

Female Transcendence:
Approaching the “Expérience Extrême” in Contemporary
French Horror Cinema

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by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Affairs in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Film Studies

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Ottawa, Ontario

Abstract:

The horror genre has not historically been popular amongst critics, scholars, and feminist writers, and is often criticized for sensationalizing physical and sexual violence against the female form. Building off the preexisting literature on the problematic representation of gender in horror, this thesis looks at a number of New French Extremity films that assault audiences with unrelenting scenes of violence, torture, rape, cannibalism, and self-mutilation, which are performed almost exclusively upon or by women. That being said, although the films of the New French Extremity have been dismissed as excessive and exploitative, this thesis argues for the feminist potential of these texts through their treatment of the female body as the site and agent of what French literary figure Georges Bataille calls the “*expérience extrême*”. Through a close analysis of the films *Inside* (Bustillo and Maury, 2007), *Martyrs* (Laugier, 2008), *Trouble Every Day* (Denis, 2001), and *In My Skin* (de Van, 2002) this thesis will examine how women are presented as the sites and agents of the *expérience extrême*, arguing that this embodiment of Bataille’s concept contributes to feminist narratives that challenge traditional notions of female victimhood in the controversial genre.

Acknowledgments

This thesis project was a labor of love that would not have been possible without the help and support I've received from the following people:

Thank you to André Loiselle for being able to help turn my chaos and ramblings into what this thesis is today. You have introduced me to books, films, and theories I would have never discovered otherwise, and been a constant source of wisdom over the last two years. It was a great pleasure meeting and working with you. Thank you for inspiring me to continue perusing my passions and diving deeper into dark depths of horror cinema. Your brilliance will continue to motivate me throughout my academic career.

Thank you to Tori for being my go-to editor and making it through the first 10 minutes of *Martyrs* before making me turn it off. Thank you for your unconditional kindness and support throughout this journey and everywhere else in between. Now here is some inspiration for you in return:

“You miss 100% of the shots you don't take, - Wayne Gretzky”

– Michael Scott

– Maddi McGillvray

To Evan, David, Matt, and everyone in Film Crew 2.0, meeting you all has been one of the greatest rewards of grad school. Without you, I don't think I could have actually done this. Whatever you all end up perusing, I know it will be great.

Thank you to Derek for always being my biggest cheerleader, even after being forced to watch horror movies. Your constant support and endless supply of laughs (even if they're dad jokes) is largely responsible for preserving my sanity in the last year. I couldn't have asked for a better partner to have by my side throughout writing this.

Thank you to my parents, Kim and Gerry. Although you may not fully understand how your daughter ended up completing an M.A. thesis on such a topic, I am grateful for your love throughout all of my life's adventures. Mom thank you for always giving me leftovers and making sure I never went hungry. If I turn out to be even half the woman you are I would consider myself very lucky. Dad thank you for always pushing me to be the best version of myself I can be.

Thank you to Inta and Emily for being amazing roommates, enduring many horror movies over the last two years (and let's face it, many other times before this thesis), and being a part of many memorable nights usually consisting of wine, takeout, going to “the pump”, or Netflix binges. Also, thank you for putting up with a couple of extra dishes in the sink while I wrote this. My bad.

Thank you to Diane Berezowski for your kindness and candy supply that always put a smile on my face.

Thank you Nan for being an example of the type of person I hope to be someday become. Words cannot describe what you have done for me.

Last, thank you to Alan Nymark for those unforgettable eyebrow raises, never taking no for an answer, and being a true role model I will forever look up to. It was an honour to have met you and I can confidently say you changed the rest of our lives for the better. Miss you.

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Introduction

“We've tried everything. Even children. It's proven that women are more sensitive for a transformation. Young women. It is that way.” – Mademoiselle as quoted in Pascal Laugier's film *Martyrs*

The female victim has been a reoccurring cinematic image from at least as early as Carl Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (Dreyer, 1928), which depicted the grueling suffering of martyr figure Joan of Arc.¹ Not only has the female form become the conventional site of pain and suffering in film, but this correlation has also become particularly quintessential within the horror genre. Linda Williams noted this in “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess” and determined that bodily genres such as horror, pornography, and melodrama hinge on the spectacle of a sexually saturated and victimized female body. The horror genre is and always has been populated by women, who can be seen to be at once both objectified and empowered. Women in horror wear many faces: they are the last ones standing at the end of the film, hunted and stalked by psychopathic killers, murdered after engaging in sexual activities, give birth to the monsters of such films (and in turn the source of their violent tendencies), and sometimes, they are even the monsters themselves. Nevertheless, misogynistic depictions of women have frequently appeared within the horror genre since its emergence. Starting with *Le Manoir du Diable* (Méliès, 1896), which has been cited as the first horror film, and continuing until today, the genre is often a minefield of degrading representations of women who are forced to fight to survive in male hierarchical worlds. While this characterization does not apply to all of the films in the genre such as *Carrie* (De Palma, 1976), *The Silence of the Lambs* (Demme, 1991), and *The Descent* (Marshall, 2005), which feature strong, non-

¹ Elliott Burton, “Control of the Knife: Transgressing Gender Stereotypes in Bustillo and Maury's *Inside*,” *Offscreen*. Vol. 18 (6-7). 2014.

normative, or monstrous female characters, the presence of gendered specific violence wherein, "young women cower, scream, or run in terror," at the hands of their male counterparts has become commonplace in the controversial genre.²

Despite the frequent use of sexist narratives, horror has been and still remains one of cinema's most lucrative genres. For instance, Oren Peli's found-footage film *Paranormal Activity* (Peli, 2007) was made on a shoestring budget of just \$15,000. However, *Paranormal Activity* grossed \$21,000,00 during its opening weekend and \$65,100,000 in total, making it one of the most profitable films of all time.³ Not only has the horror genre found success on the big screen, but the recent popularity of television shows such as *The Walking Dead* (2010-present), *American Horror Story* (2011-present), and *Bates Motel* (2013-present) suggests that horror and images of violence and gore have become normalized elements of our media and viewing culture. As a result, more is required in order to shock and stimulate today's audiences. The last decade has seen the birth of extreme cinema (also referred to as ordeal cinema), which is defined in the Oxford Dictionary of Film Studies as, "a group of films that challenge codes of censorship and social mores, especially through explicit depictions of sex and violence, including rape and torture."⁴ This trend has not only seeped its way onto North American screens, but has also gained prominence among international markets as well. For instance, in North America, torture porn films such as *Saw* (Wan, 2004) and *Hostel* (Roth, 2005), which include gruesome

² Neale King, "Boy Jokes: Content Analysis Of Hollywood Misogyny In Mean Girl And Slasher Movies." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, Sheraton New York, New York City, NY. (2009). Online article available at www.allacademic.com/meta/p13634_index.html

³ Daniel Frankel, "'Paranormal' Now the Most Profitable Film Ever," *The Wrap*. (2009). Online article available at <http://www.thewrap.com/paranormal-now-most-profitable-film-ever-9335/>

⁴ Annette Kuhn and Guy Westwell, *Oxford Dictionary of Film Studies*. Oxford University Press. Published online. (2012).

scenes of torture and mutilation, both experienced unprecedented box office success.⁵ Similarly, so-called “Asia Extreme” films such as *Audition* (Miike, 1999), *Ichi The Killer* (Miike, 2001), and *Oldboy* (Park, 2003), as well as “European Extreme” films including *A Serbian Film* (Spasojevic, 2010) and the American co-production *The Human Centipede* (Six, 2009) have also gained prominence in the global film market.

That being said, nowhere near is the surge of excess sex and violence more apparent than in France, a country that has a longstanding reputation for pushing the envelope of screen depictions.⁶ *Artforum* critic James Quandt coined the term “New French Extremity”, otherwise commonly referred to as New French Extremism or *cinema du corps*, to describe what he saw as a growing trend in the use of shock tactics in French cinema that have emerged since the 1990s.⁷ The basic agenda of the New French Extremity is an on-screen interrogation of physicality in brutally intimate terms, which assault audiences with exceptionally violent and graphic scenes that leave very little to the imagination. According to Quandt, “the New French Extremity... seems the determinants of a cinema suddenly determined to break every taboo, to wade in rivers of visceral and spumes of sperm, to fill each frame with flesh, nubile or gnarled, and submit it to all manner of penetration, mutilation, and defilement.”⁸ The films of the New French Extremity have garnered a reputation for utilizing a unique blend of horror and art house traditions. The hallmarks of these

⁵ David Edelstein coined the term “torture porn” (also known as “gorno”) to describe this brand of film. Like their splatter predecessors, torture porn films emphasize depictions of violence, nudity, torture, mutilation, and sadism. It is interesting to note that both of the torture porn films mentioned here (as well as *The Human Centipede*) experienced such impactful success and notoriety that they have gone on to become franchises along the same lines of the *Friday the 13th* and *Nightmare on Elm Street* series.

⁶ Erin Jennings, *Erotic Body Horror: Dangerous Female Corporealities in Contemporary French Cinema*. (2008): 6.

⁷ James Quandt, “Flesh & Blood: Sex and Violence in Recent French Cinema,” *Artforum*. (2004). Online article available at <http://www.artforum.com/inprint/id=6199>

⁸ Quandt.

films include graphic and visceral portrayals of sex, rape, torture, self-mutilation, necrophilia, cannibalism, and extreme forms of sadistic violence.⁹ Quandt associates films such as *Sombre* (Grandrieux, 1998), *Pola X* (Carax, 1999), *Baise-moi* (Despets and Thi, 2000), *Trouble Every Day* (Denis, 2001), *Intimacy* (Chéreau, 2001), *Irreversible* (Noé, 2002), *In My Skin* (de Van, 2002), *Secret Things* (Brisseau, 2002), *La Chatte à Deux Têtes* (Nolot, 2002), and *Haute Tension* (Aja, 2003) as a representative sample of films that fall into the New French Extremity. More recent films such as *Calvaire* (Du Welz, 2004), *Sheitan* (Chapiron, 2006), *Frontier(s)* (Gens, 2007), *Inside* (Bustillo and Maury, 2007), *Martyrs* (Laugier, 2008), and more also fall into the New French Extremity category. Despite the vociferous reactions these films have elicited among critics and writers, they have had an undeniable impact on French cinema, as these films have both flourished nationally, but also continue to grow and gain popularity beyond French borders.

At the center of this cycle, as scholar Tim Palmer suggests, is an emphasis on human sexuality rendered in stark and graphic terms including unmotivated or predatory sex, sexual conflicts, male and female rape, disaffected and emotionless sex, ambiguously consensual sexual encounters, arbitrary sex stripped of conventional or even nominal gestures of solidarity, and more.¹⁰ The correlation between sex and violence in French art is not exclusive to the New French Extremity, as France has a unique history of representing violence in art. Extending a libertine tradition that includes the writings of the Marquis de Sade and the satirical films of Luis Buñuel, New French Extremity filmmakers sought to challenge social and cinematic traditions

⁹ Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall, *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. (2004): 3.

¹⁰ Tim Palmer, *Brutal Intimacy: Analyzing Contemporary French Cinema*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press. (2006): 58.

with self-consciously transgressive depictions of sexual violence.¹¹ The New French Extremity's origins can also be traced back through a long history of violent theatrical performances, including the French Theatre of Horror, otherwise known as the Grand Guignol, which reigned in popularity during its lifespan from 1897 to 1962 in Pigalle, Paris. The Grand Guignol was known for its theatrically explicit portrayals of gore, death, and sex, and endeavored to stage realistic scenes of blood and carnage for its patrons. The New French Extremity is also closely correlated to contemporary French literature by writers such as Frédéric Beigbeder and Michel Houellebecq who traced the amoral sexual desires of their male protagonists through the contexts of late-phase capitalism.¹² Although this thesis project will refer to contemporary French cinematic texts as well as French literary figures, the following will not specifically contextualize the shock of the New French Extremity within the tradition of France's national cinema, as it is beyond the scope of my analysis. Finally, while films belonging to the New French Extremity trend exhibit traits representative of a wide range of horror subgenres including slasher, rape-revenge, and home invasion narratives, the New French Extremity borrows heavily from the body horror subgenre, and the work of Canadian filmmaker David Cronenberg in particular.¹³

Extreme cinema has caught the attention of various critics and scholars who question audience's appetites for such cinematic displays of excessive violence and

¹¹ Palmer, 58.

¹² Palmer notes that in these forms of literature, it was imperative to translate everything, all personal and professional impulses into marketable and commercial gains.

¹³ One of the largest departures between the New French Extremity and Cronenberg's work is the treatment of women and female corporeality. Unlike the New French Extremity, which places strong emphasis on the female experience, Cronenberg's narratives focus heavily upon male protagonists. While Cronenberg's earlier films such as *The Brood* (1979) and *Dead Ringers* (1988) deal with the monstrous female body as a site of disgust, his protagonists are almost always men, resulting in the subordination of female agency and subjectivity to the male perspective.

torture.¹⁴ In his discussion of the American torture-porn movement, scholar David Edelstein hypothesizes that these bodies of film perform a sort of cathartic purification or pseudo-sexual release that provide viewers with a means to feel something visceral in a world that is numb to real-life violence.¹⁵ Likewise, Cynthia Freeland has argued that horror films have appeal because, “they address human fears and limitations, forcing confrontations with monsters who overturn the natural order.”¹⁶ In this sense, part of the pleasure of viewing ultraviolent films derives from the ability to experience horrifying things that we would never want to encounter in the real world. Lastly, while the majority viewer of the horror genre is generally perceived as young adolescent males, women constitute a large portion of the extreme horror film audience. For instance, in an article for *The New York Times* titled “Up to Her Eyes in Gore and Loving It”, Alex Williams argues that the number of women who are purchasing tickets to see such films are staggering, claiming that the tension-and-release cycle that accompanies such cinematic terror, “brings about something like a gambler's high.”¹⁷ Williams further describes the pleasure she experiences when watching such films, stating "it's not that I'm a self-mutilator, but it's just a powerful rush when you can overcome some pain.”¹⁸ This is particularly interesting, since much like the female protagonists of the New French Extremity, there is something to be gained as a spectator from overcoming the pain of extreme cinema films.

¹⁴ Jennings, 4.

¹⁵ David Edelstein, "Now Playing at Your Local Multiplex: Torture Porn", *New York Magazine*. (2006).

¹⁶ Cynthia Freeland, “Graphic Horror,” *The Naked and the Undead: Evil and the Appeal of Horror*. Oxford: Westview Press. (2000): 273.

¹⁷ Alex Williams, “Up to Her Eyes in Gore and Loving It”, *The New York Times*. (2006).

¹⁸ Williams.

The New French Extremity movement has not traditionally been popular among critics, scholars, or feminist writers, and is often criticized for sensationalizing physical and sexual violence, both of which are significantly performed upon or by the female body. According to writer James Walker, “the New French Extremity has no home in modern cinema, that much is clear. Speculation of the New French Extremity transforming into a European Extremity, and a subsequent new breed of horror movies altogether is an idea nothing short of farfetched in my mind.”¹⁹ The New French Extremity trend has also earned a reputation for eliciting excessive reactions from audiences, including mass walkouts, fainting, and vomiting, often making them the target of censorship and controversy. This is evident notably in the walkouts that greeted *Trouble Every Day* and *Irreversible* at their Cannes Film Festival premieres in 2001 and 2002.²⁰ Palmer highlights that the detractors of the New French Extremity often label such cinema as indefensible and grotesque, pushing screen depictions on physicality to unwelcome limits.²¹ Quandt is also amongst many critics who consider this display of sex and violence to be of little substance, summarizing the films as, “aggressiveness that is really a grandiose form of passivity.”²² These unfavorable critiques are problematic because as Erin Jennings argues, “issues of gender and representation are almost never discussed, as critics

¹⁹ James Walker, “The New French Extremity: An Endeavour into Excessive Violence,” *The Artifice*. (2013). Online article available at <http://the-artifice.com/new-french-extremity/>

²⁰ Laugier’s *Martyrs* also experienced controversy upon release. The French Commission de Classification des Oeuvres Cinématographiques granted *Martyrs* an 18+ rating, which defined the film as unsuitable for children under 18 or forbidden in cinemas for under eighteen. The producers of the film appealed and the French Society of Film Directors (SRF) asked the French ministry of culture to examine the decision, remarking that, “this is the first time a French genre film has been threatened with such a rating.” The Minister of Culture, Christine Albanel, eventually asked the Commission of Classification to change its rating, which was done in July 2008. *Martyrs* was finally rated 16+, which allowed for wider distribution and circulation.

²¹ Palmer, 58.

²² Kiva Reardon, “Subject Slaughter,” *Cinephile*. Vol. 8 (2). (2012): 21.

often become too engrossed in the spectacles of violence to imagine anything else going on.”²³ It is my belief, however, that the New French Extremity departs from other films in the horror genre because of the ways in which they approach violence, victimization, and female corporeality.

In the New French Extremity, gruesome acts of violence, torture, self-mutilation, rape, and more are inflicted primarily upon the female body.²⁴ In some cases, these extreme acts are even performed by the female characters of such films. This in turn, presents an image of the female body that is both monstrous and grotesque. Although the New French Extremity can be dismissed as excessive and exploitative, particularly in regards to the treatment of women, this thesis project argues for the feminist potential of these texts through their treatment of the female body as the site and agent of what French literary figure Georges Bataille calls the “*expérience extrême*”.²⁵ Through a close textual analysis of Alexandre Bustillo and Julien Maury’s *Inside* (original French title: *À L’intérieur*), Pascale Laugier’s *Martyrs*, Claire Denis’ *Trouble Every Day*, and Marnia de Van’s *In My Skin* (original French title: *Dans Ma Peau*), this thesis will argue that if read from Bataille’s notion of the *expérience extrême*, these works can be understood as pushing the limit of what the female body can tolerate in order to situate the female protagonists in a position of power to overwhelm and consume the system of patriarchy. Furthermore, while horror is frequently cited as a sexist genre, one in which women are represented as one-dimensional victims, I argue that the New French Extremity sets itself apart from other horror subgenres in the way it contributes to narratives that challenge traditional

²³ Jennings, 6.

²⁴ This is not to say that men are never the sites of such acts in the New French Extremity, as is exemplified in films such as *Twentynine Palms* that includes scenes of male rape and vicious stabbing. However, it is more common for these components to be enacted upon the female body as opposed to the male form.

²⁵ Georges Bataille, *L'expérience Intérieure*, Gallimard: France. (1943): 19.

misogynistic depictions of female victimhood. One certainly cannot deny that the victimization of women is made a spectacle of in the horror genre, which is especially evident in the facial close ups of terrified women as they encounter their respective killers.²⁶ While collectively these films are preoccupied with female suffering, they can also be seen as empowering in the ways they present an erasure of patriarchy through alternative forms of violence and challenge typical modes of visuality common to the genre. Finally, although my chosen texts deal with a number of other issues outside of gender that are certainly worthy of considerate study, including racial tensions in France, I will focus primarily upon the treatment of women in these films for the purpose of cohesion.

In investigating the representations of women in the New French Extremity, it is important to acknowledge the real socio-political problem of violence against women. While an alarming number of incidents of violence against women do exist in the real world and should not be dismissed or ignored, my research project aims to depart from real cases of heterosexual violence to investigate fictional texts from a perspective that may have been previously overlooked. My methodology primarily consists of a close audiovisual analysis of *Inside*, *Martyrs*, *Trouble Every Day*, and *In My Skin* in relation to Bataille's *expérience extrême*. I chose these specific New French Extremity films for several reasons. First, I wanted to focus on films wherein women were situated at the core of the narrative as both the receptacle and/or agents of violence and pain. More specifically, I wanted to examine films that were less concerned with masculine monsters and psychotic killers (narratives that have historically perpetuated degrading gender hierarchies) and more strictly on female characters. In two of the works in particular, *Inside* and *Martyrs*, female suffering is

²⁶ Shyla Fairfax, *Women in Slashers Then and Now: Survival, Trauma and the Diminishing Power of the Close-Up*. (2014): 16.

directly positioned within the diegesis of their narratives. For instance, in *Martyrs* one of the characters states that their methods of torture can only be completed on the young female body. Likewise, in *Inside* the female protagonist is tormented by a stranger who states that the purpose of the violence she commits is to take her unborn child. Although not directly stating it like the former films, *Trouble Every Day* and *In My Skin* also center upon the destruction of the female form both at the hands of outside perpetrators and through acts of self-mutilation. This choice was done deliberately because although on the one hand some could argue that these films reinforce misogynistic assumptions that women make easier victims, I will demonstrate that if one can overcome the spectacles of blood, guts, and gore, these group of films are unique precisely because their seemingly problematic narratives offer empowering tendencies.

This thesis adopts a tripartite structure. Each chapter takes up a different mode of boundaries: whether it is existing gender boundaries, the breaking of such boundaries as a means to escape their limitations, and finally, boundaries that are completely broken to the point where we are on the other side. I have numerous objectives for this thesis project. First, I will illustrate how this brand of extreme horror cinema frequently situates women as both the sites and agents of the *expérience extrême*. In each film, female characters are either placed at the core of the narrative as the receptacle of extreme forms of violence or they are the ones inflicting such pain and brutality upon other characters. The violence performed on or by the women of these films allows the female body to become a vehicle for transcendence. Consequently, I will isolate these films as feminist texts, suggesting that their embodiment of Bataille's *expérience extrême* engenders feminist narratives that challenge traditional images of female suffering and victimhood in the horror genre.

Finally, despite the fact that these films include graphic scenes of violence and torture enacted upon the female form, a significant amount of notable New French Extremity films are written and directed by women. The following will investigate how the subject matter is presented based on the films that are directed and written by men and women. Although it is not fair to assume that women are inherently capable of producing feminist texts, it is my belief that the filmmakers' genders shape their approach to filmmaking and the representation of the female encounter of the *expérience extrême*.

In order to effectively examine the portrayals of women in the New French Extremity, this thesis will begin with a chapter that outlines several touchstone texts and concepts that will be of significance throughout this project. This includes an overview of the early scholarship that has been written upon the topic of gender and horror as well as Bataille's *expérience extrême* and his correlation to feminist theory. In addition, while Bataille provides a way to read *Inside*, *Martyrs*, *Trouble Every Day*, and *In My Skin*, the concept of the "*écriture féminine*" will be used to distinguish between the films directed by men and women. The *écriture féminine*, which translates to "feminine writing," is a strain of feminist literary theory that originated in France in the early 1970s through theorists who unpack the relationship between the cultural and psychological inscription of the female body and female difference in language and text. The remaining chapters will be organized based on the New French Extremity films written and directed by men (*Inside* and *Martyrs*) and those by women (*Trouble Every Day* and *In My Skin*). The former seek to challenge patriarchy through symbolic representations of the process of the *expérience extrême*. Not unlike Bataille's own writing, the films directed by men "use" the female experience as an aspirational metaphor for the undoing of masculine limitations. In

those films, the female characters serve as potential solutions for a male perspective that wants to escape its patriarchal condition. In contrast, the New French Extremity films directed by women avoid the symbolic language of metaphors, in which the female character signifies an alternative to patriarchy, and proposes instead an experience of transcendence that defies meaning. Similar to the *écriture féminine*, the films directed by women invite the spectators to escape the trap of linear signification, in favour of an experience of abjection and empathetic pain that breaks free from reason and veers instead towards pure affect.

Existing Boundaries: Sexual Difference in the Horror Film and Georges Bataille

“Sexual difference is probably the issue in our time which could be our 'salvation' if we thought it through” Luce Irigaray as quoted in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, p. 7

It would be rather difficult for cinephiles and fans of the horror genre to deny that such films have always been highly gendered.²⁷ Although there are gender-ambiguous monsters evident within horror films such as the blob, diseases, aliens, and gremlins, emphasis has been placed on sexual difference since the birth of the genre. This is evident in the titles of several early horror films such as *The Invisible Man* (Whale, 1933), *The Bride of Frankenstein* (Whale, 1935), *The Wolfman* (Wagner, 1941), and *She Freak* (Mabe and Davison, 1967), which emphasize gender divisions.²⁸ Multiple analyses have been conducted regarding the complex representation of gender in horror. These works often investigate the relationship between the film and the spectator, the different and rather problematic portrayals of male and female characters, the link between sex and violence, and more. Not without faults or limitations, one cannot dismiss or ignore the early scholarship focusing on gender and horror and the critiques put forth by authors such as Laura Mulvey, Carol Clover, Isabel Pinedo, Linda Williams, Julia Kristeva, and Barbara Creed. This scholarship has figured heavily in the construction and articulation of this thesis project. Despite not directly speaking to films of the New French Extremity, these texts are crucial for this thesis because they demonstrate the gender boundaries that

²⁷ Molly Langill, “Issues of Gender in the Horror Genre, Part 1,” *Offscreen*. Vol. 18 (6-7) (2014). Online article available at: <http://offscreen.com/issues/view/volume-18-issues-6-7>

²⁸ Barry Keith Grant, *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, Texas: University of Texas Press. (1996): 1.

are evident in the controversial genre, as well as the misogynistic patterns that emerged as a result of them. The following will attempt to dissect how previous depictions of women in horror have been theorized, and more specifically, how this ultimately relates to my Bataille reading of the New French Extremity.

Gender in the Horror Genre

The first approaches to feminism in film demanded for an end to stereotypical images of women within mainstream Hollywood films.²⁹ Not directly commenting on the horror genre, Laura Mulvey's essay titled *Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema* was one of the first works to illustrate the intersection between film theory, psychoanalysis, and feminism, becoming a fundamental text for feminist writing on film. Mulvey's aim was to utilize psychoanalysis as a political weapon to demonstrate the ways patriarchal society has impacted the structure and content of narrative film. Mulvey analyzes cinema through Sigmund Freud's argument that the function of woman in shaping the patriarchal unconscious is that she symbolizes the threat of castration by her absence of a penis. Female desire is then subjected to her image as bearer of the bleeding wound, and she can exist only in relation to castration and cannot transcend it. In this sense, women stand in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other. Mulvey applies these concepts to cinema, arguing that such an analysis poses questions about how the unconscious structures the ways of seeing and the pleasures of looking. Mulvey is most well known for her notion of the male gaze, in which she determines the pleasure in looking in Hollywood cinema is split between active males and passive females. She argues that the female appearance in cinema is coded for, "strong visual and erotic impact and connotes a to-be-looked-at-ness,"

²⁹ Erin Jennings, *Erotic Body Horror: Dangerous Female Corporealities in Contemporary French Cinema*. (2008): 11.

whereas the camera and the male viewer are constituted as the "bearer of the look."³⁰ Although women are seen as an indispensable element in the spectacle of narrative film, Mulvey contends that their visual presence works against the storyline and halts the flow of action. It should be noted, however, that Mulvey's ideas have been criticized for various reasons, including their strict binary divisions and their essentializing tendencies.³¹

While the "Mulvey school of thought" would suggest that women in horror fall victim to the voyeuristic tendencies of mainstream cinema, the representation of the surviving female character in the horror genre, otherwise referred to as the Final Girl, complicates such claims. Carol Clover's influential *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* examines American horror films from the 1970's to the mid 1980's, focusing specifically on slasher films, occult or possession films, and rape-revenge films. Clover investigates the topic of gender in her work, concentrating particularly upon the relationship between what she *assumes* to be the genre's majority viewer (adolescent males) and the Final Girl. The Final Girl is easily identifiable as the film's protagonist, as the audience follows her as she screams, staggers, falls, rises, and fights back against the monster that threatens her. Clover identifies several characteristics that are attributed to the Final Girl, arguing that she is often more resourceful, levelheaded, watchful, mechanical, masculine, and most importantly, not sexually active. The Final Girl is able to out-survive the other characters, leaving her alone to defeat the monster at the end of the film. Despite the fact that slasher films seem to offer sadistic pleasure to the viewer, Clover argues that they are structurally engineered to align spectators not with the male monster, but

³⁰ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen*, Vol. 16 (3). (1975).

³¹ Jennings, 11.

with the Final Girl.³² Through the use of point of view shots, the audience is linked with the killer in the early part of the slasher film. By the end, however, Clover states, “the point of view is hers: we are in the closet with her, watching with her eyes the knife blade pierce the door...”³³ Although slasher films speak to male anxieties and desires, these texts collapse masculine and feminine into one character who is anatomically female and one whose point of view is shared with the predominantly male audience. Nevertheless, Clover argues that the empowerment of the Final Girl is an illusion because she must take on masculine qualities in order to survive and defeat the killer, becoming a man in drag. While the recent horror films I will consider in this thesis feature female characters as the central protagonists of the cinematic tales of terror, their roles differ significantly from the conventional Final Girls as defined by Clover. This will be explored further in the next chapter, where I will isolate the film *High Tension* (Aja, 2003) as an example of the transition between the Final Girl and the women of the New French Extremity. The difference between the two is also likely due to the specific period Clover focuses on, namely, the 1970’s and early 1980’s, which corresponds historically to the emergence and culmination of second-wave feminism.

While Clover’s conceptualization of the Final Girl is undoubtedly influential in the study of gender and horror, much has been written about the limitations of her arguments as well. In *...And Then She Killed Him: Women and Violence in the Slasher Film*, Isabel Pinedo challenges the common assumption that the slasher film is part of a woman-hating genre that offers no source of pleasure for the female spectator. Pinedo builds off of previous canonical gender and horror texts to highlight

³² Carol Clover, *Men Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press. (1993): 35.

³³ Clover, 45.

how female spectatorship is a much neglected and misunderstood topic that deserves to be further explored. Similar to Clover, Pinedo also focuses on the slasher subgenre because of its status as the most disreputable form of horror. Pinedo contends that the literature on the subject often suggests that the pleasure of viewing a horror film is strictly limited to males, and that women are either absent or “cringing in distress.”³⁴ For instance, Pinedo argues that Clover advances the idea that male audiences primarily derive masochistic pleasures from viewing a horror film and fails to consider the female-viewer’s perspective of the Final Girl and monstrous-feminine tropes that are evident in the genre. Acknowledging that representations of women in culture are undoubtedly eminent, Pinedo highlights the significance of the Final Girl in the slasher film, as her watchful eye enables her to subject the monster to her controlling gaze, transforming him into an agent of aggressions and her into an agent of violence. The Final Girl’s appropriation of the gaze allows her to use violence to defend herself and to drive the narrative forward. Pinedo argues that she is then pushed to her limits and is forced to defeat the killer using, “any means necessary.”³⁵ Unlike Clover, Pinedo sees this as empowering, as the Final Girl manages to resist masculine oppression. The assumption that the slasher film promotes male-on-female violence, according to Pinedo, fails to acknowledge the Final Girl as well as the capacity for the male viewer to identify with her. My analysis takes this a step further by centering on films that depart from traditional horror narratives and instead portray images of female-on-female violence that resists masculine oppression.

By the same token, since my argument is based on narratives of female suffering as having feminist potential, it is worthwhile to note how other feminist

³⁴ Isabel Christina Pinedo, “...And Then She Killed Him: Women and Violence in the Slasher Film,” *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing*, New York: State University of New York Press. (1997).

³⁵ Pinedo, 97.

scholars have approached representations of gender in the horror genre. Erin Jennings has determined that the victimization of women in horror has received tremendous attention from feminist writers who, until recently, have generally rejected the genre as misogynistic.³⁶ Much of this work relied on Mulvey's argument that women only exist on screen to be looked at under an oppressive male gaze. Linda Williams also often returns to this topic in her work, demonstrating the significance of the complex relationship between excess horror and the female body. In "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess", Williams explores the notion that there is some value in thinking about the form, function, and system of excesses in the horror, pornography, and melodrama genres.³⁷ Williams argues that these three genres use spectacles of excessive female bodies on screen, more specifically women crying, screaming, or orgasming, to incite excessive bodily reactions from the spectator.³⁸ In all three genres, the female body is the embodiment of pleasure, fear, and pain. *Inside*, *Martyrs*, *Trouble Every Day*, and *In My Skin* are notorious for generating viewer disgust through the ways they represent leaky, bleeding, and fleshy female bodies on screen. Williams contends that the image of the female body in the midst of excess ecstasy offers the most sensation for the viewer. These types of films, in turn, become successful based on how the audiences' sensations imitate what is represented on screen. The films of which Williams speaks, like the ones in my study, are often dismissed as being too "gross" or sensational to be worthy of serious consideration.³⁹ Jennings argues that this dismissal can be linked, at least in part, to their connections

³⁶ Jennings, 21.

³⁷ Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 44 (4). (1991): 3.

³⁸ Williams, 3.

³⁹ Jennings, 21.

with the body, which is “a dismissal that is deeply intertwined with discourses on sexual difference.”⁴⁰

Despite the fact that I am investigating the victimization of women in the New French Extremity, I want to depart from past dismissive critiques. Furthermore, as a woman who is an avid fan of the genre, it is also worth considering how the female viewer has been previously theorized. Williams also examines this notion in “When the Woman Looks”, arguing that female viewers tend to look away when images of horror are represented on screen. Williams determines that one of the primary reasons why women refuse to look at such imagery is because they have so little to identify with on screen. Similar to the female spectator, the female protagonist also often fails to look or return the gaze of the male who desires her. This allows the male protagonist to look at the female form from a safe voyeuristic stance, with no threat that she will return the look and expel her desire upon him.⁴¹ Mary Ann Doane shares this similar line of reasoning, wherein female viewers have no hope as active and autonomous spectators. According to Doane, “the woman’s exercise of an active investigating gaze can only be simultaneous with her own victimization.”⁴² Williams builds upon Doane’s suggestion and argues that women are punished for looking in horror films. On the other hand, Williams also locates an affinity between the woman and the monster because her look at the monster recognizes their similar status within patriarchal structures of visibility. The woman’s look becomes a form of not seeing anything more than the castration she exclusively represents.⁴³ The destruction of the monster that concludes several horror films can be interpreted as a way of rejecting

⁴⁰ Jennings, 17.

⁴¹ Linda Williams, “When the Woman Looks,” *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, University of Texas Press: Austin. (1996): 61.

⁴² Williams, 61.

⁴³ Williams, 61.

the castration her body represents. Williams concludes by positing that the woman's look at the monster offers at least a potentially subversive recognition of the power and potency of a non-phallic sexuality. Precisely because this look is so threatening to male power, it is often violently punished. This is particularly significant in relation to this thesis topic because *Inside*, *Martyrs*, *Trouble Every Day*, and *In My Skin* all promote identification with their strong non-normative female protagonists who also threaten patriarchy through their returned gazes in moments of extreme pain and anguish.

In addition, though not directly addressing the horror film in particular, Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject has had profound influence on theoretical studies of the genre, and is further related to viewers' excessive reactions to the New French Extremity. Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* provides an extensive examination of abjection, conceiving it as that which is rejected by and disturbs social reason.⁴⁴ The abject refers to the human reaction to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of the distinction between subject and object or between self and other. The primary example for what causes such a reaction is the corpse, which traumatically reminds us of our own materiality. As Kristeva asserts, "the corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life."⁴⁵ Other items such as an open wound, feces, sewage, blood, bodily fluids, and more can also elicit abjection. This is significant because *Inside*, *Martyrs*, *Trouble Every Day*, and *In My Skin* depict all of these items with nauseating closeness. Kristeva also highlights that what causes abjection is, "that which does not

⁴⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press. (1980): 4.

⁴⁵ Kristeva, 4.

respect borders, positions, and rules.”⁴⁶ This leads to a feeling of disgust, and is connected to the process of subject formation. Kristeva states that, “abject things are those which highlight the fragility of the law, and humans exist on the other side of the border, which separates out the living subject from that which threatens its extinction.”⁴⁷ When one's borders of subjecthood are threatened with contamination, because of objects that inspire disgust, scholars such as Jennings determine that, “one feels an urge to expel that which threatens it, while at the same time harboring a feeling of fascination with the possibility of losing oneself to the mystery of borderless being.”⁴⁸

Barbara Creed uses the abject as her main concept in *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, which is a canonical text for feminist analyses of the horror genre. Creed examines the role of women in horror films, arguing that although a lot has been written on the genre, not much thought has gone into the representation of woman as monster. Creed determines that all societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, an image of a woman that is, “shocking, terrifying, horrific, and abject.”⁴⁹ The monstrous-feminine is evident in horror films in the forms of the amoral primeval mother, vampire, witch, woman as monstrous womb, woman as bleeding womb, woman as possessed body, the castrating mother, and more.⁵⁰ Creed sees the monstrous-feminine as constructed by and within patriarchal and phallogocentric ideology and is closely correlated to the problem of sexual difference and castration. One of Creed's central arguments is that feminine monstrosity in horror is linked to the mothering and reproductive female body.

⁴⁶ Kristeva, 4.

⁴⁷ Kristeva, 4.

⁴⁸ Jennings, 11.

⁴⁹ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis*. New York: Routledge. (1993): 1.

⁵⁰ Creed, 1.

Although the nature of the border changes from film to film, the function of the monstrous is the same, as it threatens the stability of the symbolic order. The horror genre attempts to bring about a confrontation with the abject to allow the viewer to reject it and reconstitute the boundaries between the human and non-human. Creed's monstrous-feminine relates to the films of the New French Extremity because they inspire abjection due to the horrific scenarios they present involving the human body as well as the inclusion of diabolical female killers and self-mutilators. Creed's correlation between abjection and the mothering body will also be particularly useful in an investigation of *Inside*, which positions the liminal space between the mother's body and the body of the fetus as a symbolic representation of abjection and the *expérience extrême*. While Creed sees the horror genre as essentially misogynistic, the notion of the abject, when read not exclusively from a perspective of fear, but also from one of the desire to transcend limited patriarchal subjectivity, allows for certain horror films such as the ones of the New French Extremity to lend themselves to a Bataille reading.

This proposed analysis could not be completed without addressing such canonical texts on the representation of gender and sexual difference in the horror genre. Moreover, establishing these concepts provide some necessary context so that the films I have chosen themselves might be understood. While the concepts put forth are immensely useful, the following chapters will examine the role of the female victim from a different angle, one in which Bataille provides an opportunity to read female corporeality in the New French Extremity as evoking a way out of patriarchy. The films of the New French Extremity that I am analyzing in this thesis, although seemingly indulging in the spectacle of pain, often demonstrate that the female body can transcend the *expérience extrême* and emerge on the other side as a transformed

character. In the days of the Final Girl, the female character was previously represented in rather simplistic terms, as a character who, realizing that she must take charge of the situation, develops the confidence and strength to defeat the monster or oppressor. In the films of the New French Extremity, however, the female character does not only develop enough strength to oppose the monster, but also serves as a catalyst of abjection that frees the self of the patriarchal limitations of subjecthood. Not only does this entice our desires to lose ourselves in the abject, but it also allows for an escape of the patriarchal condition in which lived subjects follow.

Georges Bataille's Limit Experience (*Expérience Extrême*)

Much like his writing, Bataille was a somewhat obscure figure, as he was largely neglected during his lifetime, and also supported by several important intellectual figures such as Michel Leiris, Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Lacan, and Pierre Klossowski.⁵¹ After his death, however, he began to rise to popularity as a result of his scandalous literature. His capacity to disturb simultaneously attracted and repulsed both readers and theorists alike. Today, Bataille is recognized by many as one of the most important French intellectual and literary figures of the twentieth century.⁵² Bataille was the founder of several journals and literary groups, and produced a diverse body of work including books, readings, poems, and essays on innumerable subjects. Best known as a writer of erotic fiction, Bataille's work centers upon the topics of sex, death, degradation, bodily waste, and the obscene. However, due to the controversial nature of his literature, a portion of Bataille's work has been published under pseudonyms, and some were even banned under obscenity laws. Bataille's most famous text has remained his first, *The Story of the Eye*, which was

⁵¹ Benjamin Noys, *Georges Bataille: A Critical Introduction*. London: Pluto Press. (2000): 1.

⁵² Noys, 1.

originally published under the pseudonym Lord Auch in 1928.⁵³ Bataille rejects traditional literature and determines that the ultimate aim of all intellectual, artistic, or religious activity should be the annihilation of the rational individual in a violent, transcendental act of communion.⁵⁴

Bataille has garnered a reputation as the “prophet of transgression”.⁵⁵ This is because, for Bataille, transgression is a desire that is created by the taboo. According to Cynthia Hendershot, Bataille considers the taboo as giving transgression a value it would not possess outside of its relationship to the taboo.⁵⁶ Bataille argues that transgression is something that is unique to human existence because of human’s creation of taboos. While taboos develop and maintain order within society, they also provide a space for transgression to flourish. Since limitations are imposed by the taboo, transgression becomes appealing. For instance, Bataille suggests that the taboo makes violence forbidden, but also provides a possibility for violence to erupt.⁵⁷ Bataille contends that it is the emotional experience of terror and horror that allows for transgression to gain value, stating: “the forbidden action takes on a significance it lacks before fear widens the gap between us and it and invests with it an aura of excitement.”⁵⁸ This directly relates to my thesis, and the horror genre as a whole. The films I am studying, like their predecessors, are engineered with the goal to incite fear, which then empowers and excites transgression. Moreover, what is unique about

⁵³ *Story of the Eye* details the bizarre sexual perversions of a pair of teenage lovers, which include rape, necrophilia, coprophilia, fetish objects (particularly eggs and eyeballs), and more. It is narrated by a young man looking back on his exploits.

⁵⁴ N.A. “Georges Bataille” *GoodReads*. Online webpage available at: http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/20842.Georges_Bataille

⁵⁵ N.A. “Georges Bataille” *GoodReads*. Online webpage available at: http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/20842.Georges_Bataille

⁵⁶ Cynthia Hendershot, *I Was a Cold War Monster: Horror Films, Eroticism, and the Cold War Imagination*. Ohio: Bowling Green State University Press. (2001): 25.

⁵⁷ Hendershot, 25.

⁵⁸ Hendershot, 25.

Bataille's theories of transgression and the taboo is that he does not position them as undermining each other. Instead, they complete and validate each other. Although the taboo makes the act of transgression attractive, it also reinforces the power of the taboo. Bataille considers death, eroticism, cannibalism, sacrifice, bodily waste, and more as acts of transgression. However, the ultimate constitution of transgression is violence. The transition to different states, both experienced during the violence of death and eroticism disturbs the calm world. Bataille sees the loss of self as being paramount in such violent transgressive acts. This is because Bataille perceives transgression as an act of sacrifice since it is an attempt to eliminate individuality in favour of continuity beyond the self.⁵⁹ This will be of significance in the next chapter, which looks at the act of transfiguration in *Martyrs* as the process of letting go of one's subjectivity to reach a continuity of being beyond death.

Bataille's controversial writings often focus upon the convergence of eroticism and its link with our understanding of violence and death. For instance, Bataille sees the violence of eroticism and death as being similar transgressive acts, stating: "the lover strips the beloved of her identity no less than the blood stained priest his animal or victim."⁶⁰ Bataille considers eroticism as the mediation between life and death, defining it as "ascending to life up to the point of death."⁶¹ Only in this state of eroticism, according to Bataille, is when an individual truly knows themselves. Bataille contends that birth and death meet in the erotic sexual act and perceives death as the avenue from "discontinuous" individual being to the

⁵⁹ Hendershot, 26.

⁶⁰ Hendershot, 26.

⁶¹ Georges Bataille, *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*. New York: Walker and Company. (1962): 11.

“continuity” of being.⁶² While human beings are finite, Bataille also argues that there is a continuity of existence that is both independent and proved by death. Likewise, while both humans and animals engage in sexual activity for the goal of reproduction, Bataille determines that eroticism departs from natural sexual activity, wherein the goal is reproduction and the desire to bear a child. While erotic activity is correlated with life, it is also independent from reproduction and also shares a relationship to death.⁶³ In doing so, the connection between reproduction and death becomes the dominant element in eroticism. Writing on obscene cinema, Peter Michelson argues that eroticism transcends animal sexuality because it carries the consciousness of transgression. While the taboo represents the profane world of productive social order, eroticism’s dependence on transgression means that it is also a flirtation with death. This directly correlates to the films I have chosen to study because they signify eroticism through their emphasis on the transgression of the female body and its journey towards death.

Bearing close resemblance to Kristeva’s notion of the abject, Bataille writes that eroticism is the exemplary means of achieving what he calls “limit experience” (also known as the *expérience extrême*) because it, “entails a breaking down of... the established patterns... of the regulated social order basic to our discontinuous mode of existence as defined and separate individuals.”⁶⁴ Building off such arguments, it is crucial to consider Bataille’s concept of the *expérience extrême* in discussions of female corporeality in the New French Extremity. The *expérience extrême* was detailed in Bataille’s book titled *L’expérience Intérieure* (1943), which was his first lengthy philosophical treatise. Bataille considers experience as putting what an

⁶² Peter Michelson, *Speaking the Unspeakable: A Poetics of Obscenity*. Albany: State University of New York Press. (1993): 269.

⁶³ Bataille, 11.

⁶⁴ Bataille, 18.

individual knows of being “into question” or “to the test.”⁶⁵ Bataille’s literature posits that the point of life lies as closely as possible to the impossibility of living.⁶⁶ This experience occurs on a voyage to the end of the possibility of man, making the *expérience extrême* the process that allows for insights into life as it approaches death.⁶⁷ Experience is, therefore, achieved in the fusion of the object and subject, being as a subject of non-knowledge, as an object of the unknown, which is attained as, “an extremity of the possible.”⁶⁸ This concept is particularly useful in relation to the New French Extremity because the horrific scenarios they present push the female protagonists as close as possible to the limit between life and death and to the point where subjectivity dissipates. It is precisely in these moments, as I will argue in the following chapters, that the films’ feminism lies.

Georges Bataille and Feminist Theory

Scholars such as Paul Hegarty have argued that Bataille offers a masculine philosophy that focuses upon death and is, “still within the orbit of a desire to control, insofar as woman comes to stand in as part of the other for man.”⁶⁹ Seeing that some contend that Bataille reinforces masculine sexual binaries in his work, it is relevant to investigate what has been previously written about the correlation between Bataille and sexual difference, and how his literature can also be perceived from alternative perspectives that depart from Hegarty. This will help situate the correlation between Bataille and my thesis project, illustrating the relevance of this theoretical approach to a feminist film reading. It is significant to acknowledge the limitations of the

⁶⁵ Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, State University of New York Press: Albany. (1954): 4.

⁶⁶ Noys, 3.

⁶⁷ Bataille, *Inner Experience*, 7.

⁶⁸ Bataille, *Inner Experience*, 9.

⁶⁹ Paul Hegarty, *Georges Bataille: Core Cultural Theorist*, California: Sage Publications. (2000): 64.

remainder of this chapter, as a lot has been written upon the treatment of gender in Bataille's work. Since Bataille was interested in a variety of topics such as literature, philosophy, anthropology, economics, sociology, and art history, I have chosen the following scholarship based on those that aligned more closely to his concept of the *expérience extrême* and my analysis of gender representations in *Inside, Martyrs, Trouble Every Day*, and *In My Skin*. Much more could be said on the topic, but in the interest of concision, I must limit my discussion to a few especially relevant commentaries.

First, Susan Robin Suleiman's "Transgression and the Avant-Garde: Bataille's Histoire de L'oeil" examines feminist critiques of Bataille's literary pornography, including Andrea Dworkin's dismissal of *Story of the Eye*. Dworkin, who I will return to in chapter three, begins her attack by equating Bataille's narratives to pulp pornography, positing that Bataille has obscured the meaning of force in sex.⁷⁰ However, Suleiman disagrees and positions that Dworkin's arguments are less than satisfying because she reads "too quickly" to get to the core of the text and fails to account for the subtleties of Bataille's fictions.⁷¹ Instead, Suleiman determines that transgression in Bataille's fiction is always played out in relation to the female body.⁷² This is because the female form embodies the coexistence of transgression and prohibition (and also purity and defilement), which characterizes the inner experience of eroticism and the textual play of the pornographic narrative.⁷³ This is primary exemplified through the figure of the mother in Bataille's literature, which is represented as the ultimate site of transgression. The mother is a site of either

⁷⁰ Susan Robin Suleiman, "Transgression and the Avant-Garde: Bataille's Histoire de L'oeil," *On Bataille: Critical Essays*, State University of New York Press: New York. (1995): 322.

⁷¹ Suleiman, 322.

⁷² Suleiman, 327.

⁷³ Suleiman, 327.

desire or fixation by the child, yet these desires cannot be acted upon. Suleiman also suggests that the male protagonists in Bataille's narratives are often split between passive and active roles. In conducting a careful reading of Bataille's texts, Suleiman posits that Bataille's pornographic fictions should not be considered along the same lines as pulp and trashy magazines, arguing that the departure between them is precisely the difference between blindness and insight.⁷⁴ The notion that transgression and the female body are closely related is central to my reading of films of the New French Extremity, for they situate transcendence at the very edge of what women can physically experience.

In addition, Zeynep Direk's "Erotic Experience and Sexual Difference in Bataille" touches on the relationship between Bataille, sexual difference, and Luce Irigaray's feminist theories. Direk begins by determining that the problem of eroticism cannot be separated from our differing relation to the heteronormative symbolic order, which conceives of desire as always male, and distributes us in terms of heterosexuality.⁷⁵ Direk questions whether sexual difference can ever appear beyond the binary division of heterosexual male and female. To answer this, he turns to Irigaray's *This Sex Which is Not One*, which argues that there is only one sex and that the other sex is not "one" and does not appear in the phallographic economy of signification that belongs to Western culture.⁷⁶ The subject of this symbolic order is always male, and woman is represented as the other of man. This reduces the feminine sexual difference to a defect, lack, or deviation. Direk suggests that this feminine sexual difference may only be brought back to life by following its traces in different discourses. Direk uses Bataille to do so, arguing that Bataille's economy of

⁷⁴ Suleiman, 328.

⁷⁵ Zeynep Direk, "Erotic Experience and Sexual Difference in Bataille," *Reading Bataille Now*, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press. (2007): 102.

⁷⁶ Direk, 102.

being provides an ontological ground for talking about the obliterated feminine sexual difference.⁷⁷

Direk determines that erotic experience can be considered as the transgression of the prohibitions that regulate heterosexual gender identities. Direk posits that despite the sexist elements that are evident in Bataille's work, he provides us with a rich account of "eros" that rethinks sexual differentiation through intimate communication with others.⁷⁸ Bataille's perspective of eroticism implies that perversion is not a deviation from heterosexual nature, but is the "overcoming of the alienation and servility that restrict the possibilities of intimate communication between bodies that are dynamically and communicatively sexed."⁷⁹ When such an intimacy occurs, it suspends the heterosexual gender identities imposed by patriarchy's binary split between male self and female other and lets the differences freely express their own excess energy in communication with each other.⁸⁰ Direk also considers how Bataille does not privilege the figure of woman as virgin, wife, and mother in his literature. Rather, he is interested in feminine figures that break with traditional morality, depicting female sexual difference in its erased, prohibited, and queer dimensions, characteristics that are also reflected in the films I have chosen to study. Bataille's writing does not reaffirm heterosexual normativity, but instead reveal that it is fortuitous and can facilitate the possibility of an insubordinate feminine sexual freedom. Direk also ponders the possibility of an "ethics of eros" in Bataille, arguing that although such ethics could not administer laws or rules, it can nurture equality among bodies engaged in erotic acts.⁸¹ Conversely, no "ethics of

⁷⁷ Direk, 103.

⁷⁸ Direk, 105.

⁷⁹ Direk, 104.

⁸⁰ Direk, 104.

⁸¹ Direk, 108.

eros” is possible if sexual difference cannot be instituted beyond Irigaray’s notion of one sex.⁸² Eroticism can be ethical only when it succeeds in erasing the binary or hierarchy between male and female, master and slave, through an experience of genuine communion among bodies and subject.

Since sexuality is central to Bataille’s fictions and theories on eroticism, questions of sexual politics are at the core of his work. Andrew Kingston’s “Bataille and Feminist Theory” attempts to consider Bataille in conjunction with a feminist point of view to highlight how his writings point beyond the restricted sexual economy through which it is usually interpreted.⁸³ Kingston posits that Bataille’s work challenges the reader’s own sexual categories and demands an understanding in which the feminine and the masculine are subordinated to the experience of eroticism. Kingston first discusses previous critiques put forth regarding the figure of the prostitute in Bataille’s writing. Although one can consider the prostitute as an economically objectified woman in Bataille’s fiction, she is the erotic object par excellence. To investigate this, Kingston turns to Bataille’s *Madame Edwarda*, which is about a prostitute who considers herself to be god. For Kingston, “the prostitute is God here because she is simultaneously an object of desire and equally indifferent to that desire. She is both plenitude and impossibility, taking on the shape of an object, and yet by doing so rendering that very objectification meaningless.”⁸⁴ Kingston sees that the prostitute results in the sliding of the male subject and his economies of signification. With this in mind, Kingston argues that to reduce the status of women in Bataille’s works to victims of sexism, fails to consider the role they play as ruptures in the phallographic sexual symbolism of traditional cultural binaries. Women in

⁸² Direk, 108.

⁸³ Andrew Kingston, *Bataille and Feminist Theory*. (2014). Online article available at: www.andrewkingston.name/essays/bataille-and-feminism/

⁸⁴ Kingston.

Bataille also frequently challenge the roles set aside for them as women, sliding between sexual categories. As a result, Kingston questions the possibility that Bataille casts women in the role of the queer, determining that it is possible to find points at which the feminine operates as an interruption of sexual identity as opposed to masculine self-affirmation. Again, these concepts will prove instrumental in my analysis of New French Extremity films, as they trace a direct link between the female-body and god-like transcendence of the mundane and narrow parameters of masculine identity and patriarchal society.

Lastly, Kingston also considers notions of visibility in connection to Bataille and Irigaray. Authors such as Suzanne Guerlac criticize the visual role that women play in Bataille's eroticism, noting that they act as a mirror that reflects and affirms the male reader. In making this claim, she uses Irigaray's argument that women embody a similar role in Freud's writing, wherein they are subjected to a masculine visibility. The female clitoris is perceived as an underdeveloped phallus that cannot be seen as one and leaves a blank screen upon which man can project his own phallus. From this perspective, women serve to negatively confirm the masculine identity without having identities themselves. Women are, therefore, deemed to be merely the visual object that men look at. Kingston highlights how Guerlac fails to acknowledge that Irigaray wishes to disrupt this visibility and looks to Bataille to do so. Kingston discusses how Irigaray's reading of Bataille's *Story of the Eye* acts as a critique of the subordination of women to the symbolic hierarchies of visibility. Irigaray determines that the erotic object in Bataille's work cannot be properly read without a prior altering of the sexual categories through which the reader interprets their own sexuality. Thus, for Irigaray, women in Bataille's works distort visibility. This is illustrated in *Story of the Eye*, where the main female character Simone inserts a dead

priest's eye into her vagina. Even on the inside, the eye is unable to take in the whole of the female sexual form. Rather than the woman being made to mirror the man in her lack of a phallus, which allows the male gaze to turn her into the phallus to-be-looked-at, the female sexual form absorbs visibility. This act turns the male gaze upon itself and leaves the spectator in a feminine internal darkness.⁸⁵ Building off this, Kingston argues that the feminine for Bataille is more than a vehicle for the masculine self-conscious, and provides a sense of disorientation to the sexual categories through which male and female are understood by patriarchy.⁸⁶ I will return to the concept of visibility, Irigaray, and sexual difference throughout this thesis, particularly when I address the visual component of New French Extremity films in chapter three.

Conclusion

While some have argued that Bataille's work is sexist and focuses on the masculine perspective, the figure of the woman is key in his literature and its desire to question the formulation of society and the constraints placed upon the free will of the individual.⁸⁷ Stemming from this, Bataille regards the feminine as the locus where subjectivity disappears. According to Cathy MacGregor, "the abyss of the tension between being oneself/being other and the interlinking of the two is the basis for many of Bataille's novels."⁸⁸ This exploration is conflated with the use of the feminine as metaphor, a common trope within his literature. Transgression in Bataille becomes ritual by which the subject exceeds the boundaries of everyday life and becomes a conscious performance of the violation of social norms. This is

⁸⁵ Andrew Kingston, *Bataille and Feminist Theory*. (2014) www.andrewkingston.name/essays/bataille-and-feminism/

⁸⁶ Kingston.

⁸⁷ Cathy MacGregor, "The Eye of the Storm – Female Representation in Bataille's Madame Edwarda and Histoire de L'oeil," *The Beast at Heaven's Gate*. (2006): 101.

⁸⁸ MacGregor, 101.

exemplified in the murder of the priest Don Aminado in *Story of the Eye*. The description of this episode in the novel is a mixture of uncontrollable frenzy and bodily order that becomes completely confused and disorganized, representing the de-territorialisation of the subject.⁸⁹ The notion of witnessing this transgression within the female body becomes key in Bataille's writing. The female body is transformed from a passive object to an active site of transgressive horror and as Macgregor states, "goes beyond the boundaries of social experience and then come[s] back to bear witness."⁹⁰ For Bataille, woman is the marker of difference and the site upon which transgression appears. The moments of witnessing transgression for the male protagonists are also moments of opening up the possibility of becoming other.⁹¹ Similar to the scenarios Bataille subjects his female protagonists to, the films of the New French Extremity also privilege the female body as the ultimate site of transgression where subjectivity dissipates. Consequently, my methodological approach in applying Bataille to the women of the New French Extremity is a relevant framework for analyzing this breed of ultraviolent horror films.

The aim of this chapter was to outline the existing scholarship on gender and horror as theorized by influential figures such as Mulvey, Clover, Pinedo, Williams, Kristeva, and Creed. Such theorists offer unique methods for articulating how women have been represented in the horror genre, as well as the alternative ways in which women in horror can be perceived. Building off this literature review, I will examine the figure of woman in horror from an entirely new perspective lead by Bataille. In analyzing what has previously been written upon the topic of gender in the horror genre, it becomes clear that phallogentric ideology is infatuated with boundaries,

⁸⁹ MacGregor, 102.

⁹⁰ MacGregor, 103.

⁹¹ MacGregor, 108.

particularly in regards to sexual difference. In chapter two and three I hope to demonstrate that the New French Extremity films I have chosen challenge these misogynistic gender binaries, and instead situate the female experience as an escape from such limitations. In addition, building off Suleiman, Derik, and Kingston's literature, it also becomes clear that Bataille's work is useful in a feminist analysis in general, and of the New French Extremity films I have chosen in particular. In turn, although some have rejected *Inside*, *Martyrs*, *Trouble Every Day*, and *In My Skin* as oppressive films in a similar vein as Bataille, both lend themselves quite nicely to a feminist reading of gender representations.

Breaking Boundaries: *Inside* and *Martyrs* as Metaphors for the Undoing of Patriarchy

“Man endures pain as an undeserved punishment; woman accepts it as a natural heritage.” – Anonymous

Alexandre Bustillo and Julien Maury’s *Inside* and Pascale Laugier’s *Martyrs* have been established as two of the most controversial and gruesome French horror films of recent years. Both films often provoke extreme responses, and some have even claimed that they are just spectacles of sexism. For instance, in an online review of *Martyrs*, R.J. Sayer posted a comment claiming, “MARTYRS is a FASCIST film. A MISOGYNIST, FASCIST film.”⁹² While most New French Extremity films deal with the female body in subversive ways, *Inside* and *Martyrs* both push the limits of obscenity and present dizzying images of violence performed upon the female body that are deemed unacceptable in mainstream cinema. What is specific to these films are their exclusive representations of female victimhood, which explicitly center upon the wounded and suffering female body. However, rather than an attempt to erase or dismiss these films as pure shock and exploitation, I will conduct a textual analysis of *Inside* and *Martyrs* to register the possibility that these films go beyond misogynistic tales of female victimization. Although *Inside* and *Martyrs* contain images of violence against women and are both directed by men, I argue that the potential sexism of these films is undermined by the ways in which they use the female experience as a means to symbolize Bataille’s *expérience extrême*. This situates the female protagonists in positions of privilege wherein they serve as a solution for a male perspective that wants to escape its patriarchal condition.

Final Girls vs. Femme Finales

⁹² Peter Hall, “Review: MARTYRS,” *Horror’s Not Dead*. (2008). Online review available at <http://horrorsnotdead.com/wp/2009/review-martyrs/>

Before an analysis of *Inside* and *Martyrs* can be conducted, it is relevant to first acknowledge that while these films include female centered narratives, they are not presenting Final Girls in the traditional sense. In order to differentiate the women of the New French Extremity from Clover's Final Girls, I will begin this chapter by briefly investigating the notorious plot twist in Alexandre Aja's *High Tension*. *High Tension* acts as a compelling bridge between Clover's concept and the films I will be analyzing because it both falls under the New French Extremity movement and directly plays upon the Final Girl trope. The last fifteen minutes of the film also effectively opens up to what I will be talking about in this chapter, as it moves towards a different discourse away from heterosexual violence. I will begin this chapter by highlighting the key differences between Clover's Final Girls and the female protagonists in the New French Extremity movement. In this sense, I will describe what the female protagonists I am studying are not before moving onto *Inside* and *Martyrs*, which utilizes the *expérience extrême* to illustrate what Elliott Burton determines as, "a woman's high pain threshold being pushed to dizzying new heights that no man in film could possibly hope to withstand."⁹³

High Tension, also titled *Haute Tension* or *Switchblade Romance*, depending on whether the film was released in North America, France, or the United Kingdom, infused new blood into the horror genre by returning to the formula of American slasher films of the 1970s.⁹⁴ With the French countryside acting as a stand in for Camp Crystal Lake or the back roads of Texas, *High Tension* begins with best friends Marie (Cécile De France) and Alex (Maïwenn Le Besco) traveling to Alex's family

⁹³ Elliott Burton, "Control of the Knife: Transgressing Gender Stereotypes in Bustillo and Maury's *Inside*," *Offscreen*. Vol. 18 (6-7). (2014). Online article available at: <http://offscreen.com/view/control-of-the-knife>

⁹⁴ Steven Schneider, *101 Horror Movies You Must See Before You Die*. London: Quintessence. (2009): 393.

home while on study break.⁹⁵ The terror begins when the doorbell rings and a psychotic killer referred to as “Le Tueur” (“The Killer”) (Philippe Nahon) enters the home. One by one, Le Tueur brutally murders all of Alex’s family and takes her captive in the back of his truck. Marie, who has been hiding during the carnage, begins a game of cat and mouse with Le Tueur and attempts to rescue Alex. It is revealed, however, that Le Tueur is not the male figure the audience has come to witness throughout the film, but Marie herself on account of her lesbian desires for Alex.⁹⁶ The film closes on a shot of Marie in a psychiatric hospital, watching Alex through a one-way mirror. Marie eerily grins and reaches for Alex, illustrating the degree to which her psychosis has taken over.

The functions of Marie’s two selves align in an atypical monster/Final Girl structure. Prior to the film’s twist, Marie is positioned as the victim-hero in the way she out-survives the other characters and faces Le Tueur at the end of the film. As a result, Marie can be considered as the film’s Final Girl (or perhaps a chainsaw wielding femme finale on cocaine). She also embodies many of the characteristics outlined by Clover such as a “boyish” masculinity, paranoia, and her level of resourcefulness. However, when it is revealed that Marie is the murderer, she becomes the agent of extreme violence as well. Marie’s two selves embody Clover’s claim that the Final Girl, “rise[s] against the forces of monstrosity surrounding her, but to do this she becomes the monster as well.”⁹⁷ Marie becomes monstrous not only to survive as the Final Girl, but is also revealed to be the film’s monster as well. In

⁹⁵ Keith Phipps, “High Tension,” *AV Club*. (2005). Online article available at: <http://www.avclub.com/review/high-tension-4497>

⁹⁶ French filmmaker Luc Besson is an unaccredited co-producer on *High Tension* and helped influence the way the true identity of the killer was revealed. It has also been claimed that *High Tension* is an authorized rip-off of Dean Koontz’s novel *Intensity*, with many similar scenes.

⁹⁷ Carol Clover, *Men Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press. (1993): 35.

exposing that Marie is the seemingly male killer, the film alludes to Clover's suggestion that the only way the Final Girl is able to defeat or escape the monster is by taking on male characteristics. Similarly, one of the key components that Clover ascribes to the final girl is that she must be a virgin and not sexually active. The most common interpretation of *High Tension*'s twist is that Marie splits her personality at the beginning of the film when she is seen thinking about Alex and masturbating.⁹⁸ No longer able to control her lesbian desires for Alex (which have not yet been acted upon), Marie has to manifest a male figure to carry out her urges and destroy everything that could keep them apart.⁹⁹ Marie is not only positioned as the film's surviving female character, but it is clear that her transition from victim to monster also personifies many of Clover's claims surrounding the Final Girl.

That being said, while Marie reflects many of the Final Girl qualities outlined by Clover, she also illustrates the differences between Clover's concept and the women of the New French Extremity as well. According to Alexandra West, normalcy is often restored at the end of the slasher film and the Final Girl returns to a feminized state with the arrival of patriarchal male characters such as doctors and police officers.¹⁰⁰ West also determines that normalcy and power structures are almost never revived at the end of New French Extremity films, as is exemplified in *High Tension*. The film ends with Marie institutionalized and reaching for Alex through the glass window. It is here where the possibility for normalcy is shattered. Clover argues that the last moments of the Final Girl sequence is crucial, stating, "[it]

⁹⁸ Alexandra West, "Fille Final: The Final Girl in New French Extremity" *Offscreen*. Vol. 18 (6-7). 2014. Online article available at: <http://offscreen.com/view/fille-finale>

⁹⁹ This largely builds upon Robin Wood's theory of the "Returned of the Repressed," in which he determines that what is suppressed in society (race, sexuality, children, religion, etc.) comes back in the horror film in the form of the monster. In this case, because Marie has repressed her sexual desires for Alex, it is manifested in the film as a murderous monster that stalks and kills the characters in the film.

¹⁰⁰ West.

is finally a footnote to what went before, to the quality of the Final Girl's fight, and more generally to the qualities of character that enable her, of all the characters, to survive what has come to seem unsurvivable."¹⁰¹ However, Marie and Alex's worlds are irrecoverable at the end of the film. Alex has lost her family and Marie has completely descended into madness. West argues that in a more traditional representation of the Final Girl, Marie would have subdued Le Tueur, possibly saved Alex, and been able to revert to her previous feminine state.¹⁰² Marie does not find the strength to defeat her oppressor, nor does she provide any of the usual payoffs or resolutions common to the horror genre. Instead, the Final Girl is subverted in some way, and as West argues, the good in the New French Extremity are punished and the monster is a part of their lives.¹⁰³ Despite surviving, the female protagonists still lose, they are hunted, tortured, and their bodies and spirits left broken.¹⁰⁴ *High Tension* (as well as most other New French Extremity films) concludes rather ambiguously by leaving its femme finale in a world where, "surviving does not mean a happy ending."¹⁰⁵

High Tension's twist also reveals that a woman has committed the atrocities in the film, and thus, includes scenes of implied female-on-female violence between Marie and herself (Le Tueur) as well as Marie and Alex. This forces the audience to reinterpret the brutality represented in the film, as it is not the same as the violence perpetrated by serial killers such as Jason Voorhees or Freddie Kruger in the slasher subgenre. Stephen Neale argues that in typical slasher films, "most monsters tend, in fact, to be defined as "male," especially in so far as the objects of desire are almost

¹⁰¹ Clover, 40.

¹⁰² West.

¹⁰³ West.

¹⁰⁴ Shyla Fairfax, *Women in Slashers Then and Now: Survival, Trauma and the Diminishing Power of the Close-Up*. (2014): 16.

¹⁰⁵ West.

exclusively women.”¹⁰⁶ *High Tension* transitions away from these misogynistic modes of male-on-female violence by including a female perpetrator. While *High Tension* partially deviates from degrading representations of women who need to fight to survive at the hands of male abusers, it is still problematic in the way it perpetuates homophobic anxieties and sexualizes the violence represented in the film. Especially problematic here is the sexualization of the violence, which is paralleled by the objectification of the female body. The victimization of women through the use of phallic weaponry arguably creates an atmosphere that reflects the value of women solely as what Laura Mulvey would call their “to-be-looked-at-ness.”¹⁰⁷ This becomes clear in the last fifteen minutes of the film after Marie is revealed to be the killer. Marie (who is represented as Le Tueur) chases Alex through a forest with a saw in hand. Alex manages to flag down an oncoming car, but Marie gruesomely murders the individual before he can help. Marie (who is now represented as her feminine self) approaches Alex and begins to passionately kiss and caress her blood-drenched face. This scene is unsettling because it not only presents a queer character as a crazed psychopathic killer, but also sexualizes the violence in the film by having Marie erotically embrace her female friend (and victim). Although *High Tension* effectively bridges Clover’s concept of the Final Girl with the protagonists of the New French Extremity and departs from heterosexual modes of male on female violence, I will secede from *High Tension* to look at the films of the movement that focus upon the female embodiment of Bataille’s *expérience extrême* as a means to signify an alternative to patriarchy.

***Inside* (Bustillo and Maury, 2007)**

¹⁰⁶ Stephen Neale, “Questions of Genre,” *Screen*. Vol. 31(1). (1980): 61

¹⁰⁷ Fairfax, 2.

To begin my analysis, I will first look at Bustillo and Maury's directorial debut *Inside*. Despite the extreme reactions *Inside* elicited upon release, it has also been particularly well received among horror film critics and audiences. For instance, *ESplatter* reviewer Lucius Gore stated, "I dare call 'Inside' a classic because it is such a damn good horror movie. It also happens to be one of the bloodiest things ever produced – anywhere."¹⁰⁸ *Inside* opens with car crash, of which Sarah (Alysson Paradis) and her unborn child are the only survivors (or so we are lead to believe). Several months later on Christmas Eve, Sarah stays home and prepares for her delivery the next day. That evening, a mysterious woman known as "La Femme" (Béatrice Dalle) arrives at Sarah's door asking to use her phone. When Sarah refuses, La Femme tries to force her way into the house. Sarah calls the police, who arrange to have a patrol car visit throughout the night. When Sarah falls back to sleep, La Femme breaks into her bedroom and tries to Caesarean her unborn baby with scissors. Sarah manages to escape and locks herself in the bathroom. La Femme torments her throughout the night and kills anyone who tries to stop her. When the police finally arrive to check up as promised earlier, La Femme answers the door and not knowing what Sarah looks like, the police take her word that she is Sarah and everything is fine. Just as they are about to leave, an officer realizes the woman who answered the door was not pregnant as was described by the dispatcher. They enter the home, but are immediately murdered by La Femme. Sarah and La Femme are left in a final confrontation. During their struggle, La Femme reveals that she was in the other car during the accident and lost her baby on impact. The two are then interrupted by the revival of one of the police officers, who after suffering from brain damage, confuses Sarah for La Femme and strikes her stomach with his baton. Desperate to save the

¹⁰⁸ Lucius Gore, "Inside Review," *ESplatter*. (2008). Online review available at: <http://www.esplatter.com/reviews.php?id=805>

baby, La Femme performs a Caesarean section on Sarah. Sarah dies in the process, and the film ends with La Femme holding the newborn child.

Inside is a highly visceral film, and the pain and brutality that La Femme forces upon Sarah is the most severe form of violence against woman imaginable; abuse towards the pregnant female body. In doing so, *Inside* investigates what the female body as the site of life can tolerate. One of the ways Bustillo and Maury approach this is by visually illustrating the liminal space between the mother's body and the body of the fetus. In the first scene where La Femme tries to take Sarah's baby, the camera shows her piercing Sarah's stomach with the blade of her scissors. The camera then cuts to a shot of the fetus struggling inside her during the assault. This sequence symbolizes a notion of extremity. That is, the extreme limit of where the body of the mother ends and the body of the fetus begins. Throughout the film, La Femme acts as the agent of the *expérience extrême* through the cruelty she exhibits upon Sarah. These violent acts include piercing her hand with scissors, slashing her face with a knife, abusing her throughout the night, and tearing her stomach open to take her child. Sarah, in turn, becomes the site of the *expérience extrême*, as her pregnant body is pushed to the extreme limit of what it can withstand before she eventually reaches death. The concept of motherly interiority in the film provides a metaphor for the unique role of the female body in exploring the extreme limit between life and death, as is represented in the death of Sarah and the life of the fetus. It is through the extreme pain and the eventual death of the maternal body that the life of the fetus is possible in *Inside*. The copious amount of blood that is expelled from Sarah's body also signifies her clinging to life as she approaches the end of living. While *Inside's* narrative centers upon the spectacle of Sarah's victimization, I will illustrate that the film offers feminist potential in the way it uses the female

experience as the catalyst to the *expérience extrême* and abjection, which become metaphors for the undoing of patriarchy.

Inside begins with a narrative that is common to the horror genre: a woman being hunted and provoked by a psychopathic killer. Yet, Bustillo and Maury do not present the typical male monster/female victim dichotomy that is common in the genre. Instead, Bustillo and Maury deviate from this narrative trope by offering a violent furor of female-on-female violence. Whilst one could argue that the representations of violence against a female character is problematic, I contend that in order to present an erasure of patriarchy as will be argued throughout this chapter, then the perpetrator in *Inside* must be a woman. If “La Femme” were changed to “L’Homme” the film would fall more in line with the slasher film, which often reinforces degrading representations of violence that is overwhelmingly directed at women. In addition, although actual cases of female-on-female violence do exist in reality and should not be dismissed or ignored, they are far less common than incidents of male-on-female violence. In having a female perpetrator, *Inside* not only rejects common horror film conventions, but Bustillo and Maury also dissociate the violence portrayed in the film from the very real and problematic discourse of domestic abuse and male violence against women.

While I have argued above that representations of sexual violence are problematic in horror, it should be acknowledged that both *Inside* and *Martyrs* include homosexual content. Both films include moments wherein the female characters erotically embrace and kiss one another. For instance, in *Inside* La Femme kisses Sarah while she is laying on her bed. However, these representations differ from traditional modes of sexualized violence in the way violence is not committed as a result of their sexuality, as seen in films like *High Tension*. In addition, the fantastical

figure of La Femme further abstracts *Inside* from the socio-political problem of real violence against women. La Femme is not given a name, but is an abstract figure labeled as “The Woman”. Her motive in the film is also quite outlandish, since wanting to take someone’s unborn child is inconceivable by the values and morals established in today’s social order. This is affirmed early on and implies that the remainder of the film is not going to be rational or realistic. La Femme also attacks the male characters in the film in over the top ways. Even though the police officers have guns, tasers, and batons that would easily defeat such a criminal in the real world, La Femme is effortlessly able to defeat the officers that try to stop her. Bustillo and Maury deliberately portray La Femme as a bizarre and exaggerated female killer to disassociate from the real horrors of male violence against women and systematically signify a message of erased patriarchy.

Sarah and La Femme further challenge traditional depictions of the victim/monster dichotomy in the horror genre through the way the audience is able (or not able) to emotionally identify with them. At first glance, one might want to identify with Sarah, the film’s supposed protagonist in a similar vein as the Final Girl. She is the film’s victim-hero and the audience watches her as she repeatedly tries to fight back against La Femme’s attacks. Despite this, Sarah is by no means a likeable protagonist that the audience could emotionally identify with or perhaps even root for. Instead, she is cold and distant throughout the film. Bustillo and Maury emphasize this by presenting her as a mother who does not want her child. Barbara Creed argues that the mother-child relationship evokes Julia Kristeva’s notion of abjection in the way it is marked by conflict. Creed highlights that while the child typically struggles to break free from the maternal hold, the mother is often reluctant to release it.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis*.

However, *Inside* takes this a step further and elicits the abject by presenting a mother who rejects her child before it is even born. This is highly unimaginable, since society commonly associates the maternal figure as a site of unconditional love. This makes Sarah appear abject and monstrous, but in a way that is strikingly different from the usual depiction of the monstrous-feminine in conventional horror, complicating the viewer's sympathy for her as the film's victim. Rather, it is the film's monster that desperately wants the child. The spectator, therefore, becomes more inclined to sympathize with La Femme because she is a mother who is unable to cope with the tragic loss of her child. While La Femme takes extreme measures to attack Sarah, she makes a conscious effort to ensure no harm comes the child. For instance, when one of the police officers awakes in a last gasp of life, he assaults Sarah, mistaking her for La Femme. Using a stun gun, La Femme performs a makeshift lobotomy on the young officer to save the baby.¹¹⁰ The extreme violence perpetrated by La Femme seems to be more meaningful and almost rationalized, blurring the binary between monster and victim.

Furthermore, harkening back to Kristeva, *Inside* directly explores the notion of the maternal body as the locus of the abject. In her analysis of the ways in which woman is constructed as abject in religious discourses, Kristeva examines the crucial change that occurred in the theorization of abjection with the advent of Christianity. Central to such teachings were a set of actions that challenge earlier prohibitions and categories of the unclean.¹¹¹ Whereas abjection was formulated in Judaism as a series of abominations external to the human subject, abjection is interiorized in

New York: Routledge. (1993): 11.

¹¹⁰ Burton.

¹¹¹ Creed, 13.

Christianity.¹¹² This outlook suggests that the abject develops from within the subject, rather than the outside. The dichotomy of pure/impure is therefore transformed into one of the inside/outside. Horror films that depict the maternal body play on the inside/outside distinction in order to point to the inherently monstrous nature of the womb as well as the impossibility of ever completely banishing the abject from the human domain.¹¹³ According to Creed, “the implication is that the abject can never be completely banished; if ‘inside’, the abject substance forms a lining for the outside; if ‘outside’, it forms a skin on the inside.”¹¹⁴ The womb represents the utmost form of abjection in the way it contains a new life form that will pass from inside to outside, bringing with it traces of its contamination such as blood, afterbirth, and feces. Bustillo and Maury directly explore this notion in *Inside* by presenting the maternal body as the ultimate site of abjection and horror.

Kristeva states that we are horrified by the abject because, “it is something that disgusts us, yet comes from us or from which we come.”¹¹⁵ *Inside* starts within the maternal body and transitions outwards. The opening credits roll over red fluids, which transitions into a shot of the fetus inside Sarah. It is a liminal place that we do not know, yet all once inhabited. The camera is able to penetrate the boundary between mother and fetus throughout the rest of the film. This is primarily evident when Sarah experiences violent trauma that directly affects the inside of her womb (as detailed above). La Femme also literally breaks this boundary by performing a Caesarean section on Sarah. Sarah is hours away from when she is due to provoke labor and has reached the extreme limit in her pregnancy. La Femme physically

¹¹² Creed, 12.

¹¹³ Creed, 13.

¹¹⁴ Creed, 13.

¹¹⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press. (1980): 4.

severs Sarah's skin and breaks the boundary between womb and fetus, but also the inside/outside divide. Her child does not simply pass through the inside to the outside, but is instead taken from within the inside by the outside. This act defies logic not only in its sheer horror, but also in its refusal to acknowledge birth as a process that respects the body's borders. This emphasis on the materiality of the body corresponds to Bataille, whose own works sought to effect such reactions. Writing on the material subject in "The Big Toe," Bataille notes humanity's, "hatred of the still painfully perceptible frenzy of the bloody palpitations of the body as man willingly imagines himself to be like the God Neptune."¹¹⁶ The moments when our bodies assert themselves through these involuntary palpitations make us conscious of our lived bodies.¹¹⁷ Kristeva argues that the place where meaning collapses is strongly associated with the mother. Building off this assumption, Bataille perceives the maternal female body as, "primarily a site of abjection where all meanings, particularly those made by masculine subjectivity, are under attack."¹¹⁸ The ability for the camera to see inside Sarah's womb returns the viewer to the place they once inhabited, while also presenting it as grotesque, dark, and soaked in blood, fluids, and unidentifiable tissue. This reintroduction into the womb through the outside does not abide by the borders of the body, but instead traumatically reminds us of what lies underneath the clean surface of the skin. This creates a collapse in meaning, one that challenges the very boarders of our subjectivity altogether.

Abjection is also apparent in the way Sarah's maternal body embodies Creed's concept of the monstrous-feminine. According to Jennings, "the female body, with its

¹¹⁶ Georges Bataille, "The Big Toe" (1929). Translated by Allan Stoekl, with Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie, Jr. Excerpted from the book *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings*. Minneapolis: UMP. (1985): 22

¹¹⁷ Kiva Reardon, "Subject Slaughter," *Cinephile*. Vol. 8 (2). 2012.

¹¹⁸ Cathy MacGregor, "The Eye of the Storm – Female Representation in Bataille's Madame Edwarda and Histoire de L'oeil," *The Beast at Heaven's Gate*. (2006): 104.

plethora of "mysterious" fluids, has generally been considered to be leakier and dirtier than the male body."¹¹⁹ This notion is developed on years of deeply ingrained misogyny and is explored in Sarah's character both through her maternal body and the fluids that discharge from her. In her discussion of the maternal body as the site of the abject, Creed suggests that it is the mother who educates the child about practices of defilement and the proper and improper body.¹²⁰ Creed relates this to toilet training as a primal mapping of the body, which teaches children about waste and excrement. *Inside* contradicts this by frequently presenting Sarah's maternal body as polluting and unclean, often involuntarily releasing fluids at any given moment. For instance, Sarah has a nightmare wherein she starts profusely vomiting milky white fluids and an infant-like figure. Also, when La Femme is tormenting Sarah from outside of the bathroom, her water breaks and causes a clear discharge to pour onto the floor. By the end of the film, Sarah's porcelain white skin is coated in bright red blood and fluids, making her appear grotesque and monstrous. *Inside* emits the abject because it threatens the borders of subjecthood with contamination and objects that inspire disgust, objects that are dirty, fluid, and sticky. This presents Sarah's body as a rejection of the basic orders and rules that are established by the mother in infancy, while also threatening the patriarchal assumption of the ideal female body: one that is thin, white, and clean.

Inside also distinctly uses the abject to refuse the typical ending of horror films. Creed determines that the central ideological preoccupation of the horror film is the purification of the abject through a descent into the foundations of the symbolic construct. Creed further states that horror films, "attempt to bring about a

¹¹⁹ Erin Jennings, *Erotic Body Horror: Dangerous Female Corporealities in Contemporary French Cinema*. (2008): 47.

¹²⁰ Creed, 12.

confrontation with the abject (the corpse, bodily waste, monstrous-feminine) in order to finally eject the abject and redraw the boundaries between human and non-human.”¹²¹ While *Inside* literally breaks the boundary between the inside/outside and evokes the abject through the maternal body, it does not redraw these boundaries as is expected in most horror films. After La Femme removes Sarah’s baby from her stomach, the film ends with Le Femme sitting in a rocking chair holding the newborn child. The walls behind her are ominous, dark, and soaked in blood, which resembles the imagery inside Sarah’s womb displayed earlier in the film. The boundaries of normalcy are not redrawn in this sequence, but are torn apart and descend deeper into the abject. This brings the spectator into the position of the *expérience extrême*. The viewer is not provided with the means to banish or reject the abject. Rather, the film’s conclusion leaves the audience exhausted, following the bloody spectacle they have just witnessed, and without any means to reassert the, “cognitive and physical control” over monstrosity that theorists such as Torben Grodal see as, “the explicit motivation for horror fiction.”¹²² Unable to make sense of the narrative according to the traditional conventions of horror films that are cognitively geared towards a “positive evaluation”¹²³ of the resolution of the tale of terror, the spectator is compelled to give up on their need for *meaningful* closure. This liberates the spectators from, “the urge to understand film as we understand language”¹²⁴ and allows them instead to indulge in their deep seeded desires to lose themselves in the abject by allowing it to flow freely without constraints. Read from this perspective,

¹²¹ Creed, 12.

¹²² Torben Grodal, *Moving Pictures: A New Theory of Film Genres, Feelings, and Cognition*. Oxford : Clarendon Press. (1997): 249.

¹²³ Grodal, 172.

¹²⁴ Bernd-Wolfgang Hoffmann, “An experimental study of learning and attitude change through film and of effects of music-montage interludes in a film.” Master Thesis. Madison: University of Wisconsin. (1979): 21.

this final juncture in *Inside* allows for a loss of subjectivity that occurs at the moment of transgression towards the *expérience extrême*. The baby can be seen as a metaphor for the film's conclusion. Much like how La Femme is left cradling this abject object, the audience is also left holding this viscerally abstract film freed from the constraints of subjecthood.

It has been illustrated above that *Inside* uses the female experience as a catalyst to abjection and the *expérience extrême*. While it is the suffering of Sarah's maternal body that brings her to this point, *Inside* can also be read as a feminist film because it presents a deliberate erasure of patriarchy. Although some male characters are present in the film such as Sarah's employer and police officers, they are positioned as secondary characters and are quickly expelled from the narrative by La Femme. The male character with the most screen time is Sarah's employer. The film implies that there is a romantic relationship between the two and he stops by Sarah's home after La Femme's initial visit to ensure she is all right. Upon entering the house, La Femme convinces him that she is Sarah's mother. When Sarah's mother actually arrives, he becomes suspicious and questions La Femme, but she stabs him to death before he can do anything. La Femme also murders the male police officers that try to rescue Sarah throughout the film. The damsel in distress trope has been reflected in some of the earliest horror films such as *Nosferatu* (Murnau, 1922), *King Kong* (Cooper and Schoedsack, 1933), and *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (Arnold, 1954), which forward the notion that women are the weaker sex and in need of rescue by a man. *Inside* challenges this convention because La Femme easily murders all of the male characters that come to Sarah's aid throughout the night, leaving her alone to save herself and fight back against her abuser. Not only is La Femme disposing of all of the male characters in the film, but they are police officers and corporate

businessmen. This works to present an erasure of the most extreme form of patriarchy: the privileged and authoritative male. It is important to note here that while there is a male Muslim youth character in the film who is not in a position of authority, the film symbolically tethers all men together by having him hand cuffed to the white male cop. As a result, while he is a different type of male character who is aligned with Sarah for a brief moment when he yells out to her that La Femme is still in the house, he is still positioned under the broader category of men.

The death of Sarah's husband at the beginning of the film also poses a substantial dismissal of patriarchy. Sarah's husband dies in the car crash in the opening sequence and only appears in the film through brief flashbacks. The significance of the father has long been emphasized in the process of subject formation. For instance, journalist Gail Gross stated, "studies show that if a father is affectionate, supportive, and involved, he can contribute greatly to a child's cognitive, language, and social development, as well as academic achievement, a strong inner core resource, sense of well-being, good self-esteem, and authenticity."¹²⁵ The exclusion of Sarah's husband from the narrative is particularly significant because Bustillo and Maury abolish the role of the father altogether. Building off of Valérie Fournier's argument that, "since de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*, feminist critiques have argued that women become women by being constituted as the other of the male subject,"¹²⁶ *Inside* inverts this notion, and removes the male subject from the narrative almost entirely. Since the gender of Sarah's baby is also never revealed, *Inside's* narrative not only centers upon the death of patriarchy, but also the birth of something

¹²⁵ Gail Gross, "The Important Role of Dad," *Huffington Post*. (2014). Online article available at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dr-gail-gross/the-important-role-of-dad_b_5489093.html

¹²⁶ Valérie Fournier, "Fleshing out Gender: Crafting Gender Identity on Women's Bodies," *Body and Society*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: SAGE Publications, Vol. 8 (2). (2002): 56.

beyond the confines of patriarchal binaries of male and female otherness. Building off Bataille, while Sarah can be considered as a victim, she is not one in the traditional sense. The brutality that La Femme exhibits upon Sarah seems to stand for something more than pain or suffering. The relentless violence in *Inside* not only presents an erasure of patriarchy, but also pushes Sarah towards the liminal point of life and death where she is able to give birth to something more than just a child. Although *Inside* does not explicitly identify what that something is (since the child is just an abstract object at this point), it is beyond the limits of patriarchy.

***Martyrs* (Laugier, 2008)**

Whereas *Inside* does not directly state what is gained from the birth and taking of Sarah's child, *Martyrs* explicitly spells out what is achieved through the violence represented in the film: transfiguration. *Martyrs* premiered during the 2008 Cannes International Film Festival at the Marché du Film and experienced heated controversy for its unflinching depictions of violence and gore. News stories widely reported that during the 2008 Toronto Film Festival's Midnight Madness screening, at least one moviegoer passed out during the film and another vomited in the lobby. *Martyrs* is unique in the way it centers upon women and shifts between home invasion, supernatural, and torture porn conventions. *Martyrs* begins with the story of Lucie (Mylène Jampanoï), a young girl who had been abused and tortured as a child. After being placed in an orphanage, she befriends a girl named Anna (Morjana Alaoui). Lucie is haunted by a demon (Isabelle Chasse) that Anna cannot see herself. The film then transitions to fifteen years later, where Lucie believes she has found her previous torturers living in the French countryside. Lucie barges into their home and brutally murders everyone, including two children. After committing the murders, Lucie calls Anna and convinces her to help bury the bodies in the family's backyard. Anna does

not trust the clarity of Lucie's memory of her attackers, but helps her nonetheless. While Anna hides the corpses, the demon reappears and torments Lucie to the point that she commits suicide. It is revealed, however, that the demon is not real, but is instead a manifestation of Lucie's guilt for not being able to save another girl who was enslaved with her as a child. As Anna is left alone to deal with Lucie's crimes, she uncovers an underground corridor where she finds a horribly disfigured woman (Emilie Miskdjian) wearing a chastity belt and a metal helmet drilled into her skull. Anna attempts to save the woman, but strangers barge into the home and immediately shoot her. Anna then becomes captured by the strangers, who belong to a Society controlled by the leader they refer to as Mademoiselle (Catherine Bégin). They seek to discover the secrets of the afterlife through the process of transfiguration (also referred to as martyrdom). After relentless abuse, the torturers surgically remove Anna's skin. Despite this, she miraculously survives and achieves transfiguration. Upon realizing that she has survived, the overjoyed Mademoiselle asks her if she has seen the other world. Anna whispers into Mademoiselle's ear, but the audience is unable to hear what she says. As the Society gathers to hear Mademoiselle's account of the event, she commits suicide as she whispers her final words, "keep doubting."

Laugier explicitly incorporates female victimization in the diegesis of the film. This is because Mademoiselle determines that transfiguration can only be achieved through the young female body.¹²⁷ When Anna is first captured by the Society, Mademoiselle shows her several pictures of historical accounts of martyrdom. She then states, "We've tried everything. Even children. It's proven that women are more

¹²⁷ What is of significant here is that both Lucie and Anna are not of Caucasian decent. This is interesting because in most cases, the young white female body is what is considered ideal. Laugier inverts this notion and presents women from different ethnic backgrounds as the central protagonists of his film, as well as the desired body for the Society's goals.

sensitive for a transformation. Young women. It is that way.” Granted that at first glance one might be inclined to reject *Martyrs* as an inherently sexist film, the following will utilize Bataille to argue for the film’s feminist potential in the way it uses the female experience as a means to symbolize the *expérience extrême*. In conducting such a textual analysis of *Martyrs*, I will divide the film into two acts. The first consists of Lucie’s murderous revenge on the family whom she believes to be her previous torturers. This also includes the disturbing scene where she commits suicide. The first act follows traditional horror film conventions, as it focuses on the conflicting opposition between a subject forcing itself upon an object. This is a common trope in the horror genre and is often seen in films that center upon a female protagonist (the Final Girl) confronting an antagonist (the monster). However, the second half of the film differs greatly from the former in that the connection to an object or purpose starts to disappear. In doing so, the second act depicts the grueling process of erased subjectivity. It is precisely through the surrendering of Anna’s goal-oriented subjectivity that she becomes the site of the *expérience extrême*. This is reflected in the scenes where members of the Society abuse Anna, as well as the climactic scene where she is skinned alive. Even though it is the battering of Anna’s body that allows her to reach transfiguration, I will argue below that her victimization also has empowering tendencies in the way it positions her as a threat to the patriarchal condition. This is emphasized both through the narrative and stylistic elements used during such torture sequences, which present a dismissal of patriarchy and challenge the voyeuristic male gaze.

Subjectivity can be considered as an individual who possesses conscious experiences, such as perspectives, feelings, beliefs, and desires, as well as broadly meaning an entity that has agency and acts upon or wields power over some other

entity.¹²⁸ The first act of *Martyrs* explicitly focuses on the latter part of this definition, as it follows Lucie's revenge on her previous torturers. Her victims reflect the stereotypical nuclear family and consist of a mother, father, and two children. In this sense, they are literally objects in the film. We know nothing about them and they become objectified in the sense that they act as superficial symbols of the family. Lucie breaks into their home and murders them in cold blood, imposing her violence upon them. This theme of opposing agency is also evident in Lucie and the demon that haunts her. Through the use of objective and subjective shots, Laugier stylistically reveals to the viewer that the demon is not real and that Lucie has been performing self-mutilation. This scene visually illustrates the resistance between object and subject. Laugier also emphasizes the sound of Lucie's screams and the tearing of her flesh as she drags a shard of glass on her forearm. This provides both a visual and auditory reflection of the gravity of the opposition between Lucie and the demon. Although the demon's actions are revealed to be Lucie's, this scene still follows a binary divide between object and subject. Lucie resists the pain as long as she can until she succumbs to suicide. While suicide can be seen as a form of submission, she is still experiencing an internal conflict of having to resist something killing her (the demon) or suicide. This act follows traditional horror film conventions and falls in line with traditional conceptualizations of subjectivity.

Martyrs has been frequently linked to the torture porn movement and films such as *Hostel* and *Saw*. Despite this, Laugier considers *Martyrs* as anti-*Hostel*, stating, "the film doesn't talk about torture - it talks about the pain."¹²⁹ *Martyrs* also

¹²⁸ Robert Soloman, "Subjectivity," in Honderich, Ted. *Oxford Companion to Philosophy*. Oxford University Press. (2005): 900.

¹²⁹ Rob Carnevale, "Martyrs - Pascal Laugier Interview," *Indie London*. Retrieved from: <http://www.indielondon.co.uk/Film-Review/martyrs-pascal-laugier-interview>

departs from the subgenre in its treatment of torture as a means of achieving what Mademoiselle calls “transfiguration”. Transfiguration is the moment when the body, through extreme physical suffering, moves beyond awareness of the physical world to see what lies beyond death. Since Mademoiselle’s goal of transfiguration is to gain accounts of what exists beyond the boundary of death, *Martyrs* is arguably the quintessential example of Bataille’s *expérience extrême* in its purest form. The *expérience extrême* is a type of action or experience, which approaches the edge of living in terms of its intensity and its seeming impossibility. This is directly reflected in the Society’s belief that through relentless violence, torture, and pain, women can transcend the liminal space between life and death and reach a state of God-like transfiguration. This concept is also visually illustrated when Anna is skinned alive. Bataille claims that the *expérience extrême*, “passes rapidly from one point to another (or from multiple points to other points), like a current or like a sort of streaming of electricity.”¹³⁰ In this sequence, Anna’s skin is surgically removed and she is placed under a heating vent to burn the remainder of her exposed tissue. The camera zooms into an extreme close up shot of her iris and pupil, descending from darkness towards a white light. This image symbolizes moving towards the light at the end of the tunnel and insinuates that Anna is approaching death. In a shocking turn of events, the camera zooms back out and rests on a shot of Anna’s face as she gasps for breath, demonstrating that she is in fact still alive and has reached the *expérience extrême*.

By the same token, Bataille determines that in order to achieve the *expérience extrême*, the subject must be severed from itself, stating, “in its desire to surpass limited existence, the subject is *ipse* – wild and eager to escape its limits.”¹³¹ Bataille

¹³⁰ Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, State University of New York Press: Albany. (1954): xv.

¹³¹ Bataille, *Inner Experience*, xviii.

writes that the collapse of meaning, which took place in a literal sense in Europe during the war, is a concrete demonstration of the sacrifice of the subject that occurs in the movement of the *expérience extrême*. Giving up is not simply a matter of dying, but a gradual merging of the boundary between subject and object until the distinction no longer exists. The martyr, according to Mademoiselle, gives themselves up to the pain to transcend themselves and achieve transfiguration. This concept is heavily explored in the second half of the film where Anna experiences transfiguration. Before Anna is skinned alive and eventually reaches transfiguration, the members of the Society shackle her to a chair, shave her head, force her to excrement into a bucket, eat green slop, and subject her to daily beatings. This leaves her face horribly bruised and disfigured. The most difficult scene to watch in the film is when a male member of the Society repeatedly punches Anna in the face. All of the previous torture sessions are handled in brief, methodical chunks, followed by a cut to black. This sequence, in contrast, is the longest of all of the stages Anna must overcome before the removal of her skin. As the unnamed man is assaulting her, melodic music begins to play. Anna then hears Lucie's voice, which tells her that she does not need to be afraid anymore. It is here where the connection to an object or purpose starts to disappear and the distinction between subject and object no longer exists. Any resemblance to human life or femininity is shattered. Anna no longer resists her abusers, nor does she seem to be affected by the pain. Instead, she succumbs herself to the pain and fate that awaits her. This violence allows Anna to break the boundary between life and death, and allows her to approach the *expérience extrême*. She is alive; but has completely let go. The departure of the subject and object divide brings about a collapse in meaning, one that is particularly engendered by masculine subjectivity. It is important to acknowledge here that Lucie and Anna

are both racialized characters. While the racial identities of both characters are not necessarily significant in the diegesis of *Martyrs* (the Society is not directly torturing racialized female characters), it is meaningful given the trajectory of the film wherein the last step towards transfiguration is to remove the skin. The appearance of racial difference through the skin is removed in the process of trying to achieve transcendence, and in turn, also signifies the *expérience extrême*. Although much more could be said about the topic of race in *Martyrs*, I simply cannot address the complexities of both gender and race within the confines of this research paper.

While the treatment of women in *Martyrs* is on one hand highly disturbing, I argue that it can also be read from an alternative feminist perspective. Incidentally, some feminist theologians have recently argued for a reinterpretation of the masochism associated with the early phenomenon of Christian female martyrdom. In her 2011 book, *Power For: Feminism and Christ's Self-Giving*, Anna Mercedes contends that the suffering of female martyrs in Christianity is not to be read merely as passive objectification, but rather as a positive means to assert “resistance”¹³² against the dominant culture, in this case, the Roman Empire. As Mercedes writes, “redemptive self-sacrifice in the Roman arena was a means by which the victim claimed power for herself, restoring her honor, and even realizing consecrated or divine status.”¹³³ In an attempt to depathologize the emphasis on female suffering and self-sacrifice in religious art, Mercedes adds, “there is something more than neurosis in early Christian portrayals of suffering: a new and *subversive subjectivity* is at stake.”¹³⁴ My point here is not to align the film *Martyrs* with a Christian discourse around martyrdom. Rather I wish to suggest, through this tangential reference to

¹³² Anna Mercedes, *Power For: Feminism and Christ's Self-Giving* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011) 97

¹³³ Mercedes, 98. Emphasis added.

¹³⁴ Mercedes, 101. Emphasis added.

feminist theology, that conventional wisdom about the representation of violence inflicted upon women must sometimes be challenged. To this end, I propose a reading of *Martyrs* that avoids accusations of misogyny and provides instead a different way of understanding female agency in horror cinema.

This is first evident in the way Laugier presents his female characters using methods that are not common in the horror genre. Any female nudity that occurs in the film is not intended to excite or titillate. In addition, Lucie and Anna are not the dumb big-breasted blonde tropes that are frequently represented in the genre. Instead, guilt emerges as one of the film's most prominent themes and female character traits. Not only does the viewer harbor a sense of guilt for watching ultraviolent images of female suffering, but Lucie also experience such extreme guilt that she produces a monster that harms her. This theme of guilt forms a crucial link to the French film *Les Yeux Sans Visage* (Franju, 1960), which is about a physician who kidnaps young women and performs medical experiments on them in an effort to find a successful facial transplant donor for his daughter.¹³⁵ The extreme acts the doctor takes, much like Lucie's murderous rage against the family, stems from his guilt over an accident he caused that disfigured his daughter. Donato Totaro further correlates Lucie's guilt to France's National guilt over the Vichy regime and their collaboration with the Nazis.¹³⁶ Whereas women in horror have been frequently represented as screaming, crying, cowering, and above all, weaker than their male counterparts, Lucie distorts previous misogynistic gender binaries. Not only is the monster that torments her female, but she has also manifested this creature purely in her mind out of guilt. Instead of a male oppressor, Lucie's own actions and psychoses are the source of her

¹³⁵ Donato Totaro, "*Martyrs*: Evoking France's Cinematic and Historical Past", *Offscreen*. Vol. 13 (15). (2009). Online article available at http://offscreen.com/view/martyrs_historical

¹³⁶ Totaro.

suffering. She commits the horrible atrocities because she is haunted by the guilt of not being able to save another young female captor of the Society. Because of this, Lucie challenges the popular victim/monster tropes in a similar vein as La Femme in *Inside*.

By the same token, Anna's character can be read in correlation to Nancy Chodorow's book *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and The Sociology of Gender*. Chodorow contends that there is an important difference between the processes of identification in female and male infants. For boys, the process of identification is based on differentiation and separation. Initially the boy identifies with the mother, but when the boy becomes aware of sexual difference and is forced by the father to separate from his mother, he must reject her as object of identification. Male identification is, therefore, based on separation from the feminine and identification with a masculine authority figure.¹³⁷ In contrast, the identity of the girl is formed through a process of multiple identifications. The girl initially identifies with the mother, but when the girl shifts her attention towards the father, she can continue to identify entirely with her mother, whom she recognizes as being like her and unlike her.¹³⁸ Chodorow argues that the woman's sense of self is based on a continuity of relationship that ultimately prepares her for an empathic role of a mother who can identify with all of her children. Anna finds herself in the cult's home because she holds empathic feelings for Lucie and wants to help her escape her troubled past. It is not just her friend that she cares for, but complete strangers as well. Once Lucie commits suicide, Anna finds the disfigured woman in the home's cellar. She cares for her and attempts to relieve her of her pain by removing the helmet

¹³⁷ Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. Los Angeles: University of California Press. (1999): 174.

¹³⁸ Chodorow, 100.

drilled into her skull. It is this desire to help Lucie and the woman that directly results in Anna's capture. This defies traditional representations of women in horror because Anna becomes more than a one-dimensional victim. Anna is not gullible, nor does she do anything to warrant what happens to her. Instead, she is a genuinely good person whose compassion and care for others directly lead to her torture.

Lastly, although the sequence where Anna is abused by the male member of the cult is horribly disturbing in the way it represents male on female violence, *Martyrs* is similar to *Inside* in the way it works to present a form of erased patriarchy. It is not a man who is able to save Anna and help her overcome the pain she is enduring, but her love and friendship with Lucie. Laugier also avoids populating his film with patriarchal male characters altogether. Much like *Inside*, the few men who are included in the narrative die almost immediately, as is exemplified with the death of the father and son at the beginning of the film. The characters in the film are also all operating under the control of Mademoiselle's authority. This is significant because although there are male characters that abuse and assault Anna, they also act under the control of a woman. With this in mind, *Martyrs* offers feminist potential by presenting a female dominated narrative that avoids the male subject and interrogates conventional gender hierarchies. Instead, *Martyrs* illustrates a battle between the will of both Mademoiselle and Anna, emphasizing the power and determination of the female form. Laugier chooses not to cut away from the abuse, but instead to present it with exhausting closeness. He distorts the female body itself, hacking away at it until it loses all hint of the feminine and its connotations and ability to give life. The film contains images analogous to those associated with the monstrous-feminine, but they do not exist in relation to the male gaze.

In a title card Laugier displays the original definition of the word martyr from the Greek meaning “witness”. Anna acts as the film’s primary witness. She has watched Lucie mentally suffer for many years, encounters the torture victim, and finally, becomes fully aware of the Society and its goals. The audience also acts as a witness to the events in the film and must process the unspeakable torment inflicted on all of the group’s victims and must watch the utter destruction of the female form as it is imagined by patriarchy. The formal elements of the film’s climax wherein Anna is skinned alive confront the audience about their voyeuristic tendencies in relation to gore, violence, and representations of human suffering on screen. The torture is not mediated by gimmicky machines like those in the *Saw* franchise or carried out in the spirit of psychosis or vengeance. Instead, it has more in common with real, institutional forms of torture and human experimentation. This sequence begins when one of the members of the Society calls Mademoiselle and states, “I have never seen an expression like it. She’s let go, completely let go. Her face is like... her eyes... I swear she no longer sees anything around her.” Anna’s face is framed through a close up at eye-level, causing her to stare directly into the eye of the camera for several seconds. It is here where the film addresses the viewer, viewing them as they view it, until the film itself becomes a gaze, rather than an object to be looked upon. The returned gaze in this sequence disrupts traditional horror cinema conventions and offers a critical feminist stance. While the second half of the film documents Anna’s victimization and the surrender of her subjectivity, the film pauses and returns the gaze on the spectator in a moment of extreme violence and anguish. Since this image of Anna’s face and piercing blue eyes is held for several seconds, it creates the impression that Anna herself is begging the audience to stop watching. Anna’s look becomes a vehicle to indirectly confront the viewer and question their

desire to voyeuristically observe such disturbing and graphic imagery from a safe distance.

Anna's returned gaze complicates Mulvey's concept of the oppressive male gaze. The removal of Anna's hair and skin defeminizes her, making her appear more monstrous than human. Although Anna is coded as the object of the gaze, she is not represented as having erotic impact for the pleasure of the male viewer. Instead, her appearance induces disgust and repulsion. Instead of enjoying the gore and violence from a safe masochistic distance, the audience is also forced into close proximity with Anna and indirectly experiences the torture alongside her. This serves to position the audience as both victim of and complicit in the violence being entrusted upon her. The longer the viewer watches, the more violence is inflicted upon Anna. This climactic scene also complicates Mulvey's argument that the way the female body is "...stylized and fragmented by close-ups [making her] the direct recipient of the spectators look".¹³⁹ Although the female body is captured through close ups, it is precisely through this framing that Anna, as well as the film, transitions from an object to be looked at, to the bearer of the look. This framing offers feminist potential because, as Williams determines, the woman's look in horror is threatening to male power. As the spectators, and especially male spectators, witness Anna's martyrdom as anguish that force her to give up on subjectivity, they too lose their comfortable sense of self. As their traditionally stable masculine position crumbles and dissolves under the pressure of the reversed gaze of the defeminized female body, male spectators might experience something akin to "becoming woman".

Becoming Woman

¹³⁹ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen*, Vol. 16(3). (1975): 206.

One issue that cannot be ignored is the fact that *Inside* and *Martyrs* are both directed by men. Whereas some like Quandt have labeled films like *Inside* and *Martyrs* as all shock and no substance, I argue that similar to Bataille's own writing, the New French Extremity films directed by men offer feminist potential through their use of the female experience as a metaphor for the undoing of masculine limitations. Bataille's use of female characters can be understood in relation to both Kristeva's use of the abject and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's notion of 'becoming-woman'.¹⁴⁰ Bataille sought to escape patriarchal life, considering it as boring and bureaucratic. In particular, it is the Lacanian idea of subject formation for which Bataille wants to escape.¹⁴¹ Bataille sees this as intolerable, a situation that is masculine and patriarchal. In tandem with this is the fact that, for the men of Bataille's writing, the end result of transgression is impotence in both senses of the word. The moments of witnessing the other for the male protagonists are also moments of opening up the possibility of becoming other. For instance, when Simone intercourses the dead priest in *Story of the Eye*, the narrator finds himself unable to do anything. The dissolution of self represented by the priest's murder and Simone's sexual climax negate the narrator's desire to "be a man" in the most basic sense, to have an erection and metaphorically to erect meaning through the power of male subjectivity. In this sense, Bataille considers the feminine experience as aspirational

¹⁴⁰ MacGregor, 103.

¹⁴¹ Jacques Lacan was a major figure in Parisian intellectual life for much of the twentieth century. Sometimes referred to as "the French Freud," he is an important figure in the history of psychoanalysis. In the basis of Freud's discoveries, Lacan outlines a revolutionary theory of the subject. The Lacanian subject follows three orders otherness consisting of the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real. In each phase, the subject is defined against a different order of otherness.

and saw it as a potential solution for the male perspective he so desperately wanted to escape.

Inside and *Martyrs* deal with the issue of the *expérience extrême* displaced on women, but aimed to provide men with imaginary means to transcend patriarchal modes of being. The focus on the breaking of boundaries is quite significant in both films, *Inside* being the boundary of the maternal body and womb, and *Martyrs* being the boundary between what lies beyond life and death. The limit of patriarchy is represented metaphorically through the limit of death. These films work to push to the extreme point of patriarchy to see what lies on the other side. Moreover, despite the fact that we cannot imagine death, these films attempt to push the female characters to the other side to see what lies beyond, for in the masculine mind only women can break such boundaries. In turn, these films also attempt to advance the female characters to a position that lies beyond patriarchy. Bustillo, Maury, and Laugier use their female protagonists in a similar vein as Bataille. While on the one hand their films include female victims and destruct the feminine body in ways that are deemed unacceptable in mainstream cinema, these characters are more than just mere victims. In bringing the female bodies to the extreme limit of life as it approaches the impossibility of death, the female characters work to present an erasure of patriarchal and masculine limitations of subjecthood. In *Inside* and *Martyrs*, the female characters come to serve as potential solutions for a male perspective that wants to escape its patriarchal condition. This leads me to believe that since Bataille was a man trying to break with the patriarchal condition, than there is no reason not to believe that such male New French Extremity directors can do the same in their works. Both forward the notion that the way out of patriarchy is through the power of the abject female form.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the alternative ways to read the controversial New French Extremity films *Inside* and *Martyrs*. Beyond that I have explored how the female protagonists of *Inside* and *Martyrs* are situated in a position wherein they pose a threat or erasure of patriarchy. Stemming from this embodiment is the glaring departure between the women of the New French Extremity and the women of traditional horror subgenres such as slasher films. While many horror films are plagued with trashy and hyper sexualized women who fight to survive in male hierarchical worlds, *Inside* and *Martyrs* remove the male figure from the diegesis of these films altogether, or at least diminish his role significantly. Instead, Bustillo, Maury, and Laugier focus on the female experience of pain, one that puts the female form to the test of its will. *Inside* and *Martyrs* seek to challenge patriarchy through symbolic representations of the process of the *expérience extrême*. While collectively these films are preoccupied with female suffering, they can also be seen as empowering in the ways they present an erasure of patriarchy through the use of female-on-female violence and subject the spectator to their own test of the *expérience extrême*. In the next chapter, I will explore the New French Extremity films *Trouble Every Day* and *In My Skin*, both of which are written and directed by women. While both films also use the female experience as a position of power to destabilize patriarchy and sexist gender representations in the horror genre, they differ greatly from *Inside* and *Martyrs* in their depiction of female corporeality. Not only is their representation of gore and self-mutilation the most nauseating and difficult to watch of the films chosen, but the films directed by women can be read as a sort of feminist language that escapes the trap of metaphorical signification and its patriarchal constraints.

Broken Boundaries:
***Trouble Every Day* and *In My Skin* as Transcendence that Defies Meaning**

“The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents.” - H. P. Lovecraft as quoted in *The Call of Cthulu*

Although *Inside* and *Martyrs* certainly do not hold any punches in their excruciating (bordering on exhausting) representations of violence and gore, Claire Denis’ *Trouble Every Day* and Marina de Van’s *In My Skin* are in a league of their own as films that break even further from what is deemed acceptable in mainstream cinema. Both films have gained notoriety through their defilement of the female form through acts of self-mutilation, cannibalism, rape, and more. While *Trouble Every Day* and *In My Skin* are both directed by women and feature ultraviolent acts towards the female body, the aim of this chapter is to conduct a close textual reading of these extreme horror films to isolate their empowering tendencies. Unlike Bustillo, Maury, and Laugier who construct their narratives around breaking boundaries to reach the *expérience extrême*, Denis and de Van present cinematic worlds wherein the boundaries are completely broken. The female characters in both films not only go beyond the *expérience extrême* like the texts in chapter two, but also reach the other side and offer an experience of transcendence that defies meaning as defined by the masculine. With this in mind, I will illustrate how these New French Extremity films offer feminist stances that challenge patriarchy by presenting a collapse of linear narrative meaning, alternative representations of violence and sexuality, and call phallogentric visuality into question. As a result, I argue that *Trouble Every Day* and *In My Skin* are filmic equivalences of the *écriture féminine*, possibly even marking a new breed of *cinéma féminin*.

The Mouvement de Libération des Femmes and *L’Écriture Féminine*

The Mouvement de Libération des Femmes (MLF) is a feminist movement that considers the feminine as a point from which to deconstruct language, philosophy, psychoanalysis, and the direction of patriarchal culture. Among others, French feminist writers such as Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, and Monique Wittig all envisioned modes of resisting and moving beyond masculine thinking. These women collectively perceived Western culture as both oppressive and phallogocentric. In her analysis of phallogocentrism and the MLF, Shoshana Felman summarizes Man's perception of his self-importance in these words: "I am the unified, self-controlled center of the universe... The rest of the world, which I define as the Other, has meaning only in relation to me, as man/father, possessor of the phallus."¹⁴² The MLF consider this appropriation of otherness as having profound influence over language. Symbolic discourse, which includes language in various contexts, therefore becomes a means through which the masculine objectifies the world and educes it to its terms and speaks in place of everything and everyone (including women).¹⁴³ From a joint attack on phallogocentrism, the feminist writers of the MLF produced various strategies against it, but also envisioned different modes of resisting and moving beyond it.¹⁴⁴ Despite their differences, their general strategy was at odds with biologically based readings of Sigmund Freud and reflected a notion of femininity and feminine writing based not on a "given" essence of male and female

¹⁴² Shoshana Felman, "Women and Madness: The Critical Fallacy". Eds. Catherine Belsey & Jane Moore. *The Feminist Reader – Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*. Second Edition. London: Macmillan. (1997).

¹⁴³ Ann Rosalind Jones, "Writing the Body Toward an Understanding of l'Écriture Féminine," *Phili Papers*. (1981). Online article available at: <http://webs.wofford.edu/hitchmoughsa/Writing.html>

¹⁴⁴ It is important to acknowledge here that while Kristeva, Irigaray, Cixous, and Wittig offer different modes of resisting patriarchy and phallogocentrism, this chapter will focus primarily upon Irigaray and Cixous, as my aim is to directly correlate *Trouble Every Day* and *In My Skin* to their concepts of "parler femme" and "l'écriture féminine".

characteristics, but on culturally achieved conventions such as "openness" in feminine texts as a lack of repressive patterning.¹⁴⁵

Irigaray and Cixous in particular emphasize that women have been historically limited to sexual objects for men and have been prevented from expressing their sexuality in itself or for themselves.¹⁴⁶ Both argue that if women can speak about sexuality in new languages, they will establish a site of difference from phallogocentric concepts and controls. Women's bodies and sexual pleasure are starting points for these new languages, precisely because they have been so absent or misrepresented in male discourse. To challenge such patriarchal thinking, Irigaray and Cixous developed the "*parler femme*" and "*l'écriture féminine*", which translates to women's speak and women's writing. For Irigaray, women have a specificity that distinguishes them from men. Since patriarchy underlies language, Irigaray argues that we should conceive of a new feminine language that would allow women to express themselves if it could be spoken. Similarly, Cixous longed for a women's writing that would privilege female experiences and feelings. In *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Cixous claims, "woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies."¹⁴⁷ According to Cixous, the *écriture féminine* places experience before language and privileges the anti-linear, cyclical writing so often frowned upon by patriarchal society.¹⁴⁸ Since *Trouble Every Day* and *In My Skin* break with mainstream narrative conventions within the horror genre, as well as cinema as a whole, I will use these concepts to investigate whether the New French Extremity

¹⁴⁵ Jones.

¹⁴⁶ Jones.

¹⁴⁷ Hélène Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa*. Chicago: Chicago University Press. (1975): 875.

¹⁴⁸ Cixous, 875.

films directed by women bring us closer to a cinematic feminist language that aligns with those desired by Irigaray and Cixous.

In *Poetics of Cinema*, David Bordwell famously argues that narrative in film has three key dimensions. These include looking at narratives as representations of a world, structure, and point of view.¹⁴⁹ According to this way of thinking about the matter, a narrative consists of its agents, circumstances, and surroundings that arrange the moment-by-moment flow of information about the story world.¹⁵⁰ This chapter will first investigate the ways *Trouble Every Day* and *In My Skin* present a collapse of linear narrative meaning, one that is frequently defined by the masculine. In doing so, both films call into question Bordwell's arguments surrounding the structure of goal-oriented narrative cinema. In addition, this chapter will also consider how Denis and de Van's texts offer alternative depictions of violence and sexuality as well as how they interrogate oppressive modes of visuality in cinema. In particular, *Trouble Every Day* and *In My Skin* are unique in the ways they both offer a separation of the narrative and the visual. These elements are significant because they work to challenge the misogynistic patterns of female victimization in the horror genre, and cinema altogether. Furthermore, unlike chapter two which followed a film-specific structure, this chapter is more suitable for a thematic structure. This is because *In My Skin* not only repeats a lot of the devices and elements seen in *Trouble Every Day*, but also pushes them even further. Likewise, while Denis' *Trouble Every Day* is undoubtedly a difficult film to watch, it is more visually and narratively accessible than de Van's *In My Skin*. *In My Skin* has been considered by some to be one of the most unwatchable films ever made. For instance, in a review for *The Hollywood*

¹⁴⁹ David Bordwell, "Three Dimensions of Narrative Cinema," *Poetics of Cinema*. New York: Routledge. (2008).

¹⁵⁰ Bordwell, 4.

Reporter Frank Scheck cites *In My Skin* as, “a bizarre exercise in perversion that will well test even the most jaded art house audiences' appetite for the offbeat.”¹⁵¹ With this in mind, I will begin each thematic section with an analysis of *Trouble Every Day* and build towards *In My Skin*.

Collapse of Linear Narrative Meaning

Trouble Every Day remains Denis' most maligned project to date. Working with her usual cinematographer, Agnès Godard, she provides an atmosphere engorged with desire and unease. *Trouble Every Day* opens with an American couple, Shane (Vincent Gallo) and his wife June (Tricia Vessey), who are supposedly traveling to Paris for their honeymoon. In reality, Shane has actually travelled to Paris to find neuroscientist Dr. Léo Sémeneau (Alex Descas) and his wife Coré (Béatrice Dalle), who he once knew, in the hopes of finding a cure for a violent disease he is suffering from. Coré is a beautiful woman, and seemingly unknown to Shane at this point in the film, lures random men off into remote fields for the promise of sex, which she fulfills right before tearing them to pieces. Léo tracks her down after one of her rampages, cleans her up, buries her victims' bodies, and locks her in the basement of his compound (an act that appears to be routine for him). However, one day while Léo is at work in his laboratory, a couple of men break into his home. They begin searching the premise and one of them finds Coré held captive in the boarded up basement. In an effort to help Coré, he breaks down the door and sets her free. She seduces him and the two start to engage in sex. This erotic moment is interrupted when Coré violently bites him to death, ripping out his tongue with her teeth. Meanwhile, a doctor who once worked with Léo gives Shane the couple's address and explains that Coré is unwell. Shane rushes to her house and discovers Coré covered in blood. He watches

¹⁵¹ Frank Scheck, “Trouble Every Day Film Review”, *Slant Magazine*. (2013).

her light the house on fire and when she finally becomes aware of his presence she tries to bite him. Shane overpowers and strangles her, leaving her to be consumed by the flames. Just after he leaves, Léo arrives and discovers the carnage and Coré's lifeless body. After Coré's death, however, Shane becomes increasingly strange and distant. This worsens until the film's end wherein Shane rapes a hotel maid, biting her to death during oral sex. At the end of the film, Shane and June are reunited and make plans to go back to America.

At first glance, *Trouble Every Day* might seem to resemble any number of horror films that are concerned with biological panic and contagion. In particular, the first half of the film seems to follow a typical Hollywood narrative of a male protagonist trying to find a solution for the disease. Nevertheless, these linear narrative conventions disappear and transition into something more abstract towards the end of the film. As in many of Denis' films, plot and narrative cohesion are subordinate to mood, visuals, and sounds. *Trouble Every Day* opens with a young man and woman, partially obscured by shadows, making out in the back of a car. The male is wearing a necklace of what looks like strung-together teeth. While this seems significant to the narrative of Coré and Shane's cannibalistic urges, the lovers are never seen or referred to again. We are then introduced to Coré and her condition. Although she initially seems to be the only one suffering from the disease, Shane's behavior is also quite bizarre and worsens after Coré tries to attack him. *Trouble Every Day* uses parallel editing to depict the characters' similar violent behaviors, which suggest that they are suffering from a medical discourse that endues cannibalistic desires during sexual arousal. However, Denis also creates the impression that Shane might have suffered from the disease before his encounter with Coré. The film reveals in a loose backstory that Shane once worked with Léo, who led

a bio-prospecting mission in the tropics in the hopes of curing, "nervous diseases, pain, mental diseases, and problems of libido."¹⁵² Denis never details whether or not this is the source of the disease or its direct relevance to the plot. Also, during Shane and June's flight to Paris, he is suddenly overwhelmed with the image of a female body soaked and writhing in blood. We do not know whom the woman is or if this is from an event that took place before their travels. Although this scene occurs at the start of the film, the sequence might not actually be the beginning of the narrative, or at least hints that we are missing part of Shane's story. Denis also avoids any narrative resolutions, as Shane does not contain or destroy the disease like a typical Hollywood ending. Instead, he rapes and kills a female maid and returns to his wife in their hotel room as if nothing has happened. This offers no source of resolution and the viewer is left with many unanswered questions as to why the characters are committing such ultraviolent acts.

Elements of style also complicate the viewer's comprehension of the narrative events in *Trouble Every Day*. This is reflected in Denis' conceptual goal as a filmmaker wherein she argues, "it's about exploring the formal design with which no one is familiar, the film itself offering a sort of immersion within aesthetic designs, taking us towards a more profound, mysterious place."¹⁵³ Denis' philosophy is exemplified in the way graphic and sexually violent encounters are intercut with banalities. For instance, after one of Shane's violent outbursts, Denis quickly transitions to a shot of Shane in a café sipping from a coffee mug. This halts the flow of narrative action and creates a disorienting feeling. In addition, Denis' use of sound also challenges the plot and narrative cohesion in *Trouble Every Day*. The soundtrack

¹⁵² This is revealed in a brief glimpse of Léo's website that appears in the film.

¹⁵³ Tim Palmer, *Brutal Intimacy: Analyzing Contemporary French Cinema*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press. (2006): 78.

featured throughout the film makes viewers acutely aware that they are also listeners.¹⁵⁴ Dialogue is often removed for extended periods of time, some segments up to twenty minutes long. In addition, Béatrice Dalle, the actress who plays Coré as well as La Femme in *Inside*, has also adopted an acting style throughout her career that heavily depends on volubility.¹⁵⁵ However, throughout *Trouble Every Day* she is given no more than two lines to say, wherein she whispers, “I don’t want to wait anymore... I want to die.” This lack of dialogue is significant since it is commonly utilized as a tool for exposition and backstory. Denis avoids these narrative devices, and in turn, events and character motivations are not explained for the viewer. Feminists have long proclaimed the potential powers of expression outside of patriarchal language. Coré’s silence also offers a sense of freedom or empowerment. When *Trouble Every Day* ends, the spectator is left with many unanswered questions. These stylistic elements differ from mainstream cinema, and instead of contributing to the narrative comprehension, create further confusion and deteriorate linear narrative meaning.

Likewise, de Van’s *In My Skin* follows the story of Esther (Marina de Van), a young professional businesswoman. At a house party with colleagues, she goes out into the hosts’ dark garden and falls, tearing the leg of her pants. Alone when it happens, Esther does not realize she has been hurt until much later. She visits a doctor (played by de Van’s real-life brother Adrian de Van) who stitches up her wound. He is also confused as to why she did not feel her injury and asks her jokingly, “are you sure it’s your leg?” This is either the beginning or first evidence of a radical shift in her relationship with her own body. Esther becomes obsessed with the damage she can inflict upon her body. She starts cutting at the wound, refusing to let the skin heal.

¹⁵⁴ Palmer, 74.

¹⁵⁵ Palmer, 74.

Esther cuts her flesh with knives, scissors, and other sharp household objects. Her boyfriend Vincent (Laurent Lucas) and her friend Sandrine (Léa Drucker) are both concerned and repelled by her alarming practice. Despite their concern, she continues with her erratic behavior. At an important business dinner with clients, she drinks too much and suddenly sees her left arm as an object separate from her body. She has to stop her left hand from playing with her food, and holding her arm on her lap, she cuts it as if to make it feel. Esther's condition becomes so severe that she needs to explain away the damage she has done to herself by faking a car accident. Eventually, Esther is unable to control her compulsion and enters a sort of crescendo of mutilation. She hurts her body with calm, detached interest and performs gruesome acts such as cutting her face, attempting to tan a piece of skin she has removed from herself, and even eating her own flesh. At the end of the film, she is alone in a hotel room and has seemed to reach some kind of new state. She is lying still on the bed, staring vacantly into the camera. This image is held for several seconds until the shot fades to black.

Unlike *Trouble Every Day* that begins with mainstream narrative conventions that descend to something much more abstract, *In My Skin* dives right into an abject narrative that veers from reason and rationale. Unlike most horror films that provide the motivations for their characters, de Van does not explain the reasons behind Esther's compulsions. In fact, her doctor tests her for neurological damage, but does not find any inclination of mental illness or psychosis. Instead, *In My Skin* foregrounds the process of self-harm as an act of gratification that rejects any easy definitions or explanations.¹⁵⁶ By the same token, while the plot centers on Esther, the viewer has a very minimal idea of what is going on in her mind. As the film progresses and Esther's grip on reality seems to disappear, the audience is just as lost

¹⁵⁶ Erin Jennings, *Erotic Body Horror: Dangerous Female Corporealities in Contemporary French Cinema*. (2008): 54.

as she is. Much like her boyfriend, the viewer cannot understand why she would continue to mutilate herself in such a violent manner. Not only does the spectator lack an understanding as to why Esther commits these acts, but the film's narrative also deteriorates in a similar vein as her body. *In My Skin* features poetic aesthetic techniques that stylistically overturn its narrative. More specifically, Esther's self-alienation in the later stages of the film is where the narrative completely breaks down. Esther isolates herself and a series of graphic tableaux depict her violent exploration of her body. We are located in a subjective position through Esther, forced to share her gaze while performing unthinkable acts of self-mutilation. This creates a disorienting feeling. There are no specific contexts, explanations, or resolutions and the film ends with a repeated series of tracking close ups of Esther alone in her hotel room. Her body is maimed, but her face is emotionless and calmed. No resolution is presented for her problem and viewers are left with the same feeling of discomfort that has permeated the rest of the film.¹⁵⁷

In her film, de Van puts an emphasis on dissonant binaries. Through this technique, *In My Skin* appears to purposefully misguide the spectator as well as the direction of the film's narrative. For instance, *In My Skin* opens with split screen images, which continue throughout the film in various contexts. The right side of the screen features still images of urban landscapes and architecture alongside their negatives on the left. By opening with these dichotomized images, de Van positions the viewer to think about the film in terms of binaries. However, while at first glance the images appear to be the same on both sides of the screen, the negatives actually differ from the original image. In some cases they were shot from farther away, a different angle, or even include a completely different image altogether. This

¹⁵⁷ Jennings, 55.

dissonance between the two seemingly opposite sides of the screen presents the impression of a binary between the normal and abnormal. Nevertheless, through her use of discordant visuals de Van suggests that the distinction between normal and abnormal is not that simple. Esther's "abnormal" condition is not merely the opposite of normal, sane, behavior. Her self-destructiveness overlaps with, responds to, and emerges from the normality that surrounds her. Esther is, on the one hand, a professional businesswoman who is excelling in her career. Alongside and in continuity with the normality of her corporate life, she also displays an "abnormal" compulsion to harm herself. Esther is torn between two worlds, as she constantly hovers on the borders between clean, respectable living and the seductiveness of her fleshy addiction. She practices her self-cutting in private and, at least initially, continues to function at her job and in her private life. Esther's flesh is set against the urban images and landscapes and slowly takes over her life, as well as the life of the film. *In My Skin* repeatedly teeters between the normal and the abnormal, which destabilizes where the film is going. Unlike most horror films that typically unfold on one side of the normal/abnormal dichotomy, something else happens towards the end of *In My Skin*. Esther does not return to a normal state or overcome her condition, nor does the film end with her death or despair. In the end, Esther's face is framed through a close up as she stares into the eye of the camera. Bearing strong resemblance to the split screens in the beginning of the film, the right side of Esther's face appears normal and engaged. However, the left side is slightly off, as her eye is bizarrely squinted and almost lifeless compared to the other side of her face. *In My Skin* ends rather ambiguously and does not conclude on either side of the divide. In doing so, de Van makes it increasingly difficult for the viewer to follow the narrative trajectory of the film. Since the dichotomy of the normal/abnormal is constantly being

pulled from under us as viewers, we are reminded that we cannot truly conceive where the film ends.

Scholar Tim Palmer argues that the New French Extremity, “unnerves on every level through its systematic dismantling of screenwriting norms that are absolutely ubiquitous.”¹⁵⁸ *Trouble Every Day* and *In My Skin* follow such an approach, and while these plots oscillate between the demented and the commonplace, both present a collapse of linear narrative meaning. For instance, Bordwell claims that, “a narrative is like a building, which we can’t grasp all at once but must experience in time... Narration in any medium can usefully be thought of as governing our trajectory through the narrative.”¹⁵⁹ *Trouble Every Day* and *In My Skin* contradict this argument because as their filmic experiences continue towards the end of the films, their narratives become more challenging than when they first started. Although the narratives in *Inside* and *Martyrs* are highly unrealistic and outlandish, they still follow straightforward goal-oriented linear plots that move towards breaking the boundary; *Inside* being the boundary of Sarah’s womb to take the child and *Martyrs* being the boundary between life and death. However, the linear narrative is completely broken in *Trouble Every Day* and *In My Skin*. Denis and de Van withhold character motivations and avoid crucial answers or resolutions as to what exactly is going on in these films. Bordwell states that one thing we expect of narrative, “is what Aristotle called peripeteiae—changes of fortune from bad to good or good to bad.”¹⁶⁰ Both films begin bad, and end even worse. The characters are not freed from their illnesses or psychological states, but are either further consumed by them or we are left with no resolutions altogether. The trajectory of the narratives, much like the

¹⁵⁸ Palmer, 71.

¹⁵⁹ Bordwell, 96.

¹⁶⁰ Bordwell, 88.

female bodies in these films, deteriorate and bring us from a traditional narrative to something being beyond narrative meaning. Read from this perspective, one of the ways Denis and de Van's films can be considered as feminist texts is the ways they adopt cyclical and anti-linear narratives that are frowned upon by patriarchal culture.

Similarly, unlike *Inside* and *Martyrs*, which present an erasure of patriarchy through scenes of female-on-female violence, Denis and de Van do feature patriarchal male characters in their films. However, *Trouble Every Day* and *In My Skin* maintain their feminist potentials because of how the typical male narrative is subverted in favor of the female experience. For instance, in regards to the figure of the protagonist in narrative cinema Bordwell states:

In the story world that the narrative presents, the protagonist is the agent whom the story is about. There are many heuristic cues that help us pick out a hero or heroine. The protagonist may be the character with the greatest power, as King David is in certain chapters of the Old Testament. The protagonist may also be the character with whom we tend to sympathize most keenly, as in the biblical story of Daniel...¹⁶¹

Not only does Bordwell suggest that it is the protagonist that offers narrative agency and drives the plot forward, but the examples he uses to mark the quintessential protagonist are also both males. *Trouble Every Day* and *In My Skin* reject this notion and the common conception of the male protagonist and goal-oriented structure.

While Denis and de Van include patriarchal male characters in their films such as doctors, husbands, employers, and boyfriends, they are collectively unable to resolve the narrative conflicts. For instance, Shane does not find a solution for the disease, but instead is overpowered by it. This is also reflected more subtly in the scene where Shane calls Léo's lab. A French doctor answers the phone, but does not make a sound. Rather, Shane is just yelling on the other end proclaiming, "Hello, is anyone there, is anyone on the other side!?" Instead of finding answers or propelling the

¹⁶¹ Bordwell, 88.

narrative forward, there is nothing; he is ignored by the doctors and left alone. Vincent is also unable to save Esther from her condition. In an effort to help Esther, he confronts her and pulls her pants down to reveal her wounds. Hoping to inspire her to receive medical attention, he repeatedly screams, “Does this satisfy you!?” His attempts fail and Esther refuses. *Trouble Every Day* and *In My Skin* present male characters as ineffective and lacking the agency to drive the narrative forward to a conclusion. This challenges previous degrading representations of female victimhood in mainstream cinema because *Trouble Every Day* and *In My Skin* reject goal-oriented narratives wherein active male protagonists are forced to save passive female victims. Unlike most horror films, *Trouble Every Day* and *In My Skin* break from linear narrative meaning to instead emphasize female experience and agency.

Alternative Representations of Violence and Sexuality

Included in these female centered experiences are acts of violence and brutality that are performed either upon or by the women of these films. While both *Trouble Every Day* and *In My Skin* present the female body as grotesque and monstrous, they can also be seen as empowering in the ways they offer alternative representations of violence and sexuality that do not cast women in the typical role of victims. This can be read in relation to Bataille’s *expérience extrême*. Beginning with *Trouble Every Day*, what is significant about Coré and the violence she exhibits is its link with sexuality. This directly relates to Bataille’s theories of eroticism and its correlation with death. According to Bataille, since eroticism departs from natural sexual activity, whose purpose is reproduction, it veers away from life and has a flirtation with death. Bataille further claims that, “the final sense of eroticism is

death.”¹⁶² Because eroticism both implies life (reproduction) and evokes death (sexual acts without the goal of reproduction), as discussed in chapter one, Bataille argues that it is one of the primary means of achieving the *expérience extrême*. This is directly explored in Coré’s character, who also partakes in the practice of cannibalism.¹⁶³ Coré lures her victims with the promise of sex, which she fulfills before violently biting and attacking her sexual partners to death. For instance, in the scene where a young man breaks into Coré home and sets her free, she seduces him and begins to engage in sex. During this act, she bites him, which is initially thought to be playful, but soon becomes threatening. She gnaws at his flesh, getting deeper and deeper with her bites. The man starts screaming and telling her to stop, but to no avail; Coré is overcome with cannibalistic desire and proceeds to devour him. The evidence of this violent outburst is revealed in images that show huge blood splatters across a large wall. In this shot, Coré moves through the foreground in a delirious haze with blood all over her face and dress. Coré not only engages in sexual activity, which holds birth and reproduction as the primary goal, but also murders her victims in the process. In doing so, Coré merges birth and death in her murderous sexual acts, situating her as the *expérience extrême*. Although the violence Coré exhibits is sexually driven, something I have argued is problematic when related to heterosexual violence, I will argue below that presenting Coré in such a manner challenges patriarchal conceptions of sexuality and violence against women, particularly those represented in the pornography and horror genres.

¹⁶² Peter Michelson, *Speaking the Unspeakable: A Poetics of Obscenity*. Albany: State University of New York Press. (1993): 145.

¹⁶³ Bataille also considers cannibalism as a taboo that offers a paradox of attraction much like the forbidden fruit, tying it to theories of eroticism. Bataille points to the communal feast and religious cannibalism, stating, “the object is “forbidden”, sacred, and the very prohibition attached to it is what arouses the desire.” With this in mind, Coré also signifies Bataille’s concept of transgression.

Pornography, much like horror, is often reviled as a woman-hating genre and condemned as a form of violence against women.¹⁶⁴ Feminist opponents of pornography, such as Andrea Dworkin, Catharine MacKinnon, Robin Morgan, and more, argue that pornography is harmful to women and constitutes strong causality of violence against women. For instance, in Dworkin's *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, she includes a quote from an unnamed actress stating, "I was thirteen when I was forced into prostitution and pornography... I was drugged, raped, gang-raped, imprisoned, beaten, sold from one pimp to another..."¹⁶⁵ Dworkin details several more accounts in her literature, and with the help of MacKinnon, staked out a position that pornography was inherently exploitative towards women and called for a civil law to make pornographers accountable of harms. While *Trouble Every Day* is often cited as a horror film, the New French Extremity frequently includes graphic representations of sexuality on screen, and thus, shares a correlation with the pornography genre. *Trouble Every Day* builds upon the arguments surrounding women in pornography and distorts previous representations of female sexuality in cinema. Unlike most representations of sexuality on screen, *Trouble Every Day* does not facilitate violence against women. In contrast, Denis presents a feminine monster that attacks and bites her male sexual partners to death during erotic moments. These ultraviolent outbursts critique the abuse experienced in the pornography industry, making men the site of sexualized violence and aggressive behavior that is so commonly enacted upon women. While I certainly do not think that sexualized violence against any gender

¹⁶⁴ While one cannot dismiss the fact that violence within the pornography industry is eminent and that some films in the genre do perpetuate degrading representations of women's serving the sexual demands of their male counterparts, a notable number of feminists do embrace of some forms of pornography, particularly those aimed at female pleasure, as a medium of feminist expression.

¹⁶⁵ Andre Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*. New York: The Penguin Group. (1989): xvii.

should be tolerated in the real world, *Trouble Every Day* can be considered as empowering in the way it challenges patriarchy by presenting a fictional undoing of the sometimes-misogynistic genre and its relationship to violence against women.

Similarly, as discussed in previous chapters, the horror film frequently emphasizes the idea of female sexuality being something that needs to be punished or come with negative consequences. This is reflected in the way female characters are often murdered by male monsters after engaging in sexual activity. For instance, in *Halloween* (Carpenter, 1978), which is cited as solidifying the slasher film formula, the character PJ (Lynda van der Klok) is murdered by Michael Myers (Tommy Lee Wallace) after engaging in sex. This trend continued throughout the genre, and is still apparent in contemporary horror films. Despite this, Coré is not punished for her sexual actions like typical horror films. Rather, it is the male characters that are attacked by Coré. When her victims seem to reach the climax of their erotic embraces, she murders them by biting them to death. In addition, in one of the most eminently disgusting acts of the scene between Core and the young man who frees her, she slips her finger into one of his wounds, playing with the fleshy opening. The hole is reminiscent of a vaginal opening into which Core repeatedly pokes her finger, thereby feminizing his body by penetrating this newly formed orifice. Through this role reversal, *Trouble Every Day* disarms the gender hierarchy that is so often upheld in moments of sex and violence. Also, although male killers in horror films frequently yield phallic-like weaponry, further illustrating sexual difference and gender hierarchies, Coré's weapons of choice are her teeth, a body part for which actress Beatrice Dalle is famous. Barbara Creed includes the iconography of the vagina dentata in her analysis of the figure of the monstrous-feminine in the horror genre. The vagina dentata, which is conceptualized as a vagina with teeth, is considered as

the mouth of hell, a symbol of woman as the devil's gateway.¹⁶⁶ Creed determines that representations of the vagina dentata in the horror genre, "generally states that women are terrifying because they have teeth in their vaginas and that a woman must be tamed or the teeth somehow removed or softened – usually by a hero figure."¹⁶⁷ This also points to the myth of woman as castrator and masculine fears about the female genitals as a trap. Coré does not need to appropriate phallic weapons in order to be a successful threat, as can usually be seen with more powerful female figures in horror films. By biting her male victims to death in moments of erotic acts, Coré undermines patriarchal phallic weaponry, and instead signifies the vagina dentata. This image of a phallic woman challenges the frequently misogynistic characterization of woman as other in patriarchal discourse. As the spectators, and especially male spectators, witness Coré's violent sexual acts, their traditionally stable masculine position dissolves in moments of castration anxiety and where female otherness is abolished. These representations of sexuality in *Trouble Every Day*, thus, work to directly challenge previous oppressive depictions of women and sexual difference in the horror genre. In turn, Denis' *Trouble Every Day* interrogates female victimhood in the horror genre through Coré and her feminine monstrosity.

Much like Coré, Esther can also be considered as both the site and agent of Bataille's concept in the way she performs violent acts upon herself. By hacking away at her body and flesh, Esther brings herself closer to death. Despite this, it is also Esther's self-harm that makes her body experience intense feelings, and therefore, are the moments when she is most alive. The merging of life and death in Esther's acts of self-mutilation and bodily harm is the *expérience extrême*. Likewise, *In My Skin* also

¹⁶⁶ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis*. New York: Routledge. (1993): 106.

¹⁶⁷ Creed, 2.

shares a liking with Bataille in the way scenes of Esther's self-mutilation are both revolting and erotic. For instance, as Andre Dumas stated, "we are presented with some foul, foul things. Horrible, disgusting, bloody, revolting things---that somehow, and against all odds, end up being rather beautiful."¹⁶⁸ Images of Esther's self-harm are frequently set against shots of Esther's bare skin. The camera slowly tracks up her smooth and unmarked legs, creating sensuality in the framing of her body. This is contrasted with the scenes where Esther destroys such clean surfaces, tearing away at them until she reveals what lies on the other side of the skin. New French Extremity films such as *Martyrs* feature women that slit their wrists as a form of suicidal mutilation. In contrast, Esther's self-harm is not done as a form of suicide. Rather, the difference is directly correlated to Bataille's *expérience extrême*. In reaching the pinnacle of the *expérience extrême*, Bataille describes it as, "a feeling of divine intoxication... which I could neither have described nor can describe in a straightforward way, which I have attempted to follow by evoking suspended nature... of the depth of being; a separation..."¹⁶⁹ Esther's self-abuse does not result in her death, but instead allows her to reach a similar state as Bataille describes. A graphic vignette sequence shows Esther performing unthinkable modes of bodily harm such as a very defiant act of self-mutilation against her face and eating her flesh. These acts allow her to reach a new state of being. At the end of the film, she is framed through a close up, staring blankly into the eye of the camera for several moments. Esther seems to be undergoing an outer body experience, as she has reached the ultimate state where her mind seems to be completely separate from her

¹⁶⁸ Andre Dumas, "In My Skin: Unable to Look Away" *The Horror Digest*. (2011). Online article available at: <http://horrordigest.blogspot.ca/2011/04/in-my-skin-unable-to-look-away.html>

¹⁶⁹ Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, State University of New York Press: Albany. (1954): 69.

body. She has completely broken the boundary of the *expérience extrême*.

While de Van's *In My Skin* is undoubtedly shocking, it is not sensationalistic compared to most films in the horror genre. For instance, in a scene where Esther is at lunch with colleagues she begins to stab her arm with a steak knife. In most horror films, blood would spout out of the wound and emphasize her victimization and suffering. However, there is almost no blood in this sequence. As opposed to making a spectacle of the physical damage that Esther is causing, de Van is more concerned with showing the knife writhing around inside her skin and the pleasure she experiences from it. *In My Skin* addresses the issue of female violence through a very different lens than what is typically seen in the horror genre. This stems from the ways in which *In My Skin* focuses on self-mutilation and refuses gendered constructions of mental illness. In "'Mad Women' in Robert Altman's 3 Women and Images" Molly Langill points to the inexplicable mad woman as a common archetype in the horror genre.¹⁷⁰ Langill argues that the figure of woman in horror often has two central signifiers, "[one] of a woman being deemed 'hysterical' were inconsistency in emotion, and [two] sexual frustration."¹⁷¹ While Esther performs unthinkable acts of self-harm, they are not attributed to past abuse, mental illness, diagnosable psychopathology, neurological damage, or hysteria. Esther is not presented as emotionally unstable, but instead appears calmed by the process of self-mutilation and cutting. In this sense, *In My Skin* uses self-inflicted bodily harm towards different ends. Instead of using it as a means to reinforce conventions of female victimization and hysteria in horror cinema, the film uses self-harm as a source of power and pleasure. While feminists have long protested violence against

¹⁷⁰ Molly Langill, "'Mad Women' in Robert Altman's 3 Women and Images" *Offscreen*. Vol. 18 (8). (2014).

¹⁷¹ Langill.

women in cinema, and the horror genre in particular, *In My Skin* complicates these issues since the defiled female body we see on screen is not the result of a male monster, but of self-inflicted injury. de Van's cinematic approach to Esther's condition, while centering upon the abuse of the female form, thus cannot simply be dismissed as masochistic female victimization.

Problems of Visuality

One of the potential difficulties in positioning *Trouble Every Day* and *In My Skin* in relation to the *écriture féminine* is how to deal with a medium that still follows the patriarchal regime of the visual, where the visible and the invisible are conceived in terms of a masculine/feminine binary. As Nicholas Mirzoeff argues in his *Introduction to Visual Culture*, much of visual culture and cinema in particular, have been read through the lens of the Freudian and Lacanian emphasis on the visible penis as the foundation of phallic subjectivity, which erects phallic visuality as the fetish upon which rests the symbolic order.¹⁷² From a similar perspective, Jason Gaiger and Paul Wood explain in *Art of the Twentieth Century: A Reader* how the visual arts have been interpreted as means to position the spectator within the regime of male visuality:

Employing a psychoanalytic, castration-oriented model of subjectivity pivoting around the registering of sexual difference in terms of the (visual) presence or absence of the penis/phallus as determined through the (male) "gaze," proponents of this art critical approach evaluated art practices in terms of their putative ideological effects on the spectatorial subject, in turn conceived virtually entirely as a function of vision.¹⁷³

Women, therefore, serve to negatively confirm masculine identity as the invisible counterpart to the visible phallus. Women are deemed to be brought into the view

¹⁷² Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*. New York: Psychology Press. (1999): 160.

¹⁷³ Jason Gaiger and Paul Wood, *Art of the Twentieth Century: A Reader*. New Haven [CT]: Yale University Press. (2003): 23.

only through the masculine agency of the gaze, which engenders the female figure as a visual object of desire. Within the masculine regime of visibility, there is the belief that seeing is evidence and a means to understand.¹⁷⁴ The masculinist celebration of cerebral inquiry is entirely rooted in the regime of the visible. It is no coincidence that the term “theory” stems from the concept of seeing or looking at.¹⁷⁵ Moreover, from as early as Laura Mulvey’s *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, there has been a common assumption of the connection between the narrative and the visual in mainstream cinema. Both are directional and work alongside each other, in particular how narrative often focuses upon looking at an object. In accordance to this, I argue that part of the feminism of Denis and de Van’s films is how they challenge patriarchal concepts of visibility through what they choose not to show in their films. This not only causes a breakdown of the masculine regime of visibility, but also forces a separation between the visual and the narrative. This is first represented in *Trouble Every Day* and the way the visuals become misleading. At the most basic level, this is evident in the way the cinematography in *Trouble Every Day* has defamiliarizing tendencies. *Trouble Every Day* takes place in Paris, one of the best-known cities in Europe with universally recognized iconography including the Eiffel Tower, River Seine, Notre Dame de Paris, Pyramid of the Louvre, and Arc de Triomphe. However, Denis does not depict the Paris that is widely known and recognized. She chose to shoot pivotal sequences either at dusk or at night and focused on transitory spaces and

¹⁷⁴ See, for instance, Annette Kuhn’s comments on the notion of “the visible as ‘evidence’,” especially in documentary practice. Kuhn, *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema* (London and New York: Verso, (1994): 128-129).

¹⁷⁵ The term theory originates from the Greek word *theoria*, which means, "contemplation, speculation; a looking at, viewing; a sight, show, spectacle, things looked at," from *theorein* "to consider, speculate, look at," from *theoros* "spectator," from *thea* "a view". *Online Etymology Dictionary*. <http://www.etymonline.com>

cityscapes devoid of specificity. In doing so, the visuals in *Trouble Every Day* result in the defamiliarization of on screen space and tangible landscapes.

This sense of defamiliarization is also evident in the way Denis frames bodies in *Trouble Every Day*. Although *Trouble Every Day* includes several sex scenes, they are not sexual or arousing in the traditional sense. This is first evident in the way they do not result in pleasure, but instead conclude with death and cannibalism. In addition, unlike most sex scenes that illustrate two bodies that are engaged in sexual acts together, Denis fragments bodies and body parts in ways that are uncommon in mainstream cinema. Traditionally, the fragmentation of the body is carefully designed along heteronormative lines to trigger very specific responses to specific body parts. This fragmentation often sexualizes the female body, educing it to a vehicle purely for male pleasure and arousal. Denis's fragmentation of bodies, however, destabilizes traditional sexual stimulations by focusing on body parts that are often unrecognizable as either female or male. Denis often puts the emphasis on genderless flesh rather than gendered body parts. This is apparent in the way Denis consistently frames the sex scenes in *Trouble Every Day* using extreme close ups. These shots linger on abstracted static shots or pans over goose bumps, writhing body parts, clumps of hair, and naked skin. Denis frames her shots with almost unbearable elements of proximity in the film's more graphic moments of sex. This creates a fragmentation of the body, which often makes it impossible for the spectator to determine whose body they are looking at, let alone what body parts are being shown. By fragmenting bodies in such a way, Denis defamiliarizes the body and conventional modes of viewing sexuality on screen. In doing so, Denis' cinematography and imagery systematically undermines masculine modes of visuality and seeing by detaching the narrative from the image.

One of the more disturbing scenes in *Trouble Every Day* is when Shane

attacks and rapes a female maid at the end of the film. The maid is in the hotel's locker room and is changing after her shift. Shane approaches her and the two begin to embrace. At first, Shane's passes appear to be consensual and the maid reciprocates. However, Shane becomes increasingly aggressive. She tries to pull away, but Shane continues to force himself upon her by lying on top of her on the floor and holding down her struggling arms. The remainder of the scene is framed on a close up of the maid's face, which emphasizes her displeasure and fear. Shane begins to perform oral sex, which is visibly uncomfortable for the maid. She starts screaming in a way that is at first difficult to determine whether it is out of pain or pleasure. Still focusing on a close up view of the maid, Shane moves his head into the frame, revealing that his face is covered in her blood. Much like Coré, this shocking moment reveals that Shane has actually been biting the maid to death while performing oral sex. Shane's violent behaviour in this scene offers a unique experience of brutality because he signifies the vagina dentata. This is presented in opposition to Coré who exhibits more masculine phallic imagery in her attacks wherein she pokes at her victim's open wound. This disorients traditional visual representations of violence in the horror genre, ones that are typically associated with the patriarchal binaries of masculine and feminine. Once Shane's bloody face is revealed, he pulls the maid's lifeless body out of the frame. The camera holds on the shot of the blood soaked ground for several moments. While on the one hand, one could argue that this scene is problematic in the way it portrays male on female rape (framed through close ups no less), it can also be read as a critical feminist stance in the way the feminine absorbs the visual. Not only is the viewer unable to see what Shane is doing to the maid, but also since he is performing oral sex, he is figuratively absorbed by the female genitals. This imagery bears strong resemblance to Bataille's

Story of the Eye wherein the female protagonist Simone inserts a dead priest's eye into her vagina. This is significant because instead of being subjected to male visuality as objects to be looked at, the female sexual form in both texts absorbs visuality and turns the male gaze upon itself. This is further reflected when Shane pulls the maid's body out of the frame, removing the deceased and victimized female body out of the visual. Traditional horror films not only invite voyeurism on the part of adolescent male audiences, but also the notion of seeing is also particularly evident in ethnographic horror films wherein male protagonists want to see and explore the unknown. *Trouble Every Day*, therefore, challenges such misogynistic modes of visuality by pushing male voyeurism to the extreme where they cannot see anymore.

These protests of masculine visuality culminate in the film's final moments. After murdering the maid, Shane returns to his hotel room and washes the blood off his body in the shower. Once the evidence of his crimes is washed away, the film ends on a shot of June's wide-eyed face. A single streak of blood remains on the shower wall, suggesting that June might be conscious of the atrocities her husband has just committed. The image of June's face and eyes is held for several seconds, emphasizing her deep gaze. As discussed by Linda Williams, the woman's look at the monster that concludes many horror films offers a threat to male power. According to Williams, in the moments when the monster and the woman are gazing upon one another there is recognition of a, "similar status within patriarchal structures of seeing."¹⁷⁶ Unlike the women Williams writes about, June does not directly return the gaze onto Shane, but instead looks into the distance beyond him. Although slightly departing from Williams' arguments, this image also maintains a strong feminist stance. In the typical regimes of seeing, men are the ones who hold the gaze and

¹⁷⁶ Linda Williams, "When the Woman Looks," *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, University of Texas Press: Austin. (1996): 62.

voyeuristically look at women. When women return the gaze upon men, as discussed in regards to *Martyrs* in chapter two, her look still remains within a binary of looking at and objectifying something to an active gaze. *Martyrs* puts its own spin on the returned gaze in the way Anna not only addresses the viewer, but also how the narrative orients around the goal of looking beyond life as it approaches death. In this sequence, Anna's gaze is also literally looking *at the beyond*. While these returned gazes undoubtedly offer empowering tendencies, June's look also provides an alternative feminist argument to the concept of the woman's look. In the film's final moments she is not actually looking at anything; her gaze is beyond the monster, but unlike Anna, she does not look *at the beyond* as an object of inquiry. This facilitates an entirely new regime. She is beyond modes of seeing that are defined by male and female binaries, and in doing so, is looking beyond narrative visual meaning.

Similar to the way *Trouble Every Day* presents a separation of the narrative and the visual, de Van's *In My Skin* takes this a step further by depicting a conflict between the two. This is primarily evident in the film's final moments when Esther is laying on a hotel bed after taking her brutal practice to a new extreme. These are not high-end hotel suites, but are instead dingy and sordid rooms. These spaces are a vital part of the film's mise-en-scene and help to set the stage for the types of illicit activities that take place. In the morning Esther wakes up and inspects her piece of skin that she attempted to tan. It has gone hard and shriveled and she lovingly places it in her bra, an act that is also given no explanation or reason. The visuals up until this point in the scene reflect determination and intentionality. Esther fixes her hair, grabs her coat, and abruptly leaves the hotel room. Her acts are deliberate and goal oriented, and for a brief moment, suggests that the film might go back to normal. However, the subsequent shot shows her lying on the bed unmoving and staring

vacantly into the camera. There is a complete lack of intentionality and goal-oriented narrative action in this final moment. Unlike the directional pan that was used to illustrate Esther leaving the hotel room, *In My Skin* ends with a tracking shot of Esther's gaze at the camera that is held for several moments. While Esther seems to have reached a new state, we do not have a sense of what she might be seeing. Rather, we are not looking at anything in these moments. Not only does this scene cause the viewer to sacrifice their curiosity to see, but also suggests that the film's visuals do not support the narrative direction. While June looks beyond the narrative in *Trouble Every Day*, Esther's returned look is vacant and empty. *Trouble Every Day* concludes with June looking into nothingness, whereas Esther is looking at it. In this sense, the visual element has been entirely emptied of its ability to convey meaning. Esther's returned gaze calls our attention to the emptiness of visuality and signs. What are not shown in *In My Skin* are the connections between visuals and meaning, undermining the masculine regime of looking in mainstream narrative cinema.

This conflict between the narrative and the visual is also reflected more subtly throughout *In My Skin* as well. This is first exemplified in Esther's wounds, which are sometimes visible and sometimes hidden throughout the film. For instance, Esther does not allow the viewer or the other characters in the film to see the wounds on her body, masking them under clothes and makeup. However, since the viewer follows Esther and her condition and since some of her wounds are visible, the audience and the characters in the film are still reminded of what lies underneath. Esther also suffers from the fear of exposing her wounds to the other characters in the film. This directly relates to the concept of shame that frequently occurs throughout the film, and is particularly evident in the pool party scene. In this sequence, Esther has just received a promotion and is celebrating with her colleagues. Her friend Sandrine

pretends to be happy for her, but is visibly jealous. A few moments after telling Sandrine the news, three male co-workers grab Esther and try to throw her into the pool. Knowing that she has a series of wounds hidden under her clothes, Esther frantically struggles and screams. Sandrine does not help her and as a result of the struggle, Esther's wounds open up and blood seeps through her pants. The men immediately drop her and she is left to deal with the embarrassment of the situation. In addition to the way viewers and characters are unable to see the extent of Esther's wounds and bodily harm, she also takes deliberate action to hide a piece of skin she has tanned in her bra. Once again, the visuals become confusing and do not direct or add to narrative cohesion. While women are traditionally positioned as objects of the voyeuristic male gaze of both the audience and the male characters of the films, Esther consistently tries to subvert visibility in the way she attempts to cover up her wounds and the visual evidence of her condition.

This is also reflected in the way Esther documents her extreme acts of self-mutilation through photographs. In the film's conclusion where Esther slashes her face and tans her skin, Esther is surrounded by images of her blood soaked and wounded body. While the images might suggest a linear recording of her condition, they do not amount to anything in the film's end, nor do we fully see them. They are not referred to or seen again throughout the film. Instead, we are looking at visual objects that do not add up to meaning, more specifically, narrative meaning. Despite a surface appearance, Esther's relationship with her professional life is also unsteady. Even though she obviously values her position and advancement within her company, she cannot stop indulging in the addictive cutting of her own skin, even if the repercussions of the behaviour could potentially end her career. During a business dinner with clients Esther drinks too much and becomes less able to engage in the

chatty business banter around the table and soon becomes engrossed with her own body. Suddenly it appears as though her arm is detached from her body and lying on the table. While on the face of it, this could be interpreted as a conventional metaphor for castration, the fact that this moment literally “makes no sense” calls into question the reliability of the film image as visual evidence of the direct equation between the character, her actions and her body. As such, this scene undermines the phallogentric fixation on looking at bodies as a means to find the truth about character.

Furthermore, this would-be metaphor is reversed, as Esther eventually *reattaches* her arm to her body and secretly stabbing herself under the table until she draws blood.

Esther’s *imaginary* dismemberment stands out as the most fantastical and unrealistic moment of the film, where the *image* purposefully fails to reveal any meaningful information about her peculiar behaviour. Culminating in the film’s final moments wherein Esther stares blankly into the camera after what appeared to be intentional goal-oriented actions, what is not shown in *In My Skin* is the connection between the visual and the meaning. Furthermore, what is not represented is the construction of evidence. This leads to the epistemological question of seeing and understanding.

What is shown in *Trouble Every Day* and *In My Skin* is not evidence leading to empirical knowledge about character and story; rather what the films display before us is what Bataille would call “the reign of unknowing”.¹⁷⁷ *Trouble Every Day*, and even more so, *In My Skin* empty patriarchal languages as the visuals lead the spectator further from meaning and into pure experience.

Trouble Every Day* (Denis, 2001) and *In My Skin* (de Van, 2002) as Filmic Equivalencies of the *Écriture Féminine

¹⁷⁷ Paul Hegarty, *Georges Bataille: Core Cultural Theorist*. London and New Delhi: SAGE. (2000): 77.

In an effort to challenge phallogentrism in language and writing, the focus of Cixous's discourse of the *écriture féminine* began reading texts in the particular contexts of women's experience. Both *Trouble Every Day* and *In My Skin* can be situated alongside the *écriture féminine* in the ways they are directed by women and also focus on the female experience. In particular, *Trouble Every Day* and *In My Skin* can be read in relation to the *écriture féminine* because they focus on women as the ultimate site of experience. This is reflected in the way Denis and de Van subvert plot and narrative cohesion to instead emphasize experience. For instance, unlike *Inside* and *Martyrs* that use the female experience as a metaphor for the *expérience extrême*, which in turn present an erasure of patriarchy, *Trouble Every Day* and *In My Skin* present women as the *expérience extrême*. Not only do the female protagonists in both films embody the *expérience extrême* through their ultraviolent acts, but they are also rooted in the experience themselves. Cixous conceives the *écriture féminine* as a form of writing that would, in psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's terms, reside or take place in the realm of the real, rather than the symbolic.¹⁷⁸ Instead of symbolizing the *expérience extrême* or a break from patriarchal discourse, Coré and Esther are ultimate site where narrative, visual, symbolic meaning collapses. The female protagonists in *Trouble Every Day* and *In My Skin* are, therefore, more than just representations; they are the experience. By presenting women in such a manner, Denis and de Van privilege female experience before language and adopt the anti-linear, cyclical writing so often frowned upon by patriarchal society. Denis's disregard for traditional narrative conventions is a point of disapproval for other critics who feel that the story lacks coherence and fails to thrill the viewer in satisfactory ways. For instance, James Quandt complains that, "Denis barely musters a hint of narrative to

¹⁷⁸ N.A, "écriture feminine," *Oxford Reference*. (2004). Online website available at: <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095741653>

contain or explain the orgiastic bloodletting."¹⁷⁹ By offering a collapse of goal-oriented linear narrative cinema, Denis and de Van's texts become sites of difference from phallogentric concepts and controls.

Not only does *Trouble Every Day* and *In My Skin* position the female characters as the *expérience extrême*, but both films also have origins in the directors' experiences as well. This is primarily evident in the way de Van directly inserts herself into *In My Skin*. de Van is the writer, director, and protagonist in the film and her premise was that she wanted to be more than a filmmaker, she wanted to film herself.¹⁸⁰ From the beginning of her career she was fascinated with the mind and body. For instance, de Van states, "I was drawn to the subject because of the feeling that the body could become a stranger, that there might be a distance between consciousness and the life of the body."¹⁸¹ Prior to *In My Skin*, de Van produced several short films such as *Bien Sous Tous Rapports* (de Van, 1996) and *Rétention* (de Van, 1997). *Rétention*, enacted by de Van, is also about a woman who becomes obsessed with her physically, refusing to discard any waste products from her body. As Palmer states, "these early ventures synthesized de Van's creative interest in the filmed – hence, stylized and dysfunctional – body."¹⁸² *In My Skin* not only builds upon de Van's previous experiences and fascinations, but also was inspired by an accident that de Van experienced when she was eight years old where a car ran over her leg. Recounting this event, de Van stated, "I felt no sense of panic, no pain, even though I should have passed out. I saw my leg just as another object."¹⁸³ This theme is directly explored in *In My Skin* and the gruesome acts Esther performs on herself.

¹⁷⁹ James Quandt, "Flesh & Blood: Sex and Violence in Recent French Cinema," *Artforum*. (2004). Online article available at <http://www.artforum.com/inprint/id=6199>

¹⁸⁰ Palmer, 80.

¹⁸¹ Palmer, 80.

¹⁸² Palmer, 80.

¹⁸³ Palmer, 81.

de Van also instilled herself forcibly within an impartiality about her own body to prepare for the role. For a year in advance she carried out actorly exercises designed to increase her objectivity and self-detachment, which included walking around in uncomfortable shoes, buying and wearing clothes she disliked, growing her fingernails to awkward lengths, and more.¹⁸⁴ This relates to the *écriture féminine* because not only does *In My Skin* explicitly center upon the female experience, but de Van also inserts her own experiences of mind and body separation into the film as well.

The philosophy of the *écriture féminine* is to undo the ways in which women have been prevented from expressing their own sexuality for themselves in writing and in language. Irigaray and Cixous contend that the most effective way to do so is for women to write about sexuality in new feminine languages. Although sometimes unpleasing to watch, Denis and de Van's texts can be read as instances of *écriture féminine* because they depict female sexuality in their own terms that break from traditional representations of women historically being limited to sexual objects for men. For instance, in *Trouble Every Day* female sexuality is not simply represented as being the opposite of men, but appears as being all over the place. As opposed to representing Coré as a mere object to appease male sexual urges, she is active and challenges traditional representations of women being sexual objects for men. Even though the reason behind Core's behaviour is a mysterious disorder, it does not transform her into a strictly undesirable monster, as she is still a beautiful and alluring woman. Furthermore, similar to *Trouble Every Day*, *In My Skin* presents female sexuality as the skin and the female body itself. While *In My Skin* does not include sex scenes per say, Esther does have a sort of sexual relationship with her flesh.

¹⁸⁴ Palmer, 84.

Esther rejoices in hurting herself and her behavior displays sexual overtones as she kisses the wounds on her arm with more passion than when she kisses her partner in a mirroring scene earlier in the film. Irigaray advocates for the fluid multiplicity of female desire as a more diffuse, shapeless form of eroticism than its masculine equivalent. Core's unruly manifestations of sexuality operate in much the same way, especially since the Dens and Godard are also women. Her character, therefore, becomes a powerful instance of female carnal expression. Since Denis and de Van present female sexuality in an alternative manner to mainstream cinema, they depart from patrician discourse and tools of representation. This challenges the ways women's bodies and sexual pleasures have been either absent or misrepresented in the horror genre and cinema as a whole.

Whether or not there is a specifically feminine aesthetic in cinema remains an open question among feminist theorists. This debate is frequently situated within the trap of using tools of patriarchal discourse that endorse the very system of subjecting women to an invisibility or non-presence. While Denis and de Van's films belong to a visual medium by their very nature and, therefore, maintain a correlation to patriarchal discourse and signification, they also systematically dismantle such patriarchal tools in their films as well. Denis and de Van distinguish their filmic representations from patriarchy by producing feminine cinematic languages that differ from those New French Extremity films produced by male directors. *Trouble Every Day* and *In My Skin* invite the spectators to escape the trap of linear narrative and signification, in favour of an experience that breaks free from reason and veers instead towards pure affect. In psychoanalytic terms, the *écriture féminine* takes the form of the expression of the inexpressible and can only be arrived at via experimentation and play. *Trouble Every Day* and *In My Skin*, as discussed above,

adopt such an experimental approach in the ways they depart from linear goal-oriented narratives that are commonplace in mainstream cinema. Similar to the *écriture féminine*, women's bodies and sexual pleasures in *Trouble Every Day* and *In My Skin* depart from patriarchal modes of representation and language. Instead, their films privilege female experiences and feelings. Since Denis and de Van are female writers and directors that are concerned with female experiences, their films allow for feminine languages of expression. This allows for a stark departure from patriarchal thinking. In this sense, *Trouble Every Day* and *In My Skin* features elements of the *écriture féminine*, possibly even marking a new breed of *cinéma féminin* that departs from patriarchal discourse and tools of representation.

Conclusion

This chapter has dissected the highly controversial New French Extremity films *Trouble Every Day* and *In My Skin*. In particular, I have investigated how the female protagonists are the *expérience extrême* in both films and offer an experience of transcendence that defines narrative and visual meaning as developed by phallogentric concepts and controls. In particular, *Trouble Every Day* and *In My Skin* differ from traditional horror films in the way they present an erasure of linear narrative meaning that is commonplace in mainstream cinema. *Trouble Every Day* and *In My Skin* adopt an anti-linear and disorienting approach to their narratives to instead focus on female experiences and feelings. Included in these experiences is the ways in which *Trouble Every Day* and *In My Skin* present alternative representations of violence and sexuality in the horror genre. This in turn works to interrogate the common portrayal of women as one-dimensional victims within the controversial genre. In doing so, while Denis and de Van's texts center upon the defilement of the female form, they cannot simply be dismissed as masochistic female victimization.

Stemming from this, *Trouble Every Day* and *In My Skin* can also be considered as feminine texts through the ways they challenge visuality and phallogentrism by illustrating a separation between the narrative and the image. All of these elements produce texts that not only reject traditional narrative meaning, but also present a breakdown of narrative and visual language. Rather, they present alternative filmic experiences that align more closely with those desired by Irigaray and Cixous.

Conclusion

“But a sort of rupture-in anguish-leaves us at the limit of tears: in such a case we lose ourselves, we forget ourselves and communicate with an elusive beyond.” – Georges Bataille

Tim Palmer was one of the first to explore the fascinating films of contemporary France, ranging from mainstream genre hits to arthouse experiments that deliberately alienate the viewer. Among these, Palmer investigates the rise of the New French Extremity movement and its icons. While mainstream audiences may have become more comfortable with images of violence and gore in film and television since the release of these films a decade ago, the methods used in the New French Extremity are still highly controversial. In particular, the filmic texts I have analyzed throughout this thesis depict the defilement of the female form in ways that are deemed unacceptable in mainstream cinema. While gruesome acts of violence, torture, self-mutilation, rape, and more are inflicted primarily upon or by the female body in the New French Extremity, this thesis project positioned the movement as a feminist film practice to demonstrate an alternative reading of these texts wherein they are more than just misogynistic tales of female victimization. By examining *Inside*, *Martyrs*, *Trouble Every Day*, and *In My Skin* in such a way, I hope to have illustrated their feminist potential through their treatment of the female body as the site and agent of Bataille’s concept of the *expérience extrême*. Although horror frequently includes women at the core of its narratives as the quintessential site of pain and suffering, these texts collectively set themselves apart from other films in the genre in the ways they situate the female protagonists in a position of power to overwhelm and consume patriarchy.

The aim of my thesis project was to consider these texts through three lenses. The first was how the female characters in these films are situated as the sites and

agents of the *expérience extrême*. In *Inside* and *Martyrs* we are introduced to characters such as Sarah and Anna who become the ultimate sites of the *expérience extrême* because the pain and brutality that is inflicted upon their bodies brings them to the extreme boundary between life and death. In *Inside* Sarah signifies the site of the *expérience extrême*, as La Femme pushes her pregnant body to the limit of what it can withstand before she reaches death. Through ultraviolent acts such as piercing her hand with scissors, slashing her face with a knife, abusing her throughout the night, and taking her unborn child, Sarah's pregnant body transitions towards death, which also allows for the life of the fetus. In this sense, life and death merge in La Femme's violent acts towards Sarah, also making her the agent of the *expérience extrême*. Similarly, in *Martyrs* Anna is the quintessential site of the *expérience extrême* since her tormenter, Mademoiselle, believes she can gain insights into the afterlife by torturing her victims and bringing them as close as possible to the liminal space between life and death. Both films use the female experience as the catalyst to the *expérience extrême* and abjection, which become metaphors for the dismantling of patriarchy. *Trouble Every Day* and *In My Skin* also evoke Bataille's *expérience extrême* through the representations of violent acts and their correlation with sexuality. However, unlike *Inside* and *Martyrs* that use the female experience as a metaphor for the *expérience extrême*, Denis and de Van present women as the *expérience extrême*. The female protagonists in both films are more than just representations of Bataille's concept; they are the experience in itself.

The second aim of this thesis was to identify these films as feminist texts, suggesting that their embodiment of Bataille's *expérience extrême* engenders feminist narratives that challenge traditional images of female suffering and victimhood in the horror genre. In an online forum, "Tired Hiker" provided the typical

misogynistic explanation for the phenomenon of female victimhood stating, “females are good lead roles for horror films, probably because mostly guys go to see horror films, and guys usually want to see hot chicks. Plus, chicks can scream better than guys, they are more vulnerable than guys, and they tend to have nicer breasts and asses than guys.”¹⁸⁵ Although at first glance *Inside*, *Martyrs*, *Trouble Every Day*, and *In My Skin* might seem to fall in line with these misogynistic ideologies in the ways they focus upon wounded and suffering female bodies, I have argued throughout this thesis that such texts also offer empowering tendencies because they interrogate female victimhood in the genre. *Inside* and *Martyrs* seemingly begin with a narratives that are common to the horror genre, but deviate from the male monster/female victim dichotomy by offering ultraviolent scenes of female-on-female violence that removes gender hierarchies altogether. Likewise, in both films, male characters are either absent or dispelled in the beginning of the narratives, presenting a systematic erasure of patriarchy. *Trouble Every Day* and *In My Skin* also follow a similar approach in the ways the male characters of these texts are unable to resolve the narratives and cure the women of their diseases and conditions. Moreover, *In My Skin* is particularly significant in relation to female victimhood because while feminists have contested violence against women in cinema, de Van complicates these issues since the battered female body we see on screen is not the result of a male oppressor, but of self-inflicted bodily harm. Finally, while the victimization of women is made a spectacle of in the horror genre through facial close ups of terrified women as they encounter their respective killers, these texts collectively challenge such misogynistic filmic techniques in the ways they interrogate modes of visuality and include moments

¹⁸⁵ Tired Hiker, Females as Lead Roles in Horror Movies? [Online forum comment]. Message posted to: <http://www.killermovies.com/forums/archive/index.php/t-401131-females-as-lead-roles-in-horror-movies.html>

wherein the female characters return their gaze upon the spectators in moments of extreme pain and anguish. Therefore, *Inside*, *Martyrs*, *Trouble Every Day*, and *In My Skin*'s cinematic approaches to corporeality, while centering upon the abuse of the female form, cannot simply be dismissed as masochistic female victimization.

Finally, despite the fact that these films include graphic scenes of violence and torture enacted upon the female form, a significant amount of notable New French Extremity films are written and directed by women. This thesis investigated how the subject matter is presented based on the films that are directed and written by men and women. In conducting an examination of the New French Extremity films directed by men (*Inside* and *Martyrs*) and those by women (*Trouble Every Day* and *In My Skin*), it is clear that their approaches to female corporeality offer different filmic experiences. The New French Extremity films directed by men challenge patriarchy through symbolic representations of the process of the *expérience extrême*. Similar to Bataille's literature, the films directed by men utilize the female experience as an aspirational metaphor for the undoing of patriarchy. In those films, the female characters serve as a solution for a male perspective that wants to escape its patriarchal condition and present an experience akin to "becoming woman". In contrast, the New French Extremity films directed by women proposes instead an experience of transcendence that defies meaning and avoids the symbolic language of metaphors. *Trouble Every Day* and *In My Skin* are filmic representations of the *écriture féminine* that depart from patriarchal discourse and tools of representation. The stylistic and narrative elements utilized by Denis and de Van not only reject traditional narrative meaning, but also present a breakdown of narrative and visual language. The New French Extremity films directed by women, therefore, present

alternative filmic experiences that align more closely with those desired by Irigaray and Cixous.

As Robyn Longhurst stated, "perhaps thinking, writing and talking about bodily fluids, abjection, orifices, and the surfaces/depths of specific bodies can offer a way of prompting different understandings of power, knowledge and social relationships between people and places."¹⁸⁶ It is my belief that the New French Extremity films *Inside*, *Martyrs*, *Trouble Every Day*, and *In My Skin* reinforce such an approach. Although the real socio-political problem of violence against women should not be dismissed or ignored, the defilement and deterioration of the female body in these fictional texts offer a perspective that may have been previously overlooked. More so than most other subgenres in the horror canon, these films are collectively concerned with women's bodily experiences. While such texts approach this topic in ways that are often deemed as exploitative and excessive, I argue for their feminist values in the ways in which the female body is the ultimate site to confront patriarchal constraints and limitations. This not only challenges previous misogynistic depictions of women in the horror genre, but also severs the boundaries of representations of the female corporeality in visual culture.

¹⁸⁶ Robyn Longhurst, *Bodies: Exploring Fluid Boundaries*. London and New York: Routledge. (2001): 135.

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