

# MAPPING THE MONSTROUS: WOMEN'S HORRIFIC BODIES IN FRENCH EXTREME FILM<sup>1</sup>

## *CARTOGRAFIANDO LO MONSTRUOSO: LOS TERRORÍFICOS CUERPOS DE LAS MUJERES EN EL NUEVO EXTREMISMO FRANCÉS*

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### **Resumen:**

El Nuevo Extremismo Francés combina el existencialismo con el shock, la hiperviolencia y las transgresiones de los cuerpos de las mujeres. En este artículo argumento que dicho imaginario se entiende mejor como una representación de la violencia que permite acceder al conocimiento mediante la representación de la monstruosidad y el abyecto de la mujer. Examino este fenómeno a través de cuatro películas de la primera ola de dicho movimiento.

**Palabras clave:** mujeres y terror; abyecto; nuevo extremismo

### **Abstract:**

New French extreme cinema combines existentialism with shock, hyper violence, and transgressions of women's bodies. I contend such imagery is best understood as a representation of violence that enables enlightenment in and through the representation of women's monstrosity and abjection. I examine this phenomenon through four films from New French Extremism's inaugural cycle.

**Keywords:** women in horror; abject; extreme cinema

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

While the early 2000's saw the global rise of extreme cinema, France is the film industry primarily associated with what Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall (2011) call new extreme cinema<sup>2</sup>. French extreme cinema draws heavily on the existential

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2 Park Chan-Wook's *Vengeance* trilogy (2002-2005), Lars von Trier's *Dancer in the Dark* (2000), *Dogville* (2003), *Manderlay* (2005), and Michael Haneke's *The Piano Teacher* (2001) and *Caché* (2005) all

questioning embedded into the French New Wave and combines the New Wave's truth-seeking tendencies with an intense focus on corporeality, foregrounding the body and all its iterations. In combining existentialism with body horror,<sup>3</sup> French extreme cinema is predicated on a multi-genre foundation, importing "codes and conventions of exploitation films—including pornography and horror—within the confines of a philosophically inflected art house cinema" (Horeck and Kendall, 2011: 8). Resultingly, French extreme cinema emerges out of a dialectic within marginal filmmaking modalities, juxtaposing high-art intellectualism and low-culture body horror.

It is precisely this hybridization of cultural variants that makes these films fruitful sites for theoretical and filmic examination around the space women's bodies occupy on screen beyond prefatory analysis of representation. This is expressly due to the fact that the films of French extremism, loosely grouped as a movement, manipulate normative notions of gender, sexuality, and the physical body on aesthetic, thematic, ideological, and physical levels. As Chelsea Birks notes:

These types of films depict bodies in extreme moments of pleasure and pain: bodies in these films scream, ejaculate, bleed and cry; they are stripped, raped, cut, dismembered and fucked. The vulnerability of our material existence is violently exposed through the extreme treatment of bodies onscreen, and also through the visceral reactions provoked in the spectator by such challenge subject matter (Birks, 2015: 132).

Unsaid here is that it is chiefly women's bodies that endure the pleasure and pains Birks recounts. Women's bodies appear degraded, powerless, and assaulted. While this superficially implies misogynistic degradation, I contend such imagery is not best analyzed as violence toward women, but rather as an ideological construction of violence through women's monstrous abject bodies wielded as patriarchal tools in service of metaphysical enlightenment. My critique, then, is not of the violence itself, but of the assumed value in the reproduction of enlightenment telos at the expense of women's corporeality and subjectivity. In our contemporary global moment, where women are subject to heinous regulations of their reproductive and other health rights, hypersexualizing and assault has reached the highest levels of government, and misogynistic trolling and revenge pornography rapidly rises, how women's bodies are used as contested sites of battles for reason, rationality, and philosophical enlightenment matters tremendously.

To articulate how French extreme film construct women's abject monstrosity as a site of enlightenment, I examine how reason and rationality is manifested through the construction of women's bodies as abject monstrous space. My texts

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serve as global examples.

3 Body horror, also called bio horror, is a subgenre of horror films that ascended in the 1980s. Body horror films are intimately concerned with biological and physical change and the implications of that change on the dissolution of the human body. Narratively and thematically, many body horror films are concerned with fear of rapidly evolving technologies; fear of the unstoppable human body; disease and illness; and the precarity of modern civilization in the face of base biological imperatives. Examples of body horror include *The Thing* (John Carpenter, 1982), *The Fly* (David Cronenberg, 1986), and *Aliens* (James Cameron, 1986).

include *Irreversible* (Gasper Noè, 2002), *Inside/À l'intérieur* (Alexandre Bustillo, 2007), *Frontier(s)/Frontière(s)* (Xavier Gens, 2007), and *Martyrs* (Pascal Laugier, 2008). I've chosen these films as my object of study because they are, in part, the germinal films that helped to solidify extreme French film as a contemporary movement and are born from the milieu of the particular brand of extremist films in the early years of the new millennium<sup>4</sup>. Importantly, they all also center women's monstrosity and suffering as tool for enlightenment in distinct ways. To begin, I review French extreme film, focusing on style, thematics, and historical congruity. I then move to theorizing women's abject monstrosity as problem and solution to an enlightenment telos and follow with an analysis of the films as a site of praxis for ideas about women's bodies, monstrosity, and abjection.

## 2. EXTREME TENDENCIES

Critic James Quandt (2004) introduced the term French New Extremity when reflecting on a new cadre of films emerging from the country. Quandt's essay sparked debate around the classification and terminology; while the films have been called by various names, the phrase 'new extremism,' adapted from Quandt's new extremity, has gained widespread usage. Indeed, a 2007 encyclopedic entry in the canonical *The Cinema Book* used the term when describing the films. Despite this codification, extreme cinema is not new. As Horeck and Kendall (2011: 5-6) note, "The term new extremism, then, reflects this bridging position between newness and indebtedness to the past, to a history of transgression and provocation that is renewed and given a visceral immediacy for the present." In his book *Brutal Intimacy*, Tim Palmer (2011) argues for considering the past and present of extreme cinema holistically, moving past the 'new' as an identifier, and instead positing the term 'cinéma du corps'<sup>5</sup> to engage the positionality of the films across a continuum of French cinematic history.

Regardless of terminology, historicizing these films is paramount. As Martine Beugnet (2011) argues, to think of new extremism outside of the context of filmic history negates the historical place of the extreme in French film's broader past. She states:

to offer such readings would amount to forgetting the recurrence of such extreme forms in French cinema, and to blank out the kind of critical vision—epitomized by the work of Georges Franju—that managed to express itself in spite of censorship prevalent in the 1950s and 1960s (Beugnet, 2011: 31).

Franju is a key connection: his *Blood of Beasts/Le sang des bêtes* (1949) and *Eyes Without a Face/Les yeux sans visage* (1960) focus on the horrific intensity of corporeal investigation, the juxtaposition of the banal and gruesome, and the inescapable circumstances of fate—all themes foregrounded in contemporary French extreme cinema. Franju was also a critical influence on the French New Wave, a key

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4 The volume and impact of these and other extreme films was significant. In 2012 the *Oxford Dictionary of Film Studies* (edited by Annette Kuhn and Guy Westfall, Oxford UP) added an entry on extreme cinema to its corpus.

5 Translated as cinema of the body.

historiographic connection, as Palmer sees contemporary French cinema as a direct inheritor of New Wave avant-gardism and ideology. He argues that the endemic value of these films is as experiments for both the filmmakers and the viewers alike, a cinematic form that pushes the borderline of viewers interaction with film as a body: a body of ideas, a body of creative labor, a body of intimate gazes, and perhaps most importantly for these films, a knowledge-seeking body enmeshed in understanding corporeal existence through transient cinematic images of human physicality. The concept of film as a vehicle to represent, and hence understand, the “realness” of human existence is critical to both the ‘cinéma de corps’ and the theoretical inheritance of the New Wave ‘vis-à-vis’ André Bazin and the *Cashiers du cinema*.<sup>6</sup> The heritage of the French New Wave is that of a knowable – or attainable – reality reproducible and perfected through the cinematic apparatus. Bazin’s commitment to cinematic realism as an attempt to capture objective, replicative reality speaks directly to the legacy of an enlightenment telos, mimicking Cartesian genuine knowledge.

Despite the connections to an established cinematic corpus, French extreme cinema does not amount to a genre, movement, or style, but rather a tendency wherein films share thematic, narrative, or ideological similarities.<sup>7</sup> Ideologically, it is, above all else, a cinema of the flesh, a threatening and visceral experience which highlights the isolation and unpredictable nature of contemporary society (Palmer, 2006). For example, several the films are concerned with political, racial, and religious unrest in France, interweaving social critiques and highlighting the violent failure of personal and social relationships. This is accentuated by usage of footage from, or allusions to, the French riots in 2005 and 2007<sup>8</sup> as a backdrop and/or narrative catalyst in several films, including *Inside/À l’intérieur* and *Frontier(s)/Frontière(s)*.

Additionally, interpersonal relationships are strained, as:

intimacy itself depicted as fundamentally aggressive, devoid of romance, lacking a nurturing instinct or empathy of any kind; and social relationships disintegrate in the face of such violent compulsions” (Palmer, 2011: 57-8).

Personal relationships often violently fail as society is revealed as isolating and unpredictably horrifying. This is reminiscent of the New Wave’s dialogue around modernization, the atomization of man, and contemporary society’s failure to

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6 *Cashier du cinema*, co-founded in 1951 by Andre Bazin, is one of the most influential film journals in history. Bazin’s impact on film theory and studies cannot be underestimated. Profoundly concerned with cinematic realism, Bazin was a key figure in the *Nouvelle Vague*/French New Wave filmic movement of the 1960s.

7 This loose bounding of films is akin to the construction of film noir, as neither aligns with the specific construction of filmic genre. Indeed, bypassing designations of genre allows for a better and more expansive understanding of the scope and influence of the cinematic tendency.

8 The 2005 French riots, which took place in the Parisian suburbs and suburbs of other French cities, and the 2007 Villiers-le-Bel riots in Val-d’Oise, were both the result of friction between French police and French citizens of color – frictions that included issues of state prejudice and over-policing of poor communities of color and immigrant communities – as well as the controversial deaths of young men of color.

successfully integrate the idealization of post-war society into a practical and successful social model. Beugnet notes:

In the cinema of the 1950s and 1960s, modernization, consumerism and the American model are ubiquitous elements of the diegesis, from fashion, consumer goods and the intensified presence of advertising, to cars and the celebration of speed, to the love of jazz. In the new extreme, such elements have become embedded in a brutally dystopian vision of exploitation, exclusion and abjection—the implicit realization of the failure of the transition into a new era

(Beugnet, 2011: 32).

The failure of the modernist project repeats.

Narratively, French extreme films place an “emphasis on the corporeal and the visceral...elliptical narrative and absence of psychological motivation” (Beugnet and Ezra, 2010: 35). Indeed, transgression is often the normative narrative motivation, including a focus on taboo breaking<sup>9</sup>. In rupturing boundaries, the films destabilize the artificial perimeter between pornography, horror, and art cinema, implicating audiences’ capricious determination on what type of fictional violence is an acceptable function of entertainment. This recalls Buñuel’s filmic use of “transgressive depictions of sexual violence to rouse society from its compliancy” (McGillvray, 2019: 9). Interwoven with these narrative shocks is the dialectic between the extreme and the banal. In films like *I Stand Alone/Seul contre tous* (Gaspar Noé, 1998) and *Calvaire* (Fabrice Du Welz, 2004), nondescript events and settings manifest a brooding, unspecified ennui, stimulating as much apprehension as the acts of violence and sex that punctuate the tense banality.

This dialectic is also threaded through stylistic similarities. Shocking violence and brutal sex are filmed at a measured pace, focusing on spectacle as passive meditation contrasted with sudden bursts of action. The eruptive disjunction between the extreme and banal manufactures an uncomfortable and unusual viewing experience. Indeed, the formal aspects of many French extreme films are meant to impact audiences in real emotional and physical ways. Ominous soundscapes bent on unsettling the viewer add to the oscillation between banal and extreme. For example, *Inside/À l’intérieur* uses a non-diegetic, preternatural, screeching sound to intensify the already extreme violence. The sound is so high-pitched, loud, and surprising that it’s difficult not to physically pull away from the film or flinch when it punctures a scene. In *Irreversible*, director Gaspar Noé employs a barely audible but irritating bass sound across the first 60 minutes of the diegesis. The sound is played at 27 hertz, the frequency used by some riot police to quell mobs by inducing unease and nausea after prolonged exposure. Rapidly moving cameras muted ‘mise-en-scène’, either very dark or flat bright lighting, protracted periods of diegetic and non-diegetic silence, and limited dialogue enhance these films assault on viewers.

Critically, underpinning these uncomfortable viewing experiences and shared thematic, narrative, and stylistic tendencies is a cynosure of the abject—the liminal space between subject and object. Leveraging the corporeality of women’s bodies, this

9 For example, *Fuck Me/Baise-moi* (Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi, 2000) and *Twenty-nine Palms* (Bruno Dumont, 2003) prominently feature unstimulated sex and *Martyrs* unsympathetically murders innocent children, two enduring cinematic taboos.



locus emphasizes how transforming the abject from negative chasm to a generative space of knowledge development serves a patriarchal enlightenment telos. In doing so, French extreme cinema transgresses the boundaries of traditional understandings of the abject, placing women's bodies at the intersection of humanity and knowledge, while requiring those bodies be violently transgressed to reach enlightenment.

### 2.1 Women's Abject Bodies

Feminist film theory has long grappled with the uses and abuses of women's bodies on screen, in part through Barbara Creed's concept of the monstrous feminine, or "what it is about women that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject" (Creed, 1999: 251). Building from Julie Kristeva's germinal study of abjection *Powers of Horror* (1982), Creed links the monstrous feminine to the function of the abject. The abject is neither subject nor object, but rather the shrouded space between the two positions. It transgresses borders, transcending its own liminal space, pushing its uncanny nature into the subjective world. The abject as border crosser is the monstrosity that invades horror films, separating human from non-human, and creating the monstrous subject personified by women's bodies. The monstrous feminine, then, brings about an encounter between the ordered subjective (read: the natural world) and unordered threat (read: women's abject monstrosity). She notes:

the central ideological project of the popular horror film [is the] purification of the abject through a 'descent into the foundations of the symbolic construct'. In that way, the horror film brings about a confrontation with the abject (the corpse, bodily wastes, the monstrous-feminine) in order, finally, to eject the abject and re-draw the boundaries between the human and non-human (Creed, 1999: 257).

Women's bodies are the image of negative abjection in horror films as the monstrous feminine demands an unwanted encounter between the human subject and the non-human abject.

Traditionally, horror films focus on containing the abject—the monster/monstrous feminine—and moving it transversely through the violated border, returning it to its liminal space. In French extreme films, however, the abject is actively sought and remains unbounded. The films use women's bodies to access their abject specifically as a site of transformation and knowledge generation. This manufactures women's abject as a tool of enlightenment, a tool whose utility is only fully realized when accessed because of the penetration and dismantling of women's physical bodies. The idea of the abject as generative or affirmative has been considered by scholars like Pauline Palmer (2007), Nilufer Bharucha (2007), and Susana Araújo (2007), who "trace the abject by stressing its function as a mode of empowerment" (Kutzback and Mueller, 2007: 12). Significantly, for the abject to be generative it must be reformatted not as a lack, but as a (meta)physical component of the bodily interior. The abject, then, must be understood not simply as the in-between, but as *something* in-between. As Kristeva (1982: 2) notes, the abject is "Not me. Not that. But not a nothing, either. A 'something' that I do not recognize as a thing."

The abject's position as *something*—a force, a space, an entity, however unrecognizable—produces a radical shift in the way women's bodies are constructed in French extreme films: the abject ceases to be ethereal, materializing as a persistence within women's subjective bodies. As Hanjo Berressem (2007: 21) notes, "the fact that *abjects* are not *objective* however, does not mean that they are immaterial. It merely means that *abjects* cannot be contained within the registers of the subject's psychic reality." The immateriality of the psyche is insufficient; imaginably, flesh and bone as material systems functioning outside of cognition and consciousness, can contain the abject, providing it spatial boundaries through the sheer biological compunction of survival. So enclosed, then, the abject creates and destroys its own subject as an affirmation of its own existence and bodily place. This agitation, Kristeva notes, produces the abject within being:

If it be true that the abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject, one can understand that it is experienced at the peak of its strength when that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very *being*, that it *is* none other than abject (Kristeva, 1982: 5).

If the impossible within constitutes the core of being, the abject can be contained with the corporeality of the subject. The abject, once spatialized, can be accessed, violated, and transformed.

But why access the abject? Here, we return to an enlightenment telos: "human liberty cut away from the moral order" (Christians, 2005: 140). The generative abject, like the Kantian sublime, is limitlessness and beyond the senses; something that must be understood through reason, but which cannot be imagined by a reasoned mind (Kant, 2001). To achieve autonomy and freedom through the attainment of reason and its correlated knowledge, one must move past the subjective and object and into the abjective. In *Martyrs*, *Inside/À l'intérieur*, *Frontier(s)/Frontière(s)*, and *Irreversible*, this is literalized by entering woman's bodies to contact the abject as a site of transcendence and existential enlightenment (Dickson, 2004). Vicious investigations of the physical body allow knowledge-seekers to use corporeal interiority as a pathway to the abject—a type of metaphysical investigation bound in flesh. This grounds esoteric, transcendental truths in the accessible physical world by transforming women from subjective embodiment into objective apparatuses for reasoned philosophical investigation. As such, these films prize reverse border crossing, using physical violence, psychological violence, and violent vision as knowledge-seeking tools wielded against the monstrous feminine as both barrier between, and access site for, patriarchal notions of reason and rationality.

I contend the three films under study herein demonstrate an evolution of the conceptual development of women's bodies as abject knowledge-seeking tools through a trichotomic process that depends on a progressive understanding of the abject moving from concept to a literalized, physical entity fixed in women's bodies. First, women's abject is constructed as a beingness endemic to women. This beingness is established through French extreme film's construction of an enlightenment telos as a patriarchal construction of knowledge enabled by the perversion of reason and

rationality, and the exercise of violent vision in Noë's *Irreversible*. An originating director of French extreme film, Noë's film constructs the abject as essential to women's being, establishing the baseline for the treatment of, and control over, women's bodies as abject monstrous space in service of edification.

Second, beingness develops into a *somethingness* via reproduction as knowledge transmission in *Inside/À l'intérieur* and *Frontier(s)/Frontière(s)*. Both films literalize the monstrous feminine abject, positioning women's bodies as capable of knowledge transmission, here using genetic renewal via reproduction as an example. If *Irreversible* establishes women's abject as knowledge-being, the literalization of information transmission through genetic reproduction transforms women's abject from esoteric to visceral. Finally, with the abject personified, *Martyrs* authenticates the claim of a generative, spatially constructed abject within the monstrous feminine through the demolition of the boundaries between flesh and abject, thereby formalizing the patriarchal knowledge-seeking project. One of the most notorious films of the early cycle, *Martyrs*, joins the establishing structures of violent vision established in *Irreversible* and the transmissibility of *Inside/À l'intérieur* and *Frontier(s)/Frontière(s)* into a foundational imbrication of women's monstrosity, the abject as site of enlightenment, and the iterations of violence necessary to weaponize its illuminative power. *Martyrs*, then, provides the final developmental phase of women abject monstrosity as tool for patriarchal knowledge development.

### 3. ACCESSING THE ABJECT

*Irreversible's* non-linear diegesis follows couple Marcus and Alex, and their friend Pierre, over the course of one night in Paris. The film itself opens at the resolution of the narrative and unfolds primarily in reverse chronology, with occasional jumps forward and backwards in time. Marcus is equally possessive and dismissive of Alex; the film implicates his participation in a series of affairs, he mocks Alex for her friendship with Pierre and Pierre for being unloved, and he's abrasive and self-involved. Pierre harbors an unrequited love for Alex, and Alex plays the role of the mediator, attempting to keep the peace between the men while dismissing her agency in the triad's dynamic. The three attend a house party, and after a quarrel with Marcus, Alex leaves the party on her own. While making use of an underpass to cross a busy boulevard, she is raped and beaten by an unknown assailant. Marcus begins a violent search for her assailant across the city, desperate to find and confront – to see and therefore to know – the man who violated Alex, and in turn, Marcus' claim on her body.

Marcus' reaction to Alex's assault is telling; he does not accompany her to the hospital nor offer her comfort, but instead immediately embarks on a night of savage retribution with Pierre in tow. For Marcus, Alex's victimization is a trespass against his patriarchal claim to her body; her assault and beating pierced her very being and made her unrecognizable against the violation of her external physicality and her internal abject construction as woman. Resultingly his knowledge of her being



has been mutated as her being has been ruptured; she has been made monstrous. As Kristeva notes:

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable (Kristeva, 1982:1).

Marcus' search for Alex's assailant is a search for her lost being, and his fixation on revenge key to recuperating and rebuilding Alex's body as knowable patriarchal object.<sup>10</sup> In order to reestablish control via knowledge, Marcus must see and know the man who possessed Alex through violent penetration.

Gaining access to the abject through vision is, in part, a manifestation of what Mark Seltzer terms wound culture. Seltzer defines wound culture as "the public fascination with torn and opening persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound" (Seltzer, 1997: 3). In part, Seltzer is referring to the human desire to know, or possesses, interior, bodily spaces. He posits the wound as a new type of public sphere that collapses the boundaries between self and other. Creating wounds through violence enables said wound's public sphere to grow through a shared violent investigation, organizing itself around interior knowledge gained through penetrative, violent vision. Rembrandt's 1632 painting *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicholaes Tulp* is a visual precursor this type of ocularcentric generation of knowledge.<sup>11</sup> Fundamental to this knowledge is the ability to reach abject interiority through violent vision. Penetrative vision, then, validates patriarchal domination and substantiates control.

*Irreversible* embodies similar tendencies to Seltzer's wound culture, resurrecting and recuperating lost abject space through patriarchal knowledge. Seltzer sees trauma as a double wounding process: the first stage is the wound in and of itself, and the second stage is a wounding in the absence of a wound: in effect, a search for the cause of the trauma (Seltzer, 1997). Trauma is theorized both as a physical and psychological process that perpetuates the idea of the wound as public space as organized around knowledge of interior bodily spaces, both physical and psychic. If Alex's assault is the wound itself, Marcus' search for the knowledge of the assailant is a reparative for the second wound: the traumatic loss of his patriarchal authority.

The focus on the regeneration of abject space through violent vision is a driving force in *Irreversible*. Interestingly, to perform this reclamation, Marcus is forced to occupy traditionally marginalized spaces of negative physical abjection: a hijacked taxicab, a hidden back alley populated by transgender sex workers, an underground queer fetish nightclub. The films' formal disorientation is key to constructing these

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10 This dynamic is heightened by the fact that the actors who play Marcus and Alex – Vincent Cassel and Monica Bellucci – were, at the time of filming, married and one of the most famous celebrity couples in France. Their characters in the film are reflective of a satirized version of their public persons: Cassel/Marcus the *enfant terrible* and virtuoso, Alex/Bellucci the patient, living goddess.

11 In the image Dr. Tulp, acting as instructor, demonstrates the functions of structure of human arm musculature by exposing the arm of a corpse with the skin removed. A group of doctors surround the cadaver, peering in earnest into the exposed arm, dependent on vision to provide the requisite medical knowledge.

abject spaces. For example, the queer club is introduced in the film's opening sequence as a dangerous and foreboding space.<sup>12</sup> The camera swirls haphazardly, catching glimpses of bare red lightbulbs, ancient brick archways, a single toilet, and distorted shadows on the walls. As the camera spins, flashes of men copulating, bondage paraphernalia, and dark corners roil across the screen like waves. Audible moans of pain as pleasure, bodies pushing into one another, a thrumming monotone buzz, and strains of thumping hardcore electronic music grow as the camera plummets through the space. The cumulative effect is a bewildering and upsetting descent into the abject. In this treacherous expanse, Marcus is unmoored and exposed; his only course of action is to yell and assault his way through these spaces, his violence the regenerative power used to regain Alex's abject by reestablishing patriarchal control and vision. Marcus can only understand Alex's abject loss by seeing the assailant, locating the trauma in the perpetrator's materiality. As Lisa Dickson notes:

seeing, the act of producing knowledge through the opening up of the subjects to sight, participates in just this process, generating discourses through which social categories and social power are contested and maintained [...] seeing is a violent act within this paradigm, and bodies—imperiled, exposed, exploited—are a key site at which this relationship among knowledge, vision, and power can be explored (Dickson, 2004: 78).

Critically, because the film's nonlinear structure is perpetually disorientating to the viewer, the audience is dependent on Marcus' knowledge quest to understand the very film itself. Indeed, nonlinearity and formal discombobulation force the audience to put both the narrative and the form of the film in continuity order, mirroring Marcus' quest to reassemble Alex's abject and indicating the audience's gaze as a controlling force in Alex's corporeality. This is highlighted in the film's final scene: Alex sits alone on a blanket in a bright and green Parisian park, content in the knowledge of her newly discovered pregnancy – knowledge accessible only to the audience and Alex in this moment. The camera looks down from above her, equating the audience's gaze with a type of godly omniscience. This serves to underscore *Irreversible's* emphasis on the form and function of patriarchal knowledge as enlightenment. However, Marcus' – and therefore, the audience's – focus on vision and power *as* knowledge rather than *with* knowledge ultimately fails. After discovering the name of Alex's assailant – 'La Ténia'<sup>13</sup> – and tracing him to a queer BDSM nightclub, Marcus misidentifies 'La Ténia', instead attacking a man named Mick. Mick overpowers Marcus; he breaks his arm and attempts to rape him on the club's dance floor – a reflection of Alex's inciting rape. Pierre protects Marcus by hitting Mick in the head with a fire extinguisher, which he then beats Mick to death with. 'La Ténia' watches silently and escapes during the melee, unharmed and unidentified. The push for patriarchal recontrol of women's body made monstrous fails, but the film succeeds in establishing women's abject as a motivating and precious component of women's being.

12 It is critical to note, here, that the film's interpretation of a queer fetish club as dangerous and abject reinforces the film's patriarchal – and queerphobic – construction of sex and sexuality.

13 Translated as The Tapeworm.

The films *Inside/À l'intérieur* and *Frontier(s)/Frontière(s)* expand on *Irreversible's* position as abject as beingness by personifying the abject as a *something* via reproduction. While the abject as *something* does not necessarily have to manifest as a fetus, Kristeva's work on abjection is indebted to her constructions of motherhood, and indeed she sees some of the earliest experiences of abjection related to the infant's attempt to break from its mother (Creed, 1999). In *Inside/À l'intérieur* and *Frontier(s)/Frontière(s)*, fetuses share abject signification with the mother, as "Subjects suck life out of biological systems, not so much from the outside [...] but from the very inside" (Berressem, 2007: 46). The fetus is an example of woman's abject space manifest, transforming beingness into *somethingness* while simultaneously providing epistemological regeneration. Critically, this process depends on genetic duplication, as the kinship and biological knowledge contained in genetic code transforms the fetus into an information delivery system bound and nurtured by women's abject space. Following, both films underscore this maturation of the abject by centering on women valued for their ability to reproduce their own abject knowledge.

*Inside/À l'intérieur* follows Sarah, a recent widow, unhappily pregnant after losing her husband in a car accident where she was the driver. Her grief has transformed into resentment of her unborn child. Trying desperately to ignore her upcoming motherhood, she works hard to signal her indifference to her fetus: she continues to work past her doctor's orders, has not set up her child's nursery, and her demeanor toward her pregnant body is one of annoyance and umbrage. The evening before her scheduled delivery her home is invaded by a mysterious woman – known only as 'La femme'<sup>14</sup> – who tries desperately take the unborn child from Sarah's womb by any means necessary. It is later revealed that 'La femme' was once pregnant, but she lost her child when she was struck by the car Sarah was driving. Injured and trapped by Sarah, 'La femme' explains:

'LA FEMME': You can kill me again Sarah. You already did once.

(The scene flashes back to 'La femme' driving on a rainy day. She caresses her pregnant belly, and a voiceover shares her interior monologue.)

'LA FEMME' IN VOICEOVER: My baby. Finally, inside, me. No one can take him away from me. No one can hurt him now. No one.

(Suddenly 'La femme' swerves, the frame is overcome by light, glass cracks, and metal crunches loudly. The camera iris' out on two cars: one Sarah's, one 'La femme's'. The audience and Sarah come to the same realization: 'La femme's' child and Sarah's husband were killed in the same accident.)  
(*Inside/À l'intérieur*, 2007)

Sarah responds with shock, saying "They told me there were no survivors" (*Inside/À l'intérieur*, 2007). 'La femme's' expression – desperate, resigned, and saddened – telegraphs the truth: there were, indeed, no survivors as without her child 'La femme' is as good as dead. 'La femme's' lost child is her lost abject, and her unrelenting need to possess a replacement child is correspondent to her compulsion to reestablish her abject. Like Marcus in *Irreversible*, she is driven to reconstitute a body – in this case, her own body – as it was "before" to *know* herself once again as

14 Translated as The Woman.

woman; her lost abject must be replaced. Replacing knowledge, then, manifests as the genetic recombination and replacement of birth. Her obsession is sated only when, at the film's conclusion, she cuts into Sarah's womb and removes the abject/child. Here, 'La femme' physically combines herself with Sarah and the child. Sarah lays face up on the bottom of her staircase, beaten, bloodied, and having begun contractions. 'La femme' determines the baby is breeched and requires a caesarian birth. 'La femme,' using a large metal scissor, slices open Sarah's stomach, reaches her hands into the gaping abdomen, merging her body with Sarah's as she pulls the child out of her birth mother and into the world. As Sarah dies, 'La femme' clutches the newborn to her chest, enveloping the child and making herself whole once again. *Inside/À l'intérieur*, then, has succeeded in first literalizing the abject as a *something*, and second, in using it to generate knowledge (read: genetic and biological knowledge) via reproduction.

Weaving similar threads of loss and repossession, *Frontier(s)/Frontière(s)* concerns Yasmine, a young woman who recently learned she is pregnant. Yasmine and her three friends, all Muslim, are fleeing Parisian riots. Although the diegetic riots are a narrative invention, director Xavier Gens incorporates real footage of the 2005 Paris riots into the film. The 2005 riots saw primarily Francophone African youth expressing frustration with poverty, over-policing and police violence, unemployment, and Islamophobia (Crampton, 2005). The inciting incident was the death of two Muslim teenagers, provoked by an encounter with police officers. In *Frontier(s)/Frontière(s)* Yasmine's brother Sami, a Muslim teenager, is killed by Parisian police. The commentary is clear.

Escaping Paris and the riots, Yasmine and her friends find themselves in an isolated countryside inn for the night. Unbeknownst to them, the inn is run by a family of incestuous, cannibalistic neo-Nazis. Learning the guests are Muslim, the family kills them off one by one. Yasmine is saved, however, thanks to her fetus. The family, after assessing her skin tone and hair, judge her phenotypically "white" enough to breed the next familial generation, confident that their lineage will genetically colonize her abject. Her abject space (read: womb), then, is appropriated by the family specifically because it renders her as a valuable tool for the renewal and rebirth of their vanishing familial knowledge. Following, women's abject—established as critical to being, literalized in women's bodies, and proficient in transmitting knowledge—reaches its final developmental phase as monstrous space of enlightenment in *Martyrs*.

*Martyrs* follows an unnamed group of zealots searching for the metaphysical enlightenment that they believe comes from understanding the world after death. Led by an enigmatic leader known as Mademoiselle, the group has spent decades kidnapping and torturing a series of young women as martyrs to their cause. The zealots believe martyrdom allows the women access to the metaphysical plane as their conscious minds, transformed through intense physical and psychological violence, occupy the liminal space between life and death. The women can then transmit the otherworldly knowledge the group so desperately seeks. Ana, their most recent victim, is subjected to a series of vicious physical assaults. The zealots believe that by creating, and then feeding, Ana's physical and psychological suffering they will sever the link between her conscious mind and her body, allowing her mind to transcend



to the metaphysical plane via her abject. Ana is kept in total isolation, chained to a subbasement wall, and subjected to numerous daily beatings and sensory deprivation to push her past her own physicality and into the plane of enlightenment.

This brutal physical abuse is symptomatic of the zealots' desire to reach Ana's abject space as a transubstantiated pathway to metaphysical knowledge. As Mademoiselle explains to her, "We tried everything, even with children, and we've proven that it's women that are much more responsive to transfiguration. Yes, young women. That's how it is" (*Martyrs*, 2008). As she is tortured, Ana's physical body begins to undergo a transformative change: her head is shaved, her face and eyes remained constantly swollen from the repetitive beatings, and her skin color gradated by filth and blood. Ana's physical transformation is representative of her passing from corporeal woman to metaphysical bridge. This is a process of Kristevain abjection, as:

that what must be expelled from the subject's corporeal functioning can never be fully obliterated but hovers at the border of the subject's identity, threatening apparent unities and stabilities with disruption and possible dissolution (Gross, 1990: 87).

As Ana's abject space is slowly separated, but not severed, from her physicality, she eventually stops resisting the abuse and accepts her fated martyrdom. Her final torture follows, as the zealots flay all the skin from her body, save for a circular patch the circumference of her face. Ana is set on her knees, arms tied to a horizontal bar above her head, torso pitched forward, head tilted up, eyes towards the heavens, musculature exposed. She is posed as if she is a supplicant at the altar of her god. Her body is de-sexed, the outward markers of her breasts and vagina lost to the flay; a visual reminder that her 'success' as a martyr is not tied to her sex but rather her endemic status as monstrous woman. Flaying Ana's body concretizes the zealot's desire for her abject space as they literally and figuratively remove her physical boundaries, accessing her abject between the fissure in her consciousness and her physical body.

Critical to Ana's construction as a bridge between planes of knowledge is her gaze into the "beyond." After the flaying Ana is shown looking up, eyes wide, intensely focusing on unknown images in off screen space, face beatific. The camera pushes into the pupil of her left eye. Her brown cornea swirls with a bright white light, which grows, filling the screen with cosmic reverberations of the bright rays until the entire frame is illuminated. The shot holds on the illumination for a beat, and then irises out as a black orb fills the center of the white space. As the camera continues to pull back, the orb is revealed as Ana's pupil, ringed a hazy blue with preternatural understanding. Ana's gaze is the gaze of enlightened knowledge. Lisa Dickson (2004) notes that all gazes consume images, and this consumption builds agency through an exertion of contestive power. The power relationships between what is being shown (what Ana can see) and act of the watching (the zealots watching Ana see) creates a type of rhetorical vision between the two positions, constructing an affective process which constitutes abject viewing positions through the act of looking. Karen Shimakawa notes:



abjection is at once a specular and affective process: one objects (this is, becomes a deject) through a process of *looking at* (which may or may not result in *seeing*) that which is designated object and recognizing one's own bodily relation to abjection (Shimakawa, 2002:19).

When the extended zealot congregation – who benefit from, rather than help create, Ana's severed corporeality – understand Ana's access to the metaphysical, they are forced to recognize their own fraught relationship to abjection while reconciling their complicity in the brutal violence necessary to unveil its transformative power.

The narrative of abjection, physicality, and the link between the two is rewritten after Ana's acquiescence. When Ana submits to her suffering she releases her hold over her object space, severing physical and psychic control, and offering it up to the indeterminate space of the metaphysical:

For, when narrative identity is unbearable, when the boundary between subject and object is shaken, and when even the limit between inside and outside becomes uncertain, the narrative is what is challenged first (Kristeva, 1982: 141).

Ana's narrative as victim transforms into one of martyrdom as she transcends into the world beyond death. Whispering an unknown truth to Mademoiselle who, in response to the imparted knowledge, takes her own life, it becomes clear that the knowledge they so desperately sought is available but fatal. While the zealots have seemingly succeeded in using Ana's object space as a pathway to metaphysical knowledge, that path can only be accessed through their own acquiescence to violence.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

These filmic examples have clarified two positions. First, it is possible, indeed necessary, to see possibilities for object space to be transformed into generative spaces of knowledge. Second, to do so, there must be a transgression of boundaries, an opening-up of women's physical bodies wherein the object is enveloped. Of course, this is not to argue for violence against women as a type of intellectual inquiry. Rather, it is to understand that while film historically may have constructed women as object powerless, subservient, and immaterial, French extreme film offers a possible recuperation of those representations not to reproduce said powerlessness and difference, but as a means generating women's self-knowing, awareness, and internal power. Resultingly, French extreme film's representations of women's abjection and monstrosity enhances understandings of women past a simple feminist vs. anti-feminist binary. As representative of an enlightenment telos, French extreme films embrace the idea of the object as a site of generation and transformation and provide alternate constructions of the object and of object space.

This is necessarily a fraught position, however, because to recognize such potential we also must accept continued horrors visited onto the filmic bodies of women. The choice, then, may be to reenvision the agency filmic women have in this violence. Recent entries into the 'tendency' of French extreme film like *Raw/Grave* (Julia Ducournau, 2016) and *Revenge* (Coralie Fargeat, 2017) follow their predecessors

investigating women's abject bodies. However, both films are directed by women and about women, rather than about what *happens* to women. Following, the women characters in these films are active agents in their own knowledge building projects, controlling their own violent investigation into enlightenment, upending the traditional role of the monstrous woman in French extreme films. This is especially true in the case of *Raw/Grave* where women's monstrosity is the positive abject, epistemological, and genetic legacy of its heroine. Reimagining women's abject monstrosity in this way aids in evolving thought around the role – both physical and semiotic – of women in film, imbuing the filmic tendency with new type of enlightenment.

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