right by blood" (i.e. parents of a child born in France need to be French) rather than the "right by soil" (i.e. children born on French soil are eligible for French citizenship). He was harshly criticized, on the right as much as the left, for employing incendiary rhetoric in a thinly veiled attempt to court the extreme-right voter base ahead of the looming elections. Nearly thirty years later, at the "*Convention de la droite*" ["Convention of the Right"] on September 28,

---

<sup>166</sup> Sharon Waxman, "France Debates Immigration Rules After Ex-Leader Warns of 'Invasion'," *Chicago Tribune*, September 29, 1991, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1991-09-29-9103140174-story.html>

2019, infamous extreme-right public speaker Éric Zemmour warned, amid nationalist and Islamophobic comments, of a “reverse colonization” that seeks to prey on France’s “Judeo-Christian traditions.”

These two public expressions of immigration anxiety in France are not isolated incidents. They are merely notorious examples of a rhetoric of exclusion favored by the right, and sometimes by the left, who are quick to blame their woes on the descendants of France’s ex-colonial subjects, and who would go so far as to paint themselves, like Zemmour, the new victims of France’s former crimes, of a “reverse colonization.” Historical perpetrators appropriating the language of their historical victims is nothing new in France, and Zemmour is sadly only the latest iteration. Before him Maurice Papon, as he was tried in 1998 for crimes against humanity for his role in deporting over 1,500 Jews during the Occupation of France, saw fit to compare his “unfair” trial to that of Alfred Dreyfus in the late 19th century.<sup>167</sup> And before him, Louis-Ferdinand Céline wrote abundantly of the Dresden bombing of February 1945 in an effort to paint the Axis powers as the true victims of World War II. Beyond their apparent lack of shame and self-awareness, all of these individuals demonstrate an understanding of history that is perspectivist: there is not one true history, but many, perhaps as many as there are individuals; historical perspectives are numerous, and they can exculpate as surely as they can accuse. The likes of Zemmour would probably think that historical truth exists but needs to be uncovered; Céline would argue that history is opaque, and that there is no point in trying to order it or articulate its truth.

---

<sup>167</sup> Dreyfus was a French-Jewish military officer wrongly accused of treason in 1894. What quickly became known as the “Dreyfus Affair” splintered France for 12 years between those against Dreyfus (*anti-dreyfusards*) and those in his defense (*dreyfusards*). The affair remains notorious for revealing the rampant anti-semitism of late 19th century France. Not coincidentally, Céline’s own father was a vocal *anti-dreyfusard*.

The fact that Zemmour would talk of “reverse colonization,” and Giscard d’Estaing of “invasion,” says as much about their racism as it does about a certain historical anxiety regarding decolonization. The “immigration crisis” that has allegedly been plaguing France since the 1970s economic crisis is selective, and immigrants of European descent are generally not included in the dire warnings of the far-right, who overwhelmingly prefers to target former colonial subjects and their descendants, especially those coming from North and Sub-Saharan Africa. Zemmour’s rhetoric, in addition to riling up nationalist pathos, implies an attitude to memory and the colonial past that is based on unrepentance.<sup>168</sup> The case of Algeria, one of France’s oldest colonies, is often at the forefront of these debates for the grueling war that opposed the two countries from 1954 to 1962, the atrocities of which have been notoriously unrecognized by the French State, until Emmanuel Macron described the actions of France during the war as “crimes against humanity,” in a September 2018 speech.<sup>169</sup> The most infamous of these crimes occurred on October 17, 1961, during a demonstration in Paris of about 30,000 pro-National Liberation Front (FLN) Algerians. Under the orders of then-police chief Maurice Papon - the same Papon who would be tried in 1998 -, the demonstration was violently suppressed, and an estimate of 200 protesters were killed, beaten to death or drowned into the Seine river. Official acknowledgment would not come until 1998, and

---

<sup>168</sup> He joins in this respect other notorious French right-wing thinkers who have argued against apologizing for France’s colonial past. Notable books include Pascal Bruckner, *La Tyrannie de la pénitence: essai sur le masochisme occidental* (Paris: Grasset, 2006) and Daniel Lefeuvre, *Pour en finir avec la repentance coloniale* (Paris: Flammarion, 2006).

<sup>169</sup> In 2012, François Hollande had also made a point of “recognizing” the massacre, although he did not apologize on behalf of the State.

even then, the government would “only” recognize some 40 deaths at the hands of the police, after years of denial and censorship.

This episode, and especially the silence surrounding it, is representative of the traumatic place that the Franco-Algerian war occupies in recent French history, and perhaps to a larger extent, (de)colonization. Memory of the crimes of colonization can indeed often be distorted in French collective consciousness, as the aforementioned intellectuals against repentance demonstrate: the old colonial propaganda about France’s *mission civilisatrice* has endured long after decolonization, under the form of the nebulous and mostly fantasized idea that France may have committed crimes, but it also contributed positively to the development of its former colonies. One needs only talk to many current French conservative voters to appreciate the lasting impact of colonial propaganda, and the scandal surrounding the 2005 French Law on Colonization<sup>170</sup> is ample evidence that the colonial legacy of France is a dark blot in the memory of many.

Voted during Jacques Chirac’s second presidential term, one of the purposes of the law was to mandate that the curriculum of French public schools “recognize in particular the positive contributions of the French presence overseas, especially in North Africa.”<sup>171</sup> This particular sentence, lodged in the middle of an otherwise long legislative text, sparked outrage among historians, politicians on the left, and foreign leaders, who accused the government of historical

---

<sup>170</sup> Officially known as the “*Loi portant reconnaissance de la Nation et contribution nationale en faveur des Français rapatriés*.”

<sup>171</sup> My translation, “*les programmes scolaires reconnaissent en particulier le rôle positif de la présence française outre-mer, notamment en Afrique du Nord (...)*” “La loi du 23 février 2005 : texte et réactions”, *Cahiers d’histoire. Revue d’histoire critique* (2005): 94-95, published online July 1 2009, accessed January 8, 2020, <http://journals.openedition.org/chrhc/1077>



revisionism. Under mounting public pressure, this specific article was removed from the law one year later, officially not on the grounds of historical inaccuracy, but because Chirac determined that “history should not be written by law.” Still, the affair showed plainly that the memory of French colonialism, as far as the State is concerned, is not an uncontested narrative of exploitation and human rights abuse.

Since then, elected presidents like François Hollande or Emmanuel Macron have made a point of at least showing public repentance, during the somewhat perfunctory exercise of acknowledging, in the strongest of terms, France’s responsibility in the Holocaust, and its criminal acts during the Algerian war. These heavily publicized and commented on public speeches, along with the semantic distinctions they imply (such as between “recognizing” guilt and “apologizing” for it) are at the crux of public debates about historical repentance and unrepentance. The logical next step - that the State should offer “reparations” to the relevant communities - is usually floated in the press, although no president so far has agreed to it. Acknowledgments, apologies, reparations: these are all part of the question of whether or not the French State can redeem itself for its perpetration of different historical traumas. They imply that with every apology, every strongly worded condemnation, the French State takes one more step towards “making things right.” Even more so when the offer of reparations is mentioned: suddenly, redemption has the shadow of a price, something that can be measured and quantified, out of historical events so terrible they have been deemed “unrepresentable.”<sup>172</sup>

---

<sup>172</sup> The term is especially prevalent at the intersection of film studies and trauma studies. See Cathy Caruth (ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); E. Ann Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005);

As previously discussed in Chapter 2, the word “redemption” has additional meanings when applied to cinema and literature, and the roles they are or are not fit to play in representing, bearing witness to, or registering trauma. Some French films, like the successful *The Round Up* (Roselyne Bosch, 2010) – a big-budget reconstruction of the infamous 1942 Vel d’Hiv roundup, which resulted in the deportation of 13,000 French Jews – seemed invested in redeeming France, in the literal sense of compensating for past historical faults. By exclusively casting national stars like Jean Reno, Gad Elmaleh or Mélanie Laurent in the roles of either victims or stalwart defenders, and relatively anonymous actors in the roles of the French perpetrators, *The Round Up* enforced, unwittingly or not, the post-war narrative that the true, legitimate, recognizable France was one of justice and resistance, as opposed to the illegitimate, collaborating France of Vichy.

But as we have seen, “redemption” also has a Bersanian, discursive connotation: that in ordering, representing, and making sense of the senseless in art, we may redeem if not the perpetrators, at least the event itself. Different scholars have different ideas of what this might mean. Adam Lowenstein prefers the term “confrontation” to “redemption,” and writes of the possibility of “[survivor] experience shaping our contemporary world.”<sup>173</sup> William Guynn argues that the unique capacities of film to represent historical trauma “may ease, at least fleetingly, the sense of loss we often feel at the utter pastness of the past.”<sup>174</sup> Shoshana Felman – who writes about literature, but whose point applies to film as well – goes so far as to suggest that writers have

---

William Guynn, *Unspeakable Histories: Film and the Experience of Catastrophe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

<sup>173</sup> Adam Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 5.

<sup>174</sup> William Guynn, *Ibid*, 1.

an ethical responsibility to “confront the horror of [our age’s] destructiveness, to attest to the unthinkable disaster of culture’s breakdown and to attempt to assimilate the massive trauma, (...) within some reworked frame of culture or within some revolutionized order of consciousness.”<sup>175</sup> In all these cases, redemption is a promise: that the historical past, in spite of its pastness, can be accessed in/by art in a manner that is fundamentally different from the logical reconstructions of historians. Furthermore, this privileged, artistic access to the historical past offers something “academic” history cannot: “testimony,” “experience,” “meaning” are recurring words that can all be used to describe the promised fruit of redemption.

Louis-Ferdinand Céline, an irredeemable writer himself in every sense of the word, seemed to forgo this promise when he wrote the “Exile Trilogy.” For him, history, as I have shown in Chapter 2, is chaotic and opaque, and neither the historian nor the artist can claim to have any sort of access to it; not even a direct eyewitness like Céline, whose odyssey through derelict Sigmaringen and across bombarded Germany in 1944 could lend him the authority needed to claim the title of chronicler - a title he alternatively honors and ridicules in the trilogy. I have previously discussed to what political ends Céline carried the idea that history is opaque: historical narratives might as well be fiction, and the Holocaust might as well have been a gross exaggeration.

The early 2000s saw an outburst of film productions whose emphasis on violent sensations, narrative and discursive opacity, and blatant confrontation of the spectator, had much in common with Céline’s own style, as I have shown in Chapter 1. The question of whether the opacity of these films presents the same political risks, when applied to historical trauma, as they did in

---

<sup>175</sup> Shoshana Felman, “Camus’ *The Plague*, or A Monument to Witnessing,” in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, eds. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (New York: Routledge, 1992), 114.

Céline's work, has not been discussed much. One reason for this oversight may be one of volume: there are simply not many extreme films that concern themselves with history, as they do with, say, representations of gender and sexuality.<sup>176</sup> Still, a few have deployed their trademark shock tactics to investigate national historical traumas: *Salò* (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1975) and the fall of fascist Italy; *A Serbian Film* (Srdjan Spasojevic, 2010), whose director claimed that the film is “a diary of our own molestation by the Serbian government;”<sup>177</sup> and of course, *I Stand Alone* (Gaspar Noé, 1999), which I discussed at length in the previous chapter. Additionally, a few filmmakers affiliated with the corpus of extreme cinemas, like Michael Haneke or Claire Denis, have elected to adopt in some of their films, if not a saturation of intense sex and violence, at least a relationship to history that is based on suspicion and unknowability. *Caché* and *The White Ribbon* (Michael Haneke, 2005 & 2009 respectively) are two of the best examples in the corpus.

This final chapter will then focus on *Caché*, for its multiplicity of connections with the aforementioned public debates in France, and for its particularly Celinian approach to history and historical trauma. Although Céline and Haneke had different historical concerns - the Holocaust and the defeat of the Axis for the former, the Algerian War and the Paris massacre of 1961 for the

---

<sup>176</sup> The sexual explicitness of extreme cinemas, more than their violence, is arguably what has earned the corpus its “extreme” pedigree. Academic circles have tended to follow suit, and much of the existing scholarship on extreme cinemas adopts the lens of gender and sexuality studies. See especially Linda Williams, *Screening Sex* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Mattias Frey, *Extreme cinema: The Transgressive Rhetoric of Today's Art Film Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016); Troy Bordun, *Genre Trouble and Extreme Cinema: Film Theory at the Fringes of Contemporary Art Cinema* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

<sup>177</sup> Kohn, Eric (15 March 2010). "[A Serbian Film' Shocks Midnight Audiences At SXSW](#)". Blogs.wsj.com. Accessed January 14, 2020

latter – both attend to these concerns from the premise that history is opaque, sometimes even dreamlike. Additionally, both are suspicious of the capacities of art to redeem these opaque spots in history, and both choose to conclude their respective works in ontological uncertainty. To what extent, then, does unknowability serve a different (political) purpose in *Caché* than it does in the Exile Trilogy? How does the narrative of the film reconcile the inaccessibility of historical trauma with the necessity to bring its memory to the fore? And finally, are the ambivalence and ultimate uncertainty of *Caché* a fixture of extreme cinemas, rather than those of an individual auteur?

One day, inexplicably, Georges (Daniel Auteuil) and Anne (Juliette Binoche), a well-off, middle-aged couple living with their son Pierrot (Lester Makedonsky), receive a videotape on their porch. There are no notes or return addresses, and the content of the tape - an hours-long single, still shot of the outside of their home - is unnerving enough that George and Anne's quiet routine has at least been upset. More tapes come regularly, one of them an in-moving-car shot of the country home where Georges grew up. He begins to suspect that the author of the tapes is an Algerian immigrant named Majid (Maurice Bénichou), who spent a few months living with Georges when they were still children, before being taken away by social workers. Stubbornly, he shares none of these suspicions with his increasingly worried wife. After one of the tapes revealed where Majid lived - a modest studio apartment in a housing project in the Parisian *banlieue* - Georges goes to meet him, aggressive, angry, confident in the righteousness of his authority. Majid, a polite, peaceful, if melancholic man, recognizes Georges at once, although he claims he did not expect him, and did not make the tapes. As fissures begin to appear and widen in Georges's professional and personal lives, he is forced to confess to Anne that as a child, unwilling to share his life with another adopted child, he lied to his parents in telling them that Majid decapitated the family rooster to scare him. As a result, Majid was taken away by social services, thereby

condemning him to the difficult life of Algerian children who had been orphaned by the 1961 Paris massacre.<sup>178</sup> On a subsequent visit to Majid's apartment, the latter calmly states, once more, that he had nothing to do with the tapes, and that he wanted Georges to be his witness, before slashing his own throat, as Georges stands dumbfounded. The film ends as Majid's son (Walid Afkir) confronts Georges, who denies his responsibility in Majid's death, but still offers money. The last shot of *Caché* is a long shot of the outside of a high school, where we can see (but not hear) Georges's and Majid's respective sons in a friendly chatter, before going their own ways. We never know for sure who sent the tapes.

*Caché*, and most of Haneke's other films (with the exception of *Funny Games* [1997; 2007] and *The Piano Teacher* [2001]), part ways with the kind of extremism that I have discussed so far, and that most scholarship on the corpus of extreme cinemas has been preoccupied with. Tina Kendall and Tanya Horeck, in one of the first extensive studies on the subject, already felt the need to "differentiate the films of Michael Haneke, which, despite their reputation for brutality, are characterized more by visual restraint than by excessive violence or horror, and the 'self-

---

<sup>178</sup> For bibliographies of literary and cultural representations of the event see, Alison Rice, "Rehearsing October 17: The Role of Fiction in Remembering in the Battle of Paris," *L'Esprit Créateur* 54, no. 4 (2014): 90-102; Lia Brozgal, "In the Absence of the Archive (Paris, October 17, 1961)," *South Central Review* 31, no. 1 (2014): 34-54; Anne Donadey, "Anamnesis and National Reconciliation: Re-membering October 17, 1961," in *Immigrant Narratives in Contemporary France*, eds. Susan Ireland and Patrice J. Proulx (Westport: Greenwood, 2001): 47-56; and Seth Graebner, "Remembering 17 October 1961 and the Novels of Rachid Boudjedra," *Research in African Literatures* 36 (2005): 172-197.

consciously trashy,’ in-your-face sex and violence of a film like *Baise-moi*.”<sup>179</sup> The understated “brutality” of *Caché* (and to a different extent of *The White Ribbon* and *Amour* [2012]) is difficult to pin down on specific scenes or on the idiosyncrasy of Haneke’s formal style, which explains why film scholars like Elena del Río have opted to employ the conceptual fluidity of “affect” to “ground the controversial, shocking effects of [Haneke’s films] less in sensationalist physicality and more on a sustained practice of intensity that already pervades the everyday body and its inherently aberrant movements and affects.”<sup>180</sup> Without disagreeing with del Río on the affective violence of *Caché*, I do not believe that there needs to be a strict differentiation between “sensationalist” extreme films (*I Stand Alone*, *Baise-moi*, *A Serbian Film*...) and “restrained” ones (*Caché*, *Beyond the Hills* [Cristian Mungiu, 2012], *Battle in Heaven* [Carlos Reygadas, 2005]...) All converge on the notion that there is something in experience, in history, in violence and in trauma that cannot be recuperated in representation. And perhaps there lies their common extremism.

That historical trauma is “opaque” or “unrepresentable” is nothing new and has long been a premise for studies on the filmic representations of such catastrophic events as the Holocaust or Hiroshima. Indeed, one cannot write about the intersection of trauma and film studies without wrestling first with crises of representation: whose point of view is represented? Is the authenticity of survivor experience damaged in representation? Does the act of representation betray the memory of trauma, and diminish the experience of survivors? Different artists have used different

---

<sup>179</sup> Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall, introduction to *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 5.

<sup>180</sup> Elena del Río, *The Grace of Destruction: A Vital Ethology of Extreme Cinemas* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 4.

strategies to circumvent these ethical quandaries, but there is a consensus that events of such catastrophic proportions cannot be represented head-on. And sometimes, film and literature can help - better yet, are the only media equipped to - render these events intelligible. For Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier, for example, a key text like *Hiroshima mon amour* (Alain Resnais, 1959) attempts to historicize the bombing of Hiroshima by way of the parallel, fictional accounting of a failed love affair in Nevers. And so, Ropars-Wuilleumier argues, “making history is making a story, by diverting indescribable sights towards a discursive continuity, they become seizable for the subject and can, therefore, be channeled.”<sup>181</sup> The (oblique) function of film therefore becomes to inscribe historical trauma in history, even if it always comes with ethical risks. What this presumes, however, is a belief in history as a stable framework of knowledge that is pre-existing to trauma, and that is narrativizable. If only historical catastrophes could be re-inscribed in this framework, then they would become intelligible.

Céline did away with this premise when writing the Exile trilogy. History is not narrativizable; it is not ordered, and it is not a reliable frame of reference; one should be suspicious of, rather than confident in, historical accounts, especially as they pertain to wars and man-made disasters. Céline’s pastiche of a chronicler-narrator constantly undermines the historical enterprise of ordering and meaning-making. A direct eyewitness, yes, but one who sees talking ghosts as surely as phosphorus bombings; a “chronicler” who on one page might provide an accurate account of the workings of Sigmaringen, but who on another will recount the time when he and his wife

---

<sup>181</sup> Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier, “How History Begets Meaning: Alain Resnais’s *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959),” trans. Susan Hayward, in *French Film: Texts and Contexts*, eds. Susan Hayward and Ginette Vincendeau (New York: Routledge, 1990), 181.



shepherded an unlikely cohort of mentally disabled children all the way to the Danish border. In Céline's disordered history, dreams and apparitions are currencies as valid as archives and testimonies. His rambling writing and narrative styles, filled with digressions and interrupted sentences, mirror his distrust in epistemological structures. The innumerable, iconic ellipses that litter the narration are as many gaps in language and knowledge that the novelist, no more than the historian, will ever be able to fill. Unlike Resnais and Duras in *Hiroshima mon amour*, then, Céline does not presume a pre-existing, stable history. And neither does Haneke in *Caché*.

Released in 2005 to near-universal praise, *Caché* is one of the most written-about films of the century, and already in 2007, Elizabeth Ezra and Jane Sillars commented on the myriad of responses the film generated, observing that "Perhaps [*Caché*] is compelling not because it has a great deal to say [...] but because it elicits an unusually wide range of responses from so many different perspectives."<sup>182</sup> (Ezra 2007, 211). Since then, *Caché* has been featured front and center in monographs and edited collections on Michael Haneke, in academic journals, and has even been the single object of a monograph.<sup>183</sup> Scholars have approached it from a variety of angles, especially those themes that recur in Haneke's cinema, such as surveillance, our relationship to visual media, and the implication of the spectator.<sup>184</sup> More recently, Dawn Fulton has suggested

---

<sup>182</sup> Elizabeth Ezra and Jane Sillars, "Introduction," *Screen* 48, no. 2 (2007), 211.

<sup>183</sup> See Catherine Wheatley, *Caché (Hidden)* (London: Palgrave, 2011).

<sup>184</sup> See, among others, Todd Herzog, "The Banality of Surveillance: Michael Haneke's *Caché* and Life after the End of Privacy," *Modern Austrian Literature* 43, no. 2 (2010): 25-40. On spectator implication in *Caché* see Brian Gibson, "Bearing Witness: The Dardenne Brothers' and Michael Haneke's Implication of the Viewer," *CineAction* 70 (2006): 25-38; Catherine Wheatley, *Caché (Hidden)* (London: Palgrave, 2011), 85-86; Mireille Rosello, *The Reporative in*

that the proliferation of scholarship on *Caché* owes to the film's open-endedness, and its discursive malleability: many critics and scholars who wrote about the film shortly after its release have each argued that *Caché* was unequivocally "about" one thing, whether that thing be immigration anxiety, trauma, surveillance or national and collective guilt. No one could quite agree what the film was about, but all had a strong opinion that it was about *something* in particular, and whatever it was, *Caché* was a brilliant exploration of it.<sup>185</sup>

Haneke himself has endorsed this intellectual malleability in numerous interviews, especially when recounting the genesis of the project. He explained that he was watching a documentary on the Franco-German television channel *Arte* about the October 17 1961 massacre, and was baffled that he had never heard of it until then.<sup>186</sup> And while the massacre serves as an unseen and unspoken narrative driving force in the film, Haneke also insists that his film does not need to be specifically about France, Algeria, or 17 October 1961, but that it can serve as a framework for different national histories. In other words, fortuitous circumstances made him choose this specific event (he was watching a documentary on TV), but he could just as easily have picked another one.<sup>187</sup> This refusal to acknowledge the specificity of the massacre or to give

---

*Narratives: Works of Mourning in Progress* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), 103; Catherine Wheatley, *Michael Haneke's Cinema: The Ethic of the Image* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2009), 78-151.

<sup>185</sup> See Dawn Fulton, "Unknown Knowns: Michael Haneke's *Caché* and the Failure of Allegory," *The Modern Language Review* 114, no. 4 (2019): 682-699.

<sup>186</sup> Interview on the Blu-Ray edition of *Caché*.

<sup>187</sup> Haneke would repeat this rhetorical gesture a few years later with the release of *The White Ribbon*, and explain over and over again that the German context is just a frame, showing that Haneke views his own films as national in context, but transnational in scope and ambition.

it anything more than a passing mention in the narrative earned Haneke and *Caché* some criticism, the most influential of which was probably Paul Gilroy's.<sup>188</sup> Yet as others have argued, the reduction of this particular historical trauma to little more than a narrative device reflects the epistemological paucity surrounding the massacre, since there is still precious little historical information on it.<sup>189</sup> As its title suggests, everything in *Caché* revolves around the scarcity of information: characters know little about each other, and sometimes even about themselves. History, then, is itself a great secret, and few events could better encapsulate this opacity than the brutal repression of 17 October 1961. Does it mean then, as Gilroy suggested, that *Caché* is complicit in the suppression of Arabic voices by focusing on his white, middle-class characters, and turning Majid into little more than narrative and psychological prop? Does Haneke share Céline's dangerous fatalism about the opacity of history and historical trauma? Or is there something in the opacity of *Caché* that is more productive, more critical than Céline's impotent posture?

The peculiar promise of *Caché* is that critical introspection is necessary, and even ethical, but it is not conducive to knowledge. In fact, it perpetuates itself: Georges's selfish (and self-) investigation only leads to obscurity. To put it into psychoanalytical terms, as Dominick LaCapra did in his seminal works on representing trauma: *Caché* is invested neither in "acting out" trauma

---

<sup>188</sup> Paul Gilroy, "Shooting crabs in a barrel," *Screen* 48, no. 2 (2007): 233-235.

<sup>189</sup> Fulton suggests that *Caché* is a failed allegory, and that this failure "is in the end the incriminating sign of the absence of collective epistemology that the film seems to exacerbate with its dismissive reference to the event," *Ibid.*, 698. Lia Brozgal coined the term "anarchive" to refer to the idea that fictional texts referring to the 1961 massacre constitute an unofficial epistemological field filling the gap left by the absence of an official archive. See Brozgal, *Ibid.*

– the compulsive and symptomatic re-enactment of the traumatic event that does not lead to healing  
– nor in “working through” trauma – the critical confrontation of trauma that is necessary to healing.<sup>190</sup> Rather, in the case of the October massacre, working through trauma is an ethically fraught proposition, since healing is so closely adjacent to absolving (or redeeming). Instead, *Caché* initiates a working through without end: a perpetual process of confronting trauma, and of probing the opacity of history, not in the hopes of coming to terms with it or understanding it, but as an ethical, if fruitless, imperative.<sup>191</sup>

On the surface, the narrative of *Caché* does lend itself well to an allegorical reading of the trauma of October 1961, as a thematic symmetry seems to emerge between the guilt of six-year-old Georges for his lies against Majid, and the collective guilt of France for the 1961 massacre. Georges’s relationship to this particular memory seems to be traumatic indeed: after receiving the first tapes, memories of the event come back to him in waking dreams. His lifelong silence about this episode, and the fact that he said nothing of it even to his wife, suggests that it was a repressed memory. The denial of Georges’s mother runs even deeper, since she has forgotten about Majid entirely when Georges goes to visit her. And when he is finally forced to confess to Anne, he does so in strangled half-sentences, all the while denying his own responsibility. The tapes themselves act as intrusive memories, wrapped as they are in disturbing children’s drawings depicting a decapitated rooster. Throughout the narrative, invitations to “go deeper” or on the contrary, to stay on the surface, abound: Pierrot, during his swimming lessons, is told sternly by his coach to swim

---

<sup>190</sup> Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

<sup>191</sup> On *Caché*, trauma and memory, see Fulton, *Ibid*; Nancy E. Virtue, “Memory, Trauma, and the French-Algerian War: Michael Haneke’s *Caché*,” *Modern and Contemporary France* 19, no. 3 (2011): 281-296; Guy Austin, “Drawing trauma: visual testimony in *Caché* and *J’ai 8 ans*,” *Screen* 48, no. 4 (2007): 529-537.

deeper; Georges, in the editing room for his literary talk-show, asks his assistant to cut when one of his guests “becomes too theoretical;” the setting of the talk-show itself - arranged to resemble a living-room decorated with rows of fake books - suggests shallow intellectualism, adapted for the needs of a two-dimensional TV screen. Finally, after Majid’s suicide, his son pursues Georges to his workplace to confront him, as if the opened wound of Georges’s childhood could not be closed again.

There is ample room then, if not an outright invitation, to match Georges’s narrative of resurgent guilt and repressed memories with the memory of the 1961 Paris massacre - a single mention of which occurs, by Georges, about half-way through *Caché*. A discourse emerges: the likes of Georges - white, middle-class French citizens - bear a collective responsibility in the past and present oppression of Algerians, a responsibility they refuse to acknowledge, and that threatens to resurface and engulf them.<sup>192</sup> There are problems with this reading. Notably, as Fulton puts it,

While through certain allegorical readings we can argue that the entire film is “about” October 1961, it is equally possible to counter that the film is instead “about” a great many other things, and, with October 1961 reduced to a fortuitous narrative device, problematically *not* about this politically fraught and censored historical event.<sup>193</sup>

---

<sup>192</sup> Many of the aforementioned scholars have extended this reading not just to Algerians, but to former colonial subjects writ-large, based on an altercation between Georges and a black cyclist half-way through the film.

<sup>193</sup> For dismissals of the national-allegory reading, see also Patrick Crowley “When Forgetting is Remembering: Haneke’s *Caché* and the Events of October 17, 1961,” in *On Michael Haneke*, eds. Brian Price and John David Rhodes (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010), 267-279; Peter Brunette, *Michael Haneke* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2010); and Oliver Speck, *Funny Frames: The Filmic Concepts of Michael Haneke* (London: Continuum, 2010).

She echoes in this sense Gilroy's original criticism that the massacre was, in the end, nothing but a narrative prop for Haneke, and Majid, a psychological foil for Georges. Yet there are also plenty of elements in the film that already derail the national-allegory reading. For one thing, as others have already mentioned, drawing a facile equivalence between the petty calculations of a confused little boy, however grave the consequences may be, and the brutal, state-ordered murder of some 200 protesters, is an example of the kind of shallow thinking *Caché* seems to guard us against. Furthermore, the film ends with more unanswered questions than what it started with, and its unresolved whodunnit narrative structure invites deciphering, at the same time as its lack of evidence frustrates any hope of a definitive answer. On the question of "who sent the tapes?," for example, Majid's convincing claims of innocence (as well as his son's), along with the fact that many of these videos were shot from "impossible" positions (either because the camera would have been too close to Georges for him not to notice it, or because they were taken at an angle unsupported by the diegesis), would imply that this is a question that either cannot have an answer, or only a tautological one (Haneke made the tapes).<sup>194</sup> Likewise, Majid's suicide is as shocking as it is perplexing - and yet it remains open to endless interpretations. As for the final shot - a long shot of the crowded steps of Pierrot's school, where Pierrot and Majid's son can be

---

<sup>194</sup> The question of who made the tapes has unsurprisingly been the object of much discussion, all with their own merit. One of the most common interpretations is that Majid's and Georges's sons conspired to make and send the tapes, based on the final shot of the film. However, the fact that the tapes and the drawings accompanying them explicitly referred to episodes of Georges's life known only to him and Majid would imply that this interpretation is incorrect, or at least implausible. Others have claimed the tapes break the fourth wall and are Haneke's; others still have gone so far as to assert that Georges sent them to himself. Either way, this is clearly a question that is meant to remain unanswered.

seen in a brief but friendly chatter - it seems designed to generate more unanswered questions: did Pierrot and Majid's son conspire to make the tapes? If so, does this shot chronologically take place before the start of the film? Or are we simply to infer from their apparent friendliness that the gap separating Georges from Majid was a generational one, which their sons can hopefully bridge?

In addition to all the excellent reasons scholars have given as to why a national-allegory reading does not take in *Caché*, I would argue that the film's own emphasis on uncertainty and unknowability already disarms such readings. The point of *Caché* is less to reveal what is hidden than to recognize and probe hidden-ness. Haneke employs a rhetoric in *Caché* that I would describe as "self-undermining," and Céline made use of a similar strategy in the Exile trilogy. In Chapter 2, I described how Céline, as narrator-chronicler of such momentous historical events as the last hours of the Vichy government or the bombing of 1944 Germany, makes claims to historical authenticity and "truth," before satirizing such claims, sometimes in the same sentence. This rhetorical strategy in the trilogy is part of an overarching discourse on the chaos and opacity of history that is meant to ridicule existing historical accounts of WWII (including the Holocaust), while at the same time serves to lay claim to historical truthfulness in the very disorder (and untruthfulness) of his narration. We can infer two things from this type of contradictory, circular logic: 1) history is narrativizable, however disordered and chaotic such narration needs to be, and 2) attempts to find truth or meaning in narrativized history are doomed to fail. In other words, catastrophically destructive events in the past exist, for Céline, as enormous blindspots bound to remain impenetrable to human understanding. The act of narration in the trilogy can be construed as a performance, and the point of this performance is to witness its own failure.

Albeit in a much more understated style, *Caché* undertakes a similar performance. The whodunnit narrative structure strongly emphasizes an investigative drive to uncover "truth," in the

same way that Céline's proclaimed position as a chronicler is aimed at recounting "truth." But the longer the narration goes on, the more impenetrable the investigation becomes. As Georges's concern over the tapes grows, his dreams are seamlessly edited into an otherwise realistic narrative regime, in the same way that Céline would interrupt his realistic descriptions with accounts of ghosts and apparitions. At first, Georges's dreams are easily identifiable as such. Images of a young boy coughing, his mouth covered in blood, are inserted with no context between shots of Georges going to bed and waking up. But as we learn about Georges's past and the context of these disturbing images, the difference between dreams and memories grows thinner. Eventually, at the very end of *Caché* and after Georges has taken sleeping pills, the film cuts to an extreme long shot of the house we can now recognize as Georges's childhood home. In the background, a young, distressed Majid is being restrained and forcefully pushed into a car by social workers, after attempting to run away. The position of the shot in the narrative (after Georges has gone to bed) would suggest, like other shots before it, that this is one of Georges's dreams. Yet its composition differs significantly from other "dream" shots, which relied on close-ups, shocking images of gushing blood and, in one of them, young Majid walking menacingly towards the camera itself. Instead, the composition of this last "dream" more closely resembles that of the tapes, especially the very first one (a long, static shot of the outside of Georges's apartment).<sup>195</sup> The camera is static and far from the action; unlike the other dreams, this one bares all pretense of sensationalism. Yet the line between dream and memory, between fantasy and truth, remains blurred, as suggested by

---

<sup>195</sup> Elizabeth Ezra and Jane Sillars judiciously pointed out that the soundtracks on both shots are identical, save for Majid's screams in the later one, as if to suggest that the Arabic voices of the past have been suppressed in the present. See Elizabeth Ezra and Jane Sillars, "*Hidden in plain sight: bringing terror home*," *Screen* 48, no.2 (2007): 215-221.



the preceding scene of Georges going to sleep. After closing heavy curtains on a room with black walls, Georges plunges himself into near-total darkness, as if he craved obscurity rather than clarity.

*Caché* is therefore structured to produce a narrative and epistemological impasse, and to draw attention to the very fallibility of narration and memory in helping to understand trauma. Majid's suicide serves as the coda of this failure: an act of gratuitous violence made all the more incomprehensible that Majid's last words to Georges are that he did not send the tapes. Failing to grasp the reasons behind Majid's suicide does not preclude explanations: only that whatever explanations there may be, they remain permanently out of Georges's reach, who in this case occupies the surrogate position of a perplexed spectator.<sup>196</sup> Like Céline in the trilogy, *Caché* maintains a relationship to truth and its uncovering that is largely performative, and succeeds only in making salient the opacity of the trauma of 17 October 1961. Unlike Céline's novels, however, Haneke's film is didactic: it encourages reflection, where Céline was content to stop at satire and fatalism.

The greatest difference between *Caché* and Céline's novels is in their styles. Céline's narration is vociferous, rambling, and seemingly unstructured - although Céline was a notoriously meticulous writer, and available drafts of his writing show that the apparent disorder of the narration was carefully prepared. In other words, Céline's at times confusing narration was part of an apparatus of opacity that we can recognize in recent extreme films, such as *I Stand Alone* or *La Vie Nouvelle* (Philippe Grandrieux, 2002). On the contrary, *Caché* is formally restrained and

---

<sup>196</sup> The camera angle in this scene is the same as in the video tape recording of Georges's first visit, suggesting that Majid's suicide was also caught on tape, and this is what we are watching.

equally meticulous, only Haneke does not hide his meticulousness behind a wall of unhinged exclamations. Rather, *Caché* wears its understated control on its sleeves: shots are usually static and carefully composed. The narration follows a mostly linear trajectory along a singular temporality. As in Georges's own life, the tapes are the only inexplicable elements in an otherwise carefully curated existence, just as Georges exerts conscientious control over the editing of his literary talk-show.

The tapes practice what could be called a pedagogy of remembering. At first, they are simply still shots of the Laurents' apartment - for all we know, they could be targeted at Georges, Anne, or even Pierrot. Soon however, they arrive wrapped in children's drawings - a head of a boy coughing blood, a decapitated rooster - that only Georges half-recognizes. This is when he begins to remember, albeit in the blur and uncertainty of dreams. The next tape is taken from a moving car, passing by Georges's old childhood home, as if to guide him down a specific site of memory; the next one still, again inside a moving car, takes the viewers - Georges and Anne - to Majid's front door, which will move Georges to visit him and set the rest of the narrative (and of his memories) into motion. The tapes are, in this sense, holding Georges's hand down the path of his memories. It is no coincidence that his recollection is spurred by video tapes, whose very purpose is both to preserve the past and to reignite memories of it at a later date. Later, when Majid commits suicide in front of a camera that could very well be recording, the tapes become the surrogate witnesses of a killing that, forty years prior, was left tragically bereft of witnessing or recording of any kind.<sup>197</sup> Because he followed the tapes, Georges was guided towards remembering, an act of

---

<sup>197</sup> As Fulton observes, tapes are also a reminder of the omnipresence of surveillance technology at the time of the film, and the absence of said technology at the time of the October 1961 massacre.

recollection that ultimately turned into an act of pure witnessing. Majid's last words – "I wanted you to be here" – tie the knot uniting remembering and witnessing commonly found in survivors of disasters.<sup>198</sup>

Yet Georges is not a survivor, nor is he quite a perpetrator, nor does he understand what he is a witness of. He occupies an uncertain ontological position, just as the ontology of the tapes is uncertain. There is the peculiarity of *Caché*: that its minute didacticism seems to eventually fizzle out, and to arrive at a conclusion that is not too different from Céline's in the exile trilogy – memories and testimonies of disasters are impenetrable to understanding. Georges's long-winded scavenger hunt comes at an impasse. *Caché* shows no small amount of self-aware irony when Georges is seen coming out of a movie theater after Majid's suicide, dazed and none the wiser, as if his first reaction had been to turn to the moving image to help him process what he had just witnessed.

*Caché*'s apparently fruitless didacticism is part of what Thomas Elsaesser has called an "epistemological fallacy," that is, "the often implicit assumption that the cinema is capable of making valid truth claims, while explicitly criticizing most films [...] for failing to come up to these standards." Underneath this initial assumption, Elsaesser writes, is another one in Haneke's cinema "constantly asserted but also constantly put into question: namely, that the cinema can be a vehicle

---

<sup>198</sup> Claude Lanzmann's monumental *Shoah* (1985) is largely invested in representing this very process in the context of the Holocaust. On the specific connection between remembering and witnessing, see Dori Laub, "Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 61-75.

for secure, grounded knowledge if only it is used the ‘right’ way.”<sup>199</sup> This double gesture of asserting and questioning cinema’s capacity for producing knowledge aligns with Céline’s cycles of claiming and undermining authority. The didactic form of *Caché* would indeed suggest that cinema can be a “vehicle for secure, grounded knowledge” - and as a literary talk-show host and avid consumer of TV news, Georges would probably share such confidence in the moving image. His going to the movie theater after Majid’s suicide is further proof of his faith in cinema’s capacity for what is clearly a process of redemption - ordering and making sense of catastrophic experience. But no such ordering occurs. And like the butcher in *I Stand Alone* and Esther in *In My Skin*, some of the last images we see of Georges feature a regressive return to sameness: in the middle of the day, having swallowed sleeping pills and closed the heavy curtains in his bedroom, Georges completely undresses in the dark and, naked as a newborn, crawls inside his bed and curls up in a foetal position. In the face of something that overwhelms him, and that he cannot hope to understand or control - that he cannot even identify or articulate as a trauma – Georges seeks the opposite of knowledge: oblivion and non-consciousness, enshrined in an opaque bedroom. The cinema, for us no more than for Georges, proves an unreliable “vehicle for secure, grounded knowledge.” What is the point, then, of *Caché*’s didacticism, if it leads to an epistemological impasse? Does this final bow to opacity make Haneke no better than Céline - an obsessive formalist with a fatalistic attitude to history? If *Caché* is so suspicious of knowledge and truth, how can we explain the deluge of scholarship about the film? Can a film that generated such an immense volume of scholarly discourses really be hostile to the production of knowledge?

---

<sup>199</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, “Performative Self-Contradictions: Michael Haneke’s Mind Games” in *A Companion to Michael Haneke*, ed. Roy Grundmann (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 56.

I would argue there are three ways to answer these questions. First, in enacting a sabotage of its didactic processes, *Caché* dodges the risky promise of redemption, as I have discussed in previous chapters. This is partly related to the specificity of the trauma of 17 October 1961, and the relative lack of available information about it. As Fulton concludes in her own article, “narrative cinema may have a unique potential to rehabilitate historical trauma through the use of allegory, but it cannot do so in the face of events whose archival trace is indeterminate.”<sup>200</sup> The final indeterminacy of *Caché* is precisely what safeguards it from the risk of shrinking, in the words of Leo Bersani, “the catastrophes of history.”<sup>201</sup> This indeterminacy also reflects and demonstrates the particular epistemological blindspots surrounding the Paris massacre. This is, once again, a position that is surprisingly close to Céline’s understanding of history as chaotic and disordered, and to his claim that art that takes history as its object should therefore espouse its impenetrability.

Second, in making understanding an impossible goal for his protagonist and for the audience, I would argue that *Caché* adopts an ethical position similar to Claude Lanzmann’s, who famously spoke of the “obscenity” of understanding, or trying to understand, the causes of the Holocaust.<sup>202</sup> Lanzmann made this statement in the context of his appearance before the Western New England Institute for Psychoanalysis (WNEIPA) in April 1990, where he was invited to speak about *Shoah* as well as a short film on the Nazi doctor Eduard Wirths. Having seen the film in private, he then opposed its showing to the audience, on the grounds that, in his view, the film was

---

<sup>200</sup> Fulton, *Ibid*, 698.

<sup>201</sup> Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 4.

<sup>202</sup> See Claude Lanzmann, “The Obscenity of Understanding: An Evening with Claude Lanzmann,” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 200-219.

attempting to bridge a gap between Wirths's unthinkable crimes and past evidence of his humanity - images of his childhood, testimonies of friends who knew him, etc.<sup>203</sup> More specifically, Lanzmann referred to other attempts at "understanding" Nazi perpetrators by showing them "talk very much about their parents, about their childhood, about their schooltime. And there is a gap, and they know perfectly well that they cannot bridge it. [...] It would become obscene to try, precisely, to bridge it."<sup>204</sup> While Lanzmann calls obscene the promise to understand the actions of perpetrators - whatever such understanding may entail - I would argue that Haneke renders obscene the promise that Georges may understand Majid. Although Georges was obviously not directly affiliated with the October 1961 massacre, nor was Majid one of its immediate victims, what unites them is a simulacrum of a relationship between perpetrator and victim. And although most of the narrative unfolds from Georges's point of view, it is telling that neither Majid nor his son, at any point, seem to make a plea for Georges's understanding. Indeed, attempting to bridge this particular gap, when Georges has already spent his life enjoying the comforts of the upper middle-class, and Majid has lived a life of hardships, may be just as obscene. Instead, we might consider the final shot of what looks like complicity between Majid's son and Pierrot as an attempt at compensating for this unbridgeable gap - though it might also offer nothing more than what Alex Lykidis called a "utopian longing."<sup>205</sup> The opacity of *Caché* can then be read as part of an ethical

---

<sup>203</sup> Several members of the audience who had come that evening to watch the short film were displeased with Lanzmann's one-sided decision not to show the film, arguing that they would have liked to make up their own mind about it.

<sup>204</sup> Lanzmann, *Ibid*, 213.

<sup>205</sup> Alex Lykidis, "Multicultural Encounters in Haneke's French-Language Cinema," in *A Companion to Michael Haneke*, ed. Roy Grundmann (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 469.

gesture to deny its main character a redemption that so heavily depends on his understanding. That is not to say that Georges should have shown more remorse or empathy; rather, what is obscene is the thought that Majid's trauma, and the Paris massacre, could be accessible by whatever remorse and empathy the likes of Georges can muster.

Finally, the indeterminacy of *Caché* makes clear the ethical risks that the act of remembering can entail. Writing in the context of the national remembering of the Hiroshima bombing in Japan, Lisa Yoneyama holds that "practices of remembering, reinscribing and retelling memories of the past [risk] reestablishing yet another regime of totality, stability, confidence, and universal truthfulness." As well-respected members of the Parisian intelligentsia (Anne works in a publishing company), and as avid consumers of TV news reports (reports of global conflicts are usually on in the background of their living-room), the promise that a "total, stable, confident and universal truthfulness" exists and is accessible to them, however superficially, forms the backbone of their personal and professional lives. And as we have seen, Georges's reluctance to probe beneath the surface of knowledge (as best exemplified in the editing room of his talk-show) shows his disinterest in processes of knowledge-production that would remain self-critical. In other words, Georges has grown accustomed to, even built his career on, the notion that knowledge is permanent and unchanging, and ideally should even be entertaining. In this respect, *Caché* is the opposite of Georges's talk-show: long, austere, and invested in making a mystery thicker rather than unraveling it, Haneke's film construes the act of remembering historical trauma as a critical process, rather than a means to a clarifying end.

This is where *Caché*'s didacticism shows its purpose, and separates Haneke from Céline most conclusively. The uncertainty of Céline's narration is always a little self-serving and exonerating, since Céline was at the very least an indirect collaborator to the Holocaust, and a

vocal Nazi sympathizer. His rejection of a “regime of totality, stability, confidence and universal truthfulness” had less to do with intellectual rigor and honesty than with his selfish interest in arguing that history is opaque. The chaotic, disjointed style of his narration is part of a project of blurring the truth, in part because he is rightly suspicious of national narratives (and post-war France was especially guilty of formulating its own national “truth”), but especially because any critical interrogation of the past would be indicting.<sup>206</sup> By contrast, *Caché* mobilizes opacity (of history and of its narrative) as a starting point for processes of critical investigations that can only be positive, and the proliferation of scholarship about the film since its launch is evidence of its success. The ultimate opacity of Majid’s suicide, of who sent the tapes, and of the Paris massacre, is not an obstacle: it is an invitation to constantly probe the surface of painful (national) memories, and to remain suspicious of claims of total truthfulness, in what I would call an ethics of uncertainty.

The indeterminacy of *Caché* therefore offers a model of remembering that addresses Yoneyama’s concerns, as well as official, public acknowledgements of past national faults. The momentous pronouncements of Jacques Chirac about Vichy, of François Hollande about the Paris massacre, and of Emmanuel Macron about colonization, albeit important, nonetheless run the risk of replacing one regime of truth for another, supposedly less vulnerable to critical scrutiny. Acknowledging France’s guilt in these past crimes is after all the first step to ordering an official national history, and as Bersani has argued, ordering and redeeming are closely intertwined processes. *Caché* avoids what is total and final in redemption through its indeterminacy: it is up to

---

<sup>206</sup> Although his formulation of an opaque history has merits, his intentions are ultimately anti-intellectual, and it is no coincidence that he presented himself first and foremost as a stylist.



us - and as mentioned before, *Caché* strongly implicates the audience - to supplement the lack of questions posed by Georges. Indeed, over the course of his confrontations with Majid or with Majid's son, the only questions Georges ever asks are "What do you want? Do you want money?," repeating perhaps the call from former French colonies for financial reparations. Such a financial transaction would have the appeal of order and certainty - Georges could finally "put this behind him," in the same way that official pronouncements are more intent on cauterizing wounds rather than opening them.

## 6.0 Afterword

In 2017, the *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* published a joint book review, authored by extreme cinema scholar Troy Bordun, for Mattias Frey's *Extreme Cinema: The Transgressive Rhetoric of Today's Art Film Culture* (2016) and Aaron M. Kerner and Jonathan L. Knapp's *Extreme Cinema: Affective Strategies in Transnational Media*.<sup>207</sup> The provocative title of the review, "The End of Extreme Cinema Studies," echoes James Quandt's pronouncement that the New French Extremity ended its short life with Gaspar Noé's *Enter the Void* (2009), since many of the directors initially associated with it (Bruno Dumont, Claire Denis, François Ozon) had since moved on to more respectable and mature endeavors.<sup>208</sup> Unlike Quandt, Bordun is less interested in the presumed end of a production trend than in the scholarly response to it. The "end" he writes about refers to a certain type of aesthetic analysis of extreme cinemas, framed by "unrefined affect theories" and exemplified by Kerner and Knapp, an approach that Frey's empirical research, Bordun suggests, has rendered all but obsolete.<sup>209</sup>

Both Bordun and Quandt are referring to a relatively short bracket in time going roughly from the late 1990s to the late 2000s that saw an abrupt upsurge in the production of graphic arthouse films. These are the films I have referred to in this dissertation as the "sensationalist"

---

<sup>207</sup> Troy Bordun, "The End of Extreme Cinema Studies," *The Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 44, no. 1 (March 2017): 112-136.

<sup>208</sup> James Quandt, "More Moralism from that 'Wordy Fuck'" in Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall, *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013) 209-213.

<sup>209</sup> Bordun, *Ibid*, 133.

extreme films, and they are arguably what gave the corpus its namesake. In this respect only, claiming that extreme cinemas have “ended,” or at least petered out, is a fair claim. However that is also an excessively narrow take on a diverse corpus that goes well beyond viscera and sex, and that certainly did not start in the late 20th century.

For all his abrasiveness, Quandt is one of the few critics - and Frey is another one - who attempted to historicize extreme cinemas by suggesting a lineage of arthouse transgressors (chiefly, for him, Pier Paolo Pasolini and Rainer Werner Fassbinder) the filmmakers of the New French Extremity could not possibly live up to.<sup>210</sup> This historicization is what earned Quandt much of the following criticism because of the admittedly rough comparison it sketched out: Pasolini and Fassbinder were “true” transgressors who did not rely on cheap shock tactics to drive their incisive social commentary, whereas Gaspar Noé and his peers are cynical opportunists out to make a quick buck by shocking the baffled bourgeois and faking profundity.<sup>211</sup> Although the expression “extreme cinema” is relatively new - and owes much to Quandt himself -, what it describes isn’t at all, especially now that the corpus has moved away from focusing exclusively on sensational films. There are obvious predecessors to the aesthetic phenomenon of the New French Extremity, such as *Salò* (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1975) or *In the Realm of the Senses* (Nagisa Oshima, 1976), but if we are now to include pointedly un-spectacular films like *Caché*, *White Material* (Claire Denis, 2009) or *Kinatay* (Brillante Mendoza, 2009) in the corpus, then we must wonder what lineage these new, restrained extreme films are a part of. As the oxymoron “restrained

---

<sup>210</sup> For a convincing embedding of extreme cinemas in the history of avant-garde film, see Nicolaj Lübecker, *The Feel-Bad Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

<sup>211</sup> See Quandt, “Flesh and Blood: Sex and Violence in Recent French Cinema,” in Horeck and Kendall, *Ibid*, 18-26.

extreme” suggests, the phrase “extreme cinemas” may simply no longer be the most appropriate phrase to describe films that, in spite of their myriad formal differences, all converge on their resistance to discourse, certainty and clarity.<sup>212</sup> Furthermore, the most common understanding of what extremity means is heavily dependent on what we consider obscene or shocking at a given time period. It would seem odd now to call a film like the rather mild *Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1931) extreme, yet some of the reactions it garnered at release would certainly suggest that it was extreme to some.

Bordun’s book review suggests that extreme cinemas studies was as short-lived a phenomenon as extreme cinemas themselves, with both scholarship and film production spanning just over a decade. The sensationalist branch of extreme cinemas has certainly not stopped: veterans like Noé and Lars Von Trier still carry the flame with, respectively, *Climax* (2018) and *The House that Jack Built* (2018), two films that perpetuated the honorable tradition of Cannes mass walkouts. Even a mainstream outlet like Netflix has recently produced its own extreme film, *The Perfection* (Richard Shepard, 2018), which boasts of provoking vomiting and generally seems to have been marketed exclusively on its potential to disgust. But as I have argued in this dissertation, such sensationalist films are merely the flagships of extreme cinemas, and are part of an older, if more nebulous, tradition of confrontational arthouse productions. The most significant contribution of extreme cinemas writ-large, then, is to the field of trauma studies, and I would go so far as to claim that difficult, occasionally opaque films like *Hiroshima mon Amour* (Alain

---

<sup>212</sup> In all likelihood, the restriction of the word “extreme” is also what led some scholars like Lübecker to use broader denominations, like “feel-bad films.”

Resnais, 1959) or *Come and See* (Elem Klimov, 1985) belong in the corpus, alongside *Caché* or *White Material*.

Although I believe the tradition of extreme films goes further back than *I Stand Alone* or even *Salò*, the films I have discussed throughout the dissertation still signal an important shift in focus, from the victims and survivors of traumas to the perpetrators, corollaries and systems that allow these traumas to exist. Much of the intersection of cinema, literature and trauma studies has been concerned with issues of representation, of witnessing and of healing; with the promise that film and literature can express what Geoffrey Hartman called “traumatic knowledge” in 1995 and what William Guynn described as “unspeakable histories” twenty years later.<sup>213</sup> Yet such an approach is based on a presumption of pastness: the effects of the traumatic wound may very well encroach onto the present, but there is still a clear temporal and ontological demarcation between cause and effect, between perpetrator and victim. Extreme films like *Caché*, *I Stand Alone* and *In My Skin* make such demarcations more ambiguous, and it is likely that the feelings of discomfort they inflict come from such blurring of the lines. These films a recent critical shift in focus exemplified by Debarati Sanyal, who warns that “the overwhelming focus in the reception of [traumatic] memory can lead to appropriations of stories not our own, [...and] positions us largely as victims of history rather than as potential actors who participate in history’s making in a myriad of ways.”<sup>214</sup> What extreme cinemas show us through their undeniable affective power is that the distinction between “victims of history” and its agents is not always clear-cut.

---

<sup>213</sup> Geoffrey Hartman, “On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies,” *Psyart* 8 (2004); William Guynn, *Unspeakable Histories: Film and the Experience of Catastrophe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

<sup>214</sup> Debarati Sanyal, *Memory and Complicity: Migrations of Holocaust Remembrance* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015) 8.

In *I Stand Alone*, the butcher may ultimately be a victim of the standards of masculinity he subscribes to, and of the effects the historical trauma of the occupation had on said standards. But he is also unambiguously an agent of a particularly oppressive and violent form of patriarchy that has damaged him as much as it has caused him to damage others, including his ex-partner and his daughter. Likewise, *In My Skin* strongly suggests that Esther's compulsions to cut herself are related to the cutthroat competitiveness of the corporate environment she thrives in, as the professional brutality with which she treats those around her is turned tenfold upon her own flesh. Yet as in *I Stand Alone*, Esther is emphatically not (just) a victim, but also the active agent of a destructive social system that can empower as surely as it can traumatize. Empowering and wounding, in fact, are one and the same thing here. As for *Caché*, the controversial but deliberate decision to focus on Georges rather than Majid, on the descendant of executioners rather than that of victims, is what gives the film its critical edge. For the specific case of 17 October 1961, healing and understanding trauma are ethically fraught propositions, as a punctual, traumatic event transforms into a damaging national narrative of denial and repressed guilt.

These shifts align with Jeffrey Alexander's recent and provocative argument about what is collective and socially constructed in trauma.<sup>215</sup> These films do not suggest that trauma is not a real condition, or that it has become a rhetorical, theoretical, or even an aesthetic construct. Instead, they address the ways in which historical trauma can transform over time into damaging social and national narratives, whose victims are also often their own perpetrators. Such confusion of roles is arguably what causes these damaging systems and narratives to be ongoing and self-perpetuating, making the distinctions between trauma and post-trauma, and between wound and healing, harder

---

<sup>215</sup> Jeffrey Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012).

to grasp. It also emphasizes what is always political in the daunting task of representing trauma: in addition to epitomizing crises of representation, attempts to represent 17 October 1961 and acts of French collaboration during World War II will always be political to the highest degree, as ostentatious acts of ritual apology continue to punctuate the terms of one French president after the next since 1995.

Céline seems a fitting precursor to this new understanding of trauma. A victim of World War I himself turned abject persecutor later on, a vocal defender of psychoanalysis and keen observer of the mental damage that material conditions can cause, his novels anticipated much of what extreme films would later accomplish. Chief among them is the single-minded belief that narrative arts can testify to the catastrophes of experience and history, as the subject matter of his novels consistently shows. He also demonstrated all too convincingly what is political in such representations, however deplorable his intentions might have been. Between the confrontational, almost tyrannical relationship he creates with his reader, and his proclaimed intention to make them the hostage of his style, Céline anticipated a connection between trauma and narrative that privileges hurting, rather than healing. Extreme cinemas inherited this approach and adapted it for their own aesthetic, political and social purposes, with varying degrees of success.

## Bibliography

- Adorno, Theodor. *Notes to Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.
- Alexander, Jeffrey C.. *Trauma: A Social Theory*. Cambridge: Polity, 2012.
- . “Towards a Cultural Theory of Trauma.” In *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander, 1-30. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.
- Alméras, Philippe. *Sur Céline*. Versailles: Éditions de Paris, 2008.
- Alphant, Marianne. “Entretien avec Nathalie Sarraute.” *Libération*, September 28, 1989.
- Andrew, Dudley. *The Major Film Theories: An Introduction*. London: Oxford University Press, 1976.
- Artaud, Antonin. *The Theater and its Double*. Translated by M.C. Richards. New York: Grove Press, 1958.
- Austin, Guy. “Drawing Trauma: Visual Testimony in *Caché* and *J’ai 8 ans*.” *Screen* 48, no. 4 (2007): 529-537.
- Bataille, Georges. *Eroticism*. Translated by Mary Dalwood. New York: M. Boyars, 1987).
- . *Œuvres Complètes V*. Paris: Gallimard, 1973.
- . “The Big Toe.” In *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, edited by Allan Stoekl, 20-24. Translated by Mary Dalwood. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985.
- Bellosta, Marie-Christine. *Céline, ou l’art de la contradiction: Lecture de Voyage au bout de la nuit*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1990.
- Bersani, Leo. *The Culture of Redemption*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990.
- Best, Victoria and Martin Crowley. *The New Pornographies: Explicit Sex in Recent French Fiction and Film*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012.
- Beugnet, Martine. *Cinema and Sensation: French Film and the Art of Transgression*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007.
- Blondiaux, Isabelle. “A Critical or a Clinical Case?” Translated by Dory O’Brien and Rosemarie Scullion. In *Céline and the Politics of Difference*, edited by Rosemarie Scullion, Phillip H. Solomon and Thomas C. Spear, 13-28. Hanover: University Press of New England, 1995.



- Bordun, Troy. "The End of Extreme Cinema Studies." *The Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 44, no. 1 (2013): 112-136.
- . *Genre Trouble and Extreme Cinema: Film Theory at the Fringes of Contemporary Art Cinema*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.
- Brinkema, Eugenie. "Rape and the Rectum: Bersani, Deleuze, Noé." *Camera Obscura: A Journal of Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 20, no. 1 (2005): 33-57.
- Brozgal, Lia. "In the Absence of the Archive (Paris, October 17, 1961)." *South Central Review* 31, no. 1 (2014): 34-54.
- Bruckner, Pascal. *La Tyrannie de la pénitence: Essai sur le masochisme occidental*. Paris: Grasset, 2006.
- Brunette, Peter. *Michael Haneke*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2010.
- Butler, Judith. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* New York: Routledge, 1993.
- Canby, Vincent. "Film Festival: 'Salo' is Disturbing..." *The New York Times*, October 1, 1977. <https://www.nytimes.com/1977/10/01/archives/film-festival-salo-is-disturbing.html>
- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.
- Caruth, Cathy, ed. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.
- Céline, Louis-Ferdinand. *Textes et documents I*. Paris: Bibliothèque L-F Céline de l'Université Paris 7, 1979.
- . *Romans I*. Paris: Gallimard, 1981.
- . *Romans II*. Paris: Gallimard, 1981.
- . *Entretiens avec le Professeur Y*. Paris: Gallimard, 1955.
- . *Bagatelles pour un massacre*. Paris: Denoël, 1937.
- . *Journey to the End of the Night*. Translated by Ralph Manheim. New York: New Directions, 1983.
- . *Cahiers Céline I*. Paris: Gallimard, 1976.
- Chareyron, Romain. "Horror and the Body: Understanding the Reworking of the Genre in Marina de Van's *Dans ma peau*." *Imaginations: Journal of Cross-Cultural Image Studies* 4, no. 1 (2013): 70-81.

- Coetzee, J. M.. *Elizabeth Costello*. New York: Penguin Books, 2004.
- Conrad, Peter. "Michael Haneke: There's No Easy Way to Say This..." *The Guardian*, November 3, 2012. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2012/nov/04/michael-haneke-amour-director-interview>
- Crowley, Patrick. "When Forgetting is Remembering: Haneke's *Caché* and the Events of October 17, 1961." In *On Michael Haneke*, edited by Brian Price and John David Rhodes, 267-279. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010.
- Dawes, James. *Evil Men*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013.
- Del Río, Elena. *The Grace of Destruction: A Vital Ethology of Extreme Cinemas*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.
- Donadey, Anne. "Anamnesis and the National Reconciliation: Remembering 17 October 1961." In *Immigrant Narratives in Contemporary France*, edited by Susan Ireland and Patrice J. Proulx, 47-56. Westport: Greenwood, 2001.
- Elsaesser, Thomas. "Performative Self-Contradictions: Michael Haneke's Mind Games." In *A Companion to Michael Haneke*, edited by Roy Grundmann, 51-74. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).
- Ezra, Elizabeth and Jane Sillars. "Introduction." *Screen* 48, no. 2 (2007): 211-213.
- . "Hidden in Plain Sight: Bringing Terror Home." *Screen* 48, no. 2 (2007): 215-221.
- Felman, Shoshana. "Camus' *The Plague*, or a Monument to Witnessing." In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, edited by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, 93-120. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Forster, Greg. "Freud, Faulkner, Caruth: Trauma and the Politics of Literary Form." *Narrative* 15, no. 3 (2007): 259-285.
- Frey Mattias. *Extreme Cinema: The Transgressive Rhetoric of Today's Art Film Culture*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016.
- Fulton, Dawn. "Unknown Knowns: Michael Haneke's *Caché* and the Failure of Allegory." *The Modern Language Review* 114, no. 4 (2019): 682-699.
- Gibault, François. *Céline 1894-1932: Le Temps des espérances*. Paris: Mercure de France, 1985.
- . *Céline 1932-1944: Délires et persecutions*. Paris: Mercure de France, 1985.
- . *Céline 1944-1961: Cavalier de l'Apocalypse*. Paris: Mercure de France, 1985.
- Gibson, Brian. "Bearing Witness: The Dardenne Brothers' and Michael Haneke's Implication of the Viewer." *CineAction* 70 (2006): 25-38.

- Gilroy, Paul. "Shooting Crabs in a Barrel." *Screen* 48, no. 2 (2007): 233-235.
- Godard, Henri. *Poétique de Céline*. Paris: Gallimard, 1985.
- Gordon, Bertram M.. *Collaborationism in France during the Second World War*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980.
- Graebner, Seth. "Remembering 17 October 1961 and the Novels of Rachid Boudjedra." *Research in African Literatures* 36 (2005): 172-197.
- Grønstad, Asbjørn. *Screenings the Unwatchable: Spaces of Negation in Post-Millennial Art Cinema*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.
- Guerlac, Suzanne. *Literary Polemics: Bataille, Sartre, Valéry, Breton*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997.
- Guynn, William. *Unspeakable Histories: Film and the Experience of Catastrophe*. New York: Columbia, 2016.
- Hainge, Greg. "A Full Face Bright Red Money Shot: Incision, Wounding and Film Spectatorship in Marina de Van's *Dans ma peau*." *Continuum* 26, no. 4 (2012): 565-577.
- Halberstam, Jack. "White Men Behaving Sadly." In *Unwatchable*, edited by Nicholas Baer, Maggie Hennefeld, Laura Horak and Gunnar Iversen, 274-280. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018.
- Hansen, Miriam Bratu. Introduction to *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality, VII-XLV*. Siegfried Kracauer. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).
- Hartman, Geoffrey. "On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies." *Psyart* 8 (2004).
- Hartmann, Mary. *L'envers de l'histoire contemporaine: Étude de la "Trilogie allemande" de Louis-Ferdinand Céline*. Paris: Société d'études céliniennes, 2006.
- Herzog, Todd. "The Banality of Surveillance: Michael Haneke's *Caché* and Life after the End of Privacy." *Modern Austrian Literature* 43, no. 2 (2010): 25-40.
- Hindus, Milton. *The Crippled Giant: A Bizarre Adventure in Contemporary Letters*. New York: Boar's Head Books, 1950.
- Hobbs, Simon. *Cultivating Extreme Art Cinema: Text, Paratext, and Home Video Culture*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018.
- Horeck, Tanya and Tina Kendall. "Preface." *Cinephile* 8, no. 2 (2012): 6-10.
- . "Introduction." In *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe*, edited by Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall, 1-17. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013.

- Kaplan, E. Ann. *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005.
- Kedward, H. R.. *Occupied France: Collaboration and Resistance, 1940-1944*. New York: Blackwell, 1985.
- Kendall, Tina. "Reframing Bataille: On Tacky Spectatorship in the New European Extremism." In *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe*, edited by Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall, 43-55. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013.
- Kerner, Aaron and Jonathan L. Knapp. *Extreme Cinema: Affective Strategies in Transnational Media*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017.
- Koch, Gertrude. "'Not Yet Accepted Anywhere': Exile, Memory, and Image in Kracauer's Conception of History." *New German Critique* 54 (1991): 95-109.
- Kohn, Eric. "A Serbian Film Shocks Midnight Audiences at SXSW." *The Wall Street Journal*, March 10, 2010. <https://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2010/03/15/a-serbian-film-shocks-midnight-audiences-at-sxsw/>
- Kracauer, Siegfried. *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.
- Krans, Julie, Dörte Janecko and Maarten W. Bos. "Unconscious Thought Reduces Intrusion Development: A Replication and Extension." *Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry* 44, no. 2 (2012): 179-185.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.
- LaCapra, Dominick. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.
- Lanzmann, Claude. "The Obscenity of Understanding: An Evening with Claude Lanzmann." In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, edited by Cathy Caruth, 200-219. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.
- Laub, Dori. "Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle." In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, edited by Cathy Caruth, 61-75. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.
- Lee, Eunah. "Trauma, Excess, and the Aesthetics of Affect: The Extreme Cinemas of Chan-wook Park." *Post Script: Essays in Film and the Humanities* 34, no. 1 (2014): 33-49.
- Lefeuve, Daniel. *Pour en finir avec la repentance coloniale*. Paris: Flammarion, 2006.
- Lowenstein, Adam. *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.

- . “Feminine Horror: The Embodied Surrealism of *In My Skin*.” In *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, edited by Barry Keith Grant, 470-487. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015.
- Lübecker, Nicolaj. *The Feel-Bad Film*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015.
- Lykidis, Alex. “Multicultural Encounters in Haneke’s French-Language Cinema.” In *A Companion to Michael Haneke*, edited by Roy Grundmann, 455-476. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.
- MacKenzie, Scott. “On Watching and Turning Away: Ono’s *Rape*, *Cinéma Direct* Aesthetics and the Genealogy of *Cinéma Brut*.” In *Rape in Art Cinema*, edited by Dominique Russel, 159-170. New York: Continuum, 2010.
- McNair, Brian. *Striptease Culture: Sex, Media, and the Democratization of Desire*. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. *The Ground of the Image*. Translated by Jeff Fort. New York: Fordham University Press, 2005.
- Novick, Peter. *The Resistance Versus Vichy: The Purge of Collaborators in Liberated France*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1968.
- Noys, Benjamin. “Georges Bataille’s Base Materialism.” *Culture Values* 2, no. 4 (1998): 499-517.
- Palmer, Tim. *Brutal Intimacy: Analyzing Contemporary French Cinema*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2011.
- Pardo, Carlos. “Crime, pornographie et mépris du peuple: des films français fascinés par le sordide.” *Le Monde diplomatique*, February 2000, 28. <https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2000/02/PARDO/2096>
- Powell, Anna. *Deleuze and Horror Film*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005.
- Powrie, Phil. “The W/hole and the Abject.” *Paragraph* 26, no. 1/2 (2003): 222-231.
- Quandt, James. “Flesh and Blood: Sex and Violence in Recent French Cinema.” In *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe*, edited by Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall, 18-26. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013.
- . “More Moralism from that Wordy Fuck.” In *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe*, edited by Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall, 209-213. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013.
- Racelle-Latin, Danielle. “Subversion et négativité dans *Voyage au bout de la nuit*.” Doctoral thesis, University of Liège, 1976.

- . “Voyage au bout de la nuit ou l’inauguration d’une poétique argotique.” In *L-F Céline 2: Ecriture et esthétique. La Revue des lettres modernes*, edited by Jean-Pierre Dauphin. Paris: Classiques Garnier. 1976: 53-77.
- Rice, Alison. “Rehearsing October 2017: The Role of Fiction in Remembering the Battle of Paris.” *L’Esprit Créateur* 54, no. 4 (2014): 90-102.
- Richardson, Michael. *Gestures of Testimony: Torture, Trauma, and Affect in Literature*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.
- Ropars-Wuilleumier, Marie-Claire. “How History Begets Meaning: Alain Resnais’s *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959).” Translated by Susan Hayward. In *French Film: Texts and Contexts*, edited by Susan Hayward and Ginette Vincendeau, 173-185. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Rosello, Mireille. *The Reparative in Narratives: Works of Mourning in Progress*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010.
- Roussin, Philippe. *Misère de la littérature, terreur de l’histoire: Céline et la littérature contemporaine*. Paris: Gallimard, 2005.
- Roussio, Henry. *Le syndrome de Vichy: 1944-198-*. Paris: Seuil, 1987.
- Robbe-Grillet, Alain. *Pour un nouveau roman*. Paris: Gallimard, 1963.
- Sanyal, Debarati. *Memory and Complicity: Migrations of Holocaust Remembrance*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2015.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Qu’est-ce que la littérature ?*. Paris: Gallimard, 1948.
- . *Saint-Genet, comédien et martyr*. Paris: Gallimard, 1952.
- Schlüpmann, Heide. “The Subject of Survival: On Kracauer’s Theory of Film.” *New German Critique* 54 (1991): 111-126.
- Scott, Kathleen. “Bearing Witness to the Unbearable: Ethics and the Phallic Gaze in *Irréversible*.” In *Sensational Pleasures in Cinema, Literature and Visual Culture: The Phallic Eye*, edited by Nurit Buchweitz and Gilad Padva, 74-87. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
- Scullion, Rosemarie. “Introduction.” In *Céline and the Politics of Difference*, edited by Rosemarie Scullion, Phillip H. Solomon and Thomas C. Spear, 1-13. Hanover: University Press of New England, 1995.
- Shaviro, Steven. “Come, Come, Georges: Steven Shaviro on Georges Bataille’s *Story of the Eye* and *Ma Mère*.” *Artforum* 43, no. 9 (2005).
- Speck, Oliver. *Funny Frames: The Filmic Concepts of Michael Haneke*. London: Continuum, 2010.

- Tarr, Carrie. "Director's Cuts: The Aesthetics of Self-Harming in Marina de Van's *Dans ma peau*." *Nottingham French Studies* 45, no. 3 (2006): 78-91.
- Taylor, Alison. *Troubled Everyday: The Aesthetics of Violence and the Everyday in European Art Cinema*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017.
- Thornhill, Chris and Ronny Miron. "Karl Jaspers." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta (Spring 2020). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/jaspers/>
- Valéry, Paul. *Degas. Danse. Dessin*. Paris: Gallimard, 1938.
- Virgili, Fabrice. *Shorn Women: Gender and Punishment in Liberation France*. Translated by John Flower. New York: Berg, 2002.
- Virtue, Nancy E.. "Memory, Trauma, and the French-Algerian War: Michael Haneke's *Caché*." *Modern and Contemporary France* 19, no. 3 (2011): 281-296.
- Watts, Phil. "Postmodern Céline." In *Céline and the Politics of Difference*, edited by Rosemarie Scullion, Phillip H. Solomon and Thomas C. Spear, 203-215. Hanover: University Press of New England, 1995.
- . *Allegories of the Purge: How Literature Responded to the Postwar Trials of Writers and Intellectuals in France*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.
- Waxman, Sharon. "France Debates Immigration Rules After Ex-Leader Warns of 'Invasion'." *Chicago Tribune*, September 29, 1991. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1991-09-29-9103140174-story.html>
- Wheatley, Catherine. *Caché (Hidden)*. London: Palgrave, 2011.
- . *Michael Haneke's Cinema: The Ethic of the Image*. Oxford: Berghahn, 2009.
- Williams, James. "His Life to Film: The Extreme Art of Jacques Nolot." *Studies in French Cinema* 9, no. 2 (2009): 177-190.
- Williams, Linda. *Screening Sex*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.
- Wray, John. "Minister of Fear." *The New York Times Magazine*, September 23, 2007. <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/23/magazine/23haneke-t.html?ref=magazine&pagewanted=all>
- "La loi du 23 février 2005: texte et réactions." *Cahiers d'histoire. Revue d'histoire critique* (2005): 94-95. <http://journals.openedition.org/chrhc/1077>