

**CON-FUSING BODIES:
NAVIGATING BEYOND THE NEW FRENCH EXTREMITY
WITH JEAN-LUC NANCY**

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**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Nottingham
Trent University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.**

April 2021

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Acknowledgements

I am extremely grateful to my supervisors, Prof. Martin O'Shaughnessy and Dr. Francesca Hardy, for their insightful feedback and attention throughout my studies. I would also like to extend my thanks to my independent assessor, Prof. Jean-Pierre Boulé, and to Prof. Gill Allwood for their kind support along the way.

I am thankful to the Association for the Study of Modern and Contemporary France for awarding me the Peter Morris Memorial Postgraduate Travel Prize which enabled me to conduct research at the Bibliothèque du film of the Cinémathèque Française in Paris. Dr. Marie Chabbert and Dr. Nikolaas Deketelaere selected my paper for the Thinking with Nancy conference at Balliol College in 2019, which was a real honour.

The warm welcome from Dr. Helen Drew, Dr. Suzy Harrison, Mara Sprengel-Smith and Dr. Richard Bromhall will not be forgotten, nor the friendships built across the course of the PhD, especially with Heather Green (and JG!), Dr. Helen Gair, Catrin Harris, Sabrina Moro and Dr. Jean Morris. Mathilde Vialard, Dr. Théo Torres, Dr. Izzy Story, Dr. Jamie Williams and Jonathan Hatfull have all been wonderful Nottingham friends.

My gratitude to Prof. Chris Reynolds, Dr. Roy Smith and Sue Sandhu for their professional support, as well as to my wonderful colleagues at the University of Nottingham International College and Europe Langues Organisation.

My sincere thanks to my super readers, Prof. Michael Parsons and Dr. Emilia Wilton-Godberfforde, as well as Alex Fletcher (YFLP), for devoting so much time to me and for giving such insightful feedback. Prof. Joan Williamson has been a constant source of support and inspiration. I am indebted to Dr. Laura McMahon and Dr. Cüneyt Çakırlar for the fantastic viva experience and for their passion for my work.

Thanks, of course, to Prof. Jean-Luc Nancy, *mon compagnon de greffe*, for bringing the body and philosophy together so beautifully. The news of his death brought great sadness as I was preparing to submit this thesis. I hope he would have enjoyed my thoughts.

Finally, love and shrieks of affection to my family – my Mum, (the real Dr) Claire Parsons, my Dad (the surreal 'Prof') Nick Parsons, and my brothers Aidan, Euan and Joseph – and to the various friends and beasts who have supported me throughout all these years.

Abstract

The New French Extremity (NFE) continues to be regarded as a key moment in contemporary French cinema, yet very little comment has been made about the apparent disappearance of the trend, nor has there been any exploration of the thematic confluences that can be remarked in the later work of the directors associated with the trend. To fill this gap, this study investigates the theoretical impasse which can be argued to have brought about the disappearance of the NFE, the point at which the graphic exploration of the body ceases to bring new insight and instead falls away into meaninglessness. At the same time, it describes a hitherto unexplored trajectory which connects the extreme films with the post-extreme cinema which has followed. This is achieved by placing NFE and post-NFE films by the same director/s into dialogue, in effect considering the NFE film and its successor as one continuous philosophical investigation. Through a reading which places the films in dialogue with the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, a dialogue instigated by Nancy himself in his response to Claire Denis's NFE film *Trouble Every Day*, it is possible to locate the moment of breakdown which the NFE films are inexorably drawn to. We can then suggest how subsequent films have moved beyond this breakdown through a less confrontational engagement with physicality which seeks not to separate and dislocate bodies but rather to draw them together into temporary moments of stability, a con-fusion which offers new perspectives on both the NFE as an ongoing field for study and on Nancy's ontology.

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Images are used on the understanding that such use constitutes fair dealing. All directors are listed in the filmography.

Introduction

In explaining the parameters of his analysis of European Cinema from 1939 to 1990, Pierre Sorlin noted that 'taken as a cultural whole or considered in relation to their respective countries of origin, European films did not go through any change in 1940 or in 1990' (1991, 207). While this assertion is merely part of Sorlin's discussion of the slightly arbitrary choice of years for the book, it feels almost like a challenge to fate. For 1991 would bring about a change in the way that French films were viewed on an international scale, marking the beginning of a filmic trend that it is still widely discussed to this day, 30 years on, despite arguably having been absent for over a decade. The purpose of this thesis is to offer an explanation for the disappearance of this cinematic trend, described as the New French Extremity (NFE), and simultaneously suggest how the trend fits into a coherent continuity of filmmaking by showing what it has become. In demonstrating that the trend has reached an impasse in terms of form, philosophy, and critical reception, we can offer up a new way of thinking which allows us to move beyond this. Such a move is achieved by overlaying a theoretical framework based around the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, whose ontology has both direct and thematic connections with the NFE, through which we can suggest the way in which the impasse has been thought around. The focus on the body, the corporeality of the films of the NFE, make them ideal as tools with which to approach and interrogate Nancy's ontology – and indeed vice versa. By applying a Nancean reading to the NFE films and to subsequent films by the directors, I will demonstrate an evolution of thought which invites reconsideration of the NFE as part of a thinking process, rather than as an aberrant group which somehow stand apart from the rest of French cinema. This study will also build on some recent work which has begun a re-evaluation of the NFE, suggesting that there is a space for new thinking of the trend which moves past the dominant theoretical approaches. Through this study, a path is opened up to see the way in which the trend has continued, navigating beyond the impossibility of grasping the body and towards a positive reinstatement of the body into a continuity with other bodies. This will shift the discourse around these films away from the typically negative reading and recast them rather as part of a thinking process which ultimately leads to a far more positive outcome. In much the same way as my readings here

lead us to films which offer new ways to consider our approach to the body, this study will suggest new ways to engage with both the NFE and with Nancy's thinking.

There is already a substantial body of literature devoted to the detailed examination of the films associated with the NFE. New writing is appearing all the time and attempting to offer a detailed overview of the literature is a difficult task. What can be observed is a certain reticence about offering clear assertions about what the ultimate meaning of the NFE trend might be. This project is equally unable to give a clear explanation. What it will do, however, is clearly indicate a path of exploration which allows for a rethinking of the NFE as part of an ongoing philosophical thinking process. French cinema of the 1990s and 2000s often depicted the body in a particularly direct way, described by Tim Palmer as a 'cinéma du corps' (2011). This refers to cinema which uses the materiality of the body on screen as a way to engage the spectator, to engender a sense of proximity. This corporeal cinema frequently created tensions with spectators and critics, its filming of the naked, exposed and violated body being seen as a transgression of taboos. Brutal sexual assault, gory dismemberment and actual physical processes typified the NFE. This 'brutal intimacy' (Palmer 2011) moves the body to the centre of discourse, both in terms of analysis of the films and the reaction to them from spectators. In the years since the trend was described, a multitude of critical academic approaches have been applied to the films (the specific corpus of films differing depending on which criteria were applied to decide the grouping). A common end point of the studies is the lack of a definite direction for the trend – many different commentators seem to draw similarly ambiguous conclusions. James Quandt, the critic who first named the trend in 2004, returned to the topic in 2011 and asked:

What, then, *was* the NFE? A manifestation of cultural and political impasse, an anxious reaction to fin de siècle and the late capitalist condition the French call *la précarité*? A short-lived resurgence of the violational tradition of French culture, also reflected in contemporaneous literature (e.g. Michel Houellebecq, Catherine Millet, Marie Darrieussecq, Jonathan Littell)? The wilful imposition of thematic pattern on a disparate and disconnected group of films? (213)

A range of fascinating possibilities, but no clear answer. While the NFE only accounts for part of their study, it is interesting to observe that Aaron Kerner and Jonathan Knapp summarise their 2016 study of extreme film by saying, 'it is unclear to us whether we have mapped the

opening to a new frontier, or have charted the ebb and tide of a waning cinematic trend we have been calling extreme cinema' (156). Again, we are left to wonder exactly what purpose these films served. Even Alexandra West's confident assertion of the importance of the NFE trend does not offer any concrete conclusions, claiming:

The films of New French Extremity have pushed boundaries, combining art-house aesthetics with the elements of horror and exploitation films, in an effort to make beautiful the ugliest parts of being French. They have transgressed and transcended. They showed that what France has to fear is itself (2016, 178)

All this goes to support the idea of the critical impasse that has been reached, yet the NFE remains hugely influential and engaged with, both in academia and in film culture more widely. It is thus important to refresh the thinking around it, to reopen the lines of enquiry which are mostly scarred over. New blood is required. My approach builds on the groundwork laid by Mauro Resmini in his 2015 article 'Reframing the New French Extremity: Cinema, Theory, Mediation', in which he calls for a rethinking of what has become in many ways the expected and accepted response to the NFE, which is to say that this is a group of films which somehow surpass others in their ability to approach the body. Resmini observes that this assumption must be challenged though, as we shall go on to see, the specific angles with which he and I approach this issue are rather different. For me, everything must come back to this idea of impasse, and the fall into meaninglessness that comes with proximity to the body. This study will add to Resmini's work in offering different ways to reconceptualise the NFE. Where it will also add usefully to the existing literature is in offering not only an explanation for the diminishment or disappearance of the trend, but also a navigable passage towards what came next. It is very important for the continuing study of these films that they be identified as part of a wider, ongoing process of thought and filmmaking. At the same time, the co-exposure of the films to Nancy's thought which opens up new ways of reading the trend also allows for new reading of Nancy. The two key concepts which form the backbone of my study here, of *l'image en saignée aveuglante* and con-fusion, are applicable beyond film analysis, feeding back into Nancy's wider thinking around community, plurality and the body.

This study addresses two key questions – 1) What caused the NFE to disappear? and 2) What came after the NFE and how does it respond to what came before? We will see clearly that

the answer to the second is an inevitable response to the answer to the first – briefly, that the theoretical impasse which graphic exploration of the body leads us to can only be navigated around through a process of restoring the body through a co-mingling with other bodies (in the positive state of con-fusion which we will go on to describe). This thesis will return to the well-explored field of the NFE and qualify and contextualise it in a way that has not been attempted before. This will be achieved by moving beyond it, offering a description of the hitherto unexplored group of films which represent the progression of the trend. As the title suggests, this will be achieved through a thinking process initiated by Nancy, whose direct relationship with the trend will be explored at length.

More personally, this project marks in many ways the culmination of a long engagement with these films, one that has moved from undergraduate to graduate study, and which will continue to inflect and infect my thinking as I move forward in my work. This latest stage is distinct from the previous interventions in its philosophical outlook, one which is both Nancean – for the two have become inseparable in my thinking – and also highly positive, looking at the trend as part of a process of negotiation rather than as an open wound or hang nail which continues to cause pain. This latest iteration of my thought was inspired not by my interest in violence and extremity, but rather through an entirely different way of thinking cinema. It begins ten years ago with an image: a poster on a wall in the Paris Metro for the forthcoming release of the film *Intouchables* (Toledano and Nakache 2011). There are two figures on the poster, one behind the other (Figure 1). Omar Sy standing, François Cluzet seated. Telling a story (loosely adapted from the real-life story of Philippe Pozzo di Borgo and Abdel Sellou [Pozzo di Borgo 2001]) of a man from the Parisian banlieues coming to work for a rich, tetraplegic businessman, *Intouchables* would go on to become the second highest-grossing French film, and receive numerous international remakes including English-language *The Upside* (Burger 2017).

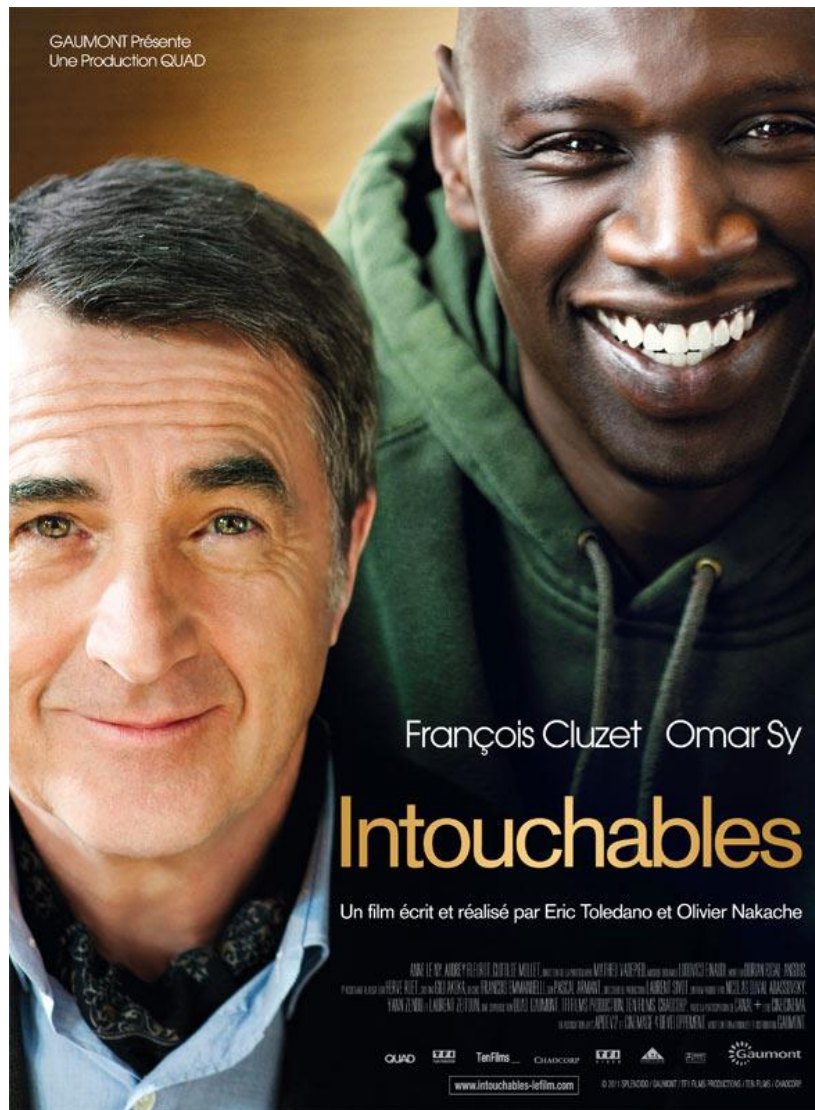


Figure 1

Something about this poster, in particular the space where the title is written and how the figures disappear into darkness, and later watching the film itself, activated a thought process which was not immediately coherent. There were a number of films released around the same time dealing with the relationship between a disabled and an able-bodied person. Before *Intouchables* had come *La Ligne droite* (Wargnier 2011), in which blind athlete Yannick (Cyril Descours) is paired with a sighted partner (Rachida Brakni) to run with. They are not allowed to touch during the race – they hold either end of a piece of string – yet the shots as they run see parts of their bodies overlapping, giving the impression that they are indeed in contact (Figure 2).

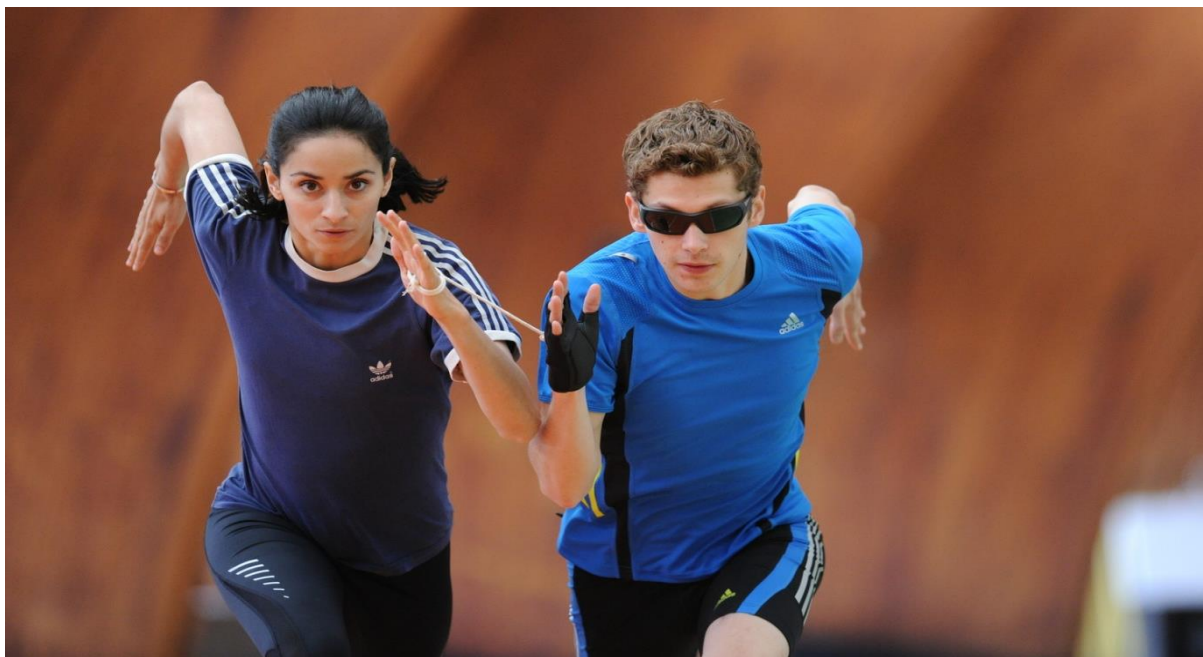


Figure 2

Jacques Audiard's *De rouille et d'os* (2012) equally gives over much of its screen time to the relationship between Marion Cotillard and Mathias Schoenaerts' characters after she loses her legs in an accident with a whale. Again, we often see them framed in such a way that parts of their bodies overlap (Figure 3).



Figure 3

This trend did not go unnoticed. For instance, Cox observed in his *Guardian* article that 'with worldwide hits such as *Untouchable* and *Rust and Bone*, French cinema is changing the way

disabled people are portrayed on screen' (2012). Alberge quotes Toledano as saying that *Intouchables* 'struck a chord with the public perhaps because we live in a time of global crisis', and observing that 'the film redefines our heroic image, from yesterday's "superhero" to "two simple people who can accept the fragility of their lives"' (2012). This idea of cinema being in some way responsive to the global crises ongoing around us, negotiating these through an investigation of a relationship between bodies, is strongly correlative with the central thesis of this project: the move towards restoration and reparation through the con-fusing of bodies. This idea of accepting fragility through contact, creating a shared body, a one of two, is amplified by the visual dynamic of disabled/able-bodied people. There are strong parallels to be drawn between the movement towards restoration and reparation that the NFE directors made and the rise of disability cinema in France.

It must be stated outright, however, that these films will not be looked at in any detail in this thesis. Rather, they raised the issue of how this point had been reached. It seemed that French cinema had moved into a new era, but how had it got there? Something around this blurred connection, this space between bodies which both separates and links them, planted the seed of an idea which would lead me back to the NFE and impose a Nancean reading. For this idea of communal being, of commonality between beings, inevitably brings us to Nancy. This showed a dangling thread, an opening which demanded to be explored. Nancy had engaged with the NFE, and his thinking collided with an apparent impasse. This sense of impasse then expanded, suddenly showing a series of apparent dead ends. Looking to Nancy for possible ways in which these dead ends might be thought around is what led me to the key concepts which this study will investigate. This project thus moves from the well-explored ground of the NFE towards the later films which I will describe as 'post-extreme' – in that they literally follow the extreme films, but equally 'post' in that they represent a movement beyond extremity. This movement, bringing us up against the impasse that the NFE has remained stuck at, and then beyond it to explore the post-extreme, is expressed primarily through two concepts, which intertwine with various aspects of Nancy's ontology. The first of these is *l'image en saignée aveuglante*, a term used by Nancy (2001a, 64), translated by Douglas Morrey as 'the image bleeding, blinding' (2008, 9). This concept, which will be contextualised and explained in close detail in the second half of the literature review and in Chapter 1, describes the moment at which meaning is lost when the body is approached too closely. This

helps to express the point of impasse, with the dual concepts of bleeding and blinding aiding us to comprehend the way in which the penetration, the graphic exploration of the body can actually cause us to lose sight of it, or rather to lose sight of any meaning which is being sought in the exploration. The second conceptual figure which guides us here is the idea of con-fusion. Con-fusion marks the positive move away from the impasse, describing a re-thinking of the approach to the body, offering a restoration of the sense of wholeness which keeps the body safe through a process which brings it into contact with other bodies and blurs the lines of distinction between them. Rather than the fraught, destructive separation of bodies which predicates the NFE, we see in the post-extreme films a clear move towards positive comingling of bodies. Describing con-fusion requires a reading of the possibilities which exist at the edges of Nancy's thinking. This will be explored in the second part of the literature review and in Chapter 1, then teased out through the close textual readings which follow.

It is important to acknowledge from the outset that Nancy's work appears to resist and reject the idea of outright fusion. Consider Jacques Derrida's summation of Nancy's thinking on touch which describes it as 'être avec sans confusion' (2000, 221). However, despite this, Nancy also frequently leans towards the idea of a fused state, offering up tantalising suggestions of its possibility. I will mark the distinction between confusion and con-fusion, where the hyphenation offers both proximity and distance. I will also offer a detailed explanation of con-fusion within Nancean thought, leading off from his most revealing engagement with the idea. In his short essay, 'Making Sense', a musing on the idea of that titular activity, he poetically describes a moment of fusion which is part of the process of sense-making. In observing a tree, in experiencing its greenness in the rays of the sun, Nancy seems to lose himself (albeit temporarily) in admitting 'je me confonds avec lui' (2011, 209). In this apparent achievement of fusion, this moment of con-fusion, we find a world of possibilities opened up and exposed, a line of inquiry which marries to the tactile, ultra-present physicality found in Nancy's ontology – which we shall examine in detail around his writing on the fracturing of the sense of self that occurs around organ transplantation – as much as it ties to the more theoretical concepts espoused in his work.

With Nancy, then, we can gesture towards both the possibilities of cinema and the possibilities of con-fusion, and obviously together this allows us to consider con-fusion as depicted through cinema, given the flexibility of the cinematic apparatus as a whole to depict

and explore formulations of reality which cannot be summoned up in our experiential world. Where Jenny Chamarette refers to Ian James, himself navigating Nietzsche, in describing the way in which film destroys the illusion of the body proper, returning us to the state of flux which is our natural existence (2012, 206), we can draw Nancy into the discussion, grafting his conceptual gift of the singular plural being onto this idea of a body-in-flux. Edges and endings are elided, leaving us with a sense of endlessness which exceeds the film without attempting to transgress the limits of film. This idea of bodies in flux will recur throughout this thesis. Nancy describes existence as being an unbroken continuity of bodies, which he describes as the 'lieu d'un interminable partage' (2001a, 64). The rupture that is brought about by extremity, by the probing, grasping approach to the body that the NFE depicts, interrupts this continuity, bringing us to the point of breakdown and exposing us to *l'image en saignée aveuglante*. Through the process of con-fusion, the continuity is restored. Cinema works, as we shall see in detail as we move through the analyses of the films, as a highly useful tool for thinking through these concepts.

It is important to acknowledge that there is a degree of mediation necessary when approaching extreme cinema, or corporeal cinema more generally. Kerner and Knapp engage with this, citing Eugenie Brinkema's criticism of such studies as flattening the nuances of spectatorship: 'what Brinkema diagnoses, in part, is what she sees as an overemphasis on the body' (2016, 158). This leads to unquantifiable generalisations about the spectator's position vis-à-vis the film and their own place as embodied observers of (or perhaps participants in) the film's world. In attempting to avoid this problem of embodiment in the relation between film and spectator, this study gives primacy to the visual elements in the films, using them to express and explore the theoretical considerations.¹ The theoretical framework emerges from a direct, fruitful encounter between the films and the philosophy. The engagement between

¹ The specific focus of my approach here involves a necessary but perhaps messy evacuation of considerations of spectatorship and ethics related to both extreme cinema and Nancean bodily ontology. There is a vast body of work negotiating these issues, both independently and in their intersection. In terms of notable omissions, it is first necessary to acknowledge that I have skirted round Nancy's own ethical investigation of the image in *Au fond des images* (2003), in favour of the very specific and, as we shall see, in some ways atypical approach to a particular image, which we will explore at length in Chapter 1. In taking the concept of touch and examining it only as occurring between on-screen bodies, avoiding the affective touch which incorporates spectator bodies, the dimension of extreme film as an interrogative ethical endeavour such as is explored by Del Rio (2016), Dooley (2015), Lübecker (2015), Nayman and Tracy (2014), Downing and Saxton (2010) and Brinkema (2009), among many others, is equally overlooked. The Nancy-body-ethics convergence is equally explored outside of extreme cinema, by authors such as Paszkiewicz (2020).

Nancy and Claire Denis, explored in detail in Chapter 1, opens a direct dialogue between Nancy's thought and the NFE. I will go on to describe this meeting in much greater detail, but it is important to recognise that Nancy was drawn to these extreme films, engaging productively with Denis's *Trouble Every Day*. The subsequent analytical exchange between Denis and Nancy, including Nancy's appearance in a short film directed by Denis, offers a rich, fertile matrix of analysis through which to read these films. We can extrapolate from this encounter and build a theoretical framework which encompasses the entire trend, an extension of the theory which is eminently reasonable given the clear philosophical links between the films which will be explained in the literature review. The visual basis for this study allows for a reappraisal of the structural issues affecting the NFE, which is often seen as an arbitrary grouping. While outliers still exist, an approach focusing primarily on the visual treatment of the body shows clear connections which demonstrate the usefulness of discussion of these films as a coherent group. Linked visuals are also present in the post-extreme films, again making a clear case for a grouped analysis. Contextualising the visual reading of the films, the theoretical framework will be drawn from the fruitful theoretical encounter between Nancy and Denis. This gives us the first of our key terms, *l'image en saignée aveuglante*, from Nancy's own analysis. The second term, con-fusion, I have coined myself but drawn from an analysis of Nancy's work which indicates its usefulness. Nancy addresses the idea of confusion that happens when we encounter a new body (in his 2011 'Making Sense' article) but is quick to shut down this idea as an impossibility. However, elsewhere he frequently calls to the possibility of dual states, such as in the way he sometimes describes the *être-singulier-pluriel*, with the hyphenation which stands in for both connectivity and distance. In this way, we can easily posit the possibility of an ongoing con-fusion (note the hyphenation), which respects this connectivity and distance. In the lack of clarity, in the eliding of definite borders and creation of a composite being which maintains an indistinct ratio of separate beings, we can find the positive, restorative move which saves the body from bleeding away into meaninglessness, the spectator blinded to any meaning, and instead restores it to its place in the unbroken continuity of bodies of which, for Nancy, our existence is comprised.

As noted earlier, a recurring question in literature relating to the NFE is that of what it has become. Whilst in the 17 years since it was first identified, the academic gaze has never

shifted from the twenty or so films which comprise the loose trend (more on this later), there does not seem to be a consensus about what happened to it. Simply, an understanding that it has ended, or retreated, somehow disappeared from view, is shared by most who critically engage with it. Mauro Resmini underlines the fact that certain key concepts associated with the NFE have been widely accepted, despite the fact that the 'New French Extremity' remains a contentious and rather vague descriptor. Resmini puts this consensus in question, drawing out key issues which are often overlooked in favour of uncritically presenting a new and revolutionary cinematic model. One fascinating point that Resmini raises, and which I will return to later, is the fact that the NFE, however new it may be, is structured around familiar generic forms. This awareness of the genre, of preconceived limitations, allows for transgressions of expected generic touchstones which compound the bodily transgressions and complete the extreme experience. In my reading, I will underline the importance of this awareness of genre and show how a return to genre predicates the post-extreme films, the treatment of generic codes setting it apart from the NFE's subversion.

The story of a young girl who moves from staunch vegetarianism into meat-eating and eventually cannibalism, punctuated with bloody scenes of violence and physical exploration, *Grave* has been hailed as a successful return to the sort of body horror which was prevalent both in the NFE and in wider international filmmaking during the late 1990s and 2000s.² For instance, Tafelski observed that 'in the 2010s, few French horror films have made a critical impact on an international level [...] this is where Julia Ducournau's *Raw* stumbles in to fill the void' (2017). This idea that there was a void which needed filling speaks to the importance of my project here: there is clearly an interest in what happened after the NFE, yet no attempt has been made to sound this void. However, it is difficult to hail *Grave* as indicative of a return to the concerns of the NFE. Vestby draws a comparison with *Trouble Every Day* but then observes that the film is 'not managing to be as icky as it wants to be' (2017). It is not formally challenging nor especially transgressive, despite a number of critics finding it to be so (or at least suggesting that it is attempting to be so) (Gester 2017, Dooley 2018, et al). However, the fact that the return of explicit violence and a renewed interest in the body on film has spurred

² Katherine McLaughlin compared *Grave* to Canadian indie hit *Ginger Snaps* (Fawcett 2000), locating the films' shared interests in the joint paradigm of the apparent monstrosity of the female body and the bonds of sisterhood exposed and interrogated through an incongruous turn towards physical violence (2017).

critics to cast their regard back to the NFE period shows just how important this disparate group of films still is to an understanding of contemporary French cinema. We need only look at the books released in the same year as *Grave* (Frey; Kerner and Knapp; West; Del Rio) to see that a strong focus still remains upon these films, despite the fact that the last film which can be closely associated with the trend was released in 2008 (Pascal Laugier's *Martyrs*).

As we will see, the strong visual and representational similarities in the NFE and the post-extreme films clearly support my analysis. We can make the convincing argument that the NFE extinguishes itself, losing any meaning as its approach to the body exceeds the limits of understanding. The frozen, ambiguous stares which so frequently conclude the films represent this lack of meaning – the body is unreadable. We will examine these moments in great detail in the coming chapters. Moving forward, we can then find similarities in the post-extreme films which demonstrate a positive restoration of the body. Where the NFE pushes at separateness, dividing and isolating the body from the unbroken continuity of bodies that Nancy describes, the post-extreme films rather cast the body back into this continuity, restoring connections and protecting the body from the fraught, tension-filled junctures which the NFE probes. The bodies of the post-extreme films are in motion, looking towards a future, with new avenues of possibility opened up to them. Possibility, I will argue, brings positivity. There is an element of compromise in this. Possibility is not reached without sacrifice, nor is con-fusion a comfortable process. Violence does not disappear with the end of the NFE, nor does it disappear into purely internalised echoes of itself. This last point draws a distinction between my work and that of Karine Chevalier, whose work also deals in part with the aftermath of the NFE. Chevalier points towards 'une violence intériorisée' which, she asserts, has in some ways replaced the explicit brutality of the NFE (2016). My analysis can be usefully contrasted with Chevalier's, and together both might point towards a new mode of French cinema. My specific focus lies on the directors associated with the NFE, whereas Chevalier simply contrasts different types of contemporary French film. There can be a fruitful negotiation between our respective positions, especially in terms of leading back into the French cinematic mainstream.

This project will reopen the discourse around the films of the NFE by placing them into dialogue with the films that came next. We will begin with an overview of the literature. This section is divided into two halves. The first half describes the NFE, looking at the ways in which

it has been discussed so far. Here we will observe the opening created by Resmini which this study will exploit, but also give a sense of the issues that are at stake within the trend. It will become clear that the violation of the body is what predicates the trend, along with the generic subversion described earlier.

The second half of the literature review will then examine Nancy's approach to the body, drawing from a multitude of his works to show how his philosophy fits neatly with the considerations of the NFE. Nancy's approach to the body describes it as composed of edges, held together by a sense of wholeness. Any fracturing of this sense of wholeness, for instance by 'murder or surgery' (Manjali 2010), untethers the body and leaves it traumatically open, confronting us with *l'image en saignée aveuglante* in detaching the body from the continuity of bodies by a violent intrusion. The idea of rupture of the body leading to a breakdown of meaning, a stoppage of the process of making sense of the world, is key to this concept. Élodie Laügt observes that intrusion is 'l'un des aspects de l'œuvre de Jean-Luc Nancy parmi les plus susceptibles de toucher, de troubler, voire d'interdire le lecteur' (2019, 9). This idea of somehow blocking understanding is highly important. As we shall go on to see, Nancy's thinking around intrusion is inextricably linked to the body, as his ontology is itself embodied. This inevitable return to the body in Nancy's thought thus leads us to reason that violation of the body also has this effect of touching, troubling and ultimately interdicting. In engaging in this way with the body, we reach a point beyond which sensible thought is impossible. In this section, I will also point towards the positive con-fusion which Nancy gestures towards and which I will extrapolate into a key tool for navigating beyond the NFE. Where *l'image en saignée aveuglante* represents an impasse in the approach to the body, in thinking the body and perhaps in thinking in general, con-fusion gives us a way to return from this point, to reopen channels of thought towards the body and to navigate beyond the impasse.

Having described these thinking tools, the first chapter will then examine Nancy's direct engagement with the NFE, through a close reading of his dialogue (across literature and film) with Claire Denis. This begins with Nancy becoming enchanted by Denis's cinema in his review of *Beau travail* (2000a), then leads us to one of the core texts which will inform this thesis, 'Icône de l'acharnement' (2001a), in which he responds to Denis's film *Trouble Every Day*. We then move forward, through Denis's filming of Nancy in her short film *Vers Nancy* (2002), to her version of his autobiographical text *L'Intrus* (2004). This journey through their

intertwining processes of thinking and creating will demonstrate how the encounter with *l'image en saignée aveuglante* leads to a breakdown of sense, Denis offering an exploration of this breakdown in her oneiric, cyclical and ultimately answer-free adaptation/adoption (more on this terminology later) of Nancy's *L'Intrus* (2000). The description of the breakdown at the limit, the loss of meaning which occurs as we approach the body, will pave the way for the close textual readings which will follow, showing the fragmentation which the post-extreme films move away from.

The next three chapters each analyse two films, one associated with the NFE and then the next (post-extreme) film that the director/s made. Each of these chapters will examine how the first of these films moves towards *l'image en saignée aveuglante*, and then how the second navigates beyond this to a state of con-fusion. In this way, the films will be read as one ongoing thinking process, a diptych hinged on extremity. There are remarkable stylistic points of comparison that emerge from this method of reading the films, with scenes often mirroring the earlier film but moving in the opposite direction. Each of these comparison chapters will describe how the films approach the two key concepts in a dialogue which brings in a key work by Nancy: *L'Evidence du film* (2001), *etrete singulier pluriel* (1996) and *Corpus* (1992).

The second chapter will look at Gaspar Noé's *Irréversible* (2002) and *Enter the Void* (2009), using Nancy's work on cinema as a key reference point to observe how film allows us to think past the fragmented body and see it reinscribed into a positive series of openings onto the world which allow for continuation. The third chapter considers Marina De Van's *Dans ma peau* (2002) and *Ne te retourne pas* (2009) as texts dealing with the idea of singular plurality. The first film sees a body dangerously separated from the continuity of existence, marking its breakdown and descent into self-destruction, while the second restores the endangered body through a process which blurs the line between bodies. The final chapter brings us back directly to the body, seeing it literally ripped open in Julien Maury and Alexandre Bustillo's first film, *A l'interieur* (2007), and then reassembled in their second film, *Livide* (2011). This makes for a highly useful pairing to finish upon, as these films bear particularly clear visual depictions of *l'image en saignée aveuglante* and con-fused bodies.

In the NFE films, focus is negatively drawn upon the bodies of individuals, and their suffering or damaging further isolates and individualises them. In the post-extreme films, the focus

moves towards positive plurality. By the end of the post-extreme films that we will look at here, we as the spectator are left unsure as to the exact nature of the protagonist. In *Enter the Void*, Oscar is reborn, it seems, but when, and to whom? In *Ne te retourne pas*, Jeanne finds compromise with Rosa-Maria, and some sort of shared relationship is entered into, beyond the expected exorcism of the intruder. In *Livide*, Lucie and Anna likewise appear to share matter, two bodies working together becoming one body which is open with possibility. The conclusion of this thesis will summarise the findings from these close textual readings, returning us to the idea of blurred distinctions between bodies discussed here. We will see that the field is now open for new analyses of the NFE, 30 years after it began and 17 years after it was first described. What will also be clear is that the hitherto unexplored field of the post-extreme films is ripe for exploration, especially when seen as the continuation of the considerations that the NFE investigates. We will also be left with a keen sense of how the analysis of these films can feed back into analysis of Nancy – offering up new perspectives on his work.

Literature Review – Part 1

Bodies, Genres: Criticism and the corporeal corpus of the New French Extremity

An unhealed wound

The NFE remains obstinately important as a reference point for contemporary cinema. It frequently appears on 'top ten' horror lists (see Blyth 2017, et al), in discussion around extreme film – 'French Extremity remains the most well-documented form of contemporary extreme cinema' (Hobbs 2018, 115) – and around world cinema in general, with debates and discussion around the extreme content meaning that 'French cinema is once more in the global critical spotlight' (Palmer 2006, 22). However, despite the continuing importance of the trend, both academically and as a journalistic reference point, its extremities are ill-defined. There is, appropriately, something frayed and fraught about the trend, regularly reopened and probed but never satisfactorily dealt with. In French cinema and film criticism more widely, the NFE remains an unhealed wound which demands renewed attention. It will be argued here that part of the problem of the approach to NFE is that interventions have so far ignored the evidence of a clear impasse in the trend's handling of the body, an impasse which can be seen within both the critical approaches to the film and in the films themselves once we consider a wider cinematic context which has so far been almost entirely overlooked. Rather than a continuation of the bone-picking approach which offers frequently fascinating yet ultimately circular readings, it is the navigation of this impasse, and the toolkit of approaches which can be engaged in order to move beyond it, that forms the backbone of this study. Before engaging with this wider field, however, it is necessary to discuss the position that the NFE currently occupies in cinema studies.

This study is informed by Mauro Resmini's timely 'reframing' of the NFE (2015). His throwing into question of the typical approach to the films is useful as a way of suggesting the possibility of reconceptualisation, opening up the trend for new readings following a period of introspective analysis which has tended to cycle aimlessly, Resmini argues, around the same observations. He summarises the problem he locates within criticism of the NFE thus:

By way of extremity, cinema foregrounds sensation, which in its aesthetic immediacy provides the point of access to a more authentic reality. Governed by extremity, this ideological wavering between authenticity, sensation, and immediacy is structured

through a circular mirroring of meaning in which each of the four terms echoes and expands the semantic halo of the others. In this sense, the discourse in question produces the impregnability of the endless return of the same, the imperturbable stillness of a mirroring that masquerades as conceptual progression. This false movement results in the argument's steadiness; it appears not to be disturbed by anything – even the films themselves' (2015, 163).

This assertion peels back the dressing on the wound mentioned previously, exposing the raw edges which refuse to close. Whether or not Resmini's analysis is entirely fair, it nonetheless exposes a fact: the discourse around the NFE seems stagnant. First described in 2004, the NFE has continued to be an important reference point. As we have seen, in 2016 several books and numerous articles were published which make explicit reference to it (West, Del Rio, Kerner and Knapp, Chevalier, et al). This, despite the fact that there had not been a film associated with the trend released for almost a decade at that point. The references continue to this day, when there has only been one film which has been associated with the trend released since 2008, *Grave*, and even that association is questionable, as was discussed in the introduction. It will be argued here that this stagnation has, in part, been brought about by an inability or refusal to consider *what came next*.

Resmini's approach pushes for a rethinking of the political possibilities offered up by the films, something he feels has become sidelined in the analysis. He focuses particularly on the role of women in the films, arguing that the powerfully feminist angle which is often ascribed to many of these films (with the idea of extremity offering a way to reclaim in a physical way what has been sublimated or stolen from the female by men, society and struggle) is in fact nothing of the sort: 'yes, the woman exists, but only as the site of a misguided positivization of sexual identity that, ironically, turns a radical statement into a perpetuation of stereotypes' (2015, 183). We will go on to consider the way in which the body in these films might be thought beyond these stereotypes. What is more important from Resmini in support of our argument here is that his analysis casts doubt upon the common assumption and assertion that the NFE films behave in some way differently to other films, that in their excess they open up new sensory experiences. He highlights this in stating:

The promise of touching the real, which buttresses the NFE trend, is ingrained within a specific conception of cinema — namely, the medium's essential striving to attain the invisible in the visible, to grasp the elusive substance that at once grounds and transcends representation. With few exceptions, a critical consensus has been

reached. According to film scholars such as Martine Beugnet, Linda Williams, Tanya Horeck, Tina Kendall, Tim Palmer, Nicole Brenez, and Adrian Martin, the NFE is successful not only in articulating this promise but also in keeping it, thus marking the rise of a new breed of cinema (2015, 162)

This is a pertinent and important observation, and one which opens up the field for the research here. As stated previously, study of the NFE has been trapped in a circle of similarity, with no ultimate conclusions drawn and no forward momentum. We end up as trapped in our analysis as the protagonists of the films, staring out helplessly and hopelessly. Resmini suggests that part of the reason for this stagnancy of analysis rests in the inappropriate application of theory to film. In approaching Beugnet's theory of 'sensual engagement', Resmini notes that 'an awkward feedback loop is established: filmmaking becomes an illustration of theoretical tenets and, concomitantly, film theory complacently looks at itself in the reversed mirror of the work of art' (2015, 164). It is important to understand and, where possible, avoid this 'feedback loop'. Part of the approach of this research, which will be explained in greater detail in the next chapter, is to approach the films and the philosophy as parallel concerns which meet in fleeting encounters that seem almost furtive, as though unwilling to fuse together entirely: touching, grazing, testing.

The idea that we can reopen and reframe the discussion surrounding these films equally opens up the space for navigation beyond the trend, something which has so far proven elusive, but which will be shown as both possible and productive for the study of contemporary French cinema. While the idea here of reframing and moving towards a new approach to analysing the films mirrors Resmini, my analysis follows its own course in isolating the specificity of the body as both the primary consideration in the films and a way of moving beyond them to reinvigorate the discussion around them through an exploration of what came next. What this study will not do is attempt to posit the reason for the existence of these films in the first place – others have tried to impose structures on the trend as a whole, either political or philosophical, often conflating the NFE with wider global trends in extreme cinema such as the New European Extremism. Rather, this work will outline here the unifying factors which bring the films together, looking for useful linking material whilst at the same time not attempting to bend the films to fit into any specific theoretical bracket. As stated in the introduction, the 'with' of the title of this project is key – permitting the films in a sense to speak for themselves, allowing for dialogue with applicable theory where invited by a

natural confluence of thought. This is helped immeasurably by Nancy's direct engagement with the trend, through his response to Denis, which opens up a clear and useful dialogue between his ontology and the group of films, which we will explore in close detail in the next section of the literature review and in Chapter 1.

What is it, then, about the NFE that invites continued analysis, appraisal and acceptance? In this section, we will examine some of the aspects of the trend which make the grouping useful for continuing analysis of these films, looking at how different interpretations set the edges of a corpus of films which become a skin upon which to apply and think through philosophical concerns. We will see that the primary concern of the NFE is the graphic violation of the body, either directly or through proxy bodies, leaving its status uncertain, and detached from the world. This will lead us to a taxonomy of the visual depiction of the imperilled body, which frequently appears in a similar fashion at the conclusion of the films, as we will go on to explore in greater detail with reference to specific films in the following chapters. In examining these, we will draw out a structural cartography of the NFE, one which describes and defines the edges which we will go on to explore as we move into the series of close textual analyses which will juxtapose films from the NFE with later films from their directors' respective bodies of work.

The NFE films share the same general approach to body, casting it as a rigidly defended or enclosed skin which is somehow under threat: the protective skin is tested (close camerawork exploring it in intimate detail, moments of touch and marks left upon the skin showing its flexibility but also its fragility), challenged (through rupture, puncture and violation) and usually overcome (the body thrown into flux either through outright destruction or destabilisation, or removal from the world into which it should fit). Along with this singular focus which leads inexorably to the destruction of the body, or the detachment of the body from its anchorage to the world of the film, we will consider the parallel genre deconstruction which can be read in the films, offering up recognisable constructions which are then subverted or destabilised. While this has been read as part of an approach which is intended to unsettle the spectator, and such a reading is entirely coherent, it will be argued here that the generic subversion goes hand in hand with the attempt to explore and test the limits of how the body can be explored on film. This makes a useful point of comparison with the later post-extreme films, which readopt generic markers. With bodily destruction and generic

destabilisation considered together, the key theme which will be drawn out, and which will go on to inform the continuing dialogue around the later films from the directors associated with the trend, is the breakdown in sense which occurs when the limits of the body are explored. There is a necessarily open approach to this analysis, as the films were not created with any shared intent or design. However, in taking the lead from the visuals in the films themselves, it is easy to point to comparable presentations of bodily exploration and violation. This violation can also be drawn out from the narrative trajectories of the films. This convergence lays the groundwork for a progression beyond the NFE into the space opened up in the later films, where we will see that a similarly unintentional but comparable thematic confluence recurs between the films. At the same time, we will look at the subversive elements of the NFE, often highlighted by critics as key to its strength and interest as a field of study. The post-extreme films respond differently to the body, but there are also noticeable changes in relation to genre and formal considerations. We will go on to see how these spark off the body's changing role at the heart of the films.

The NFE has always been a divisive term, constantly requiring explanation, apology or justification. Coined by critic and programmer James Quandt in response to what he perceived as a failure of certain French directors (notably Bruno Dumont and Denis) to live up to his expectations of them, the term first appeared in his 2004 *Artforum* article 'Flesh and Blood'. Quandt's description of the trend is an angry attack on what he perceives to be a waste of talents better suited to other styles. However, there are useful key points which he touches upon which have since been taken up as markers of the trend. At the same time, as mentioned previously, the trend has become co-mingled with other trends, such as the wider New (European) Extremism, or American torture porn. Quandt's contention was that these directors had consciously moved away from an ill-defined philosophical heritage in French cinema in order to engage in thoughtless shock tactics, placing themselves alongside a new generation of French filmmakers doing just the same thing (Ozon, Noé, De Van, et al). As Nikolaj Lübecker summarises, according to Quandt these directors 'wallow in pseudo-transgressions, and recycle avant-garde topoi in a way that allows a seamless recuperation by the culture industry' (2015, 112). However, despite its initially pejorative dimension, the title was taken up by extreme cinema fans as well as mainstream critics and academics to become a catch-all descriptor for a certain brand of contemporary French cinema. Quandt's analysis

is arguably influenced by the idea of French cinema as an edgier, more political cousin to Hollywood, arguing that ‘the authentic, liberating outrage—political, social, sexual—that fuelled such apocalyptic visions as *Salò* and *Weekend* now seems impossible, replaced by an aggressiveness that is really a grandiose form of passivity’ (2004, 132). It is difficult not to see a certain snobbishness in his suggestion that a newer, self-aware mode of cinema is somehow less worthy, which might make it easy to discount his response, yet his analysis is also filled with useful insights into the nature of these films. Indeed, Quandt’s broad attack on the films in fact suggests a multitude of approaches. Consider what is perhaps the most vivid section of his article:

Bava as much as Bataille, *Salò* no less than Sade seem the determinants of a cinema suddenly determined to break every taboo, to wade in rivers of viscera and spumes of sperm, to fill each frame with flesh, nubile or gnarled, and subject it to all manner of penetration, mutilation, and defilement. Images and subjects once the provenance of splatter films, exploitation flicks, and porn--gang rapes, bashings and slashings and blindings, hard-ons and vulvas, cannibalism, sadomasochism and incest, fucking and fisting, sluices of cum and gore--proliferate in the high-art environs of a national cinema whose provocations have historically been formal, political, or philosophical (Godard, Clouzot, Debord) or, at their most immoderate (Franju, Bunuel, Walerian Borowczyk, Andrzej Zulawski), at least assimilable as emanations of an artistic movement (Surrealism mostly) (Quandt 2004, 127-128)

This analysis, though highly critical, suggests a taxonomy of transgressions which invites useful discussion. His description is an almost poetic list of bodily images and vivid violations. There is an openness, a flexibility or fluidity to this listing, suggesting that the films are linked by an explicit but not necessarily similar depiction of the body. This idea of a shared catalogue of parts which, albeit sometimes awkwardly and jerkily, comes together to form the whole maps neatly onto Nancy's own fragmented ontology of the body. Consider the way in which he concludes his book *Corpus*, which we will go on to examine in close detail in chapter 4:

Un corps est une image offerte à d’autres corps, tout un corpus d’images tendues de corps en corps, couleurs, ombres locales, fragments, grains, aréoles, lunules, ongles, poils, tendons, crânes, côtes, pelvis, ventres, méats, écumes, larmes, dents, baves, fentes, blocs, langues, sueurs, liqueurs, veines, peines et joies, et moi, et toi (2000, 105)

Both Quandt and Nancy gesture towards the idea of an assemblage, whether of a cinematic trend or of the body itself. What Quandt’s analysis offers us is a way of reading these films as a loose but useful grouping, their articulations hinged on the idea of an exposure of or to the

body – the fragmented, tortured, stretched, separated body, exactly as Nancy describes – which is somehow overwhelming in its excess. The idea of it being the ‘extremity’ – not, as it is frequently misquoted or reformulated, ‘extremism’ (see, for example, Lübecker and many more) – suggests the collision or encounter with an ultimate border. This push towards a limit is also, it can be argued, what has led to the disappearance of the trend. The NFE films always lead to destruction, and in so doing the trend itself is destroyed. In the following chapters we will see, through a series of close textual readings, the ways in which this conceptual exhaustion is depicted. We reach an impasse – there is no scope for continuation without useless repetition – there are only so many ways in which the body can be explored, exposed or exploded. This excessiveness is also congruent with Quandt’s vivid description of the body filling the screen – the idea of these films simultaneously exposing the body in explicit detail and occluding our vision with its proximity. This idea of a limit reached, of course, raises the question of what comes next – which, as has been stated previously, has thus far been largely ignored, or bypassed. But we are getting ahead of ourselves. First, let us examine the unifying factors of the trend in greater detail.

The Body of the New French Extremity

There are many factors which have been used to describe, organise and classify the NFE’s corpus, yet it remains (appropriately, given where this thesis is going) a body of work which loses sense and cohesion as it is approached. What binds the films? There are a number of approaches which can all lead to fruitful analysis of the trend, some taking the films as described by Quandt and others as a body equivalent to, for instance, the Nouvelle Vague, others overlapping with neighbouring trends, predicated on sex, violence, graphic display, formal disordering and any number of other elements. It is thus always necessary to stress specific foci when responding to the NFE. Quandt himself has returned to the trend and tweaked his definitions and, around his interventions, others have structured their definitions in ways that fit their particular lines of argumentation.

It is important to look first at the corpus of films, in order to understand the body of work that is being examined. Different critics and observers have offered slightly different lists of associated films and directors, and these are confused further by the related but not exactly

synonymous trends which emerged around the same time. For example, Martine Beugnet's description of the 'cinema of sensation' (2007) or Palmer's 'cinema du corps' (2011) include films of the NFE yet also extend beyond these to form their own corpuses. Quandt listed the following directors in his article (the cited films follow in brackets): François Ozon (*Regarde la mer*, *Les Amants criminels*), Gaspar Noé (*Carne*, *Seul contre tous*, *Irréversible*), Catherine Breillat (*Romance*, *À ma sœur !*), Philippe Grandrieux (*Sombre*, *La vie nouvelle*), Bruno Dumont (*Twenty-nine Palms*), Claire Denis (*Trouble Every Day*), Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi (*Baise-moi*), Bertrand Blier (*Les Côtelettes*), Jean-Claude Brisseau (*Choses secrètes*), Bertrand Bonello (*Le Pornographe*) and Jacques Nolot (*La Chatte à deux têtes*). Around the time that Quandt wrote his response, critic Jonathan Romney also described the emergence of an extreme trend in France. Romney highlights a theme which we will go on to engage with closely, noting that many of the films depict 'a world in which society has fractured into mutually combative, self-mortifying individuals - existential loners suffering a degree of isolation that Camus never dreamed of' (2004). The idea of existence in a singularity, so opposed to Nancy's position, is something which recurs throughout the NFE and which is then responded to in the post-extreme films. Romney responds directly to Quandt, yet he is far more positive in his outlook. For Romney, there is a useful philosophical dimension to the films, even if it is only the way that the *Théâtre du Grand-Guignol* served its purpose in shocking the theatregoers of 19th century Paris. Romney's analysis adds Olivier Assayas (*Demonlover*) and C.S. Leigh (*Process*) to the list of associated directors, while Beugnet later described the corpus in conversation with Laura Mulvey, stating

The work of directors Olivier Assayas, Bertrand Bonello, Patrice Chéreau, Gaspar Noé, Catherine Breillat, Claire Denis, Virginie Despentes, Coralie Trinh Thi, Pascale Ferran, Philippe Grandrieux, Bruno Dumont, and Marina de Van, to name but a few, are extremely diverse in their subject matter and style, but some of the films have jointly attracted the attention of critics and theorists because they share a willingness to address onscreen corporeality in sensuous, visceral, graphic, and in some cases horrific terms (2015, 188-189).

As we can see, there are certain films which feature in every analysis, while others appear like dendrites branching away from a nucleus. Beugnet's association of Ferran with the trend is a rather egregious one, though this links to her discussion of the trend as part of a wider 'cinema

of sensation', which is not necessarily focused on extremity as its key qualifier.³ Cinema of sensation can address bodily issues in a non-intrusive, invasive way. The NFE, however, must always attack the edges of the body, grasping and grinding. Where there is little crossover of sex and violence, the extremity is reached in the singular focus on pushing the visual depiction of one or the other. Breillat's films with their anatomical close-ups, for example, or *Martyrs* with its explicit torture. It should also be noted that Quandt, in his later returns to the subject, suggests that certain films might fit with a purely horror trend. In his afterword for Horeck and Kendall's book, for example, he observed that the rise in extreme French horror might be seen as a trend apart: 'the specific genre of French horror, which quickly established its own distinctive sanguinary *terroir*' (2011, 210). However, this is something which has not been reflected in fan listings or academic discourse, nor is it borne out when we place those films, *À l'intérieur* and *Martyrs*, in conjunction with their horror contemporaries (*Humains* [Thevenin et Molon 2009], *La meute* [Richard 2010], etc)⁴. Ultimately, it seems reductive to follow this reasoning, then, when the films clearly correspond with the model of extremity which Quandt himself first described. Alexandra West muddies the waters further in her book, in bringing in films which have not otherwise been widely affiliated with the trend, such as Kim Chapiron's *Sheitan* (2006). Even in *Sheitan*, however, the body is brought to the limit through the reuse of stolen parts, the fragility of one body juxtaposed with the apparent invulnerability of another, making it thematically if not formally comparable.

It should be noted that although Quandt and Romney's responses emerged in quick succession, there followed something of a lull. This might be explained by the fact that the films themselves began to tail off after 2004, which saw the release of Breillat's *Anatomie de l'enfer* which Quandt described as the trend's 'apotheosis and nadir' (2011, 210). It might also have taken a certain amount of time for the ideas raised in the two articles to filter into academic study. But filter they certainly did. The trend sees periods of renewed interest every few years, such as the 2016 eruption mentioned earlier.

³ Though, it must be noted, Beugnet's association of Ferran is no stranger than Quandt's own reference to Blier, which has been largely ignored (something this study is equally guilty of!)

⁴ David J. Jones *does* include *La Meute* in his list in 2011, along with *Calvaire* (Du Welz 2004]) and *Flandres* (Dumont 2006) – and these latter two are arguably more closely related to the trend.

Spectator Bodies

Laura Wilson draws certain films from the NFE into her discussion of a looser grouping which she calls mutilation films, which bring the spectator to 'an awareness of an embodied mode of existence' (2015, 14). This approach recurs in many responses to the trend, usually influenced by the idea of hapticity which is called up by the close filming of the body, engendering an embodied viewing experience. Here, though, our focus is less on the relationship between film and spectator and more on the visual representation of limitation, and the subsequent closing up of avenues of exploration. It is interesting to notice that Wilson refers to Horeck and Kendall's 2011 assertion that the New Extremism films, among which they situate the NFE, are distinct from torture porn in their moralistic dimension, summarising that 'the films popularly known as torture porn do not situate violence as means of interrogation into the film-viewer relationship' (2015, 129). Wilson assesses this moral dimension in part as a subversion of the sadistic male gaze, creating spectator identification with victim rather than perpetrator (*ibid*). Whilst this gendered approach has been a popular one in theorising the trend, it does not correspond to the focus here. What is more relevant for my purposes is Wilson's assessment that 'certain images that suggest the construction of a sadistic gaze (the mutilating wound image) direct this look towards the self; in other words, the bleeding wound returns the destructive gaze' (2015, 129). This suggestion demands discussion, as it resonates with the through-thread of wounding of the body and direct address to the spectator which we will see become a point of connection between all of the NFE films, as well as with Nancy's formulation of the wound. Where it seems important to mark a distinction of my own is in the way that this direct address can be read. Whereas Horeck and Kendall, Wilson and others gesture towards the radical repositioning of the body which this address might engender in the spectator, there is an equally powerful argument to be made for a focus on the ultimate inscrutability of the final scenes in the films, which seem designed to leave the spectator uncertain, confused and potentially physically uncomfortable. Even if we discount spectator interaction, which has the virtue of allowing for greater objectivity, the visual similarity of many of the end scenes (protagonist or substitute body staring directly at the camera, their expression ambiguous, captured in an unnatural stillness) suggests that there is a rich seam to be mined here. We will investigate these scenes at length in the following chapters, highlighting the often startling similarities which prove that, though

the films might have been arbitrarily forced together initially, there are nonetheless highly useful points of connection which make the NFE a useful grouping to uphold.

Form

Another unifying factor of the NFE films is that they tend to offer images and narratives which might be regarded as non-traditional, leaning towards an experimental mode of cinema apart from the mainstream. We might consider the examples of narrative and image fragmentation or manipulation that we see again and again throughout the NFE as representative of an 'art cinema' aesthetic, and indeed the distribution model of NFE films (through festival circuits and arthouse cinemas) has itself been used as a basis for readings of the trend (Frey, Kerner and Knapp, and others). A film irrevocably linked to film festivals due to its vividly reported impact on its first cinema audience, *Irréversible*, of course, is the clearest example of this innovative approach to both theme and form, its narrative tracking backwards in such a way as to simultaneously distance and approach the violence, containing images and sounds which are designed to elicit strong physical responses (though this is harder outside of the cinema) and ending in an explosive, blinding blur. We will go on to see in Chapter 2 how this blur marries to Nancy's own exploration of the NFE and of the exposed body more generally.

Formal manipulation is also clear in *Dans ma peau* (explored in Chapter 3), *Haute tension* (Aja 2003), *À l'intérieur* (explored in Chapter 4), *Martyrs* and more. There are vastly different ways in which we can perceive this manipulation, from the simple trick of reshowing events from another perspective (in *Haute tension*, where we see murder scenes replayed from a non-subjective viewpoint and understand that we have been tricked) to the digital manipulation of the image (the negative bursts in *À l'intérieur*, for example, or Esther's blurred perspective in *Dans ma peau*). The approach towards the body which leads to its breakdown also brings us to the uninterrupted continuity of bodies that Nancy describes, and which we will explore in greater detail around Nancy's writings on plurality and the body. This is a useful point of dialogue with Resmini's observation of the 'tension inherent to the *informe*', which he categorises as 'a form in crisis, yes, but a form nonetheless' (2015, 176). We are faced with a jumbled, moving, unclear junction of bodies, and the concern as we navigate away from the NFE changes from a desire to grasp at the form – to assign structure to it, to know it, to control

it – to a more nuanced negotiation between bodies which accepts the tenebrous zones of limitation as part of a plural existence, tensions elided through a process of con-fusion, a fusion in separation, which allows for bodies to repair themselves.

Those moments where film ‘breaks down’ in the NFE are brought about in part as a demonstration of the impossibility of grasping at the firm edges of the body. As the film approaches the body, exposing and exploding it, sense runs away and leaves only fragments, bursts of light and colour and sound which are illogical, unassimilable into any clear schema of the body. This formal manipulation marries to the thematic manipulation which I mentioned previously. Beugnet draws the idea of formal and thematic manipulation into contact with the idea of hapticity and materiality when she observes:

Although these works remain within the boundaries of what can be loosely called narrative fiction cinema, the directors knowingly deploy an array of stylistic techniques, editing, lighting, framing, and sound effects that compete with or exceed narrative requirements and call attention to the materiality of the film itself’ (2015, 189)

Beugnet is perhaps rather generous here, as some of the films certainly come close to abandoning conventional narrative altogether. Beugnet’s acknowledgement of the boundaries of narrative fiction, and reference to the NFE films competing with or exceeding its requirements, is key to an understanding of the behaviour of these films. They share, even in their thematic and formal differences, a subversive playfulness, at a radical tangent to the closest genre touchstones to which they might be compared:⁵ *Twentynine Palms* is a road movie that goes nowhere; *Haute tension* begins as a French riff on the American-style slasher film, but the traditional audience association figures are cruelly subverted; *À ma sœur!* (Breillat 2001) twists family drama into brutal horror in its very last moments; *La Vie nouvelle* (Grandrieux 2002) is arranged around abstract concepts; *Anatomie de l’enfer* (Breillat 2004) is a nightmarish spin on the trope of boy meets girl, where the couple are reduced to ‘Homme’

⁵ It should be noted that there are antecedents to the NFE – Quandt references Godard’s *Week-end* (1969), and there are other examples of former New Wave directors exploring violence in their films of the 1960s and 1970s. There is also the casual brutality of the *cinéma du look*. Ultimately, we might observe that a playful and creative nastiness has been present since the dawn of French cinema: consider, for example, the destroyed eyes of *Le voyage dans la lune* (Méliès 1902) and *Un chien andalou* (Buñuel 1929), then take a step forward to *37° 2 le matin* (Beineix 1986) and finally to the complete facial destruction of *Irréversible*.

and 'Femme' and explore the limits of disgust that exist between them. The slippery, frequently ungraspable meaning of the visual elements is thus mirrored in the narratives, which tend to avoid structured plots or, when these are present, subvert them entirely. The issue that is raised by this subversion and manipulation of form, however, is that these films become films on the edge. In addressing boundaries, in overstepping them in terms of taste and even comprehensibility (if we consider the visual fragmentation present in so many of them), these films reach a point where they can go no further. We can read this in those final shots wherein the protagonist stares out at the viewer, scenes which have been analysed in a variety of ways (passivity, accusation) but which are ultimately unified only in their ambiguity. The DVD release of Philippe Grandrieux's *La Vie nouvelle* claims that 'Grandrieux pousse son cinéma dans ses derniers retranchements' (2002), neatly summing up this issue. These films, pushed to the very limit, appear also to be trapped in an endless cycle of repetitive critical analysis, always returning to this same point: the extremity.

The extremity as the edge which we collide with as we try to understand the nature of reality is best expressed through the fragmentation or obfuscation of the image, and then crystallised in the moment of stillness which recurs throughout the films at the conclusion. The films certainly appear to centre on the failure of fusional, plural existence, or the separation of bodies. As we shall go on to see, Nancy describes bodies as being part of an unending continuity, edges meeting edges ad infinitum. The NFE troubles this continuity with its insistence on penetration of edges, of rupture of the form. We will examine all of this in much greater detail in later chapters. It must be acknowledged, however, that these films' status, and the fact that they were gathered together in the first place, is due to the rather more prosaic presence of extreme sex and violence. Some of the films are concerned merely with explicit sex, though for the most part, as Jonathan Romney notes, 'sex and violence go together, embroiled in a brutal, not to say febrile, dialectic of death, transgression and even spirituality' (2004). The dialectic of death and transgression is easy to codify – these films push the body to the edge, and beyond, leaving bodies that are bloody, broken and bare, in the sense of being fully exposed. Where the spirituality comes in is rather harder to establish, particularly when applying a Nancean reading, though as we shall see in the close textual readings, the immanent encounter can offer its own pleasures. However, the approach to the body in the NFE means that these pleasures are missed, lost in the explosion of flesh, bursting

forth from the screen just as blood and bodily fluids pour from the figures onscreen. Quandt rather mockingly quotes Grandrieux in asking:

What do we try to reach so feverishly, with such obstinacy and suffering, through representation, through images, if not to open the body's night, its opaque mass, the flesh with which we think—and present it to the light, to our faces, the enigma of our lives? (2004, 130).

It is certainly true that the opening up of the body's night, the exposure of the unseen, is rapidly worn out by overfamiliarity. There is only so much that can be shown, before we inevitably fall into repetition.

Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall's 2011 edited volume, *New Extremisms: From France to Europe*, located the NFE as a point of genesis for a new type of extreme cinema which spread across the continent. Horeck and Kendall end their introduction on an ambiguous note, echoed as we have already seen in much of the study of extreme cinema, and of the NFE in particular: 'the question of whether the new extremism is still alive or whether it is a thing of the past (not so new any more, in other words) or to what extent it is useful to employ such a term remains a matter for debate' (2011, 16). Horeck and Kendall do not wish to declare the trend extinct, yet they cannot offer any strong proof of its continuation. We can, of course, look back to Quandt's own retrospective regard over the trend which I mentioned earlier, wherein his summation is similarly uncertain: 'what, then, *was* the NFE?' (2011, 213 – his italics). This uncertainty continues into later study of the trend, such as Kerner and Knapp's 2016 book. As they draw their analysis to a close, they are unsure whether they are charting or merely describing, in a way which echoes both Horeck and Kendall and Quandt. They claim to have made 'preliminary gestures toward identifying general tendencies in extreme cinema' (2016, 156), but cannot offer anything more conclusive. It certainly seems to be the case, however, that French cinema has moved away from extremity – even if *Grave* somehow resurrected the conversation.

Quandt goes on to claim that many of the films associated with the NFE now look like 'desperate artefacts' (2011, 213). Once again, in discussing an 'impasse', Quandt touches upon a useful point of discussion, which I have mobilised here. While not exactly his meaning, the reference to the idea of an impasse can apply just as well to the trend itself as to its

potential motivations. With no new films to respond to, the academic discourse around what is a relatively small number of films continued at an impressive rate, yet there is little that is new within the analysis. However, it is impossible to respond to the NFE without at least acknowledging the reading of the films, questioned by Resmini and certainly not the focus here either, as engaging in a physical dialogue with the spectator. As summarised by Wilson,

Physical spectatorship is the idea that embodied responses to film are textual constructions that return the viewer to a sense of their own corporeality. In this sense, the viewer is the body in front of the screen, but their physicality is manipulated and constructed through engagement with the film. Physical spectatorship therefore challenges the dichotomy of film as object/viewer as subject as well as the language we use to describe or explain the film-viewer relationship (2015, 3)

Laura McMahon engages with this idea of a haptic film/spectator rapport, describing it as a 'fusional intimacy' (2012, 22). This is certainly, as we have seen, the sort of relationship which much of the analysis of the NFE leans towards. However, for the purposes of my study, the model of spectatorship, whether we accept the haptic dimensions or not, is less important than the way in which the images are treated on screen. Quandt describes the filmmakers' desire to 'fill each frame' (2004, 127), and this leads us to the predominantly visual analysis which I have chosen to adopt for this study. In filling the screen, in bringing the body in all its colours and humours to the fore in graphic detail, these films push at a universal. Beyond gender, beyond racial difference, beyond the physical borders between bodies, these films reach for some kind of unformed, or deformed, aspect of the body.⁶ The tactility of the images onscreen, frequently leading towards a reading of the hapticity of the films, notably

⁶ This abstracted approach to the body is certainly problematic, bulldozing through difference and risking assuming a utopian sameness which elides gender difference and so avoids some difficult questions, but, as with issues of spectatorship and ethics, it serves my focus here better to deliberately avoid interacting with these concerns. However, whilst it is my belief that these films under discussion often sublimate gender in favour of a neutral, perhaps *neutered*, representation of the body, it is important to acknowledge that a large body of work exists which deals with the thorny issues around gender in extreme cinema. Indeed, several of the commentators whose work I refer to herein have engaged with these very issues, such as McGillivray (2019), Holland (2019) and Beugnet and Mulvey (2015). There is an intersection of gender and ethics in extreme cinema, or in the work of directors associated with the NFE, where my deliberate omissions might be most keenly felt. The omission of this discussion from this writing is purely based on my key field of interest, and in no way looks to undermine their approaches. It should also be acknowledged that Nancy's casting of the body as a malleable, fluctuating concept which allows for engagement with, and questioning of, body-centric thinking can offer interesting ways of rethinking established feminist critique, such as is discussed by authors like Hole (2015) or Perpich (2005). Future study might find useful ways to reincorporate these debates into a discussion of con-fusion.

influenced by Laura Marks (2000; 2002), might equally suggest not an attempt to engage the spectator physically, but rather simply to express as much of the body as possible onscreen.⁷

We can return here to Resmini's reframing of the trend, wherein he calls the idea of the NFE enjoying any sort of advanced film/spectator relationship into question. Where we certainly *can* read this sort of bodily fusion is visually within the films themselves. In order to arrive at fusion, of course, we must pass by touch. McMahon's Nancean study primarily examines the impossibility of fusion for Nancy, favouring a touch that does not penetrate. McMahon distances Nancy's reading of touch from that of Marks and Vivian Sobchack in noting 'touch is predominantly considered by Marks and Sobchack in terms of presence, fusion and immediacy. The work of Nancy provides a useful intervention in qualifying this touch – persistently and deconstructively – with an irreducible spacing' (2012, 7). In this research, we will press against this 'irreducible spacing', examining the ways in which the films explore and express it, and attempt to overpower or circumvent it. We will draw the films together with Nancy's own corpus of writing and demonstrate the ways in which fusion can occur, or appear to occur, in a manner not irreconcilable with Nancy's own philosophy. It is here that my titular proposal of con-fusion will be explained, demonstrating how Nancy's philosophy allows for a certain flexibility at the edge of bodily experience. This space opens up a world of positivity and possibility, moving away from the destructive nature of the NFE.

A Political Mirror

Alexandra West's monograph *Films of The New French Extremity: Visceral Horror and National Identity* (2016) is, so far, the only book to solely address the NFE as a trend, rather than including study of it as part of an engagement with extreme film more widely. In it, she attempts to restore the political angle taken away from the films in James Quandt's initial analysis, which offered the following damning critique of the political dimensions of the NFE: 'one begins to suspect a deeper impulse at work: a narcissistic response to the collapse of ideology in a society traditionally defined by political polarity and theoretical certitude,

⁷ This approach is supported by the important studies on the aural dimension of extreme film which have emerged in recent years (including from several of the writers cited in this thesis) – the filling of the screen with the body extends to the soundtrack.

perhaps' (2004, 132). West associates the NFE with a certain disruptive 'Frenchness', building her reading around the idea of these films demonstrating France confronting its own past. She concludes that the films' 'focus on transformation through violence and sexuality is truly exciting and engaging, allowing an audience to explore the most human of desires through the thin safety net of a screen' (2016, 11). West is certainly not the only author to make the claim that these films have a political agenda. However, the idea that the films offer a safety net stands at odds with other critics who have located the NFE as a space which precisely removes such a distancing.

There are a number of issues upon which my reading and West's are noticeably divergent. If we take a specific example to understand my approach to the specificities of the NFE and its approach to the body, we might look at the way in which West reads the brutality of *À l'intérieur* as constructive, demonstrating the reparative deconstruction and reconstruction of self. For West, the brutal conclusion which sees La Femme remove the baby from the womb of the seemingly complicit Sarah marks the end of the tension which has existed between the two women, borne out of the car crash which injured them both and killed La Femme's own unborn child. For me, this twist is little more than a vague justification for the events of the film, a last-minute reveal to retroactively explain La Femme's intent. It ultimately changes nothing. It provides a pause to key up one final shock moment of explosive brutality, leading to the improvised Caesarean which – a point upon which West and I *do* agree – appears to suggest a moment of understanding between the women, with Sarah allowing La Femme to cut into her in order to save the baby. Beyond this, however, our readings of the final scene differ entirely. For West, 'the wrongs of the crash have been righted, the tragedy ended' (2016, 160). In contrast, I read this final scene as being comparable to many other examples from the NFE, showing the character's ultimate rupture from normalcy, possibly from life. Sarah is lying dead, brutally opened up, her innards pouring from her – the child has been at stake throughout the film, and Sarah is discarded once it is born. La Femme sits and holds the baby, stares directly towards the spectator, and then her head drops. We hear a cry from the child, but it seems far from the 'soft gurgles' which West describes (155). It appears rather to be a non-diegetic extension – the sounds of life, the specific, instantly recognisable noise of an infant – which is deliberately contrasted with the scene of abject awfulness. Rather than any sort of restoration, the end can only be a moment of complete detachment from the

world, of disassociation and destruction. The body of the child stands in for the more nebulous body, ultimately destroyed by this grasping, penetrative ordeal. To show the relevance of the scene to my reading, this ending is then starkly contrasted with the conclusion of *Livide*, Maury and Bustillo's follow-up film, which sees a positive con-fusion of two women, theoretically opposed and yet ultimately joined together, initially by force but finally by choice.

Uncertain Futures

In summarising their approach to extreme films, Kerner and Knapp hold that 'one of the most significant tropes of extreme cinema is its potential to elicit affect' (2016, 156), but acknowledge that this poses problems in terms of analysis, with affect falling away as it is crystallised in critique. This returns us to the earlier assertion that it is difficult and unnecessary to explore the fusional intimacy of the film/spectator relationship, when the critical apparatus can be put to better use in an investigation of the way in which instances of attempted fusion are depicted visually within the films themselves. Fusion, and all the problems this poses, brings us to Nancy. For reasons we have touched upon and will go on to discuss in greater detail, it makes sense to use Nancy's approach to physicality, touch and community to help contextualise and analyse the move from extremity to a less confrontational cinema. The graphic, shocking encounter with the self, the physical self, the unseen self, or rather the part-seen but unacknowledged self in Nancy's work is painted across the NFE like the abstract, bloody wall painting smeared by Coré in *Trouble Every Day*, which Nancy describes as 'les projections de sang metamorphosées en schème de peinture et de temple à la fois, comme le tracé des neufs d'un sanctuaire, iconostase démoniaque' (Nancy 2001, 61). Nancy's most influential text in this regard, however, is his autobiographical *L'Intrus* (2000). Nancy's description of a vertiginous shock caused by his confrontation with the fragility and flesh of his own body reflects closely the devastating ripping, tearing, cutting and rending of the body in the NFE, all shown in graphic detail, no moment of the spectacle shied away from. Where we can use Nancy as a bridging tool is in the differences, the evolutionary changes, which become apparent when we juxtapose the NFE films and the next films made by the same director or directorial team. The *fil conducteur* of Nancy's philosophy will take us from the destructive physical encounter to a restorative, reparative encounter in

which something new, positive, and con-fusional is engendered by a less graphic, less grasping encounter with the limits of physicality. This will become particularly apparent when we consider the concluding moments of these films. As we have seen already, a common end scene of the NFE, or moment during the finale, sees a damaged protagonist staring at the camera, their regard unreadable, their status unclear. We can consider June in *Trouble Every Day* (Figure 4), Esther in *Dans ma peau* (Figure 5), Diane in *Demonlover* (Figure 6), Anna in *Martyrs* (Figure 7), and many more – all are left in states of fracture, of rupture, without conclusion and without repair. Even though June and Diane are physically intact at the conclusion, both are seemingly destined for a horrifying fate to which they have been inexorably drawn throughout the film.



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7

In contrast, if we consider the endings of *Ne te retourne pas*, *Livide* or *Enter the Void*, we see a very different configuration. Jeanne and Anna-Maria are reconciled in *Ne te retourne pas*, sharing space on the screen in a way which suggests a non-effacing fusion of the two. Anna and Lucie are ambiguously merged in *Livide*, but what is certain is that they begin working together, overcoming obstacles to reach freedom and, seemingly, some sort of happiness. With *Irréversible* perhaps the most visible film of the trend, certainly one of the most impactful in terms of spectator response, it is particularly interesting to see Noe's next film, *Enter the Void*, as one of the first films to move away from the grasping brutality of the NFE and towards a more positive approach to the body.⁸ The idea that there is a progression of thought apparent in this move, which I will argue for all of the films that I discuss in detail in this dissertation, is supported by the directorial flourish of beginning *Enter the Void* with the same piece of music that ends *Irréversible*.

To return briefly to the question of gender, Kerner and Knapp take up Williams' assertion that horror negotiates 'sexual differences' (2016, 46), yet this is not apparent in most of the films in the trend. Indeed, as I have suggested, the films usually in fact elide any specific investigation of gender in favour of a more generalised approach which describes an ultimately detached, nebulous body: a body of parts, which is articulated beyond sex. We can

⁸ *Enter the Void* premiered at Cannes just six days after *Ne te retourne pas* in 2009

go further and claim that the NFE films demolish gendered genre archetypes and familiar genre formulations. For example, as Coulthard and Birks assert, ‘these new extremist films undermine gendered horror tropes such as the monstrous-feminine, the feminized male monster and the final girl, through a reworking of the genre’s sexually charged substructures’ (2016, 463). Though this example is more applicable to the films which fit more closely with the horror end of the spectrum, such as the subversion of the ‘Final Girl’ in *Haute tension* or the substitution of a foetus for the same role in *À l’intérieur*, we can see this approach across the entire trend. Even the moments where sexual difference is relevant are twisted – in *Irréversible*, Alex is raped, yet her attacker turns out to be a gay man, not interested in her sexually but merely as a victim. This is prefigured in the scene where the search for a man is confused by the revelation that he is the transsexual prostitute to whom the protagonists are already speaking. Another example might be where the rape-revenge trappings of *Baise-moi* are subverted by the protagonists’ own indiscriminate violence, lacking the codified structure that the form demands. As Linda Ruth Williams observed, ‘women die too, and unlike in such films as Michael Winner’s adaptation of Helen Zahavi’s novel *Dirty Weekend*, it’s fairly arbitrary who gets slugged and who doesn’t as the pair oscillate between “devil may care” and “he had it coming to him”’ (2001, 29). While Williams also notes the cineliteracy which informs *Baise-moi*, this subversion of the traditional model suggests that the focus should, and does, lie elsewhere. This is another point where my reading of these films diverges from Resmini’s approach. Resmini leans towards a gendered reading of the films, asserting that ‘there seems to be a distinct inclination in the NFE to try to solve femininity and solidify its meaning’, offering such apparent female cinematic archetypes as ‘the man eater in *Trouble Every Day*, the gaping hole in *Romance*, the undecipherable in *Twentynine Palms*, the automaton in *In My Skin*’ in support of this (2015, 182). While the tendency does lean towards female bodies as victims of violation, it can also be argued that many of the films, and indeed three of these examples, are not overly concerned with sexual difference – *Trouble Every Day* sees its male and female protagonists both afflicted with the rapacious sexual hunger, each guilty of brutally murdering their would-be sexual conquests. *Twentynine Palms* sees a brutal male rape leading to a brutal murder, after which the victim-turned-murderer is also destroyed. *Dans ma peau* engages with the body far beyond sex, a subcutaneous affection which, by its conclusion, has moved beyond any human interaction at all, turning its protagonist into a contorted reflection of herself. The only one of Resmini’s examples which

automatically invites a gendered reading, then, is *Romance*. However, as several commentators have observed, the sexual politics there are part of a much longer thematic exploration by Catherine Breillat, whose work converges momentarily with the NFE (in *Romance*, *À ma sœur!* and *Anatomie de l'enfer*) before moving off on its own trajectory.⁹

Kerner and Knapp equally make reference to a 'radical return to the body' (2016, 32), part of a process of ongoing negotiation between identity, neoliberal work environments and something more abstract, a sense of place or meaning linked to the very fact of our physicality (or of physicality more generally, not tied to the individual). The problem, of course, with this approach is that the extreme content, especially in the French context, has diminished over the past decade. Even in *Grave*, as was discussed in the introduction, the violence to the body is enacted at a distance, the bloody images used for their shock value. Most importantly, the body of the central protagonist remains intact; indeed, she finds a sense of wholeness and cohesion as we learn that her affliction is apparently genetic, her trauma thus inscribed into a continuity and not a rupture with the normal world of the film. This can also be applied to Kerner and Knapp's association of extreme film with the episodic nature of pornography – episodes, explosions: 'the eruptions of spectacle in the otherwise conventional linear narrative' (2016, 125). If we compare *A l'intérieur* with *Livide*, for example, in the later film we certainly see episodes where the body is thrown into crisis, but they are not as shocking as the explosively brutal eruptions in the former, and they can be far more easily understood as expected moments within a traditional horror narrative. Maury and Bustillo's sophomore film is a world away from the sort of assaultive images contained within their first film, and this is true of all of the directors associated with the NFE. It can be asserted with confidence that the post-extreme films both de-radicalise the approach to the body and reappropriate generic markers. We will see this in much greater detail in the close textual analyses.

What the study of the NFE, it all of its waves, brings us to, and what I have tried to elucidate here, is an important limitation. The exposure of the body, the graphic exploration, leads us to a point beyond which we cannot go. This limitation fits perfectly onto both the depiction

⁹ There are arguably comparisons to be made between the post-extreme films which will be discussed here and Catherine Breillat's later television movie fairy tales for Arte (with another in the same series directed by Marina De Van, opening up another potentially fruitful avenue for exploration beyond the NFE)

of the body within the NFE, which is bent to breaking point, and the way in which Nancy describes the limits of the body in his work. We will go on to examine Nancy's formulation in much greater detail, but for now it is enough to note that both the NFE and Nancy open a space for conceptualising a place beyond the body, or a space in which the body becomes controlled and known, but in both instances this space is one where sense breaks down, where the film literally blurs, freezes or fades, and where the body becomes a messy rush, a flood of particles which offer no meaning. This excess, this overflow, is explored through formal and thematic manipulations which challenge both narrative and visual understanding. There are extreme images, yes, but beyond these we are brought to a point of breakdown. This is explored in the typical shots of the protagonists which occur late in the film, or in its final scene – the staring eyes that demonstrate the confusion, the uncertainty of the extremity that has been reached. This links back to the idea of the desexualised body, the body as both meat and meeting point of philosophical concerns. The body is the vessel for exploration, the tool and the victim, yet it is also the limitation which defines and defeats the NFE. It becomes apparent that this limitation, this furthest extremity which can be reached, might suggest a reason, if only one of several possible reasons, for the disappearance of the trend. To put it simply, there is an exhaustion of thematic possibilities. The films, so often described as politically engaged, are unable to move beyond this limit, no matter how hard they push against it. Ultimately, they can go no further. However, if we take Nancy's encounter with the NFE as a guiding framework, we see a mappable shift away from extremity and towards a more positive, restorative approach to the body in the later work of the NFE directors. Where this research will add to the large existing body of literature on and around the NFE, then, is in this opening up of the possibility of reading the films as part of an *ongoing* process of exploration. Whereas studies tend to examine the films in a closed system, without a clear indication of what happened next (just as the films themselves appear as closed systems, inexorably shutting off access until we are forced into an ambiguous, seemingly dreadful singularity), through close textual readings of the NFE films and later work by the same director, read alongside Nancy's approaches to cinema, being and the body, which are themselves galvanised and tested by the films, it will become apparent that we can think beyond the NFE, collapsing its hitherto rigid borders, and perhaps start the process of healing the wound that it has left, whilst still upholding the usefulness of a trend which has offered so much to the study of French cinema.

Literature Review – Part 2

Jean-Luc Nancy's Bodily Ontology

Now that we have looked at the body of films which form the NFE, we will move on to consider Nancy's writing and the ways in which it offers itself up as a useful tool for analysis of the NFE and beyond. I am going to give a general overview of how I locate Nancy's work with regard to the NFE, laying the foundations to demonstrate how, even beyond the direct philosophical intervention that links Nancy with Denis, his wider ontology leads us towards an effective methodological framework with which to think through the NFE films and then on to what came next. In describing how the critical impasse which appears to have been reached on the NFE and the impasse we reach within the films as the body is approached are mirrored in the fragmentation of Nancy's ontology as we approach the body, and how Nancy's thought around the body equally offers us a way to navigate beyond this impasse, I will indicate how we can open up a new field of academic exploration.

Having described the primary focus of the NFE as being the extreme presentation (and devastation) of the body, it seems pertinent to observe immediately that Nancy's ontology is a bodily one. Most relevant to my argument here is the way in which his work touches directly upon physicality as his career progresses, informed by his own experiences. Having received a heart transplant, and subsequently suffered through a cancer brought on by the anti-rejection drugs he was required to take, his post-1991 writing has a particularly personal, emotional dimension which brings to the fore the corporeality which has always been latent in his thinking. This close, visceral engagement with the body in his post-transplant writing makes Nancy's ontology an ideal framework through which to approach contemporary French cinema, as the 'brutal intimacy' of recent French cinema is predicated on a close engagement with the filmed body, and Nancy's philosophy itself invariably turns towards the body, marking it out as that which is unattainable, always outside, yet essential to our understanding of ourselves and our world. We will touch more closely on the paradox of embodiment that exists at the heart of Nancy's writing on the body as we move forward. There are also clear and important parallels to be drawn between the way in which Nancy describes bodies and the way he describes films, which allows for a nuanced dialogue between the two.

Giorgio Agamben neatly summarises Nancy's writing in a way that shows why it can be so usefully applied to the NFE. In describing Nancy, he observes

If there exists for each author a decisive experience – something like an incandescent core that he or she incessantly approaches and flees from at the same time, where must we situate this experience for Jean-Luc Nancy? Without a doubt, it involves an extreme experience. Nancy is not, as has been suggested, a tender thinker (2014, x)

It would not be inaccurate to assert that Nancy's thinking is concerned with roughness, with edges, with breaking points. In terms of the 'extreme experience' that Agamben describes, it can certainly be observed that Nancy's later engagement with the body is borne out of the very extreme experience of his transplant. Witness the opening in himself which the necessity of the transplant exposes:

La sensation physique d'un vide déjà ouvert dans la poitrine, avec une sorte d'apnée où rien, strictement rien, aujourd'hui encore, ne pourrait démêler pour moi l'organique, le symbolique, l'imaginaire, ni démêler le continu de l'interrompu : ce fut comme un même souffle, désormais poussé à travers une étrange caverne déjà imperceptiblement entrouverte, et comme une même représentation, de passer par-dessus bord en restant sur le pont (2000, 15)

This complicated sensation, of a divided self, connects back to the idea which we touched upon in the introduction of Nancy's formulation of the world as an unbroken continuity of bodies, into which violence intrudes. The violent encounter with the body, the sudden rupture, the coming to awareness of an underlying physicality (though one expressed primarily in terms of what is absent rather than what is found within), troubles this continuity. At the same time, it also clearly speaks to the way in which the NFE opens up traumatic pathways both formally and thematically. We can consider the way in which this uncomfortable encounter with physicality is expressed as the literal shock which opens Noé's *Carne* (1991), described by Quandt as the 'ur-text' of the NFE (2004, 129). A horse receives a killing bolt to the head and has its neck cut open, the blood pouring forth towards the camera and towards the spectator. The blood pouring beyond the limit of the screen suggests an unending flow, a rush of innards that fills the world and points towards the existence of an unseen space that falls outside of the visible. This flow that falls into an indistinct opening also reflects Nancy's description of the openness that arrives when the heart fails, when the chest is opened, when a new heart is transplanted – Nancy describes this opened and stitched-closed access as 'une ouverture par où passe un flux incessant d'étrangeté' (2000, 35). It is

this moment of abrupt rupture, of exposure to an eternal openness which has hitherto been hidden within the continuity of bodies, which we will return to most frequently throughout this study, ultimately looking at how we can reach an acceptance, a compromise with this openness which saves us from the potential trauma and restores the continuity. The sense of shock and fragmentation that Nancy describes around this encounter – ‘dès le moment où l’on me dit qu’il fallait me greffer, tous les signes pouvaient vaciller, tous les repères se retournaient’ (2000, 14) – is echoed in the film adaptation of, or response to, *L’Intrus* directed by Denis which will be examined in detail in Chapter 1.

Nancy allows us to navigate a direct path from the NFE to the post-extreme films, to explain how the exhaustion of one philosophical trajectory opens up the field for another. The push towards destruction, devastation and damage of the NFE leads to a philosophical fragmentation, a collision between the act of grasping at the body and the impossibility of grasping the body. I will explore the way that Denis depicts this breakdown in Chapter 1. After this, the series of close textual analyses, case studies comparing an NFE film with the director’s (or directorial team) next film, will demonstrate how the films, when examined together, respond to the problem of reaching an extreme, *the* extreme, and show how the philosophical concerns move away from destruction and into a process of restoration and reparation through the apparent fusion of bodies. I will indicate how film allows us to push Nancy’s theories to their limits, to stretch and test his thinking in ways which are not possible in the world outside the films. Ultimately, however, the limitations upon the body on film are much the same as those on our worldly bodies. The body on film can be manipulated, stretched, opened and altered but, in the end, it remains just as unknowable as our own. This relative malleability of film bodies versus the rigidity, or inflexibility, of actual physical bodies (whilst at the same time ultimately obeying the same laws) is key to my understanding of Nancy’s position on film, and to my reading of films through Nancy. I will begin here by explaining the way in which I see the convergences between the films and Nancy’s thought, then move on to describe Nancy’s perspective on the body and film, drawing from these the two key points which will guide my discussion: *l’image en saignée aveuglante* and con-fusion.

Thinking With

The wording of the title of this thesis refers to navigation 'with' Nancy. It is important to assert that this engagement will not offer a glove fit between theory and film, but rather point at a series of convergences which offer a rich framework for thought and discussion. In assessing Nancy's thought's overall effectiveness as a prism through which to analyse cinema, McMahon noted a possible complication in applying philosophy to cinema, and indeed cinema to philosophy: 'there may be a necessary resistance of film to philosophy, and of philosophy to film – a necessary spacing or dislocation between philosophy and film, a certain *unworkability*' (2011, 158). While this unworkability is always something which can be used to criticise the film-philosophy encounter, it also helps to describe the specific way in which Nancy's ontology can be useful. For Nancy, our worldview is constructed around an unending series of encounters. Nancy eliminates the possibility of transcendence, and in the immanence of existence we are constantly arriving at awareness through encounters with our environment, with other bodies. The encounter between film and philosophy does not require an ongoing contact. Indeed, McMahon's thesis is constructed around the importance of the withdrawal of touch, and it is in this constant state of reaching and recoiling that we can see the interface of film and philosophy. As McMahon concludes her book, 'film and philosophy remain mutually, untenably, open to the event of contact' (2011, 158). Chelsea Birks builds on the importance of recognising this distance, especially with reference to the NFE. She summarises the primary issues thus: '[Nancy] impels us to think of (embodied) experience in terms of fragmentation, withdrawal and distance' (2015, 134), and that in terms of the film/spectator relationship, 'the spacing between subject and art is an essential component of the experience: while violence and affect might seek to intrude on these spaces, they remain impenetrable and inescapable conditions of our relationship with the world' (*ibid*). This is something which I will keep returning to – the impenetrable and inescapable spaces which divide us from our bodies, a space which the NFE films incessantly prod at.

Once the choice has been made to apply a Nancean framework to a reading of these films, his usefulness as a critical guide is immediately exposed in a multitude of ways. The body, community and philosophy are, for Nancy, constructs or concepts which are understood as pre-assembled, or rather as assemblages in the way we experience them. The body is, for

Nancy, an automatic assembly of physical body and self (or mind, or soul), which are distinct and separate and yet, forcibly, together. The distancing within the self leads to the vertiginous feeling which Nancy refers to when this sense of wholeness is affected by penetration. Community is something which happens in-operatively, inadvertently and inexorably. It is impossible for bodies to be separated from other bodies as all bodies are part of the unbroken continuity of bodies, so community is unavoidable. Indeed, the very word 'community' might be inappropriate, as Nancy acknowledges, 'la communauté peut-être n'a rien, ou surtout n'est rien de commun' (1983, 218). Community exists all around us. We are part of it, it is part of us. We are assembled within the assembly: 'à la limite – de la communauté, de la philosophie – le monde n'est pas un *monde* – c'est un amas, et peut-être immonde' (1983, 218). This amas, this multiplicity, is our world, and we cannot divide ourselves from it. At this point the inherent tension underpinning Nancy's approach to the body should have become very apparent. If bodies are indistinct and automatically part of a continuity, any threat to the body becomes a threat to existence itself. Finally philosophy, for Nancy, is itself an assemblage of ideas. There is nothing, for Nancy, but the immanent world, and thus all thinking occurs within the world, without recourse to contemplating that which is outside the world, or rather that which *is not*. Philosophy thus rests on the assemblages of body and community: indeed, philosophy *is* the way in which we think across these assemblages. The very process of making any sort of sense of our world, of ourselves, involves a thinking-across, a thinking-with. As Nancy describes it, 'le sens du *sens*, depuis le sens « sensible » et dans tous les autres sens, c'est : s'affecter d'un dehors, être affecté d'un dehors, et aussi affecter un dehors' (1983, 211). We configure ourselves, our world, in relation to other selves, other formulations of the world, as well as to our own sense of ourselves. There is no self beyond the world, and at the same time no world beyond the self. There is only a coming together of these two. To unite the two ideas of community (or perhaps world) and philosophy, 'il semble bien que quelque chose comme une « communauté » implique une philosophie, ou de la philosophie, le partage articulé d'un sens qui donne lieu, précisément, à la communauté' (1983, 211-212). The thinking is cyclical and reciprocal. Meaning occurs through contact of the two, but without the contact there is nothing. Our thinking and understanding must be thought and understood through co-exposures, through openings and encounters. Thinking across the NFE with Nancy leads to productive tensions that can help us to think beyond the impasse at which the trend currently sits.

The Body

As I noted at the outset, the body is at the heart of Nancy's ontology. Indeed, we can go so far as to say that the body *is* Nancy's ontology – '*l'ontologie du corps est l'ontologie même: l'être n'y est rien de préalable ou de sous-jacent au phénomène. Le corps est l'être de l'existence*' (1992, 17 – his italics). As Peter Fritz observes, 'Nancy contends that philosophy must begin with, proceed as, and end in a thinking of body, of flesh and blood bodies in the world, together, struggling for survival and occasionally enjoying themselves' (2016, 262). The body is always there, for Nancy, but in a typically complicated arrangement of philosophy and physicality, the body for Nancy is equally never *here*. According to Nancy, we write our bodies out, while at the same time inhabiting them. In other words, we place the body at an extremity. In his autobiographical work *L'Intrus* (2000), Nancy's position on the body is affected by his own close encounters with mortality. Whilst the book is an incredibly personal account, it also shows Nancy exposed to the body at the extremity. As Nancy later observed, 'l'intérieur du corps n'existe pas ; il n'y a rien à y voir, rien à y chercher. Le corps est un dehors. La greffe m'a ouvert à ce dehors' (Cerf 2012). This revealing quote touches on a key aspect of Nancy's approach to the body which we will engage with as we move into the comparison chapters, which is that Nancy's exteriorising of the body renders it, and the continuity of bodies in which it is located, essentially bloodless. By this I mean that the continuity of bodies – the flux, the *amas* of existence – is fleshy without being full. Where penetration of the body occurs, the flow of blood disturbs and disrupts the body's place within the continuity and thus threatens the stability of the world. It is little wonder that the graphic destruction of the body in the NFE brings his thinking to the point at which meaning breaks down: to *l'image en saignée aveuglante*.

It is worth observing briefly that Nancy's engagement with the body truly begins with his engagement with religion. Nancy takes Christianity, with all its complications and contradictions, and tries to unpick the sense behind it. This leads neatly towards his discussion of the ungraspable nature of the body. Consider the phrase which he draws out, obsesses over, in *Corpus*: '*hoc est enim corpus meum*'. This is my body. These words, spoken in the Bible by Jesus as he hands bread to his disciples at the Last Supper, show us a Nancean formulation of the body which usefully parallels the filmic body. This phrase gives us both a centring and a substitution (or displacement) of the body. The '*hoc*' places the body at the

forefront, offered up for appraisal, for consumption. However, what possibly fascinates Nancy the most is the following qualification – ‘corpus meum’. My body. What we are given here is both a substitution and a displacement. The bread which Jesus offers is a part of him and yet distinct, representing both absolute intimacy and complete separateness. The bread takes the place of his body (either literally or metaphorically, depending on denominational viewpoint) – at once same and different. Jesus’ gift of himself to his followers is held out very much in the same way as Nancy attempts to write out the body, the tension between a Cartesian dualism and immanent wholeness apparent in the struggle. For, as stated previously, Nancy rejects transcendence. This rejection frequently causes friction within his work, as he collides with edges that seem to overflow with meaning yet cannot be over-flown. This tension becomes especially apparent in his response to *Trouble Every Day*.

Nancy places the body at an extremity, or rather acknowledges that placing the body at an extremity is something that we all do, that happens automatically. As Douglas Morrey notes, ‘the body as it is discussed by Nancy inhabits neither matter nor discourse [...] Nancy’s conception of the body exists at the limits – and as the limit – between these concepts [of body/mind/soul], a fracture or an opening in the continuum of matter, as in the continuum of sense’ (2008, 11). The body remains unknowable to us, because in formulating the body we immediately place it outside of ourselves (even though, evidently, we must also be inside it). ‘For Nancy, there is no sense in talking of body and thought as though they could be separate from one another, subsisting each for itself: they are only insofar as each touches upon the other and this touching is in itself the limit that marks the spacing of existence’ (Morrey 2008, 12). This difficulty of writing or describing the body is addressed by Nancy, who explains that we must ‘excrire’ the body – making of the body that which is written out: ‘son inscription-dehors, sa mise *hors-texte* comme le plus *propre* mouvement de son texte : le texte *même* abandonné, laissé sur sa limite’ (1992, 14). The body is pushed to the extreme limit of our understanding. We might try to recover it through pushing and touching and scratching, all of that damage vernacular which we associate with the NFE, but ultimately it will still elude us. This, understandably, leads to that state of anxiety, of friction, wherein we are constantly grasping at the ungraspable, denied a sense of wholeness. This is certainly the position which we are drawn to at the conclusion of the NFE films, the state of being lost or adrift, unanchored from the world. We will go on to see in Chapter 1 how Claire Denis depicts

this sense of floating between states in her adaptation of *L'Intrus*. Where analyses of the NFE tend to stop is at this point of breakdown, and this is where we can apply a new reading, through which a sense of continuation will be reached. Instead of pushing at the limits, at the extremity, we must instead retreat from them and find meaning in togetherness.

To rest briefly on this idea of the limit, it is worth observing that Nancy has a particular affection for the skin. We will see later how he links the skin on film with the skin of the film itself, drawing immediate comparisons with Marks and her haptic reading of cinema. However, for Nancy the reading of skin goes much deeper than this sort of comparison. Skin is one of the edges that Nancy refers back to throughout his work on the body, yet, of course, it is never offered as an ultimate edge – '[les peaux] sont poreuses par définition organique et métaphysique à la fois (Nancy 2020, 146). Skin offers up an edge but it also provides an access: '[la peau] est un lieu de passage, de transit et de transport, de trafic et de transaction' (Nancy 2020, 147). This latter description is particularly intriguing if we consider the way in which Denis depicts the fragmented body in *L'Intrus* around a series of transfers and transactions, organs separated from the body and finding new bodies to inhabit. It is important to keep in mind the porosity that Nancy ascribes to skin, as well as its place as a 'lieu de passage' – rather than being simply a site of contact and rupture, the skin also appears as a meeting point between bodies.

Film

Film reflects our world, it is recognisable to us, but due to the malleability of filmed bodies, philosophical concepts can be worked through, applied and tested in a way that would be impossible in the experiential world. As Nancy describes the specificity of cinema, it offers 'une possibilité de regard qui n'est plus exactement un regard sur la représentation, ni un regard représentatif' (2001, 15). Film is something else – a between-two-worlds. We know that it is not our world, and yet it can appear to be. Indeed, the very power of cinema is that it is something that resembles our world incredibly closely yet can offer a flexible reading of it, can engage with the world in an elastic way. Nancy lays out certain specific conditions of film as he sees it. While, for example, it is possible to view cinema as a contemporary Plato's Cave, the spectator drawn into the darkness to see projections, shadows of an exterior world,

Nancy notes that comparisons between the cinematic space and Plato's Cave are, for him, inaccurate. For Nancy, 'le fond de la caverne [de Platon] témoigne précisément pour un dehors du monde, mais en négatif, et installe par là même la déconsidération des images que l'on sait, ou l'exigence de considérer des images plus hautes et plus pures, nommées « idées »' (2001, 45). Thus, the flickering visions described in the Allegory of the Cave are an opening into a metaphysical negotiation between our empirical sense experience and our philosophical mindscape which leads us to think further into our experiences and look for clues towards higher purposes and lower substrata of existence. Cinema, conversely, in Nancy's view, does not do this. Cinema exists, and reflects existence, but it offers no higher truths. As Nancy writes, '[le cinéma] ne reflète pas un dehors, il ouvre le dedans sur lui-même. L'image sur l'écran est elle-même l'idée' (2001, 47). In Nancy's ontology, there is no transcendental realm for cinema to refer to. So, cinema is not, for Nancy, a way to rethink our world, not a world apart – rather, it is a world rethought. The thinking happens instead in the dialogue between us, as spectators, and the film as both the target of the gaze and a charged, asymmetrical double of the world from which we spectate. The power of cinema in this regard is its ability to open up a space for negotiation within our reality. It offers an opportunity to push at and to explore the limitations of our world. How far it might go in this pushing depends on the genre of the film, on its style, on its purpose. Evidently, when we are discussing the NFE, we are imagining that some sort of limit is being probed, the furthest reaches of possibility explored. This is not simply in terms of the violence on display – it also refers to the breakdown of expected cinematic codes, whether visual or generic, at play within the films. What this allows for is an interrogation of philosophical concepts, limited in terms of its effect on the real world, yet also limitless in terms of film's eliding of borders within itself, allowing for expansions upon the real, and the normal, which cannot occur in the actual world.

Nancy's approach to film in *L'Évidence du film* takes into account the difficulty of understanding cinema in parallel with the real world. He does not ignore the fact that film exists within our world, reflecting it, perhaps, yet also *from* it. Cinema is a product: it cannot occupy a privileged space in terms of its own existence – film is a human construct, so in some respects everything we see in films is *of our world*. And yet, its reflective capacities do bestow

upon its special characteristics which bend and stretch the limits of representation. As Nancy describes it,

Le cinéma présente – c'est-à-dire partage (communique) – une intensité du regard sur un monde dont il fait lui-même partie intégrante [...]. Il en fait partie en ce sens précis qu'il a contribué à le structurer tel qu'il est : comme un monde où le regard sur le réel s'est résolument substitué aux visions de toute espèce, aux prévisions et aux voyances (2001, 21).

This summarises the points discussed above: cinema allows for a regard upon the world, whilst also existing upon the same immanent plane. This takes us back to Resmini's criticism of the perceived difference of the NFE. How can these films open an access on to any sort of essential truth, when they are bound by the same limitations as we are? In short, they cannot. Nancy adds to this sense of cinema as a tool for examining the world within its limitations in stating,

Le cinéma s'avère désormais [...] comme bien d'autre chose que comme un support relativement nouveau pour des modes d'expérience reçus (le récit ou le sentiment, le mythe ou le rêve, etc.). Bien au-delà du support qu'il est aussi, il forme un élément : l'élément d'un regard et d'un réel en tant que regardé (2001, 21)

This idea of 'réel en tant que regardé' helps us to consider the nature of cinema according to Nancy. Film cannot act alone. Film's reality, its evidence, is activated by the process of spectatorship. We, as viewers, give reality to the film. Obviously, as mentioned above, films exist in our world, impregnated in celluloid or digitised into files. But this is film in its inert state, lacking in mobility. Film is mobilised two-fold: the projection or playing of the film marks the first step, unleashing the potential energy of the film into kinetic life. Film's pregnant, rippling texture, the result of its inherent mobility, from its spinning reels or running digital files, gives even still images a potent potential, such as we encounter every day, where the unexpected is ubiquitous. The second step is the act of spectatorship. In watching, we make the reel real. As Nancy describes the flow of the film-spectator relationship:

Il ne s'agit pas de passivité, encore moins de captivité, il s'agit d'accorder à un regard afin de regarder à notre tour. Notre regard n'est pas captif, et s'il est captivé, c'est parce qu'il est requis, mobilisé. Cela ne va pas sans une certaine pression qui fait obligation : la capture de l'image est clairement un *ethos*, une disposition et une conduite à l'égard d'un monde (2001, 17).

We can also borrow here the sort of language that Nancy employs in describing the relationship between observer and portrait in *L'Autre Portrait* (2014):

Si l'«autre» – c'est-à-dire celle/celui dont on cherchait l'image – se retire dans le portrait, dans *son* portrait, c'est moins pour abriter au fond de ce retrait le secret d'une identité mystérieuse et fascinante que pour partager avec nous, qui le regardons, l'étrangeté qui n'est la sienne qu'en étant aussi bien la nôtre (86).

As Marie-Eve Morin summarises Nancy's thinking around the image, 'at the same time that the image shows something or makes something present, it also shows *itself* showing something' (2012, 135). 'It is because the image re-marks its own distinction as an image that we cannot "enter" into it, but always remain on the threshold of it as before a "totality of sense" or a "world"' (2012, 135-136). The border of the film is ultimately the same as those borders which define us in our world, the edges of bodies which touch upon other bodies. This is where the NFE both gains its power to shock and ultimately reaches the impasse: it tries to bring us close to an experience of our own nature as embodied beings – skin like ours filmed up close: its folds and pores, its lines and textures – and then opens the body up as a way to push to something beyond this. However, herein we find the point at which the drive of the NFE and the flow of Nancean ontology collapse in upon one another. The films of the NFE attempt to bridge a gap, to cross a divide. In so doing, the film bodies ultimately collide with the same limitations as those which govern our physical bodies. Our bodies are, for Nancy, distanced from our understanding of ourselves. They are pushed to an extreme outside, an unknowable exteriority. The closer we try to get to them, the more they evade us. Cinema which pushes towards the body, or towards *our* bodies as spectators, is bound by these same limitations – the graphic exposing of the body ruptures it, destroys it or fragments it. Once again, we can connect back to Resmini's questioning of the supposed transcendent quality of the NFE and once again we can agree that these films do not function at a level beyond other films in terms of spectator engagement, or at least not in the sort of haptic, body-engaging way that some critics claim. Film blurs into non-sense at the point where it directly challenges the spectator. By this I mean that film collides with the boundaries which Nancy describes film as having, the ability to open up a regard onto the world of which it is itself a part. As I noted previously, for Nancy the body is always an unknowable quantity, held at arm's reach (or perhaps slightly *beyond* arm's reach). If film pushes at this divide, it stops being useful in the sense that Nancy understands film to be. We will go on to examine in detail

how he expresses this loss of comprehension that occurs when his thinking is drawn to this extremity. This limit, this divide, this extremity, is the point at which we can continue no further. In this regard, extremity itself is the death of the NFE. In dissecting the filmed body in order to bring us closer to an awareness of ourselves, or in using film itself to approach us, the meaning which we can draw from films dissipates into the same unknown space that our own bodies inhabit.¹⁰

L'image en saignée aveuglante

While Nancy's thinking leads us to call into question the possibility of film overstepping the limits of the screen and directly affecting the spectator in a physical way, his reaction to the events within the one NFE film that he directly engages with nonetheless show that film can impact heavily on his thought process. In Nancy's response to Denis's *Trouble Every Day*, which we will go on to explore in detail in the next chapter, the depiction of bodily exploration brings him up against the edges of his thinking, in such a way that McMahon describes it as 'articulated [...] in uncharacteristically extreme terms' (2012, 136). It is here that Nancy seems shocked by the bodily devastation, the explored and exposed flesh. He declares of the film that 'il prend le risque de passer au revers du film, de fermer le regard en l'ouvrant sous la morsure' (2001, 64). There is a sense that this risk that is being taken forces the spectator to a point where they can no longer truly see. This calls to the idea of a certain respectfulness in the ideal viewing relationship: the spectator must be able to see in order to understand. In the instances where the body is made to fill the screen, true seeing is not possible. This pushing behind, this attempt to get into the framework of what lies behind the visible, brings Nancy to 'la rupture du spéculaire et de l'image ressemblante: l'image en saignée aveuglante'

¹⁰ It is worth noting that in his writing on film, Nancy in many ways seem to privilege the cinematic space itself. This might help us to explain another issue which may have played a part in the disappearance of the NFE trend: the problem of replication and longevity in terms of the impact of the films. Nancy talks of cinema specifically in the cinematic space, but films themselves are no longer limited to this arena. The power of the film becomes lost outside of its natural environment – the dark, Dolby-surrounded *huis clos* of the cinematic space. Those of us unlucky enough not to have seen *Irréversible* at Cannes, surrounded by faintings, vomitings and brouhaha, or *Demonlover* (Assayas 2002) in its original, explicit and uncut form, cannot perhaps truly grasp the effect that these films had on their audiences.

(ibid), which is where his analysis concludes. The opening of the flesh necessarily brings about the closing of the look. This dissipation or disappearance, or displacement or destruction – this moment at which we find ourselves facing a wall of ambiguity, often expressed in the unreadable gaze of the protagonist – is what I describe, after Nancy, as *l'image en saignée aveuglante*. It is a wonderfully visual term which encompasses the idea of the loss of meaning which occurs at the endpoint of the NFE. We will explore in the following chapters how we can be led to this point over and over again, via different paths. The ways in which Nancy reads film, plurality and the body itself are all brought to this same point.

We should pause for a moment to talk through the way in which I see the still image of the protagonist as indicative of *l'image en saignée aveuglante*. While it might seem contradictory to express a bleeding, blinding flood of non-sense in an image that is sedate and steady, or indeed frozen, it is my belief that we can read these moments of stillness as the protagonist's experience of this moment, or *as* the experience of this moment itself. Nancy's engagement with *Trouble Every Day* ends at this point, his sense of the world fragmenting not in the rush blood of the film's most violent scenes but rather around the image of the ill-fated wife and more specifically the mark on her skin which suggests the bite that lies beyond the kiss, a troubling symbol of that which is *dans la peau*. That so many of these films reach this same point is a fascinating coincidence which seems to support my reading – that this point of stillness signifies rupture.

In order to gain a full understanding of *l'image en saignée aveuglante*, it is necessary to explore briefly how Nancy regards physical contact in terms of the NFE. Nancy typically privileges touch over penetration: touch is the contact which allows communication without fusion. As Douglas Morrey notes, informed by Derrida's *Le Toucher*, Jean-Luc Nancy (2000), Nancy's position on the body 'turns around the crucial trope of touch which comes to stand, in his philosophy, as the marker of the most fundamental limits that shape our understanding of and interaction with the world' (2008, 10). However, in his analysis of *Trouble Every Day*, through which we can bring his ontology to bear on the NFE more generally, Nancy asserts that 'toucher veut crever et en crève' (2001, 60). In this instance, then, it appears that even touch is in some way effacing. In coming into contact with another (an Other?), we either erase them or we erase ourselves, or at least that part of ourselves which entered into contact with the other. We will go on to look at how the grasp, the attempt to possess or contain, to

fully understand the edges of something, to see its fullness, inevitably leads to its displacement or destruction. What we are led towards, in order to allow for the possibility of continuation, is a blurring of edges. A-communal bodies in the NFE become detached from their world, divorced from their reality. If death is the absence of meaning, then these dead (or as-good-as-dead) protagonists disappear into senselessness. They fall away (though there is no actual fall) against this permanent edge, this limbo space which Nancy describes : 'ce n'est plus une chute, ça n'a plus ni haut, ni bas, le corps n'est pas déchu, mais tout en limite, en bord externe, extrême, et que rien ne referme' (1992, 14). The films of the NFE all undeniably push towards this 'bord externe', this outside edge, this extremity, drawing the body in through the devastation of its physical presence. But the body escapes. In isolating it, wounding it, pushing the fact of the body, its evidence, to the fore, the body is rendered inanimate, essentially killed off. There is no meaning to be found in the frozen image: *l'image en saignée aveuglante*. Ultimately, bodies can only make sense in opposition, in counterpoint, as part of the unbroken continuity.

Birks describes the death of Oscar (prior to his post-death experience) in Noé's *Enter the Void* as the moment at which 'the film passes beyond the impossible' (2015, 136). This is an appropriate description, given that this is one of the first films which I locate as belonging to the post-extreme group. While it has been associated with the NFE, and certainly contains sex and violence comparable to that which is found in the NFE, *Enter the Void* is distinct from the NFE films in that it restores its protagonist, Oscar, to life, reborn through his own sister. We have seen his body die, so the child which Oscar seems to become is a confused entity, part-Oscar, part other. There is another possible reading here. If we follow Noé's claim that the woman whom Oscar 'impregnates', in the sense that he possesses her body, fills it, like ink impregnating paper, is the character's mother (Birks 2015, 140), we still encounter an idea of fusion. This interconnectedness of bodies, explored throughout the film and expounded on in Chapter 2, corresponds with Nancy's assertion that the world is a chain of interconnected yet distinct bodies, bodies touching bodies all the way down, up, across and around – 'un corps est une image offerte à d'autres corps, tout un corpus d'images tendues de corps en corps' (1992, 105). We might also link this back to Birks who, in discussing *Dans ma peau*, refers to 'the screen itself as a body open to deconstruction and anatomization' (2015, 142). For Nancy, everything is a body, so it makes sense that the screen is a body, film is a body,

cinema is a body. Onto such a body, we must lay the weaknesses of other bodies - the fragility, the impossibility of full knowledge. At the limits of film, just as at the limit of the body (or the limit that *is* the body), everything breaks down. Think back to the blood of the slaughtered horse at the beginning of *Carne*, pouring away into the interstices between screen and spectator – another gap between bodies. Just as in the real world, the more we grasp at meaning, the more slippery, quick, unobtainable it becomes. If the wound is 'a non-place that opens onto nothing, a site where meaning collapses' (Birks 2015, 144), then the wounding screen of NFE must also ultimately fall apart, or fall in upon itself, drowned in an excess which is unknowable. As Nancy said, 'par la plaie s'échappe le sens' (1992, 71). Extreme film brings us nothing more than the real world of the senses does. The wounded body, the opened and exposed body, does not bring us any closer to any sort of essential 'truth'. There can be no true approach. The only way to move is in reverse, to push backwards, away from this divide, to re-contain the film within itself, and restore the body to its correct place. Instead of the rupture, the fission of the film-at-extremity, we move towards the restoration of bodies on film, the return of the body to its extremity – a reparation of the codes of being, and thus a restoration of meaning. However, we must always keep in mind the rejection of absolute fusion which governs Nancy's thought. What we can gesture to instead is the possibility of con-fusion.

Con-fusion

Nancy's ontology appears outwardly to reject fusion. We can return to McMahon's observation that 'the work of Nancy provides a useful intervention in qualifying [...] touch – persistently and deconstructively – with an irreducible spacing' (2012, 7). Spacing certainly seems inherent to Nancy's thinking and it appears that attempting to reduce this spacing will only lead to destruction. However, I will take up this idea of fusion and argue that while the impossibility of fusion Nancy describes is applicable to the way in which the body is treated in the NFE, we can actually see a move towards a sort of fusion in the post-NFE films which is not irreconcilable with Nancy's own philosophy. McMahon usefully describes the 'dream of fusion' (2012, 132) which begins to develop at the graphic encounter with physicality in *Trouble Every Day*, and which the film marks as impossible. This is certainly the response of the NFE to any move towards fusion. Esther in *Dans ma peau*, for example, appears to be

trying to come to an understanding of herself through a process of self-dissection. She is seemingly attempting to reconcile her physical self with her intangible self – in other words, attempting a fusion. This is represented most clearly in the moment in which she places a tanned piece of her skin against her flesh, as though trying to incorporate the excised piece, to draw her body under her control through dissection and reassembly. This process is an apparent failure, as by the end of the film we leave Esther detached, damaged and possibly dead. In contrast, De Van's second film, *Ne te retourne pas* (2009), sees Jeanne attempting to control her life which seems to be fragmenting, breaking apart, and is ultimately successful in this via a fusion of the separate aspects of her identity. We will examine all of this in much greater detail in Chapter 3.

Whilst it is difficult to argue for any permanent fusion that can be reached thinking with Nancy, what Nancy does offer up, perhaps unintentionally, is the possibility of a productive con-fusion which still maintains difference and spacing. Tellingly, it is in his short work entitled 'Making Sense', originally produced for the colloquium of the same name, that Nancy provides a vivid description of how we might understand this type of fusion. In Nancy's description of the limitations of the body in relation to other bodies, we see this poetic, metaphorical space wherein the con-fusions of the post-extreme can occur:

Dans la sensation, il y a affirmation simultanée du dehors et du dedans, du corps et de l'âme si on veut : je vois cet arbre vert traversé de rayons de soleil, je suis en lui, je passe en lui, je me confonds avec lui – jusqu'au point où cette confusion s'interdit elle-même puisqu'elle résonne en moi précisément comme approche d'une intimité inimaginable. Je ne deviens pas cet arbre parce que... je le deviens, justement' (2011, 209)

This is a richly complex text that offers a multitude of theoretical avenues to explore. Consider the way in which it exposes the tension of duality at the heart of Nancy's thinking – the 'affirmation simultanée du dehors et du dedans, du corps et de l'âme' highlighting this constant double exposure of self. Think back, too, to the way in which Nancy describes the skin as porous and passable, leaving the body open to just this sort of transfusive encounter (2020, 146). It is also a fascinatingly visual moment, with the place of seeing and light explicitly part of this moment of compenetration or comingling. There is a pleasing visual similitude between rays of sun cutting through and lighting up the tree and the beam of light from a film projector hitting a frame of celluloid. It would be fanciful to suggest that all the answers lie in

cinema, but what this moment certainly allows for is the discussion of what I describe as *con-fusion*, wherein the essential spacing that Nancy describes as necessarily existing between bodies is maintained. Fusion-with, but with a distance maintained, just as the *être-singulier-pluriel* is contained within one interspaced concept (1996, 58), or the idea of com-passion stands as the meeting of bodies (1996, 12). The hyphenation, which suggests at once a closeness and a distancing, demonstrates Nancy's allowance of this seemingly contradictory existence. We can also think back to the idea of going 'par-dessus bord en restant sur le pont' (Nancy 2000, 15), which encompasses this idea of simultaneously existing in multiple states, albeit states which are perhaps strained and uncertain. Remember that con-fusion, while ultimately a more positive outcome than *l'image en saignée aveuglante*, is not without trauma.

There are wider possibilities opened up by this idea of con-fusion, which in turn circle back to issues that Nancy has already investigated. The idea of con-fusion allows for a positive reconceptualisation of the idea of the brutal invasion that intrusion, in its irruptive otherness, appears destined to become. In considering the possibility of a con-fusion, wherein the edges are blurred yet a distinction is still marked, we are offered a possibility of continuation without destruction. What still exists, however, is a certain disruption. We will investigate in detail in the following chapters how this disruption is expressed and navigated. What is clear, however, is that con-fusion allows for a highly positive reading of the post-extreme films and also a useful rereading of Nancy. There is much to be mined from the idea of a struggle between two bodies to co-habit one place. In *Vers Nancy*, an interaction with Denis where she films Nancy discussing the idea of intrusion with a student, which we will touch upon in the next chapter, Nancy asserts that 'un intrus est toujours menaçant' (2002). There must always, therefore, according to Nancy, be a struggle. It is difficult sometimes, however, to understand which is the intruder and which the primary body. We must consider the opposing perspectives. De Van provides a possible way of reading the move towards con-fusion in an interview with Stuart Jeffries. Describing the alienation of self and body in *Dans ma peau*, she notes that 'sometimes our bodies are utterly absent from us' (2004). It might be that a sense of self, of belonging in the world and thus, perhaps, happiness itself can only be reached when the body is dialogue with a contrasting body, the two beings making sense only when con-fused.

Having reached a limit, a point at which we can go no further without fragmentation – as in *Irréversible*'s final blurring, bursting, blinding, breaking moments – the only way to go is in reverse, or rather to look again, to approach differently. It is remarkable that the follow-up, post-extreme films (which are, in many cases, the second films made by the director/s) all appear to move in this same direction. The extremity is not forgotten, the body is still imperilled, but ultimately the body is salvageable, defensible. It is here that we can see film stretching philosophy to its limit, but without causing it to fragment, or fragmenting *with* it, as happens in the NFE. In these films, rather than hitting against an impenetrable edge which can only lead into blurred, blinding uncertainty, we instead reach a point of con-fusion which leads to a moment of reparation, of restoration. The self is held in balance against another. This is at the same time completely in line with Nancy's philosophy, and entirely anathema to it. Nancy's bodies are both limited and limitless. In his writings, he places the body within the schema of the world as a fluid link, part of a cycle or circle of bodies touching each other. Yet this is always in conflict with the acknowledgement of the edges which define bodies, the inviolate whole which dies with penetration. What film allows for, and the post-extreme films certainly exploit, is an exploration of the fluidity of the body, in a way that cannot occur in the exterior world. In this moment where Nancy claims 'je me confonds avec lui', we see opened up the way in which we might navigate towards the post-extreme films. From the damaged, destroyed, violated bodies of the NFE, we move to a state of con-fusion, one which holds the world in a stable moment. The moment might not be permanent, but it demonstrates the restorative and reparative strength of con-fusion. It cannot be kept forever, the flow cannot be held up, or else everything will stop, but for as long as the film lasts, we can see the possibility of a fusional existence. In direct contrast to the a-communality of the NFE, the post-extreme films show people healing, repaired and restored, through con-fused bodies.

In the following chapters, we will begin an investigation of the dialogue between Nancy and Denis, which links both text (Nancy's reviews of *Beau travail* and *Trouble Every Day*, *L'Intrus*) and film (*Trouble Every Day*, *Vers Nancy* and the adaptation of *L'Intrus*), and offers a direct point of access into the NFE. I will describe in detail how the dialogue between Nancy and Denis can be used to mark a transition from the NFE to the post-extreme films which I am describing here for the first time. We will then move on to look at three in-depth case studies, placing a film associated with the NFE alongside the next film by the same director or

directors. These pairings will be examined through a Nancean lens, each chapter informed by a specific work by Nancy (*L'Évidence du film*, *Être singulier pluriel* and *Corpus*) as well as the overall Nancean framework which has been described here where we move towards the destructive, destabilising moment of *l'image en saignée aveuglante* and then through and beyond this towards a point of positive, restorative con-fusion. We will see how we can navigate beyond the traumatic conclusion of the NFE films and find positivity through con-fusion in the post-extreme films, opening up both a new avenue of exploration of the NFE and a new field of study in the hitherto unexplored post-extreme films, as well as the possibility of a new approach to Nancy's writing.

Chapter 1

Troubling Intrusion: Jean-Luc Nancy and Claire Denis in dialogue

Having seen the way in which Nancy's ontology has developed into an embodied approach to the world, and having explored the NFE's shattering physicality, we will now bring these two together in order to demonstrate the useful application of a Nancean reading to the films. In this chapter, we will see how an encounter with extreme cinema activates, or at least galvanises, a branch of Nancy's thinking around the body, forcing him towards an uncomfortable consideration of the very limit of his ontology. As will have become clear, Nancy's work frequently reflects and examines the same issues that commentators see as being at stake in the NFE. Stephan Hilpert notes that 'foreignness and intrusion, community and exposure, touch and corporeality, in their combination and interconnectedness, are central aspects of Nancy's work' (2012, 65). If we take, for example, Palmer's response to the 'cinéma du corps', which he described as 'arguably the most notorious tendency in recent French filmmaking' (2011, 11), we can see a direct correlation between Nancy's thought and the concerns of this branch of contemporary French cinema. Palmer describes these films as being 'profoundly centred on the body, dwelling on the visceral processes of corporeal acts, from body crimes to self-mutilations, often savage behaviours derived from unchecked sexual and carnal desires' (2011, 11) – in other words, an exploration of the 'brutal intimacy' which he chose as the title for his monograph on contemporary French cinema. Beugnet notes that 'the "synchronicity" between theory and practice in the current shift towards a cinema of the senses is particularly manifest in French cinema' (2007, 10) and indeed it quickly becomes apparent just why contemporary French film and Nancy have been brought into such intimate correlation, or co-relation – the focus on the body lends itself to an engagement with touch and corporeality (bodies against bodies, understanding our body and other bodies), but also beyond this into ideas of community (bodies living alongside other bodies), foreignness (Other bodies), intrusion (what is done to the body, what the body does unto others) and exposure (how we view the body, how the body is viewed, how much of the body is seen and how much is unseen). Through a Nancean framework we can engage with the rationale found within these films and move from extremity to post-extremity to see how the films differ in their manipulation of form and of the spectator. This study will thus revisit a number of key

texts from the NFE, before moving on to investigate later films that have so far fallen largely outside of the gaze of academic criticism. Before this is possible, however, it is necessary to describe the way in which Nancy has already encountered the NFE in order to construct a workable framework to apply to the films. We can look at Nancy's direct engagement with the work of Claire Denis, one of the directors associated with the NFE, to build an understanding of why his philosophy is particularly well-suited to use on this branch of contemporary cinema. In this chapter, we will draw a dialogue between Nancy and Denis, with Denis's films *Trouble Every Day* (2001) and *L'Intrus* (2004) and Nancy's 2001 article 'Icône de l'acharnement' and 2000 book *L'Intrus* as the key texts. In doing so, we return to ground already investigated by McMahon and Morrey, among others. However, my aim here is to draw a methodology from the encounters between Nancy and Denis, which can then be extrapolated and used to describe the move from negative corporeal destruction, the moment of *l'image en saignée aveuglante*, to positive corporeal con-fusion as we move on from the NFE.

Some of the discussion in this chapter might not seem directly relevant to a study concerned with mapping the disappearance or evolution of the NFE, particularly if we accept that 'Denis and Nancy sometimes seem to be carrying on a private dialogue in film/philosophy of only tangential interest to viewers/readers' (Morrey 2012, 518). However, what Nancy and Denis's fascinating and fruitful dialogue brings us is the sort of access onto a world which we will examine at length in Nancy's own response to cinema in Chapter Two, which permits us to extrapolate a philosophical trajectory that comes not from abstract application of philosophical theory but rather from a direct exchange of thought between filmmaker and philosopher. Nancy's direct engagement with *Trouble Every Day* is our pathway to the space which is opened up around Nancy's work encountering the films, and allows us to develop from this encounter an approach to the NFE more broadly. In their dialogue, we can see exposed the limits of the NFE's destructive trajectory, and the breakdown of meaning such extremity engenders. From here, the way ahead (or perhaps the way back) toward a cohesive, untroubled (or no longer troublesome) body is opened up and will be navigated in the following chapters. It is important first, however, to describe the scope of Denis's encounters with Nancy.

Good work, everyday troubles

The first published engagement between Nancy and Denis comes in Nancy's response to Denis's 1998 film *Beau travail*, a loose adaptation of *Billy Budd, Sailor* (Melville 1924). While not affiliated with the NFE, the physicality of the film has seen it situated within the wider cinéma du corps corpus. Nancy is extremely moved by the film, describing it as a work of beauty whilst at the same time refusing to reduce its impact simply to an aesthetic one. Indeed, Nancy suggests that in creating a beautiful work of art, Denis calls both beauty and art(work) into question: 'sa beauté est celle de ce travail (ou bien l'inverse)' (2000, 70). We can see here the beginnings of the fruitful exchange of ideas which is to come, and certainly it is clear from this first encounter that Denis's filmmaking captivates Nancy, providing both a vessel through which to perfuse his thoughts and a catalyst for new thinking. Nancy's next engagement with Denis would see the opening-up of the dialogue which will be extrapolated throughout this thesis, marking the moment at which Nancy's ontology faces collapse as it confronts the destruction of the body onscreen. *Trouble Every Day* was one of the targets of James Quandt's vehemence in 'Flesh and Blood'. Offended by Denis's choice to abandon the 'clear-eyed empathy and sociological insight' which he felt were present in *Chocolat* (Denis 1988) and *S'en fout la mort* (Denis 1990), Quandt claims that, in *Trouble Every Day*, 'an enervated Denis barely musters a hint of narrative to contain or explain the orgiastic bloodletting' (2004, 128). It is certainly true that there is little offered by way of narrative, but it is also true that the narrative is not the key factor here. Rather, the thematic concerns take precedence, and it is in these that Denis's interests correlate with Nancy.

From its opening credits, where the rather jaunty, coloured title font suggestive of a 90s romantic comedy (Figure 8) is underscored with the gently haunting Tindersticks title song – its lyrics, 'it's on the inside of me, so don't try to understand', hinting at the impossibility of access that lies at the heart of the film – while the credits appear over images of a couple embracing and moody night-time shots of Paris, *Trouble Every Day* is a film which resolutely defies categorisation.

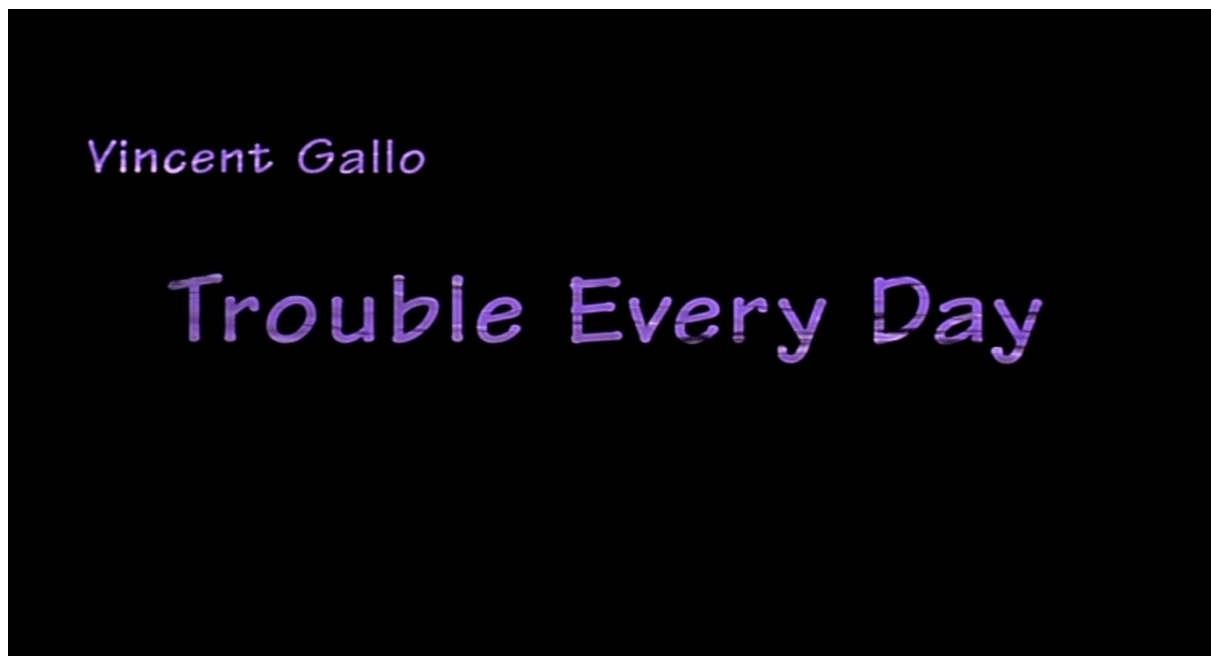


Figure 8

Though she undoubtedly leans heavily on the codes and formal stylings of the horror film, Denis is not beholden to clearly defined genre limits or limitations. McMahon describes the film as 'an ambiguous mix of silent horror, melodrama, thriller and gore' (2012, 128), pointing to Beugnet's description of 'the hybrid quality of Denis' filmmaking, at the crossroads between genres and art forms, between realism and nightmare' (2004, 183). It is perhaps this complicated mesh of genre which led to the often negative critical response. Like many of the films associated with the NFE, *Trouble Every Day* received a mixed critical reaction. Half-boomed, half applauded at its Cannes festival premiere (Kaganski 2001, np), the film was described by one critic as 'a risible disaster' (French 2002), with another noting – interestingly, given where we are going with this chapter – 'what's required here is not metaphor but a transfusion – of sense, rigour, purpose' (Quinn 2002, np). Even the positive reviews noted that the film would not pass without difficulty – two reviewers for *Les Inrockuptibles* describe the film as an 'acte de foi' (Bonnaud 2001; Nicklaus 2001), which can be read both as an act of faith in the capacity of cinema to convey her message and as a leap of faith (possibly that of a director setting out to create a film intended to unsteady its audience?).

Trouble Every Day focusses on two characters, Shane (Vincent Gallo) and Coré (Béatrice Dalle), who were previously involved in some sort of experiment in French Guiana that has left them with a rapacious sexual appetite comingled with a powerful lust for blood. Shane

arrives in Paris on his honeymoon with June (Tricia Vessey), but is actually desperate to find Léo Semenau (Alex Descas), Coré's partner and the only person he believes can help cure him. Denis is uninterested in the science behind the fiction, science fiction being little more than the Hitchcockian 'Macguffin', the impetus required to launch her characters on their carnal journey, heading inexorably towards the violent destruction of the body.¹¹ Of course, it seems inevitable that Nancy would pick up on the suggestion of infection of the body by foreign matter which provides the skeleton of story upon which the film hangs – and be keenly attuned to the sense of radical bodies veering out of control.

We are introduced to Shane and June – the new Mr and Mrs Brown – on a plane. They comment upon the city they are passing over, probably Denver, its lights 'so geometrical, like a computer chip', as June describes them (Figure 9). This functions as an indication of the trajectory of the film's narrative, and of the NFE more generally, as well as a clear parallel for the Nancean reading of the body – these objects that, when viewed from a distance, appear to have a definite shape but once examined become fragmented and undefined. Things fall apart as we approach, and knowing this means that even the apparent cohesion of the distant structure becomes uncertain. Similarly, the more one attempts to comprehend the plot of the film, the harder it becomes to understand. What happened in Guiana? How has Coré remained under Léo's control for so long? Answers are not forthcoming.

¹¹ Alfred Hitchcock referred to an object or concept which exists solely to drive the plot forward as a Macguffin. Examples of this in his films include the secret plans in *The 39 Steps* (1935) and the stolen money in *Psycho* (1960).



Figure 9

What is constantly in evidence is the underlying menace of the film (upon second viewing, something that is even clear from the opening kiss, as later on we will learn the danger of such contact). The latent threat of Shane's condition is codified through Coré's violent actions. Shane seeks a cure for his affliction, and tells his story to a scientist he visits in their lab full of centrifuges and other paraphernalia such as we would expect to see in a science fiction environment. 'I went to Guiana' he says, and it is revealed (albeit cryptically) that Shane stole Léo's work, somehow infecting himself. The scientist admonishes Shane and appears to view his situation as just punishment for his transgression. It is telling that the destruction of Shane and Coré's identities, their rupture with normality, should be played out in France but the source of the infection located in one of its colonial satellites. As we shall see later in relation to *L'Intrus*, these spaces are representative of divided selves, of a strangeness which comes from being in a place at once foreign and home; uncanny. Denis, who spent most of her childhood moving between French-speaking African countries, returns to this odd dichotomy, of home and away, throughout her work.

As mentioned previously, Denis plays with genres throughout. For instance, in a shot reminiscent of *Daughters of Darkness* (Kümel 1971), Coré walks through waste ground and lifts her coat up around her head, forming a simulacrum pair of batwings: a fitting (and indeed perhaps expected) accompaniment to her vampiric activities (Figures 10 and 11). After she has fed again, the grass dripping with blood, Léo buries the cadaver of her latest victim while

she waits in the car, the blood on her face like chocolate around the mouth of a greedy child, matched with her expression of guilt. These scenes draw together genres, but steadfastly refuse to settle upon one. Indeed, there is something almost playful about the use of horror, first in Coré's idly giving herself wings, then in Shane's imitation of a lumbering monster later on. Equally, Léo's relationship with Coré, and indeed with Shane, brings an element of human drama to the film, but is dealt with in broad, dispassionate strokes. In a romantic interlude, but one with hidden tension, Shane and June visit Notre Dame. First, they regard it from the exterior, the camera sharing their gaze as they look at its monstrous carvings. Next, they are on the tower, Shane nibbling at June's neck and imitating first a lumbering monster – such as Boris Karloff's creature in James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931) – and then a hissing fiend, framed between two gargoyles (Figure 12). The humour of the scene, and the gentle music, serve to create a layer of distance from the dark events we have hitherto witnessed. Shane plays at being a monster, though we now understand that he is one himself. Nancy sees the film as somewhat playfully and knowingly repeating 'je ne suis pas ce qu'on appelle un "film d'horreur"' (2001a, 60-61), seeing the film rather as something which engages with the unrepresentable. While this leans rather too closely to the sort of acceptance of the NFE as somehow beyond cinema which Resmini criticised, it is useful to consider that the film does something which pushes Nancy towards a border in his thinking. Nancy certainly acknowledges the shock factor of the film, though not in the traditional sense. Rather, Nancy engages with the film as a philosophical bomb, something which both opens up and collapses a way of thinking: 'l'éclat: ce qui ouvre et ferme la vue en même temps. Ce film est un éclat' (2001a, 64).



Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12

The romance of Shane and June's trip to Notre Dame, albeit itself fraught with invisible danger, is thrown into relief by the horrific, carnal passion of the following scene. The first of the scenes which led to this film's association with the NFE, this is also the key moment which resonates with Nancy, the key scene of corporeal disruption: an *éclat*. Earlier in the film, we see two young men from a neighbouring house to Léo and Coré, Erwan and Ludo (Nicolas Duvauchelle and Raphaël Neal). After Léo leaves the house, they climb into Léo and Coré's garden, potentially casing the house for a robbery. It seems as though Coré alerts them to her presence by shaking the shutters, desperately grabbing at them, but they appear not to see her, or remain somehow indifferent. In this scene, they finally break into the house. After an exploration of the strange items in the cellar (more scientific wherewithal without explanation), Erwan mounts the stairs and finds Coré, trapped in her room by wooden bars nailed across the door. Through the gaps between the bars they make contact, first wordlessly staring at each other, then touching fingers, then caressing each other's faces. Erwan eventually pulls the bars away and Coré lifts her dress, drawing him to her. Nancy talks about the expression of fury through manipulation of the image, drawing together the skin of the film (pellicule) and the filmed skin: 'crever la peau, faire la peau: le film est tout entier fait sur la peau. Littéralement: pellicule expeausée. (Pellicula, petite peau)' (2001a, 60). Such a meeting of skins is most clearly expressed in the camera's caress of Erwan's torso, the spectator's gaze and the camera's subjectivity becoming one in their exploring of the

landscape of his skin. Whilst such a sequence of shots leads easily to a haptic reading of the film – a reading that is entirely plausible and supported throughout by Denis’s focus on skin and favouring of a soundscape which aurally simulates materiality – it is more important to notice here that the closeness of this caress, the merging of subjectivities across the skin, is then destroyed as Coré penetrates his flesh. From the apparently concrete solidity of his skin, we are brought to the abstraction of his smeared blood. For what starts as sensuous quickly becomes violent as her furtive nibbles become bites, eliciting first a cry of surprise and then shrieks of agony as she bites into his neck. Ludo slowly mounts the stairs but then turns away and flees. Coré devours Erwan, tearing away his lips, but also toys with him like a predator playing with its prey, slapping at his head. In this moment, Coré becomes entirely ‘other’. In this respect she is as much of a victim as Erwan; she is powerless to stop the complete loss of self. Her scream at the end of this scene demonstrates her recognition of this but she does not stop. She cannot stop. She continues playing with her victim, fingering under his torn skin, kissing at his ruined lips (Figure 13). At one moment she seems to pause to suck the breath from his mouth. This destructive kiss keenly affects Nancy and draws his thinking directly to the tension inherent in his formulation of the body. He observes that:

Le baiser qui mord et la mort auraient ceci en commun de se porter au lieu impossible de la dissection : qui est celui de la conjonction – d’une âme et d’un corps ou de plusieurs corps ensemble, en tant que lieu d’un interminable partage (2001a, 64).

This both points to the way that Nancy views the body, as part of an unending continuity of bodies, and to the way in which the approach to the body found in the NFE troubles Nancy’s thinking. This graphic exposure or explosion of the body carries us to this ‘lieu impossible’, exposes the junctures which are usually hidden, leading to an extremity which ultimately occludes our understanding.



Figure 13

When we return to Coré, after a friend of Léo's has given his address to Shane, she has painted the walls with Erwan's blood (Figure 14). Nancy points to the religious symbols discernible within the bloody daubs, carrying his theme of iconography: 'les projections du sang métamorphosées en schème de peinture et de temple à la fois, comme le tracé des nefs d'un sanctuaire, iconostase démoniaque' (2001a, 61). However, Nancy also acknowledges the marks as 'comme une peinture gestuelle ou une abstraction lyrique' (ibid), which resonates more with my reading of the scene. While Quandt asserted that 'the Pat Steir-like sprays of incarnadine remind us that the French can never abandon their tendency to aestheticize even when aiming to appal' (Quandt 2004, 128), it would be wrong to suggest that the painting is merely abstract without intent, just as I would disagree that it represents a call to a transcendental truth. Rather, the marks and lines suggest form without meaning – something is painted on the wall, from the something that spilled out of Erwan, yet we cannot read into it more than the fact of its existence. The body has been opened up, but we have learned nothing from it. Coré's hunger is unabated, and she will herself be destroyed as Shane arrives and strangles her just after she has started a fire in the house. As the flames reach her body, she appears to ignite – an appropriately vampire-like demise. The painted wall returns us to the plane and the city far below -there are discernible patterns, yet nothing is certain. Shane's killing of Coré offers no break from the pattern, either. As Nancy notes of the violence, 'il n'y

a pas de résolution, ni extase ni apaisement : juste un égarement. Il y a crise et reprise de la crispation, cela ne cesse pas. *Trouble every day*' (2001a, 62 – his italics).



Figure 14

The second scene of corporeal disruption sees Shane succumb to the affliction and murder the maid with whom he has exchanged enigmatic looks throughout the film. Shane finds her in the basement area where the staff changing rooms are located, and wordlessly seduces her. The inevitability of this scene comes from more than the obvious predatory hunger that Shane shows, or the maid's clear interest in Shane, but is rather interwoven through the fabric of the film. We cannot help but be drawn here. Throughout the film, the hotel rooms seem to be constantly being made up, the trollies of the maids lining the corridors, as though creating a path towards the storage area where Shane will wipe her blood from his mouth. As we will see, Nancy picks up on the idea of 'couloirs et sous-sols' being part of the film's closed system – Denis' calculated premeditation has a rigid yet inscrutable design, a sort of narrative map that resembles the earlier figure of a distantly-glimpsed, uncertain city.

Trouble Every Day certainly poses more questions than it answers. It is odd, disquieting and frequently vague. It shifts in tone both between and within scenes – Erwan's murder begins as a powerful scene of wordless flirtation and sexual longing, reflecting Kathleen Turner's calling of William Hurt using wind chimes in *Body Heat* (Kasdan 1981), but ends not in sexual gratification but rather in bloody death; outright horror scenes are juxtaposed with odd

science fiction elements and surrounded by a story which remains unclear. In watching the film, Nancy is drawn to a conclusion which suggests the sort of extrusion which I have tried to locate. He suggests an explosive outpouring, ending his analysis with a deconstruction of the process of loving which can also be seen as the process of spectatorship. Following the tensions that Nancy has already described in the brutally intimate relationship between love and violence, and equally the relationship between the skin of the film and skin on film, his conclusion which describes 'l'image en saignée aveuglante' (2001a, 64) can be read as the violent breaking of these tensions – a sort of outpouring, of lashing out from the film. Encapsulated within it is the sense of erupting matter, bleeding outwards, from the pierced body, and equally the obfuscation such an eruption necessarily engenders, blinding us to the meaning. The 'bleeding, blinding image', as Morrey translates it (2008), is the point at which sense breaks down. We will go on to link this to the ambiguous shots which conclude most films associated with the NFE, and the idea is equally applicable to specific moments where image is manipulated to become unclear. All three examples of films from the NFE which we will engage with in the following chapters contain moments where the visual breaks down, whether through the spinning of the camera, the blurring of figures on screen or the rendering of the image in negative. Beyond the directors studied in this thesis, there are many more examples from the trend of directors whose cinematic approaches at times lean towards the dismantling of the visual, often in favour of the haptic.

At the film's conclusion, as Shane washes away the rest of the blood, June finds him in the shower. He says that he feels good and expresses a desire to leave. A trail of blood slides down the shower curtain as they embrace, and June's expression suggests that she has seen it (Figures 15 and 16). This is where the film ends. Denis shows no concern for logic. How will these crimes go undiscovered? She also shows no interest in offering a clear conclusion, nor a suggestion of what will happen next – 'ce qui arrivera après la fin, *back home*' (Nancy 2001a, 59 – his italics). There is something in June's final regard, her ambiguous stare, which resonates with other films from the NFE, and certainly the other three examples in this study. All of these films end with a central female character staring towards the camera, their expression unclear. I have already briefly touched on this fruitful coincidence and noted that there are many ways in which these shots have been read but is important to flesh out this idea in this chapter, given how it fits my reading of *l'image en saignée aveuglante*. They

appear sometimes as a challenge to the spectator, to invite a judgement. At other times they can look like an appeal. What certainly unites them all, and equally brings in shots like the end of Grandrieux's *Sombre* where the stares are directed both at the spectator and into a void where a body *should* be, is the ultimate ambiguity. For me, these shots represent the moment at which we are confronted with the impasse – with *l'image en saignée aveuglante*. The unreadable expressions mark the end of understanding.

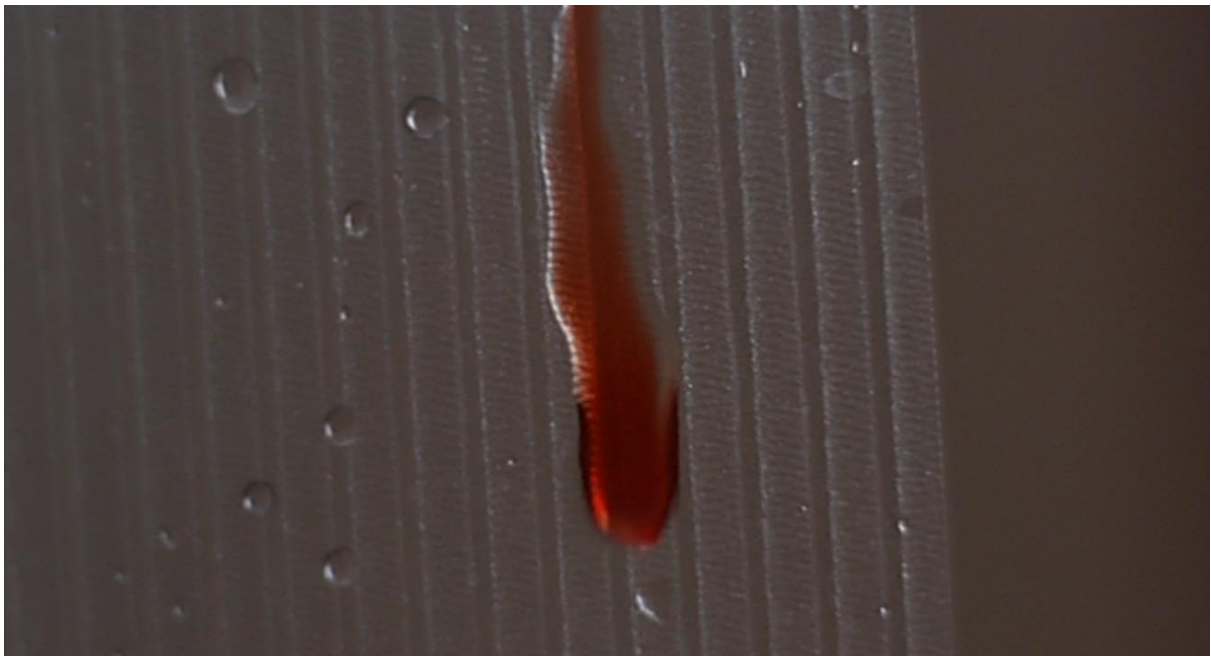


Figure 15



Figure 16

We might also focus on some of Nancy's language used in the conclusion to 'Icône de l'acharnement' – in particular the idea of 'la transfixion ou la transfusion de ce – celle, celui – qui pouvait se croire simplement auprès de soi' (2001a, 64). Here the exposure to a shared existence is something to be afraid of – Shane and Coré have been infected by a foreign body, and the meeting of bodies in sex leads to certain death. Even the most positive relationship, that of Léo and Coré, has no possibility of a future. These considerations will be developed as we move forward, and we shall see the navigation away from the threat of no longer being alone with oneself, towards an acceptance of this state of being, where transfusion becomes part of the positive con-fusion of beings. While it is not the case that I am making here, we might also briefly consider the notion that the shared mode of being that Nancy points towards is exactly the relationship between spectator and film. Transfixion and transfusion – the act of watching, and of receiving foreign matter.

However, despite the idea of moving matter which is encapsulated in transfusion, Nancy's focus on the film sees it as composed of closed systems:

Il n'y a pas de délivrance, tout est fermé – cabine de l'avion dans la nuit, chambre condamnée, volets clos, tubes scellés, couloirs et sous-sols, serre, laboratoire, casque, camion. On n'en sort pas et ça recommence – *trouble every day*. Ce n'est pas une condamnation, c'est l'obstination acharnée d'une interrogation (2001a, 63 – his italics)

There is more - characters pause at thresholds before trying to overcome them: the boys at the gates of the Semenau residence; Christelle at the door of the Browns' room, 'Do Not Disturb' sign on the door keeping her out; Semenau is professionally shut out, 'no longer part of the scientific community', his work having alienated him from his colleagues. This sense of inexorability, of inevitability, of being trapped within the system, suggests perhaps the reason for the furious anger that is often highlighted as representative of the NFE. There is an attempt to act out, to break up, to damage, to destroy. There is a limit which has been reached and which must be traversed. It is perhaps just this sense of enclosure, of being trapped, that leads Nancy to the point which we have already touched upon, at which he claims that in this film 'toucher veut crever et en crève' (2001a, 60). There is a furiousness to this – much like Erwan tearing at the boards which are keeping him from Coré. Morrey translates this as 'touch desires to destroy, and is destroyed by this desire' (2008, 3), while McMahon offers her own translation as 'touching desires to invade and is worn out by it' (2012, 131). My understanding of Nancy here falls somewhere between Morrey and McMahon. Nancy's statement is loaded with possibility, an infinitely flexible position which reflects the malleability of much of his thought. Crever as destroy, indeed, but it is also important to consider the physicality of the word, the connotations of puncture, of opening up, indeed of exposure to the inside. In the phrase 'crever les yeux de quelqu'un', for instance, which suggests gouging out eyes in a violent attack. Or 'crever un pneu', the violent, possibly sudden, puncture of a tyre. We might rather suggest two subtly different senses of 'crever': touch wants to *open up* (in the sense of access, opening a view onto something – but with an added dimension of franticness or violence, like ripping something open), but is *destroyed* by this want. The desire to hold, to possess, to know leads only to destruction, to the displacement of constituent parts. This neatly describes the violent trajectory of the NFE and the explosive destruction which the films lead to. The danger of the closed system, the fear of immanence leading to a state of imminent fear where the next turn brings death and destruction.

Drawing together these elements, of *l'image en saignée aveuglante* and the touch that destroys, we might also consider Morin's analysis of 'plenitude' in Nancy. Morin begins by asserting that 'Nancy's ontology gives the sense of a positive fullness of being and of sense: everywhere beings, everywhere sense-making' (2013, 65). This certainly appears to be the case – Nancy inscribes us into a continuity of bodies touching bodies, where no singularity

exists without also being plural. However, as we see throughout Nancy's writings, the fact of being one state – in this case, full, in contact, in touch – does not negate the simultaneous possibility of existing in another. As Morin goes on to remark, 'plenitude, full presence, is the loss of possibility of the circulation of sense, the filling up of the spacing' (ibid). We can point here to Nancy's rejection of the possibility of fusion, given that fusion would necessarily remove the spacing between bodies. The blinding rush of the bleeding image might also be seen as an example of impossible plenitude. The blood flows forth and fills the gap. This draws us back to the key tenet of 'toucher veut crever et en crève'. Crever as bursting, popping, and bringing forth a torrent which cannot help but become obscuring. We can also see this described in Nancy's discussion of the collision of Eros and Thanatos within the film: 'non pas comme une dialectique des contraires, mais comme une excitation et une exaspération [think here of McMahon's translation of 'en crève' as 'worn out by'] mutuelles, chacun demandant à l'autre d'aller plus loin, d'aller au bout, de s'égarer absolument' (2001a, 58-59). The loving - in a very general sense encompassing many passions - caress of the body leads to its loss. As we go on, however, I will draw on Nancy's own move towards making sense and suggest that these states, which we might refer to as separation and violation, with no middle-ground in between, can in fact be reconciled, or at least temporarily held in suspension.

In summarising the relationship between Nancy's ontology and Denis's films, Morrey locates the wound as a key strand of connective tissue: 'the wound opens the body to the outside, but is also an opening in, an in-folding or invagination' (2008, 29). Morrey suggests that the just approach to the ethical considerations opened up in the dialogue between Denis and Nancy would be by 'sliding across the surfaces of sense' (2008, 29). This is a logical response, and one that corresponds with McMahon's reading of the importance of the withdrawal of touch, of touch being the limit which can only be retreated from. It is my argument, however, that there is a conceptual stage beyond this furtive, gliding, sliding contact, one which Nancy himself will engage with in a manner which appears to arise almost unconsciously. The move towards this further stage, this con-fusion which exists beyond touch but before the crève, will be explored at length in the following chapters. It is important first, however, to explore the way in which Nancy and Denis engage with the traumatic outflow of sense that occurs at the site of the wound.

***L'Intrus* – Jean-Luc Nancy**

L'Intrus is a meditation on the way in which the body is both literally and figuratively opened up, exposed to itself and to others, by a transplant. This is an autobiographical work – Nancy himself received a heart transplant, and it was this reception into himself of part of another being which led him to question the boundaries that we unconsciously impose on our own bodies. There is a physicality to the philosophy explored in *L'Intrus*, with Nancy using his own body as a means by which to interrogate our understanding of existence. He places an importance upon the implicit harmony which exists between ourselves as physical bodies and our selves as we perceive our own existence. In the rupturing of the body, this harmony is displaced. 'Dès le moment où l'on me dit qu'il fallait me greffer,' writes Nancy, 'tous les signes pouvaient vaciller, tous les repères se retourner' (2000, 14). The tumultuous displacement of meaning is evident in this emotive response. The idea that our body is somehow mutable, malleable, flexible in a way that we had hitherto been unable to consider throws our understanding of ourselves into disarray. Nancy refers to a visceral feeling of openness, a sort of falling into space: 'un vide déjà ouvert dans la poitrine'; 'une étrange caverne déjà imperceptiblement entrouverte' (2000, 15). This concept, of being half open, unsealed, is key to the analysis in the following chapters, and to my overall thesis. This is the point of tension which must be navigated – openness exposed is dangerous and destructive, yet openness also allows for productive con-fusion.

Being in some way failed by an integral part of our body; being opened up, operated upon, altered, and then absorbing the alteration into ourselves, or not...the idea of transplantation, for Nancy, raises the possibility that we are always closed and yet open, both receptive and inimical to the Other. We are, as bodies, in some ways the same closed system as the film of *Trouble Every Day*. And yet, we are open. We are receptive. We can be plural. The level of involvement of others within the process, even in the literal sense that the procedure must be agreed upon, sanctioned, carried out, carries a powerful sense of the multiplicity which we look towards in the post-extreme films. As Nancy explains of his transplant, 'cela n'a lieu qu'à la condition que je le veuille, et quelques autres avec moi. « Quelques autres » : ce sont mes proches, mais aussi les médecins, et enfin moi-même, qui me découvre ici plus double ou plus multiple que jamais' (2000, 19). No man is an island, detached in a sea of separation. As Nancy goes on to state, 'ma survie est inscrite dans un processus complexe tissé d'étrangers et

d'étrangetés' (2000, 21). We might contend that Nancy's condition makes him truly aware for the first time of the way in which survival depends on contact with others, a representation of singular plurality. From the danger, the fraughtness of the exposed body, we will navigate the move towards bodies that are positively open and shared, their edges elided in a state of con-fusion. There is an ongoing tension in the negotiation between self and other, however, a tension that mirrors the sometimes-awkward dialogue between film and philosophy, and this will be explored as we move further into our analysis. Nancy certainly finds difficulty in the process of transplantation, of the encounter with the intruder. He details the uncomfortable actions upon the body, the need to fight against yourself in order to accept the foreign material: 'il y a un intrus en moi et je deviens étranger à moi-même' (2000, 31). There is, evidently, a dissociation. 'Quel étrange moi!' exclaims Nancy, 'Je suis ouvert fermé. Il y a une ouverture par où passe un flux incessant d'étrangeté' (2000, 35). Apparently, according to Nancy, the irruption of another (or an Other) into the self creates a split, a break in our understanding of ourselves: 'c'est donc ainsi moi-même qui deviens mon intrus, de toutes ces manières accumulées et opposées' (2000, 36). Illness, Nancy holds, merely exposes us to the fragility of ourselves, to our inherent frailty as bodies: 'on n'est, très vite, qu'un flottement, une suspension d'étrangeté entre des états mal identifiés, entre des douleurs, entre les impuissances, entre les défaillances' (2000, 39). We function perfectly until we realise the limits of our functionality, or rather we are always unknowingly imperfect. Again, this describes the traumatic realisation of otherness which is key to understanding the NFE and to navigating beyond it. *L'Intrus* leaves us, much like *Trouble Every Day*, with the sense that intrusion is destabilising, an event which leads us to the brink of a precipice over the edge of which meaning disappears. This approach to intrusion clearly resonated with Denis, who would soon go on to make the dialogue between her and Nancy even more explicit.

Vers Nancy

The next engagement between Nancy and Denis came with Denis's short film, *Vers Nancy*, part of the *Ten Minutes Older: The Cello* anthology (2002). Essentially a filmed Q&A with Nancy, we watch as one of his students, Ana Samardzija, poses questions to him on a train journey. A man watches them and eventually asks a question himself. This short film functions in some ways as a microcosm of the concerns which recur through Denis's and Nancy's work,

and which are especially apparent in their next engagement. There are deliberate creative choices which have been made, and it is useful to draw the film into the continuity of the dialogue between Denis and Nancy. Firstly, one cannot fail to acknowledge that the film is fragmentary, both in its placement as part of an anthology of films but also in its structure. There are details missing, crucial things unstated. Even the title is telling – towards Nancy, a reach, a stretch, perhaps an attempt to grasp. As the film begins – voices over darkness before we see the speakers – Nancy is on a train, talking to Samardzija. They sit facing one another, with the window beside them showing the passing scenery. As the film begins, before we see Nancy, we hear him remark that he finds it funny that Samardzija should have wished to be ‘aussi imperceptible que possible’ when she arrived in France, as this literally means that she would not be seen. Her response is interesting: ‘je voulais m’introduire, être là, ne pas être aperçu comme différent, surtout pas déranger l’ordre des choses’ (2002). This is the sort of intrusion that Nancy believes to be impossible, as he responds: ‘quand il y a une intrusion, il y a du désordre, il y a de la secousse et il y a de la menace. Un intrus est toujours menaçant’ (2002). The very essence of the intruder lies in its disordering of the system. This is certainly the case for the sort of intrusions depicted in the NFE, and it also clearly returns us to *L’Intrus* where ‘les repères se retournaient’ (2000, 14) at the moment that Nancy is brought to the realisation that his heart has failed him, has become an intruder in his chest which can only be replaced with another intruder, his body suddenly disordered and unruly.

Samardzija goes on to question ‘l’Europe de Schengen’, in many ways a closed system, noting that all entry becomes intrusion, as ‘il est difficile de s’introduire autrement que par l’intrusion’ (2002). This both refers back to the closed systems of *Trouble Every Day* and looks forward to the border crossings of Denis’s *L’Intrus*, and more generally points to the limitations that bear down upon Nancy’s – and indeed Denis’s – formulation of the body. Although *Vers Nancy* does not describe the body as such, we can always fall back upon the body when discussing Nancy’s ontology, as his ontology arises from the body. With this in mind, we can read the description of the body here as one that is threatened by its fragility. Nancy calls to the *secousse* but does not suggest how a compromise might be reached, beyond the underlying suggestion that the intruder loses their menace by losing their specificity. Denis offers up an intruder in the film, as Alex Descas appears and enters the carriage. Here we see one of this short film’s leaning towards the cinematic, imposing the

skeleton of a narrative. There are implicit racial undertones – he is black, they are white – yet it is also clear that intrusion is occurring between all of the bodies on screen. We are suddenly aware of the enclosed space, of the bodies sharing that space. Even the outside world intrudes through the train's window.¹²

Ultimately, it would perhaps be appropriate to take the title literally as a statement of intent from Denis. Where Nancy had engaged with Denis's films before, now we see her moving towards him. The intertwining vectors of filmmaker and philosopher are beautifully suggestive, returning us to Beugnet's assertion that contemporary French cinema – and particularly the cinema of the body which has so captivated critics – seems intimately connected to the concerns of contemporary philosophy. *Vers Nancy* is clear in its focus, bringing Nancy to the screen and offering up a discussion on one topic. For Denis's next engagement with Nancy, she would adapt a piece of his writing in a far more abstract manner.

***L'Intrus* – Claire Denis**

Four years after Nancy's book was published, Denis would release a film also titled *L'Intrus*. Denis's *L'Intrus* revolves, like Nancy's book, around a heart. McMahon observes that this central concept offers the possibility of a framework for the film and for a shared space which Nancy and Denis can inhabit, noting that 'the event of the heart transplant foregrounds an overarching process of ecotechnics – Nancy's term for an originary connection between world, trade, technology and existence' (2012, 143). We might propose that, for Denis, the heart in *L'Intrus* is as much of a Macguffin as the science fiction of *Trouble Every Day*. The idea of a failing heart, the search for a replacement, the violent rupture of surgery and the fusion of bodily matter; all are sublimated within the film, which instead offers a fuller investigation, in as much as such an investigation is possible, of the sort of state of disintegration that Nancy's *L'Intrus* posited as the unavoidable result of intrusion. If we take intrusion to be synonymous with violation, the encounter with plenitude which we discussed earlier, we can

¹² It is interesting that Denis will choose to return to this strange, oddly artificial set-up in one of several self-referential sequences in *High Life* (2018), her first English-language film. This perhaps supports my reading that, while it might perhaps seem like an inconsequential work, *Vers Nancy* can be seen as a crystallisation of a cornerstone of Denis's thought.

return to Morin's discussion of violence, which offers a useful point of reference for Denis's film. In describing the violence of imposing a transcendental truth upon the world, which we might see in the grasp of the body, wherein one tries to appropriate another through touch, Morin observes that 'when such an imposition happens, the singular existent can only make sense by appropriating the transcendent truth, and this means [...] by sacrificing the "here and now" of existence to an "elsewhere and afterwards"' (2013, 66). This displacement of the here and now to the elsewhere and afterwards clearly corresponds with the place of the body in *L'Intrus*, as we shall see.

Much as Nancy moves between interior and exterior spaces, using his own body as a tool with which to examine our nature as humans and indeed our human nature, exposed through or co-exposed with intrusion, so Denis uses the opportunities offered by film to explore, test and observe instances of blurred or violated boundaries. It is also logical to understand Denis's film as a response to *Trouble Every Day*, and Nancy's analysis of it. We can read the film as the explanation, in as much as such a thing is possible, of the fragmentation that intrusion causes. The destructive drive of *Trouble Every Day* disappears here, the ferocity replaced with a nebulous series of encounters, of lost points of contact. The ideas of intrusion and transgression are still everywhere in the film, but Denis's focus is rather more dispassionate than it was in *Trouble Every Day*. The opening scene sees customs officers going into a van at a checkpoint - a legal crossing of boundaries, but nonetheless a charged one. From this scene, it is immediately clear that this is a world constructed entirely of limits and borders, and of bodies in contact with each other. However, the limitations, potentially calming, potentially worrying, that borders offer are almost immediately called into question. In the following scene, we see liminal bodies apparently coalescing from darkness (Figure 17), leading into the opening credits where the title is discovered by the eerie floating light of a cigarette, which brings the words to the fore, making of the title an artefact in itself and thus calling to its outsideness. The light discovering the letters of the title also calls to mind the piercing light of a torch discovering figures in darkness, mimicking the hunt of fleeing figures. This scene of transgression, of half-seen figures moving across an unclear divide, makes it clear that Denis is concerned here not with the describing and defiling of proper edges, but rather with the mutable zone which exists around that transgression. What we must remember in our reading of this film as part of a continuing dialogue, a dialogue which will be taken up and applied as

a methodological approach to other films, is that this film rests in ambiguity. It takes its place as a bridge moment between the NFE and what came next – interestingly, this reading fits well with James Quandt’s analysis of the trend, which places the ‘apotheosis and nadir’ of the NFE in 2004, with Catherine Breillat’s *Anatomie de l’enfer* (Quandt 2016). While the NFE would continue beyond this, as we shall see in subsequent chapters, there has been the suggestion (not least from Quandt himself) that these later films represent something of a side-track to the trend. While I do not believe that this is a useful division of the films, it is certainly interesting to consider that in the year that the trend was seen as exhausting itself (and exhausting is certainly the right word, given the way in which I have already described the trend), this film should arrive and hint at the way forward.



Figure 17

It is useful here to locate *L'Intrus* as a bridging point between the movements, falling after the majority of NFE films but before the films that we will go on to explore later in this thesis. Denis appears in many ways to be testing the waters – she locates her work in a poetic and disconnected space, a register beyond the ‘sticky’ materiality of *Trouble Every Day* but before the near-bloodless con-fusion of the post-extreme films. Ideas in this film show the navigation of the tumultuous, fragmentary state that the NFE films push the body to – but we are not yet able to move beyond it. To highlight this, we can look to Nancy’s reading of the film, in

which he points to the openness of a scene in the film wherein an off-duty customs officer remarks upon the inappropriate footwear of a group of people she and her family pass on a trek in the foothills – ‘cette scène sans suite s’inscrit comme une inclusion de doute’ (2005). This scene, lacking definition and without any direct sequel within the action of the film, can be seen as indicative of the openness of the film more generally – an openness within a closed system, which closely resembles the way in which Nancy comes to view his own body, and bodies more generally, in his *L’Intrus*. Denis constructs a liminal space – she herself describes the film as being ‘like a boat lost in the ocean drifting’ (Smith 2005, np). Such a description correlates with Nancy locating the ‘schème directeur du film’ in the movements, the travel, the voyaging between states (sovereign states, states of being, states of time) which Denis depicts throughout the film (2005), and also in the nebulous, blood-ish seascapes that carry Trebor between countries. This film is concerned with the same issues as the NFE and the post-extreme films but negotiates them as detached concepts, using encounters with the body not to shock or engage the spectator haptically but rather to draw awareness to the physicality that underlies the concepts in play. In *L’Intrus*, we are not drawn towards the explicitly represented body but rather exposed to it, partaking in the exposure of the skin as detached observers, the curiously non-linear nature of the narrative compounding the beguiling effect of bearing witness to bodies somehow detached from reality.

Indeed, it is not certain that we can permit ourselves to use the word ‘narrative’ to describe something so wilfully fragmented and obfuscating – as Staat notes, ‘the viewer is often at a loss to construct a story out of the plot’ (2008, 196). The film follows Louis Trebor (Michel Subor), a man initially living in the wilds of the Jura mountains. Trebor is introduced as a man seemingly at one with nature. We see him walking naked in the woods, then sleeping beside his dogs in a sort of wild family unit. At first he seems to be perhaps the victim, the object of a malign gaze. This is most clearly expressed in the scene where, after swimming in a lake where we see him from the perspective of someone hidden from his view, he suffers a heart attack and falls to the ground, naked and frail-looking. No help comes to him. The onlookers remain passive. However, we soon see him as an observer, as the gazer. He traps a woman in the focus of his binoculars and she looks back at him, the prey regarding her predator. When Trebor subsequently murders a man, seemingly in cold blood, we realise that he is in fact a guardian of the border, despatching those who cross over illegally. The world of the film is an

odd one, and our grasp of what is real and what is representational is never sure. In this world, the forests of its Jura are seemingly filled with bodies. People are dragged through the snow or found dead beneath it. We are constantly witness to strange bodies: semi-visible bodies slipping through the darkness, dead and dissected bodies appearing from nowhere, the vast canvas of exposed flesh that is Trebor's chest. Where Trebor initially seems to be a part of the natural world, we soon come to view him as somehow outside of it. The buzzing of his electric shaver sounds over images of the misty forest, symbolic of some sort of intrusion into nature. He becomes the outsider, the *intrus*. He is with-out the world, even as he seems to navigate through it with ease. Trebor is a man in need of a heart in more ways than one. His own is failing him, and his relationship with his son (Grégoire Colin) has broken down entirely. Trebor travels to South Korea to receive a heart transplant, the suspect provenance of said organ being expressed through a number of horror film-style tropes which Denis engages with. While this film does not approach the horrifying intensity of *Trouble Every Day*, Trebor's murder of the man, the pulsing music reminiscent of Ennio Morricone's score for *The Thing* (Carpenter 1982) – appropriately a rhythmic, 'heartbeat' sound – and finally the startling, beautiful and disgusting sight of a heart in the snow, not far from the body from which it has been torn, are all assimilable with horror cinema. This torn-out heart is then devoured by dogs – such treatment suggesting that, perhaps, the exposed heart is distasteful above all things. The heart is bloodily exposed, yet now serves no purpose other than to be devoured. It is useless, abject and lost (Figure 18).



Figure 18

After receiving his new heart in South Korea, Trebor travels on to Tahiti where he spent time as a younger man, hoping to find the son that he left behind. Numerous critics have called into question the existence of the son, and he certainly exists in a tenebrous world of uncertainty. Ultimately, Louis comes to understand that his son is irrevocably lost to him. He is presented with a corpse, itself bearing a scar on its chest – though the corpse appears to be that of the son he left behind in France. There is the suggestion, picked up on by a number of people, that somehow Trebor's son in France has become caught up in the web of the illegal organ trade, and that Trebor has unwittingly taken the heart from him. We cannot say – there are no clear answers. What we can suggest is that, in this scene in the morgue, the exteriorisation of familiarity, this being-with expressed through mutual pain or violence – both have been opened up and now cannot be closed again – is the only sort of reconciliation available to Trebor. 'Identifying his son's body in a Polynesian morgue,' writes Staat, 'Identifying also an enormous, fresh scar, still gaping open, on his son's chest, is as close to a recognition as Louis can come' (2008, 204). Each character is somehow fractured, and the only possible encounter can be another fracture, another break.

The film brings bodies to the fore and then moves away from them, a maelstrom of meaning leaving these bodies in unclearly defined spaces. Despite being the body that we, as spectator, follow most closely, Trebor's body is lost. In line with the plenitude Morin describes, Trebor

shifts geographically (appearing in different countries - elsewhere) and temporally (through the flashbacks to his youth which reuse clips from an unfinished film which starred a younger Subor – not afterwards, perhaps, but certainly in a different time) – his entrouverte nature leaves him untethered. As I mentioned previously, even the scenes where we see him travelling are odd – the rolling waves lit deep red, like blood ebbing and flowing (Figure 19). The focus on these scenes is telling, as though we as the spectator are being carried upon the flow of blood, the flow of meaning or of sense, jumbled into incomprehensibility, towards the next fractured encounter, the next scene without sequel, the next intrusion: wave after wave.



Figure 19

Trebor either rejects others or destroys them with no regard to their status as living beings. All bodies are liminal – an idea compounded by the audition scene towards the end of the film. This scene sees Polynesian villagers looking for a suitable figure to stand in as Trebor’s lost son (Figure 20). In Morrey’s reading of this scene, ‘the paternalism of the former colonial power [...] is turned on its head as the islanders exploit Trebor’s western guilt by holding auditions to find a suitably convincing “son” to accept the father’s gifts’ (2008, 22). It does not seem to me that Trebor feels guilt, however, or at least not in a tangible way. The power and strangeness of the scene rather comes through the disturbing suggestion that bodies are replaceable, their status unanchored from constraints of race, age or size (all of which Denis humorously touches upon in the bizarre line up). This brings us back, of course, to Nancy, for

whom bodies are not fixed or cleanly defined but rather ebb and flow themselves as part of an unending continuity. Nancy and Denis establish, both consciously and unconsciously, a relationship between their works and their concerns. While they take care to distance themselves from any sort of collaborative project – Denis’s film ends with the statement that ‘le livre de Jean-Luc Nancy “L’Intrus” a été une inspiration pour ce film’, and Nancy notes that ‘Denis n’a pas adapté mon livre, elle l’a adopté’ (2005) – the flow of thought across the two versions of *L’Intrus* suggests a remarkably similar engagement with the idea of shared and invaded physical and theoretical spaces. The fact that the limits are not clearly defined, that ideas float between the two and become weighted with the other’s conceptual baggage, is a satisfying precursor to the sort of positive con-fusion that this thesis describes. This is not a case of inspiration, adaptation or appropriation, but rather a dialogue, and perhaps a movement towards compromise after the jarring collision of *Trouble Every Day*, constructed around mutual contact.



Figure 20

In a more recent intervention in 2013, Nancy is asked what characterises the contemporary political crisis. His description of politics in response to this feels very close to his description of the divided body and self, which will be explored in greater detail in Chapter Four. He claims that the word politics ‘désigne à la fois une sphère séparée d’autres sphères et une enveloppe de toutes les sphères’ (2013). This resonates with the body which is both present and absent,

within reach and ungraspable. In speaking about the political situation, vaguely enough that his response is applicable in a very general sense, he describes it as part of a wider 'mutation générale des ordres symboliques', in which :

Les valeurs, les signes, les enjeux de ce qu'on nomme "vie" et "mort", "individu" et "communauté", "Dieu" et "homme", "histoire" et "espace", "exception" et "banalité" se trouvent dans un état particulièrement brouillé, voire chaotique à l'intérieur de la société dite "développée" (2013, np).

If we allow ourselves to make the comparison between the body politic and the body physic, Denis's *L'Intrus* might be seen as a filmic representation of this 'état brouillé'. Where the films of the NFE push at boundaries, damage and rip and tear in an attempt to shock some sort of meaning out into the open, or force reconsideration of seemingly stable positions, *L'Intrus* rather takes everything that can be understood and deconstructs it. Denis creates an oneiric space, an elliptical and obfuscating narrative that lacks signified objects for its gaze. If the NFE is attempting to overcome a boundary, to broach the extremity it exists at, the sequel to this is the uncertainty, the dislocation and the seemingly irreparable breakdown of meaning that we see in *L'Intrus*. If we reduce the film down to its essential nature, it is about borders: who constructs them, how they are constructed, how they can be overcome, and how intrusion is understood. Nancy is led to claim that 'l'intrusion est plus forte, moins réductible et plus troublante qu'aucun mélange : car elle va déjà du même au même' (2005, np). However, the shared creative process for the film suggests, rather, that mutual intrusion can be productive and useful, eliciting a compromise which supports the two without recourse to a 'mélange' – implying a mutually effacing process – nor any sort of reduction of either party. The touch does not need to destroy, as Nancy suggests in his response to *Trouble Every Day*. The touch can be mutual, and enable a con-fusion that is seemingly stable and mutually beneficial. Togetherness is not an impossibility.

Moving forward

Nancy's encounter with his own mortality, arguably the most intimate encounter that one can have, throws his understanding of his relationship between his body and his self into chaos. Given that his ontology is itself embodied, this chaos can be read as more than simply

a discomfort, or a personal dissociation. Rather, the entire world as Nancy sees it is thrown off its axis by the encounter with the limits of the body. The 'éclat' which Nancy experiences in watching *Trouble Every Day* appears to affect him in a similar way. In both instances, the traumatic encounter leads to an outpouring of emotion and a loss of sense. Something pours out from the open body, but the nature of this something is impossible to comprehend. Any approach only engenders further distancing. In this explosion of unsignified signs, then, we can see the apparently unavoidable result of the tumultuous encounter at the limit. This explosion, the after-image of the éclat, becomes the matter of Denis's 'adaptation' of *L'Intrus*, wherein she constructs a world that is not a world, where meaning and sense are in constant flux. Opposed to the taut skins of the protagonists of *Trouble Every Day*, which are either marred – as in the fierce icon which Shane has left upon June – or mauled, like Erwan and the hotel maid, the bodies in *L'Intrus* are malleable, and any destruction is either hidden from view, as in the murder in the dark early on in the film, or abstracted to the point of losing any connectivity with the body itself, like the heart in the snow. Compare the caress of Denis's camera over Erwan's perfect chest with the same approach to Trebor's scar, angrily red or deathly white. Nothing is coming to the bodies of *L'Intrus*, it has already been – or rather it is to come, but the bodies are not present to greet it.

What the post-extreme films then offer is a return from this, a return which reduces separation whilst avoiding violation and instead blurs the limits of the body in a positive confusion. Denis's wider career obfuscates the trajectory slightly – it is necessary to look at the enfants terrible that Quandt identified in order to see the clear transition. In the next three chapters, then, we will see three case studies which draw together a film associated with the NFE and the next film made by the same director or directors. Rather than seeking to destroy, the ultimate aim of the films which have appeared in the directors' oeuvres post-extremity appears to be the construction of a new way of being, wherein bodies find a compromise between separation and violation, a con-fusion which elides borders. We will see this in the compromise reached between multiple bodies in *Enter the Void* (Noé 2009), warring bodies in *Ne te retourne pas* (De Van 2009), and the reconciliation of old and new achieved through a physical exchange in *Livide* (Maury & Bustillo 2011). Through Nancy's engagements with Denis, we have seen how his ontology touches film and is worn out by it, or perhaps destroyed, or simply uncomfortably exposed. Drawing on these encounters, we can suggest

a bridge from the violent destruction of the NFE, through the deconstruction presented in *L'Intrus*, to the restorative, reparative compromise which is offered up in the post-extreme films.

Chapter 2

Noé Out – Cinematic Trans-Immanence in Gaspar Noé's *Irréversible* and *Enter the Void*

1. 'You mean we're stuck in this world for all of eternity?' – Oscar in *Enter the Void*

('Autrement dit, on est coincé dans ce monde de merde pour toujours, quoi ?' – the equivalent line in the French dub¹³)

2. '[*Enter the Void*] has a human purpose [*Irréversible*] lacked' Peter Bradshaw (2010).

Reading the two quotations above, we are introduced to two concepts which are key to an understanding of Gaspar Noé's *Enter the Void*. The first, drawn directly from the film's dialogue, suggests the idea of the world of the film being a closed system, one of immanence from which there can be no escape, while the second describes the inherent positivity of the film. These positions might at first appear somewhat contradictory. Indeed, a positive reading of *Enter the Void* such as that offered by Peter Bradshaw, given that the film concerns the disembodied perspective of the seemingly deceased central protagonist travelling through a number of traumatic events in his life, certainly might not be the most obvious one. However, it is my argument that these post-extreme films, of which *Enter the Void* is one of the first, do indeed find positivity within the closed system of the world, turning inward to explore the positive potentialities of existence, rather than attempting to extrude (dangerously, traumatically) into an unknown outside. As Bradshaw intimates, this latter formulation suggests a more constructive, humanist position, one which is shared by all the post-extreme films. The friction between immanence and transcendence, the surface tensions of the films, inform the discussion around the NFE. While a number of analyses find a transcendent quality within the trend's films, something which has already been called into question by Mauro Resmini (2015), I suggest that the concerns of the NFE only lead to a collapse of sense. This fragmentation at the borders of understanding was experienced by Nancy in his response to *Trouble Every Day*, and such an endpoint – a point of fragmentation, of the breakdown of

¹³ It is worth noting that, although *Enter the Void* was originally released in the English language, I have chosen not to count it alongside the work of those directors who moved from the NFE to Hollywood (such as Aja, Gens or Laugier). *Enter the Void* is still largely a French production.

understanding – is mirrored across the films of the NFE. In order to restore meaning, to claw back a sense of sense, the post-extreme films do not attempt to isolate, and thus extirpate, the body but rather approach it as a malleable thing that exists as part of a flux of beings, constantly meeting, fusing and moving. It is fitting that one of the first post-extreme films should be by Noé, given that Quandt located his short film *Carne* (1991) as ‘perhaps the ur-text’ of the NFE (2004, 129). In this chapter, I will draw Noé’s films *Irréversible* and *Enter the Void* into dialogue with each other and with Nancy, primarily his discussion of cinema in *L’Evidence du film*. In navigating through the films and Nancy’s ontological approach to cinema, I will demonstrate how *Enter the Void* marks a turn towards a more positive cinematic mode, celebrating the possibilities of cinema and leaning towards their capacity to co-represent our experiential world and offer new versions of it to consider, fulfilling the promise that Nancy feels cinema holds as a tool for thought. As shall be the case in each of these next three chapters, I will present my argument that the earlier of the films, the one affiliated with the NFE (or, in this case, the most famous of Noé’s NFE films), reaches a point of collapse as it tries to approach the physical fact of the body, while the later film moves away, or even retreats from such an engagement and instead reconfigures and understands the body through a con-fusional, constructive encounter. The changing position or placement of the body between the NFE and post-extreme films might also be considered through the lens of Chamarette’s formulation of the graspable body. Chamarette calls to the body’s ungraspability, or rather to the fact that a grasp does not equal a grip – the body evades our grasp, escapes it, remains ever-distant, ever-divorced, ever-elsewhere. The body can never be *right here*. Approaches towards it cause it to collapse away, to avoid our attempts at touch. Like Eurydice, the body resists our regard, and is destroyed or sent away by our approach. As Chamarette writes, evocatively casting the body as ‘darkness’, ‘the risk of shedding light upon the darkness is that in doing so, whatever constitutes the darkness will dissipate, dissolve, and slip from one’s grasp back into intangibility’ (2012, 196). This is strongly Nancean, with Nancy evoking the impossibility of touching touch to describe the spacing which inevitability keeps the body separate and unknowable, always at a distance. In its graphic, brutal and proximal approach to the body, *Irréversible* collapses the body, distances the spectator from it even whilst focusing on the spectacle of penetrated and ruptured flesh – with the explosion of light at the conclusion a very vivid depiction of *l’image en saignée aveuglante*. *Enter the Void*, conversely, shifts the focus from the isolated, opened body to instead describe a

continuum of bodies in touch with other bodies, in a constant flux of motion. In *Enter the Void*, the body does not slip away from us because we are not trying to grasp it – rather, we are seeing the body sharing its space with other bodies, their limits elided in con-fusion.

Nancy's approach to cinema revolves around a number of key tenets – representation, motion and openings. First, and perhaps most importantly, cinema for Nancy is representational rather than reflective. In *L'Evidence du film*, which is a direct response to Abbas Kiarostami's cinema but which can also be read as a discussion of Nancy's approach to cinema more generally, Nancy describes cinema as becoming something different to painting, photography, theatre or circuses: 'il devient cet art du regard qui rend possible et que demande un monde qui ne renvoie qu'à lui-même et à son réel' (2001, 19). It is not a reflection of our world, then, but rather a view onto our world which remains resolutely within it. In its representation it is equally governed by the same rules as the exterior world. We can usefully develop this point by folding in Nancy's later analysis of the portrait:

C'est l'altérité de son sujet – au sens pictoral, son motif, aussi bien qu'au sens ontologique, l'ipséité dans le motif – qui ouvre le retranchement et qui entraîne le retrait, le glissement interminable vers une profondeur dont la mince surface à deux dimensions indique qu'elle est insondable (2014, 28)

Nancy places cinema as somehow beyond other forms of representation (2001, 15) and thus we can opine, without overstepping a sensible reading of his work, that the specificity of the portrait transfers across into the more complex form that is film, becoming another fold in its skin. Nancy makes it clear that film does not encompass everything which the portrait is, nor does it contain everything of painting, theatre, or any other form of representation. Rather, it touches and is touched by a multiplicity of representative forms. To elaborate on the quotation on the portrait above, what Nancy describes is the essential nature and complexity of the represented subject: we cannot draw a direct reflection, a reflection necessarily adds to or removes from that which it represents, leaving us rather with an Other image which is recognisable but ultimately of a different substance. In cinematic terms, such representational otherness is clear to us simply in looking at the dimensions of the screen itself – a 2D plane in which we see a 3D world represented. This layering, a world within a flat plane, leads to a withdrawal, an acknowledgement of the difference between the filmic world and our experiential world, yet there is strength to be found in this inherent differentness. Nancy proposes cinema's proximal yet distant rapport with our world as a useful thinking

mechanism. Cinema does not offer definitive answers to questions we might ask about our world, but in accessing the body of cinema, in existing alongside it and engaging with it, we might begin to think or rethink new approaches to it:

La propriété la plus proprement distinctive du cinéma, et peut-être aussi la moins possible à distinguer, la propriété indistinguable de tout l'énorme flux des films de par le monde, c'est l'enchaînement, le glissement indéfini de la présentation le long d'elle-même' (2001, 79).

Cinema moves along itself and alongside us. To return to Nancy's position on the portrait, and to see how this can be developed, transposed to a reading of cinema, in a physical, mechanical sense, the notion of the 'insondable' feeds back into Nancy's discussion of film's operation at various depths. The physicality of film, its concurrent solidity and fluidity, captivates Nancy: 'c'est une espèce de fluide de capture qui saisit le vif et qui le fige en vingt-quatre images distinctes par seconde mais pour instantanément fluidifier leur suite en un regard continu' (2001, 51). Although this refers specifically to celluloid film, we can easily transpose such an analysis to digital film, with the interface of hardware and software offering a similar concurrence. This is something that clearly sets film apart from the portrait, but it does not negate the shared considerations of the possibilities of representation.

Following its capacity for co-representation, this is the second of Nancy's tenets of film. Film, in contrast to photographs or portraits, is constantly moving. Developing the theme of substrata, of invisible movement beneath the skin of the film as we see it, Nancy points towards the *pregnance* of the cinematic image – while it might appear still, there are twenty-four frames rushing past per second. Even when the image on screen is not moving, there is unseen movement beneath: 'à la différence d'une photographie, un plan immobile n'est pas déposé sur la fixité d'un substrat' (2001, 49). There is incessant motion (Nancy 2001, 29). As Nancy states, 'c'est ce que veut dire cinéma : mouvement continu, non pas représentation douée de mobilité, mais mobilité comme essence de la présence et présence comme venue, venue et passage' (2001, 67). This idea of 'venue et passage' leads us to consider the third aspect of Nancy's approach to cinema, which is its focus on openings, and an invitation to look through them. Cinema opens up the gaze, as well as to some extent captivating it. 'Le cinéma, ici [in the work of Kiarostami, but we can extrapolate beyond that to suggest an ideal cinema according to Nancy], se propose très loin d'une vision qui seulement « visionne » (qui regarde « pour voir ») : elle s'impose comme la mise en puissance d'un regard' (2001, 19).

Cinema draws us into its world, a world which is real on and in its own terms, and also frequently comparable to our own. As Nancy goes on to say, 'bien au-delà du support qu'il est aussi, il forme un élément : l'élément d'un regard et d'un réel en tant que regardé' (2001, 21). Cinema offers an opening for us as spectators to engage with its world, and in doing so we are open to the possibility of rethinking our own world. Cinema's unique power lies in its multiplicity – it can represent yet also re-present. Film can offer thinking frameworks which extend beyond the borders of possibility in our own experiential world, yet which are ultimately anchored by the same constraints.

Nancy's reading is based on a what I have already described as a respectful relationship which understands the distance between film and spectator. Film offers an opening, and as spectator we are invited to participate in the motion of the film. It is clear that the films of the NFE do not correspond to Nancy's ideal model of cinema. In his response to *Trouble Every Day*, discussed in the previous chapter, we see Nancy losing his theoretical footing in his approach to the film at its conclusion, encountering *l'image en saignée aveuglante*. As McMahon notes, 'Denis's film exerts an untold degree of pressure on Nancy's own philosophical model of touch (2012, 127). Where the post-extreme films bring us is to a point of rehabilitation of the cinematic body, or rather towards a new approach which does not attempt to control either the body or our spectatorial response to it. These later films restore to the body the multiplicity of possibility which is present in Nancy's typical reading of it, suggesting an encounter which occurs around the skin of the body and the skin of the film but does not attempt to transgress that which divides spectator and film. The hapticity of film's skin, as described by Marks, is less important to the post-extreme films, where the divide between film and spectator is positively re-embraced. The eyes are no longer required to 'graze' (Marks 2000, 162). This encounter is fusional, both in terms of the body onscreen and the offering up of the body to the spectator, and I will discuss later in this chapter how I find the potentially problematic possibility of fusion presented within Nancy's ontology. The post-extreme films return to a co-representational ideal which stands at odds with the directly confrontational approach of the NFE. In this chapter, I will demonstrate how the NFE film (*Irréversible*) interrupts the process of spectatorship, breaking with Nancy's ideal mode of viewing, while the later, post-extreme film (*Enter the Void*) develops a con-fusional rapport

with the spectator, inviting their shared presence just as the characters within the film are themselves drawn into states of con-fusion.

‘Hard to watch’ - *Irréversible*

Like almost all of the films associated with the NFE, *Irréversible* is a film concerned with violence – a brutality that is depicted in graphic detail. The film contains instances of sexual assault and blunt force trauma, with sex and violence graphically conflated in the infamous rape sequence and the sadomasochist club opening/conclusion, in such a way as to automatically attract the ire of censors. The film is famously shocking – apparently 20 people fainted at its Cannes premiere, and there are videos of viewers’ angry reactions upon leaving the cinema (BBC 2002). Following the *cause célèbre* at Cannes, a legend built up around the film, claiming it to be somehow dangerous and nasty - Geneviève Welcomme of *La Croix*, for instance, reviewed the film without having seen it, based only on the press dossier and witness statements (2003). The narrative follows a trio of friends – couple Alex (Monica Bellucci) and Marcus (Vincent Cassell), and Alex’s ex-boyfriend Pierre (Albert Dupontel) – who attend a drug-fuelled party. Alex leaves after an argument with Marcus and is violently raped by a pimp. Marcus, with a less willing Pierre, hunts down the perpetrator to an S&M club, Le Rectum. Inside the dark club, pacifist Pierre brutally murders a man to save Marcus, as the rapist looks on.

The traumatic register of the film extends beyond the violence inflicted on bodies onscreen. The film itself is a concussion grenade of formal subversion: ‘in every sense of the phrase, *Irréversible* is hard to watch’ (Palmer 2011, 76). Regarded as a ‘companion piece to "bad girl" road movie *Baise-Moi*’ (MacNab 2002), with which it certainly shares the dubious distinction of being the most talked-about example of NFE, *Irréversible* undoubtedly shares thematic similarities with Desportes and Trinh-Thi’s 2000 film, with a sexual assault functioning as the catalyst for later violence, such that it might cosmetically be classified as a rape-revenge film. However, as with *Baise-moi*, for *Irréversible* this is an inaccurate description. As Angelique Chrisafis neatly sums it up, ‘this is a rape revenge film cut into a hundred smashed pieces and pasted together in the wrong order’ (2002). Whereas rape-revenge films typically see the abused heroine facing and ultimately besting her attacker(s), in *Irréversible* we do not see

Alex recover after the assault. There is also none of the satisfaction usually found in the punishment of the perpetrator, as the men seeking revenge are unable to mete out justice, merely falling into a spiral of violence. As I mentioned above, the rapist is unharmed. More subversive still is the backwards storytelling. We begin with the final scene, where Philippe Nahon reprises his character of Le Boucher from Noé's *Carne* (1991) and *Seul Contre Tous* (1998), the preceding films in Noé's loose 'butcher trilogy'. This is not accidental or a mere in-joke. The presence of Le Boucher indicates that *Irréversible* continues the evolution of themes from the preceding films, as I shall go on to demonstrate. Le Boucher introduces the overarching theme of the film in saying 'le temps détruit tout', a quotation from the appropriately named *An Experiment with Time* (Dunne 1927). This quotation is returned to at the end of the film. In the final scene, we see Alex at some point prior to the events of the day shown in the film, lying in a field which seems impossibly idyllic – 'hugely incongruous' with the rest of the film (Palmer 2011, 72) – surrounded by happily playing children and reading *An Experiment with Time*. Following the rather oddly detached opening scene with Le Boucher, we experience the film in reverse order, each subsequent scene ending roughly where the previous scene began. This has a disconcerting effect on the spectator. We meet two of the main characters, Marcus and Alex, as bloodied victims of brutal attacks: an almost rape and beating, for Marcus; a rape and beating for Alex (Figures 21 and 22). The film progresses and the narrative reverses, drawing us away from the opened bodies, becoming less formally and thematically challenging as it goes on, but the temporal manipulation leads us to regard both Alex and Marcus as bodies-to-be, bodies in the sense of exposed, brutalised, damaged bodies, their insides on show. They become useless lumps of flesh – there is nothing to be learned from them because we know that they are destined to be destroyed. This demonstrates my argument outlined throughout this thesis. The NFE draws us towards the body, overwhelmingly pushing at the edges of the form, both cinematic and corporeal, seeking knowledge, a sense of sense, through graphic exploration. Alex is presented to us opened up – we see her bloody, prone body on a stretcher. She might be dead. There is certainly no visible life to her. She is inert, broken. She has become flesh, inanimate and bloody. The rest of the film brings us back to Alex, eventually exploring her naked body in an intimate domestic scene, but we are held at the distance engendered by our introduction to her broken form. Marcus, too, is brought forth from the club injured and bloody, and the same feeling of detachment applies to his later intimate nakedness with Alex.



Figure 21



Figure 22

Irréversible might be regarded, thus, as a disrespectful film. Not in the sense that it betrays a trust with the spectator, the sort of disrespect which angered James Quandt and subsequently birthed the NFE nomenclature in the first place. Rather, disrespectful in the sense that Noé breaks with the mode of cinema which Nancy sees as the most effective. For Nancy, 'le juste regard est un respect pour le réel regardé, c'est-à-dire une attention et une

ouverture à la force propre de ce réel et à son extériorité absolue : le regard ne captera pas cette force, il la laissera se communiquer à lui, ou il communiquera avec elle' (2001, 38). The aggressive methods used by Noé to destabilise the spectator remove the possibility of this respectful encounter between spectator and film. A Nancean approach is not a requirement of cinema, of course, but in terms of contemporary French cinema, a Nancean thinking-with offers a useful and apt manner of viewing for films which are ever-turning towards the body, either the onscreen body or the spectator's body, in a dialogue which is opened up by Nancy's engagement with Denis and her subsequent approach to Nancy, as discussed in the first chapter. The NFE seems designed to challenge Nancy's approach. In the specific example discussed in this chapter, it is the inflexibility of *Irréversible* that interrupts, closes off or interdicts the useful mode of cinema that Nancy proposes. For Nancy, as I have previously noted, movement is key. The notorious rape scene in the underpass is brutal not least due to the resolute stillness of the camera. Our gaze is held, beyond the sort of captivation which Nancy suggests is key to the cinematic experience. For nine minutes, we are essentially trapped between watching the horror onscreen or looking away. Movement occurs within the frame – the attacker grabs, holds down, thrusts; Alex wriggles; an unknown person enters the tunnel, sees what is happening and quickly leaves again – but we, the spectator, are held still. The rest of the film is full of movement, leading up to the concluding spinning of the camera which then becomes a vortex of light and visual fragments (Figure 23) which seem to burst outwards but, as I have explained, we are always drawn back to the future. We know where the film is headed, where Alex is headed. Alex is a body. Alex is *the* body. *Irréversible* is unwavering, even as the image itself trembles and wavers before our eyes, the picture bleeding and blinding as the film breaks down into unreadable fragments at its conclusion. Its sense of purpose – exposing the body – is resolute, even though this drive to expose can only bring us to *l'image en saignée aveuglante*, here rendered as a sequence which is genuinely difficult to watch, the strobing, pulsing light an assault on the eyes.



Figure 23

Both Pierre's brutal rescue of Marcus in the Rectum and the rape establish an end point of violence, of physical disturbance, or disturbance of the physical. Noé presents two very different formulations of violence in quick succession – the head smashing (to borrow Nicolas Winding Refn's starkly descriptive term [Lim 2011]) and the rape scene. The head-smashing is gory and shocking, its power sustained through ever-more-violent detail of injury. After the first hit, Pierre pauses before hitting again and again. The camera jerks with the body. If we consider this violent moment in contrast to the rape sequence, it is the stillness of the latter which gives it much of its power to shock. As Palmer describes, 'Noé's kinetic camera becomes suddenly and cruelly static' (2011, 77). While there is undeniably a lot of movement in the film, the movement found in *Irréversible* is not the pure, positive cinematic motion that Nancy seeks. Noé either traps our gaze, immobilises it, or makes it difficult for the spectator to focus, presenting a slippery world where nothing is quite clear and it is difficult to find points of focus. The rolling, dizzying camerawork, and then the shocking juxtaposition of the entirely still camera, that 'excruciating nearly nine-minute single shot' (Palmer 2011, 77), serve to rob us of our autonomy, our choice to look. In the moments of kinetic camerawork, it is hard to look. Conversely, in the still moments, Noé appears to be daring us to look away. This disruptive, confrontational relationship has already been constructed in the films which lead to *Irréversible*, all three linked by the presence of Le Boucher. In *Carne*, the first scene shows a horse being culled. The camera holds on the exsanguinating body, the blood pouring

towards it, and thus towards us, before disappearing offscreen, beneath our gaze. This confrontational opening is then compounded by the captions which directly address the viewer, suggesting perhaps that we should in some way feel culpable for the events that we are witnessing. ETES VOUS A L'ABRI D'UN DERAPAGE? asks the film. In the following film, *Seul Contre Tous*, Noé pushes this interruption further. The film again pauses to offer the spectator a moment of reflection, but this time it is formulated or proposed as an escape route: ATTENTION. VOUS AVEZ 30 SECONDES POUR ABANDONNER LA PROJECTION DE CE FILM, we are told, and for the next 30 seconds the counter ticks inexorably towards zero (Figures 24 and 25). It is playful, reminiscent of the 'Werewolf Break' in *The Beast Must Die* (Paul Annett 1974) where the audience is given time to decide which character is secretly a werewolf, yet it is also menacing, and potentially disquieting.



Figure 24



**VOUS AVEZ 30 SECONDES
POUR ABANDONNER LA
PROJECTION DE CE FILM**

Figure 25

We might consider another caption from *Seul Contre Tous* – ‘la mort n’ouvre aucune porte’. Such a statement seems antithetical to the sort of (potentially) post-mortem travelogue which we will explore in *Enter the Void*, seeming instead to call to a world that is closed off, where all paths lead to destruction. This thematically anticipates the closures of *Irréversible*: Noé does not allow for openings – we pre-empt each new opening because we already know where it leads. The opening onto the domestic scene of Alex and Marcus in *Irréversible* is not a true opening, as we are already cognisant of the fact that these bodies that are exposed to us in their nakedness are already bodies in peril, bodies at the end of meaning. Such a trajectory, or lack of one, stands in stark contrast to Nancy’s vision of film as an ongoing offering of new openings onto its world. Like the title cards of *Seul Contre Tous* and *Carne*, the reversed structure of *Irréversible* interrupts the cinematic process, the process of being-with the film, of the experience of co-representation. Noé interrupts the gaze, bars its points of access. Not only does the reversed temporal structure force us to experience the passage of time, to consciously look back (or rather, forward), but throughout the film we are also frequently denied easily comprehensible images. We are unable to co-experience the events, because we cannot access them. At the points where the gaze is most direct, the film open to the spectator, we are either drawn back to the ultimate point of bodily destruction or, in the case of the rape scene, almost taunted with images of extreme violence that are fixed, static and brutal.

For Nancy, films should ideally offer themselves to the spectator in a series of openings, with each new scene, or change of shot, offering newly constructed evidence every time. This is a demonstration of film's (partial) mimetic capacity – its offering of its own evidence is closely comparable to our own evidence-gathering in our experiential world. 'C'est ainsi l'*évidence* au sens où, s'il m'arrive de *regarder* un matin ma rue que je parcours dix fois par jour, je construis pour un instant une *évidence* neuve de ma rue' (2001, 69). For Nancy film should, like life, offer up constant newness, the opening of openings that lead to new evidence for us to process. This processing of evidence is part of our way of making sense of our world, experiencing each new opening as a new moment of being. Noé, in *Irréversible*, seems intent on interrupting such a process. He mobilises an arsenal of cinematic techniques to assault the spectator. This is especially clear if we consider the soundscape of the film. While the effect is lessened in the home-viewing environment, '*Irréversible* uses [...] a barely perceptible but aggravating bass rumble that was recorded for Noé's purposes at twenty-seven hertz, the frequency used by riot police to quell mobs by inducing unease and, after prolonged exposure, physical nausea' (Palmer 2011, 73). Even on the basic sound system of a living room television, on a laptop even, the sound is still disconcerting, unsettling. This is married to the drunkenly roving camerawork, such as in the opening scene where the camera refuses to stay still, tumbling around the room in such a way that we are only offered fragmented, oddly framed glimpses of the scene (Figure 26), and finally falling away into the street and down to the entrance of the Rectum where Marcus is being wheeled out. The camera swoops and rolls, offering no clear access for our spectatorial gaze. The experience is uncomfortable. In other moments in the film, Noé offers up pulsating strobe lighting, the scene in Le Rectum being the most obvious example with its pulsing red light that fills the darkness.



Figure 26

In a mise-en-abyme of the sort of effacing, violent encounters at play throughout *Irréversible*, we watch as Marcus and Pierre descend into the Rectum, its red walls and dark corners appropriately fleshy. Their quest is unclear – at this point of the film, all we understand is that they are entering the Rectum to find Le Tenia, the rapist pimp whose name means ‘tapeworm’. The negative Nancean possibilities of colliding bodies, the opposite of the positive con-fusion I describe in relation to the post-extreme films, are encapsulated in this figure. The tapeworm represents an intrusion and, as Nancy states in Claire Denis’s short film *Vers Nancy*, ‘un intrus est toujours menaçant’ (2002). A tapeworm is parasitic, existing within the body but denying it sustenance – a-symbiotically part of the system yet also a danger to it. This stands in opposition to the positive fusions which build and allow for progression, the sort which we encounter in the post-extreme films. Le Tenia’s rape of Alex is the touch that destroys – ‘toucher veut crever et en crève, c’est la vérité’ – emphasised not only in the violent sexual assault but also the ensuing beating which leaves Alex the bloodied, wrecked body we first encounter. Le Tenia, this insidious intruder, is a figure with analogues throughout the NFE: La Femme in *À L’Intérieur*, Marina De Van’s cuckoo-in-the-nest in *Regarde la mer*, or again De Van’s Esther in *Dans ma peau*, the very title of that film describing her intrusion into her own flesh. This intrusive negativity is explored further in the depiction of the club. Marcus and Pierre traverse a warren of rooms, in which half-hidden figures engage in violent sexual acts – ‘fiste-moi!’ screams a man strapped into a bondage harness. The bodily penetrations and

manipulations occurring as tableaux vivants in the background (with Gaspar Noé himself masturbating amongst them) serve as both points of contact and of distance. The figures of the men are recognisably human, exposed in their nakedness, yet the darkness and redness lend them a disquieting air of being part of an organism, melting into the soft focus (Figure 27). Marcus and Pierre are intruders into this space, just as the space intrudes upon them in its threat, its menace, its uncomfortable strangeness. The depiction of Le Rectum as a space where borders are elided, where existence blurs, arguably makes it one of the heterotopias, the liminal non-spaces which recur throughout the NFE, locations which exist somehow between or around the world of the film. In terms of the films studied in this thesis, it fits beside Esther's hurting places in *Dans ma peau*, the distorted, impossible interior of Sarah's house in *A L'Intérieur* and Coré's hunting grounds in *Trouble Every Day* but there are many more examples – the blurred places of *Sombre*, the dark web of *Demonlover*, the lost farm of *Frontière(s)*, or the torture chambers hidden within the family home in *Martyrs*.



Figure 27

Beyond the mise-en-abyme of the Rectum, the final scene of the film is another example of the way that Noé deliberately interrupts the viewing experience. Everything ends on the sickening spin which breaks down into fragments of light, pulsing and bursting forward as *l'image en saignée avueglante*. The film as a whole is a bleak, torturous experience of this breaking down of sense. People, bodies, buildings: everything becomes unclear. Dialogue

floats, sound surrounds. As Palmer notes, ‘throughout the film there is often slippage in acoustic fidelity, a wavering connection between image and sound’ (2011, 73). The film feels claustrophobic, as if we are being pressed against a limit. The sense of being at a limit is not, it must be noted, automatically negative in Nancy’s thought. McMahon asserts that ‘Nancy points to the *jouissance* of liminality, the play of the threshold’ (2012, 29). There is a terrain to be negotiated around the idea of borders and boundaries, and how far one can push against the limits. McMahon is clear that this skimming contact, this furtive encounter, ‘does not absorb or appropriate’ (2012, 29), and indeed that is not what my reading suggests either, at least not fully. Where I diverge from McMahon slightly is in the extension of this encounter with the border – in my reading, the encounter at this edge, this space outside but also within, can be continued on film, the contact can be maintained. The possibility of permanent fusion seems unlikely – we will go on to consider the separateness which continues to be exposed in later films, such as the continued presence of Jeanne’s ghostly figure in *Ne te retourne pas* – but the moment of con-fusion, and the positive consequences of such a meeting, are clearly exposed within the post-extreme films. The vision of con-fusion I see in these films is one of succour, of compromise, rather than the worrying, violent effacement of and/or by the Other which Nancy often points to, this absorption or appropriation that McMahon describes – the kind of negative intrusion which is summed up in the figure of Le Tenia.

Irréversible irrevocably draws us to a point of disembodied separation, of destruction of the body, in spite of or because of the direct focus on the body. The film comes into clearer and clearer focus as it proceeds, becoming less formally challenging, but this only serves to compound the effect. The violence comes closer as we move away from it. *Irréversible* depicts time as just that, irreversible, a merciless progression, even when reversed. The temporal aspect of the film stands in for experiential life. Thus, in this formulation, we are constantly being drawn towards the body, the exposed innards. *Enter the Void*, as we shall now go on to see, presents the progression of time - time as an embodied experience of life going by - as, if not completely reversible, then at least flexible in a way that *Irréversible* does not allow for.

‘Mr. Noé has mellowed’ – *Enter the Void*

If we consider *Enter the Void* as a direct counterpoint to *Irréversible*, we see a move towards finding positivity in the play at the border which offers a trans-immanent experience. The body is out – there is no body. Or rather, there *is*, but it is a body which is not accessible to us. However, conversely, and demonstrative of this entire ontological position which runs along lines of approach and withdrawal, grasping and escaping, the inaccessible body is precisely so because we are invited to share its space, to live its experience in a state of confusion. It stands in stark contrast to the shutting-off of the gaze which *Irréversible* acted out. Rather, the film becomes a gaze, the gaze, a series of moments of seeing and experiencing, of shared openness onto the world. In comparison to the films which we will consider in the next two chapters, the pair of films explored in this chapter are perhaps not as directly reflective, but *Enter the Void* can certainly be read as a reflexive response to *Irréversible*. There are startling points of articulation to be found. The simple fact that *Enter the Void* begins with the music which plays at the end of *Irréversible* is a pleasing pivot-point. This counts doubly when you consider that its title of this piece of music is ‘The End’ – where this is an appropriate culmination for the destruction-obsessed *Irréversible*, it is also fitting that it opens a film which is concerned with demonstrating the absence of true endpoints. Think back to my observation in the introduction that these pairings of films function as a diptych divided by extremity – it makes a lot of sense for the second film to begin at the end. This self-aware, reflexive use of music also marks a stylistic transition. Thomas Bangalter’s score for *Irréversible*, as we have discussed, is brutal, uncomfortable and confrontational. The score for *Enter the Void* is far more pleasant to listen to. Added to this, the self-referential re-use of music is part of a closer, more nurturing relationship with the spectator, something which I argue is true of all the post-extreme films. Rather than attempting to shock, to challenge, to disrupt the viewing process, these later films construct a productive spacing between spectator and screen, which actually draws film and spectator closer together. We will go on to look at how the traditional narrative trappings of *Ne te retourne pas* and the weight of references to the canon of horror cinema in *Livide* play into this in the next chapters. This sort of fan-pleasing approach, an approach based on prior knowledge and familiarity, continues in Noé’s work, such as in the use of Goblin’s music from Dario Argento’s *Profondo Rosso* (1975) to underscore moments of his film *Love* (2015). As Manohla Dargis states, ‘Mr Noé has mellowed’ (2009). The *enfant terrible* is no longer terrible, and this is largely true of all the directors associated with the NFE.

Enter the Void sees Oscar (Nathaniel Brown), a young Frenchman living in Tokyo, shot by police after becoming involved in drug dealing – and having taken a dose of DMT. His soul then appears to depart his body, and we follow the lives of his sister Linda (Paz de la Huerta) and various of his acquaintances, as well as flashing back to events from his life. The stylistic tic which Noé adopted for *Enter the Void* is a first-person camera. Noé explained his reason for this as originating during a magic mushroom trip he underwent, during which he came upon *Lady in the Lake*, Robert Montgomery's 1947 Raymond Chandler adaptation which uses the same conceit (Lim 2010). We see events from Philip Marlowe's perspective, only seeing him in reflections (Marlowe is played by Montgomery himself – Figure 28). In her analysis of *Lady in the Lake*, Vivian Sobchack describes it as 'a film that has become the paradigm for posing the hermeneutic problem of the film's body' (1992, 230). Sobchack usefully raises Jean Mitry's criticism of the first-person style: 'Mitry emphasizes the difference between the spectator's body sitting relatively quiescent in a theater seat and the film's body invisibly living out, through the activity of the camera, a kinetic life and activity clearly not shared bodily by the spectator' (1992, 234). This idea of the quiescent spectator is obviously a frequent problem to overcome in analysing film as an embodied phenomenon. I argue, however, that from a Nancean perspective, the fact that a spectator can be a passive observer does not mean that the fusional aspect of the relationship is collapsed. Nancy focuses specifically on the cinematic space, the dark box in which the spectators are arranged. For Nancy, this dynamic is just another opening, another invitation to look. It is exactly in the distance, in the looking, that con-fusion can occur. As I have stated previously, it is in the attempt to somehow overcome this spacing, this spectatorial distance, that the project inevitably collapses.

Like Montgomery in *Lady in the Lake*, in *Enter the Void* Oscar is sometimes seen in reflections (Figure 29), but for the most part we only hear his thoughts (a return for Noé to the internal narration of *Carne* and *Seul Conte Tous*), and his voice in conversation, until later after his death when we see him from an external perspective as he reviews his past life.



Figure 28



Figure 29

Oscar, our proxy, is thus absent in his presence, yet also becomes a presence in his absence. His self, his essence, is fluid and ungraspable. He appears to leave his body at the point of death, thence floating ghostlike between places and times from his life. He returns to the death of his parents and the lead-up to his shooting, a spectral observer. However, his presence seems at times to be felt by other characters, particularly by his sister. At one point,

in the car, she appears to speak directly to Oscar but then screams in horror and asks what he is. This is then revealed to be a dream that she is having, as though the film is itself shifting through different states of being, and deliberately confusing and blurring the edges of these. Edges are fluid throughout the film: from the start, Oscar's physicality evades us. He appears only in reflections, yet we understand that we are sharing his outlook onto the world. Oscar's friend Alex (Cyril Roy) refers to experiences after death, or at the moment of death, as explained in the Tibetan Book of the Dead, as being akin to reflections in a 'magic mirror'. This is very much like Nancy's description of the cinematic world in contrast to our own experiential world that we discussed earlier, informed by his position on the portrait. We might see a reflection of ourselves, but as with all reflections there is an unknowability. There is distortion. We cannot touch our reflection, as contact with the mirror makes part of the reflection invisible. We can only appreciate from a distance, *respect* the distance. We can only ever see our own entirety through media which capture or reflect our image – mirrors, photographs, film, glass, eyes. Much of what we know of ourselves is what we have seen cast back at us, rather than what we have seen directly. Here we can open up a point of proximity between film and experiential life: the reality we see on screen is, in some ways, very close to the way in which we experience ourselves, our sense of self, in our experiential lives. Film might be the best art form for momentary trickery, for reflections that seem uncannily accurate only to be broken down once more at the point of realisation. In other words, film is the perfect material for con-fusion.

In *Enter the Void*, Oscar's absence in presence and presence in absence force us to feel the truth of Nancy's assertion that, even in stillness, there is constant movement. This stands in stark contrast to the cruel stillness of the camera in *Irréversible*, which dispassionately observes the violence and holds our gaze captive, offering us the option to look away and break contact, or experience the brutal images, and is equally far removed from the rapid movement which interrupted the process of spectatorship, movement which closes off the pure cinematic motion that Nancy looks for. In *Enter the Void*, the *pregnance* of the image is brought into clear focus through the embodiment of the spectatorial gaze within the diegetic reality of the film. The gaze of the camera is Oscar's gaze, constantly forcing an awareness of both the underlying cinematic form – the mechanical processes which bring a film to the screen transmogrified into a physical or psychical force – and of the act of spectatorship itself,

as Oscar's physical presence behind the gaze alerts us to our own presence as spectators. We thus participate in the fusional aspect of the film, engaging with it through Oscar's engagement with his world. The subsequent destruction or effacing of Oscar's physicality opens up the physicality of existence within the film, allowing Oscar to pass through it, to be at once a part of it and an external observer (but an external observer who is still bound within the world – just as we can be seeing ourselves touching but not touching ourselves touching). Oscar's con-fusion with his world mirrors our con-fusion with Oscar. The lines become blurred as we move with Oscar through the series of openings which make up his journey. The spectrum of fusions allows for momentary shifts in perspective – we are watching Oscar watching. While this is still divorced from the touching of touch, there is certainly a tactile reading of the journey, culminating in Oscar's apparent rebirth, an experience of the matrix of creation, depicting in the blurred view from the perspective of a newborn baby (Figure 30).



Figure 30

Oscar is trapped in a moment of becoming much like that which Nancy locates in the process of making sense, his 'trip' extending this moment, prolonging the fusion and allowing Oscar to adopt an apparently transcendent position in his immanent world. Even at the end of his trip, we are left with a con-fusional moment, wherein Oscar's consciousness appears to be reborn – or perhaps we are witnessing the cyclicity of existence, the ultimate endpoint of

life within a closed system. We go away only to return, to start again. This draws us back to McMahon and her description of Nancean play upon the threshold, an exploration of the edges of existence. Nancy, I believe, allows for the transgression of such edges, for a fusional moment, even as he seems to interdict it. In thinking through his position, we can suggest an openness to two theoretical outcomes, or rather an extension to the only logical outcome which allows us to temporarily experience the possibility of fusion, of a second path. Nancy proposes sensation as the first step towards making sense, and sensation here can be understood as an encounter, a sort of touching. In his offering up of a way to make sense, however, Nancy allows for a fusional experience which informs the transition away from extremity that I locate in this thesis. If we return to Nancy's 'Making Sense' article (2011), we can see how such apparently contradictory positions can be reconciled:

Je vois cet arbre vert traversé de rayons de soleil, je suis en lui, je passe en lui, je me confonds avec lui – jusqu'au point où cette confusion s'interdit elle-même puisqu'elle résonne en moi précisément comme approche d'une intimité inimaginable (209)

It is clear that Nancy does not propose a permanently fusional experience. And yet, he also clearly demonstrates that part of the process of drawing sense from the world is to allow a momentary fusion to occur. 'Je me confonds avec lui' – a moment of con-fusion. The state of being fused with, but in a positive, mutually explanative rather than exploitative mode. In order to know, to make sense, we must momentarily *become*. We are in a constant cycle of inconstant fusions. It helps here to consider Welch and Panelli's discussion of existence within the singular plurality which Nancy describes, and which we will look at in more detail in the next chapter: 'being in this simultaneously singular and plural form involves continual cross-referencing between "self" and the non-self "other" not as binary poles but as a continuous condition of co-constitution' (2007, 350). This process of 'continual cross-referencing' is the moment at which a fusional possibility opens in Nancy's thinking, allowing us to consider the movement which allows for the continuation of singular plurality. This is con-fusion, with its hyphenation evoking the necessity of guarding a distance even at the point where distance seems to become impossible. The cruxes of the post-extreme films exist at and around this moment of becoming, of con-fusion. They play at the limit, but only in the sense that they acknowledge its impassability, rather than pushing to transgress it, to break through into an outside, as the films of the NFE attempt to do. The end point must still be a withdrawal – as

with McMahon's observation of the withdrawal of touch in Nancy – yet it seems clear that a fertile moment opens up between encounter and withdrawal, a moment of con-fusion.

Enter the Void might seem to be at odds with the immanent secularism of Nancy's ontology, with the idea of a wandering soul seemingly indicating a Cartesian dualism. Noé certainly walks a line between religion, science, philosophy and spirituality -is Oscar the soul freed from the body? Is he an emanation of energy, a force which continues beyond death? Is his continuation and apparent return to fleshliness simply indicative of the passage of organic life from one state to another, ashes to ashes, dust to dust? All are possible readings. However, there is leeway to consider a rather different approach. Noé has stated that *Enter the Void* does not necessarily describe a post-death experience but might rather depict a drug-induced out-of-body experience at the point of death, or at least at the point of traumatic injury: 'you don't know if the character died at the start of the movie, or if he's going to wake up in a morgue, or in hospital, or in prison. You don't really know what happened after he got shot' (Lambie 2010). Such an assertion can be supported if we consider the moments in which the film returns us to the location of Oscar's death, as though to remind the spectator that this is the key moment. The specific drug which Oscar takes before his death – or near-death – is important here. He requests that his dealer supply him with DMT, or dimethyltryptamine, which is used in Peruvian spiritual ceremonies to bring about religious experiences, drunk in the entheogenic mixture known as ayahuasca. The idea of an entheogen corresponds fruitfully with Nancy's rejection of transcendence, suggestive of the idea that 'god' is to be found within us, understood as an extension to or experiment in experience, an immanent encounter. Oscar Saéz states that 'ayahuasca allows a distinct perception of the other world without losing consciousness of this one' (2014, xii). If we collapse this slightly, to consider not another world but rather a fuller understanding of the edges of this one, we can imagine Oscar's trip as an exploration of the closed system, rather than a demonstration of duality of self. The DMT is merely another opening onto the experience of the world. We can see the shape of this approach to immanence in Nancy's observation that 'il n'y a pas d'autre monde, pas d'outre-monde ni d' « arrière-monde ». Cela veut dire qu'il n'y a pas de renvoi ultime pour le réseau des renvois du monde, et qu'il n'y a donc pas de Sens (dernier) du sens ou des sens' (2011, 213). This certainly supports the idea of Oscar returning to the scene of his 'death', or travelling a closed loop of experiences, a journey composed of openings but with no exit. For,

despite its title, *Enter the Void* is not concerned with accessing the unattainable. It explores the closed system of the world; it constantly reincarnates through movement. This marks a return to the incessant motion that Nancy described, the movement which carries us as the spectator, which draws us to new openings. The focus on rings as openings in *Enter the Void* – gas rings, lights, peepholes – which give onto new spaces and carry us from scene to scene demonstrates this approach to movement, which remains steadfastly within the world, rather than attempting to move beyond it (Figure 31).



Figure 31

Even the use of sex – including the internal shot of ejaculation – is suggestive of this sort of immanent mobility. The body provides more openings, apertures which give on to destinations, continuations, possibilities. The body which is at once open and closed, which navigates and is navigable. To return to the opening quotations which seem somewhat divorced in tone, we can think of *Enter the Void* in comparison to *Irréversible*. The subject matter is dark in both films, but throughout *Enter the Void* there is an almost gleeful sense of positivity and possibility. Where *Irréversible* closes off points of access or renewal, trapping us in an inescapable cycle of destruction, *Enter the Void* revels in recreation, or re-creation. As Didier Péron describes it, ‘c’est le cinéma en entier qui palpite et renaît à chaque plan’ (2010). If we compare the introduction of the character Alex in *Enter the Void* to his namesake in *Irréversible*, we can see the positive contrast. Alex (Bellucci) is brought out on a stretcher,

covered in blood. Marcus speaks to her but she is unresponsive. Some critics refer to her as being dead, though this does not appear to be the case. In *Enter the Void*, Alex (Roy) is first seen through the peephole of Oscar's apartment (Figure 32). This presentation serves to normalise the openings which the film will continually traverse, and also demonstrates the focus on re-creation which I mentioned previously – Alex is introduced as a new possibility, through an opening. The conversation which follows, in which Oscar questions Alex about the Tibetan Book of the Dead which he has borrowed from him but only skim read so far, introduces the themes which the film will go on to explore.



Figure 32

Alex refers to the 'matrix' of rebirth which one enters as one approaches reincarnation, and this matrix is drawn out to become the entire fabric, the flesh of the film. Building on the earlier observation of the importance of openings, we can describe the world of *Enter the Void* as a porous one, constantly sliding and bleeding into new states. Not bleeding away into nothingness, as with the horse's blood in *Carne*, nor pushing outwards towards the spectator, as with the pulsing blasts of senseless light which conclude *Irréversible*, but rather offering openings that open onto new moments of being, new encounters, new engagements with the world, but never onto its limits. There are no limits within the world, there is just the matrix. This matrix might be the world in which they are trapped, the 'monde de merde' as Oscar describes it in the French dub, but this idea of being trapped within a closed world is not formulated as a negative experience. Within the world, there is movement, there is

rebirth. Oscar's body becomes confused – his presence is blurred into the matrix of existence as he travels from moment to moment, becoming part of it, con-fusing with it and ultimately, perhaps, being reborn through it. The idea of existing within a matrix of re-creation brings us toward Nancy's description of the *être singulier pluriel* and the operation of community, which we will go on to examine in greater detail in response to *Dans ma peau* in the next chapter, and certainly closer to the idea of a positive con-fusion or series of con-fusions, the being con-fusing and remoulding with the mesh of existence.

In contrast to the ultra-presence of the body in *Irréversible*, *Enter the Void* removes the body, revels in its absence. In doing so, Noé actually draws us into much closer contact with it. Oscar's blinks, depicted in flickering darkness obscuring events onscreen, become an imitation of our own, a constant separation from the body of the film, in the way that Nancy underlines as primordial in the cinema/spectator relationship. The cinematic space, or any proxy space around a screen, is a 'boîte à regard' (2001, 29)¹⁴. Or a looking glass. But the gaze is not fixed, nor perfectly focused. We blink, we rub our eyes, we look away. In depicting the world through Oscar's eyes but removing his body, Noé actually allows for a more bodily viewing experience, yet one which is acutely aware of the limitations of bodily engagement. Bradshaw, whom I quoted at the start of this chapter, praised Noé as one of the few directors he believed to be 'battling at the boundaries of the possible' (2010). While this may be true in terms of pure cinematic experimentation, thematically the battle has stopped long before *Enter the Void*. Noé does not attempt to transgress or traverse, he merely celebrates and plays at the boundary.

The fusional element of the viewing process of *Enter the Void* – we are not just looking, but rather we are con-fused with, fellow passengers on Oscar's hallucinatory voyage - recalls Nancy's analysis of Kiarostami. Nancy finds in Kiarostami's work a process of blurring the lines between the filming look and the gaze of the spectator: 'c'est comme si Kiarostami ne cessait pas de former son spectateur au film, c'est-à-dire non pas de l'instruire d'une technique, mais de lui ouvrir les yeux sur le mouvement qu'est le regard' (2001, 31). This is very much Noé's approach with *Enter the Void* – he revels and invites us, the spectator, also to revel in

¹⁴ This does not seem too far an extrapolation of Nancy's reading, even though the home viewing environment offers more distractions. It is questionable how far we can accept Nancy's evocation of the pure cinematic space: we are always faced with too-high lights, uncomfortable seating, loud co-spectators, incorrectly calibrated sound levels – there are flaws in all systems.

movement, in colour, in light, in openings. Instead of a push towards an extremity, blinding the spectator in filling our vision with the graphically opened body, this film invites us to watch – the regard onto the world is reopened. The film is firmly demarcated as a fiction, as the very ‘magical mirror’ that Alex describes, yet as such it invites an engagement, it exerts a pull. In offering up a world of motion, a world of ceaseless possibility, always open onto another moment, Noé shows a world of overflowing positivity. The joy of experience surmounts the specific lived moments, which goes some way to explaining the odd dichotomy opened up by the quotes that I chose to open this chapter. Jeanne-Marie Roux holds that Nancy’s ontology brings us to a body which is ‘avant tout l’expérience d’une infinie ouverture à l’autre’ (2011, 144). Incessant movement, endless openness. It becomes very clear that cinema is a particularly useful vessel for an experience of Nancean ontology. The othered world that cinema presents to us allows for this sort of journey, permits the bending of the rules of existence in order to show new regions of possibility. Manohla Dargis claimed that in *Enter the Void*, Noé ‘with beauty, mild and sharp jolts, and mesmerizing camerawork [...] tries to open the doors of perception’ (2010). Opening the doors of perception is a beautiful image, and one which works well to describe the process of *Enter the Void*. Where *Irréversible* attempts to smash down walls, to bridge a divide, to reduce distance, *Enter the Void* contents itself with a journey of discovery which respects limitations and distances. Where *Irréversible* demolishes and limits, pushing and challenging borders until all that is left is a primal scream, an explosion of light and sound that is difficult to watch and impossible to make sense of, *Enter the Void* instead constructs and opens new pathways through which to understand the world. Though its subject matter is potentially bleak, and its religious connotations rather worrying in the context of secular Nancean worldbuilding, its execution draws out positivity through fusional contact, forming and reforming as it continues its incessant movement. Noé himself rejects the theistic reading of the film, a reading which oversteps the boundaries of knowable existence, and instead delineates the sort of entheogenic structure that I described previously, whereby the drug functions as an opening onto a world that has ultra-present limits yet that still allows for a certain navigation. The world passes through us, and we pass through it, a constant process of con-fusion, where the lines of demarcation are temporarily blurred. The conclusion of *Enter the Void* appears resolutely fusional, a shared rebirth, but we are left unsure as to exactly what kind of fusion we have witnessed. It is thus confused, con-fusional and certainly stands apart from the rupture which we experience at the end of

the films of the NFE, whilst also being firmer in its structure than the breakdown of signification in *L'Intrus*.

What I certainly do not wish to do is reduce the importance of either the NFE or Nancean readings of it. Nancy offers fruitful routes by which to approach the trend, and excellent work has been undertaken and will continue to be. Nancy's writing lends itself to a discussion of the extreme aspect of the films, certainly, yet if we consider Nancy's description from *L'Evidence du film* of 'le cinéma intensifié, poussé de l'intérieur vers une essence qui le détache largement de la représentation pour le tourner vers la présence [...] et la présence n'est pas l'affaire d'une vision : elle se donne à une rencontre et à une inquiétude ou à un souci' (2001, 31), we arrive at the very matter of the distinction between the NFE and the post-extreme films. The earlier films seek meaning through an explosion of divisions – the divisions between spectator and screen, the divisions of skin. They look to enact this turn from 'représentation' to 'présence' through deconstruction of form – both the physical form of the body and the vessel of film. However, this sort of intensity is a blind (or indeed *blinding*, aveuglante), a distortion. The body exposed, violated, opened up, does not bring us any closer to its truth, its ultimate meaning. The singular focus of these films removes our choice to look, reduces the possibilities of film. While the experimental nature of the NFE films is fascinating, and rightly receives wide critical and academic appraisal, it must also be noted that they reach a point of fragmentation at the extremity. The body still evades them. The moves towards reducing the spacing between film and spectator in the NFE, 'shock tactics' as Quandt called them (2004, 126), cannot make the body more accessible. The body remains at a distance. The simulated proximity only hastens the collapse. The exposure of the body might elicit physical responses in the spectator, but these are not indicative of a conscious process of assimilating knowledge. They are inadvertent (shudders, nausea), or else deliberate moves to create spacing (covering the eyes, looking away). The shift from NFE to post-extreme films demonstrates a move towards films which respects Nancy's model of cinema, making the films into sense-making bodies of thought that seek to open up channels of thinking rather than pushing against an unnavigable divide and risking the collapse of sense. In the following chapters, I will continue my comparisons of NFE films and their post-extreme follow-ups. In drawing these comparisons into encounters with Nancy's ontological perspective on the body, inoperative community and the plurality of being, I will continue to demonstrate how

this cinematic shift corresponds with Nancy's ontology and shows a logical and sensible redirection which enables an escape from the theoretical cul-de-sac of the NFE's graphic experimentation.

Chapter 3

Dans leurs peaux – Plural existence in Marina De Van's *Dans ma peau* and *Ne te retourne pas*

As we saw in the previous chapter, Gaspar Noé's first post-extreme film, *Enter the Void*, moved from the sort of explosive, interruptive fission of the relationship between bodies that we saw in his NFE films to a more positive con-fusion, wherein the body of the protagonist becomes blurred, positively slipping back into the continuity of bodies. To further illustrate this move towards restoration of the body to its place in the unbroken continuity of bodies, which I believe helps to explain the disappearance of the NFE trend, in this chapter I will offer a close textual analysis of another pair of films through a Nancean lens: *Dans ma peau*, the first film by Marina De Van, and one of the most frequently discussed examples of the NFE, and her second film, *Ne te retourne pas*. This pairing can be read as an uninterrupted thinking process which takes us back to Nancy's formulation of the body, where the first film leads us to its unreadable breakdown and the second moves towards finding positivity in its malleability. Having already touched on the idea of pluralities in terms of the unending series of openings back onto the world that film offers, finding new evidence in each opening, here I will move from examining the films as cinematic artefacts in Nancean terms to examining the interplay between the films and Nancy's description of the *être singulier pluriel*, as well as continuing to draw them towards Nancy's thinking around the body. Indeed, these concepts, of singular plural being and the body, as well as community, are all inherently linked in Nancy's philosophy. Not only this, but they are also inextricably connected to tension – 'un corps, c'est [...] une tension' (Nancy 1992, 126). To explain, the fact of being part of a continuity of bodies is primordial to Nancy's thinking. However, Nancy's rejection of outright fusion means that his philosophy unavoidably becomes one of tensions and edges. As Garnet Butchart describes, 'semiotic codes of communication expose the self in its lack of wholeness and completion by drawing attention to the lived body as edges, parts and zones (surfaces) to be comported, preserved, and governed' (2015, 234-235). Nancy directs our attention to the tension inherent in the plurality of existence at the end of *Être singulier pluriel* where he speaks of the 'côtoiement hagard' (1996, 122) of the singular and the plural that exposes itself

when we begin to delve into the nature of existence.¹⁵ These invisible *frottements* and *frôlements* that are constantly at play within and around us also resonate with Nancy's description of inoperative community. Nancy reduces community to an inescapable fact of being, as much a part of the continuity of existence as bodies that are touching other bodies. Though I will go on to question the legitimacy of approaches to De Van's films which are too heavily anchored in late-capitalist, neoliberal critique, it is true that the proximity, or indeed sameness, of body and community can easily lead us to equate pressure upon one with pressure upon the other. As Nancy states, '*le corps est l'être de l'existence*' (1992, 17 – his italics). Body and being are one and the same. This certainly allows for extrapolation into a social study based on a bodily one, but my readings here will rest with a primarily visual approach, as well as situating the films within my Nancean framework. De Van's project across these two films seems to be throwing our bodies into relief, exposing their fleshy oddness, and then surmounting this fascination (or repulsion) to return them to their place as part of the unbroken continuity – a community of flesh-in-common which does not engage with the organs as such but serves to contain existence.

Separation, Anxiety

I have chosen to focus on *Être singulier pluriel* in this chapter, as De Van's investigation of otherness and difference which emerge from within individual bodies perfectly correlates with the ideas at play in that text, as well as neatly mapping onto Nancy's wider embodied ontology. In the book, Nancy outlines his thinking on society as a continuity of bodies in contact with other bodies, defined and described as singularities within a plurality. Just as we will go on to see in the next chapter in relation to the body as described in *Corpus*, Nancy underlines the tensions apparent even in describing this state of plural being, '*la condition ontologique primordiale de l'être-avec ou de l'être-ensemble*': '*ce n'est peut-être pas par hasard que la langue se prête mal à exhiber l'«avec» en tant que tel. Car il est lui-même l'adresse, et non ce qu'il faut adresser*' (1996, 14). Our very existence relies on sharing of space with other bodies, on an openness to the other which allows us to define ourselves. Any sense of singularity is thus an imagined state which breaks down when thrown into relief

¹⁵ I like Richardson and Byrne's translation of this as 'frantic or distraught' closeness.

against the structures which govern our very existence. As Nancy writes, 'il n'y a pas de sens si le sens n'est pas partagé [...] parce que *le sens est lui-même le partage de l'être*' (1996, 20 – his italics). This contact between bodies, the essential sharing which defines us, can also be applied to our sense of our own bodies, of ourselves *as* bodies. The spacing and proximity with other bodies, which is part of a shared, plural existence, is equally applicable to our own relationship with ourselves. An unspoken assemblage contains us and allows us to function, holding us in a suspension of tension. The cutting into the body, the sort of penetration and separation which forms the extremity of the NFE, thus poses a threat both to the structure of our bodies and to our bodies' placement within the continuity of existence.

The apparent contradiction of a fusion and separation draws us ever back towards the essential dichotomy that Nancy draws around the singular plural being. Nancy frequently hyphenates his terms, and in so doing allows for their existence as both permanent and transient states: 'la co-essence met l'essence elle-même dans le trait – « être-singulier-pluriel » - dans un trait d'union qui est aussi bien un trait de division, trait de partage qui s'efface donc, laissant chaque terme à son isolement *et* à son être-avec-les-autres' (1996, 58 – his italics). Singularity, then, as a unique and separate event is impossible, and even the approach to it is fraught with tension. The hyphenation which both links and spaces, bridges and divides, is the point at which con-fusion occurs. It becomes difficult, impossible even, to distinguish the edges that define, to delineate the ultimate borders between beings: 'les étants se touchent: sont au con-tact les uns des autres, se disposent et se distinguent ainsi' (Nancy 1996, 120). Con-tact, the in-contact-with that Nancy describes, allies itself closely with 'com-passion', 'le contact d'être les uns avec les autres dans ce tumulte' (1996, 12), serving to reinforce my reading of these blurred lines that draw together and space apart to such an extent that their actions become a masking of the junctures and junctions of existence. Our very point of existence within this scheme is itself con-fused: 'cest la brèche ou l'écartement de l'horizon lui-même, et sur la brèche, *nous*. Nous comme la brèche elle-même, tracé hasardeux d'une rupture' (Nancy 1996, 11 – his italics). We are *always* at the edge of collapse, of falling away into the interstitial spaces that divide us just as they connect us. We exist within and without this rupture, part of it and apart from it. It is in the exploration of these spaces, the touch that destroys, that tears, that grasps, and thus removes the possibility of distancing, removes *possibility* itself, that we encounter the traumatic destruction of the NFE.

As previously noted, Nancy's assertion of the singular plural state of existence reflects his description of inoperative community. For Nancy, 'community cannot be a construction but is the event-of-being-with, or that which constitutes being' (Welch and Panelli 2007, 351). Community is formed in the singular plurality of being, and beings. There is no action involved in the formation of community, it is a necessary extension of singular plural existence. This inherent connection between bodies and community, the fundamental matter of existence itself, explains the danger to be found in the process of dismantling the physical body. In *Dans ma peau* Esther, in her cutting, in her opening up and exploration of her body, is in the process of putting herself *en oeuvre*, essentially forging a parallel path which removes her from community, exposing in so doing the tensions that reign within the underlying structures that govern existence. This traumatic encounter with the edges that are an inescapable fact of existence, and the subsequent navigation of this encounter through con-fusion in *Ne te retourne pas*, becomes the linking material between De Van's films.

Something Jean-Baptiste Morain highlights in his review of *Ne re retourne pas*, and which feeds into my overall project, is the idea that 'le cinéma est plus vrai que le réel' (2009). There is something majestic about this assertion, something which transcends discussion of this film alone and indicates the usefulness of cinema as both an art form and as part of the philosophical machine, a process for understanding, as I explored with reference to Nancy's writing on cinema in the previous chapter. Where the usefulness of cinema continues to present itself in these films is in its capacity to show singularity – as we shall go on to see, sound and image can be manipulated in order to shut out the world. Separateness, the *être singulier*, can only be expressed on film, because we understand that we are looking into a reality that defines its own limits. Equally, as I have indicated throughout, cinema can also express con-fusion in a way that is not possible in the exterior world. The very fact of cinema reducing 3D beings to a 2D plane means that borders are elided, points flattened down. Cinema offers a flat, democratised and communalised vision of the world. From its very inception, cinema has played with *trompe l'oeil*, with actions that disturb normalcy and expose it at the same time. Cinema offers an opening back onto the exterior world, but also offers a malleable version of it which can be used to explore experience.

Returning to my earlier discussion of the process of con-fusion still containing the potential for trauma, Morain also picks up on the fact that, for Jeanne in *Ne te retourne pas*, 'la sortie,

forcément douloureuse, de cette angoisse énorme passe par l'acceptation de cette transformation du regard' (2009). As we shall see, there is still violence in this process. We have not moved from the brutality of the NFE and found a non-violent alternative. The body is still mutable, worryingly so. If anything, the process Jeanne undergoes in the post-extreme *Ne te retourne pas* is more horrifying than Esther's descent in the NFE-affiliated *Dans ma peau* – Esther is fascinated by the damage she causes to her body; Jeanne is horrified by her transformation. Once again, this horrific aspect which is still present in the move towards confusion and the continuation of the body highlights where my reading of these films stands apart from Karine Chevalier's formulation of violence intériorisé. I propose a space where exterior violence is still an important factor, but in which the violent threat to the body is countered through con-fusion with another body or bodies, stability brought about through a compromise which restores order. A perhaps agonising yet ultimately jubilatory, often semi-conscious, surrender of singularity offers the only route to progression.

In *Dans ma peau*, De Van herself plays Esther, an up-and-coming analyst who finds herself becoming increasingly detached from the world she inhabits after an accident in which she badly cuts her leg.¹⁶ Esther becomes fascinated with her wound, and this fascination leads her to start cutting herself, becoming ever more obsessed with opening up her flesh. Her actions alienate those around her, and she seems to lose touch with her environment, finding sense (and apparently happiness) only in her wounding. We leave her in an uncertain state, perhaps on the verge of death. The key NFE vernacular of division, fission, tearing and violation is very much at play within this film. Even the title is suggestive of an intrusion, of ruptured flesh. Carrie Tarr said of *Dans ma peau*,

A taboo-defying study of a monstrous female body, akin to the cannibalistic female figure incarnated by Beatrice Dalle in *Trouble Every Day*, it invites analysis in terms of Kristeva's concept of the abject and what Barbara Creed, in her study of film, feminism and psychoanalysis, has named 'the monstrous-feminine' (2006, 78)

Tarr's comparison of Esther with Coré in *Trouble Every Day* is a common one. Kath Dooley, for instance, asserts that 'both *Trouble Every Day* and *Dans ma peau* portray the cannibal as an

¹⁶ While a number of commentators take Marina De Van's decision to star in the film to be important, conflating it with her personal history, I do not wish to engage with this reading here. There is, of course, much that can be said about casting linked to physicality in the NFE, with De Van and Béatrice Dalle being two actresses whose features are frequently commented on (see, for example, Carrie Tarr on De Van's 'unusual, pallid physiognomy' [2006, 80], or Stuart Jeffries describing her as 'gap-toothed and surly, like a boiled-down Béatrice Dalle' [2009]).

unstable body who loses the ability to maintain close relationships and exist in “normal” society’ (2019, 54). It can certainly be suggested that Esther engages in cannibalism, as Dooley and others have claimed. Esther’s interest, however, is solely focused on her own body, her own flesh and blood (and she is unquestionably more concerned with chewing and nibbling than swallowing). Likewise, though we can definitely read a sexual element to the carnal interest, as with Coré, for Esther it is purely auto-erotic. Her relationship with her boyfriend, Vincent (Laurent Lucas), deteriorates as the film progresses, and parts of Esther’s own body begin to resemble an-other, and sometimes a lover, her arm hanging oddly as she lies in bed as though someone else’s arms were draped over her. The intimacy she shared with Vincent has been replaced with an almost literal self-absorption. Equally, in terms of the violence, the explosive violence that Coré and Shane act out in *Trouble Every Day* is here acted inwards, as Esther tears and slices at herself. In certain contortive positions, she resembles a snake eating its own tail (Figure 33).



Figure 33

In this chapter, we will continue to focus primarily on the ideas thrown up by the visuals of the films, considered through a Nancean lens. While readings influenced by Kristeva and Creed are valid and entirely plausible, I feel that they ignore the somewhat jubilatory aspect that the self-harming quite clearly takes. Rather than the exposure of Creed’s ‘monstrous feminine’, there is rather a focus on the vertiginous joy to be had in the experience of the

body – which in this instance happens to be female – in tearing at the seams of existence. As Palmer suggests, ‘a more productive line of inquiry is to analyse Esther on-screen as active not passive, a sympathetic albeit traumatized human being rather than as a feminine grotesque’ (2011, 83). I like this suggestion of activity opposed to passivity, as it corresponds with my reading of Esther as activating her own community apart, although, as we shall see, this joy of exploration can only lead ultimately to destruction.

One of the reasons that it is important to connect the directors’ NFE film to their immediate successors is that such juxtaposition throws assumptions about the extreme films’ philosophical drive into question. The recurrent suggestion that *Dans ma peau* is a critical deconstruction of the late-capitalist work environment seems less sure when De Van’s next film sees positive restoration in a return to just such an environment. While Martine Beugnet calls to the ‘disturbingly graphic vision of corporate normalisation’ (2011, 32) in *Dans ma peau*, Jonathan Romney describes the film as ‘Marina De Van’s unorthodox depiction of executive stress as self-dismemberment’ (2004), and it is true that the film can hardly be seen as offering any support for this mode of being, if we look at De Van’s two films under discussion here as a cohesive whole, we can equally make the case that the capitalist work environment is just a stand-in marker for community, or existence, more generally. *Dans ma peau* sees Esther break away from the social norms, from what others expect of her, and fall into a cycle of self-destruction and self-consumption. *Ne te retourne pas*, conversely, sees Jeanne coming to terms with her identity in order to return to work and a stereotypically normative model of family life. Even if we do take the late-capitalist work environment as an important thematic concern, De Van seems to suggest that a compromise can be reached between the ideals of physical freedom and self-description and the demands of contemporary late-capitalist society.

The Split Screen – *Dans ma peau*

Dans ma peau opens with a split-screen, and this effect returns in a key sequence later in the film. We watch the credits roll over images of Paris and La Défense – people heading to work, commuter traffic – sometimes slightly different angles on the same location, sometimes different locations (Figure 34). Several analyses of this split screen have been offered, and the

usual position is an assumption that this divided screen, one half a normal, positive image and the other rendered negative, is reflective of the mind/body divide, and the rupture that the capitalist machinery of contemporary life causes. There are lines that divide, certainly. Beugnet gestures towards this in noting of the later use of a split-screen that 'the passage from full screen to split screen occurs through an almost invisible cut; as Esther leaves the supermarket, the door's reflecting panels, half-blank, half-filled with a colourful reflection of the shop, already create this divided effect' (2007, 160-161). However, it is equally possible to read these lines that divide (which extend beyond the split screen and into the brutal straight lines of the architecture, edges of computer screens, doorways) as lines that *define*. We are not being introduced to a world divided by neoliberal capitalism, but rather simply to a world which is for Nancy, as I have already discussed, composed entirely of invisible divisions and hidden lines of definition. It is useful to contrast these two instances of the effect. The opening split screen shows different locations or angles, but always othered on the righthand side of the screen by the negative rendering. The later split screens lose this negativity and only show different angles on Esther's actions in her cutting room, and finally on her eye (Figure 35). The possibility of bodies in contact, of plurality, has been removed from this later sequence. The stark definitions of the earlier shots are replaced with the oddly framed contortions of Esther's own body; bending, uncertain and alone. The openings onto otherness have been replaced with an opening onto the same, the end of newness, the focus on a singularity. One world (or body) viewed from many angles, rather than many worlds (or bodies) in one view. In these later shots, Esther has become a singular entity, separate and alone.



Figure 34



Figure 35

Esther's aloneness, her move from plurality to singularity, starts to be demonstrated early in the film. We are introduced to her briefly during the credits sequence, her boyfriend Vincent sharing her space, their faces crossing over each other in a display of intimacy and plurality. The next scene shows Esther at the party where she will begin her process of separation. The scene in which Esther first injures her leg is played out in almost total darkness. Neither Esther nor the spectator sees what it is that cuts her. Escaping from the crowded party, she enters a

courtyard, walking in the darkness. Quickly she stumbles and falls, and we hear something break. Interestingly, and reflecting the real-life story which inspired De Van to make the film, when Esther first accidentally cuts her leg, falling in the dark, she does not feel any pain. She stands and we hear her trousers tear. She continues walking for a moment, but finally turns back when she hits yet another obstacle. Back at the party she appears to be unharmed, commenting on having fallen but no more. It is only when she discovers the gash on her leg that she begins to act differently. She falls to the ground; she looks scared and horrified by the injury. She does not stand up, but rather drags herself into a bathroom, suddenly a wounded creature aware of its fragility. This is a strongly Nancean moment, resonating with the idea of the being that realises its own delicate, fleshly nature only when it is opened up and exposed to its internal functions.¹⁷ As discussed in the first chapter, in *L'Intrus* Nancy describes the powerful emotion of the moment he was told of his need for a heart transplant – ‘dès le moment où l'on me dit qu'il fallait me greffer, tous les signes pouvaient vaciller, tous les repères se retournaient’ (2000, 14). For Nancy this exposure is figurative, though the scar will later be clearly evident; for Esther it is literal, her skin gaping open, a trail of blood behind her. Here it is also useful to consider Nancy's questions that he asks when the fact of his heart transplant draws him to a point at which he begins to see a distance between his self and his body:

Comment devient-on pour soi une représentation ?

Et un montage de fonctions ?

Et où disparaît alors l'évidence puissante et muette qui tenait tout ça sans histoire assemblé ? (2000, 16)

¹⁷ I have my own personal engagement with this sense of estrangement – two incidents, two legs. First, I broke my leg aged eight and it was discovered that I had a bone cyst in my right tibia. In essence, there was a void inside me that I had had no idea of until the bone surrounding it was fractured. It is simultaneously incredibly easy and very difficult to express this. Second, when I was 18, I jumped off a balcony and badly broke my leg, fracturing the fibula and tearing the tibiofibular ligament. There is a video of the jump, in which you can see me land (badly) but laugh as I try to stand. My leg gives way underneath me and I stare at my foot, hanging very much at the sort of ‘unusual, unfeasible angle’ which De Van has described (Jeffries 2004), and cover my face in embarrassment but not in pain. Though there would be pain later, and long-term repercussions, at that instant I felt completely disconnected from my injury. Evidently, I feel a close personal connection to both De Van's films and Nancy's philosophy in *L'Intrus*.

Esther herself, at this point in the film, is facing these same questions. She has been exposed to her body as a weak sac of organs and blood. She is far from the comfortable, antiseptic world she inhabited before the accident, away from her 'clean and proper body' as Carrie Tarr describes it (2006, 81). There is something telling about the 'sans histoire' part of Nancy's questions. As we have seen, Nancy's philosophy is one of edges and limits, of borders and voids, and also one of embodiment. This evokes a body which appears whole but is made up of edges, frictions and collisions, creating a space of worrying dichotomy: a protective surround that is at the same time porous and in constant flux. 'Un corps est le lieu qui ouvre, qui écarte, qui espace phalle et céphale, leur donnant lieu de faire événement (jouir, souffrir, penser, naître, mourir, faire sexe, rire, éternuer, trembler, pleurer, oublier...)' (Nancy 1992, 18). We can read tension and even terror here – our openness throws into question our assumed solidity as beings. As Douglas Morrey notes:

If the body is the site of our sharing of the world, of our fleshy communion with other bodies, it is also a site of otherness and alienation. The body, as Nancy describes it, is always 'ob-jected', projected outside the self (or, alternatively, the self is subtracted, withdrawn from the body, which amounts to the same thing). In this sense, my body will always remain a stranger to me, will always be other, even as other people appear to me first and foremost as bodies (2008, 13)

Something must permit the continuity of existence beyond these limits, or in spite of them, and it is here that I would locate con-fusion. The strangeness is contained, tamed and sublimated, in con-fusion: we forget or are shielded from the assembly. Not an entire, complete and irreversible fusion, as Nancy quite rightly marks as impossible, but a series of temporary yet meaningful con-fusions, held in suspension. The edges are elided through contact with other edges. The boundaries are blurred in the constant approach, con-fusion and withdrawal of existence. The hyphenation maintains the essential distance, yet also allows for the contact and the confusion that overwhelms the potential negativity of the edges, the points of articulation which become points of tension when exposed or tested. This fits both with McMahon's reading of the necessity of withdrawal, because we still do, ultimately, withdraw from the state of confusion, and also with Nancy's telling acknowledgement of the moment of fusion in *Making Sense*, where fusion occurs until it must stop because of its overwhelming intimacy. Nancy, in *L'Intrus*, goes on to state that 'l'étrangeté ne devait venir du dehors que pour avoir d'abord surgi du dedans' (2000, 17). This exposes the tension inherent in the assemblage of existence. The irruption of something into

Esther's body (a piece of metal, glass, something, anything) has brought surging forth not simply her blood but a realisation of self, of that which is always, innately, under the skin and in the skin. The touch that destroys, or rather which exposes the inherent gaps - the underlying tension of the body - and leads to the breakdown of sense at the interruption or exposure of con-fusion, recurs throughout Nancy's work. Consider, for instance, Nancy's description of the impossibility of pinning down the body: 'sitôt touchée, la certitude sensible vire au chaos, à la tempête, tous les sens s'y dérèglent' (1992, 9). Esther's exploration of her body, her opening of herself, is thus doomed to fail, to fall away into meaninglessness – the wounding of the body brings about the flood of bleeding, blinding blood.

As I stated earlier, however, Esther's transgression does not seem to disturb her much – rather, it becomes a source of utter fascination, an addictive focus. After her injury, we watch Esther as she passes quickly from terrified and disgusted to fascinated, enthralled by her own exposed flesh. We move from a long shot of Esther, staring down at her leg, to a slow close-up pan from her foot, past her hand caressing her leg, and up to her face, now calm and focussed (Figures 36 – 39).



Figure 36



Figure 37



Figure 38



Figure 39

Back in the melee of people, Esther's colleague, Sandrine (Léa Drucker), finds her and tells her that she and a friend had discovered blood everywhere, but found nobody (no body). 'On avait peur de tomber sur un cadavre' Sandrine tells her, unaware that this is, in essence, exactly what Esther has done. In falling and damaging her body, Esther has been confronted by her own structure, a sense of her own nature. She has literally fallen upon her own body. Esther's journey will take her closer and closer to becoming the sort of inanimate cadaver Sandrine feared finding, moving her beyond the limits of the world in which we met her and placing her into an uncomfortable zone of otherness. A separation, an opening onto an opening, exposes the unspoken assembly, and brings the house of cards tumbling down. Esther finally, after heading out for a few more drinks, goes to see a doctor. He jokes with her when she tells him she didn't feel her injury, asking 'vous êtes sûr que c'est votre jambe?'. This will also become a *fil conducteur* throughout the film, the interrogation of the limit between body and self. This is also, again, a strikingly Nancean concept. For example, in discussing his need for a new heart, Nancy asks 'si mon propre cœur me lâchait, jusqu'où était-il le 'mien', et mon 'propre' organe?' (2000, 15). When we interrupt the con-fusion that blurs our lines of distinction, our concepts of togetherness, wholeness and self are thrown into flux.

In her cutting, Esther appears to be actively seeking this separation, but it is nonetheless evident that this process is not without tension, and pain. While West asserts that ‘when Esther cuts into herself, De Van’s camera shows the destruction and decay of her body, yet Esther’s face always remains neutral and unflinching’ (2016, 88), we can objectively see that Esther does in fact show emotion, lines of struggle clearly visible on her face (Figures 40 and 41).

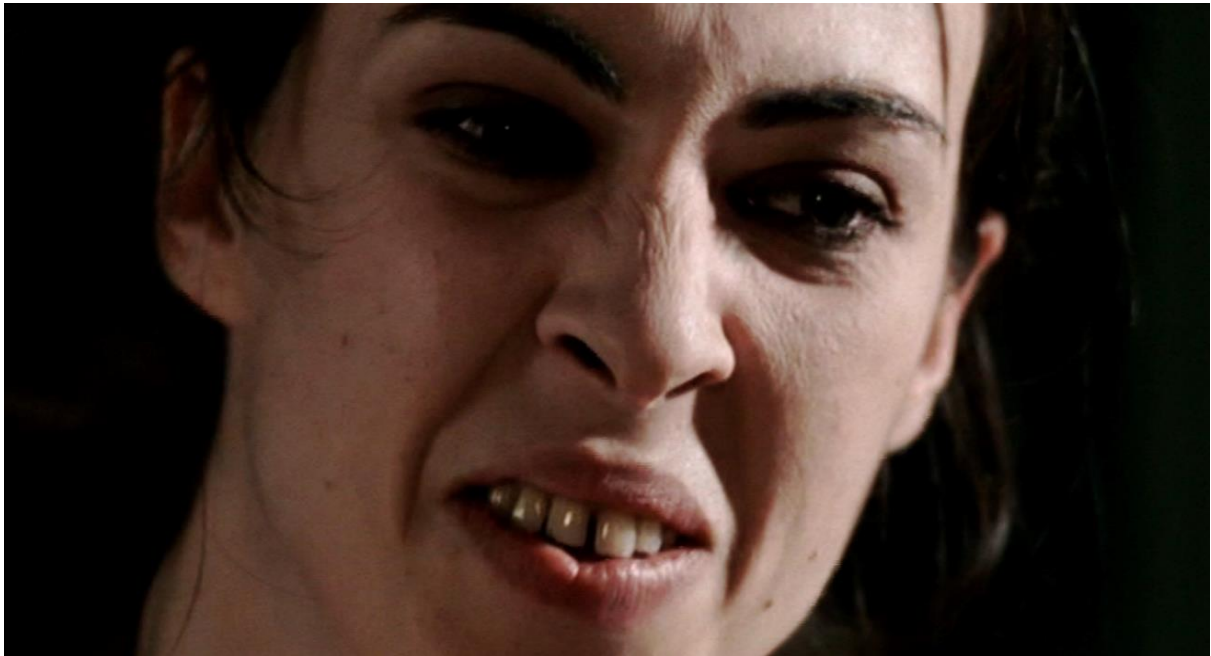


Figure 40



Figure 41

There is an unavoidable tension, even as she revels in her cutting. The dichotomy at the heart of the film, that Esther can only understand herself through this violent process of self-exploration, which is entirely incompatible with the society in which she exists, is expressed in a scene where Esther tries to explain her actions to Sandrine. De Van films this interaction as shot/counter-shot, Esther sharing the screen only with the back of Sandrine's head. Most interactions from this point in the film repeat this format, as though to demonstrate Esther's dissociation, her drive towards singularity. Esther tells Sandrine about going to the dark space beside the archives in their office building in order to cut herself, but her explanations make no sense to Sandrine.

SANDRINE : Comment tu t'es entaillé ?

ESTHER : Avec un truc en fer

SANDRINE : J'ai compris – mais qu'est-ce que tu faisais avec ce truc en fer ?

ESTHER : Je m'entailais

Esther is, through her self-exploration, engendering her a-commonality, her separation from the other bodies which make up the world. It is worth considering closely how Esther is depicted in this scene. There is something desperate about her, De Van twitching, uncomfortable, yet there is also something seductive. She leans in, whispering breathily, as though offering Sandrine an access to her illicit world. Sandrine takes Esther home to look after her and there she is horrified by the extent of Esther's injuries, driven to tears and reacting to Esther with incomprehension and disgust. She suggests that Esther see her doctor, though worries that he would send her to a psychiatric hospital. Vincent's reaction is equally worried, disturbed and angry. Esther cannot explain herself to him, and he cannot understand her actions. There is a threat to stability, to the status quo. His reaction appears to push Esther further away.

Esther's break with her world is demonstrated in the film's most inventive scene, wherein Esther sees her arm as detached from her body. In a restaurant eating with colleagues, her left hand starts to move by itself and, ultimately, she sees it as a mannequin's arm, cleanly and bloodlessly separated from her body (Figure 42). The oddness of this scene is prefigured

earlier when Esther wakes up after having slept on her left arm. She plays with it, fascinated by its limpness. De Van toys with the idea of the 'dead limb', that moment in which a lack of blood supply suddenly makes you aware of a part of your body. There is an inherent oddness in that sensation which feels so Other, so unusual, but which in so doing precisely brings you to an awareness of the connectedness of your appendages and the blood flowing outwards from your heart. This corresponds with Nancy's description of the egregious nature of a transplant suddenly making you aware of the internal processes of your system, which have hitherto been almost automatic, intangible.



Figure 42

De Van's films explore this moment, this sensation of strangeness and disconnection. For example, in the scene at the annual party, Esther is almost thrown into the swimming pool (the rowdy crowd of men only dropping her when blood seeps through her wet trouser leg). Afterwards, she stands alone, and the diegetic sound is reduced to the lapping of the water, and Esther's breathing. She looks around her, and the shots that mark her perspective are blurred, unclear. Esther is detaching from the world as is, drawing into herself. She begins to experience a dissociative break from the world around her. A later scene sees Esther visit a shopping centre, and there too the bodies around her become blurred, their edges soft and indistinct. That this is expressed as Esther's point of view, her regard onto the world, speaks to the nature of the rupture that she is experiencing. As 'the camera racks focus unevenly, as planes of color, bright light and texture collide and juxtapose' (Palmer 2011, 87), it is as though

Esther is seeing the junctures that underlie existence, the con-fused continuity of blurred, indistinct edges, but somehow from a distance. Esther is apart, rather than a part. Throughout the film, she passes from well-lit, occupied spaces into dark, ambiguous spaces. She escapes from the party into the darkness of the garden, from her office into the dark space of the storage area by the archives, from the restaurant into a corridor somewhere by the kitchen. Esther eventually retreats to a hotel room, hiding away to explore her own body in a bloodily auto-erotic series of operations. After an unclear amount of time spent cutting into herself, Esther gathers her belongings and rushes out, leaving the keys in the door. However, we then cut back to a close-up of Esther's face. She is lying on the same bed; she never left the room. We might make a useful connection here with the way in which Nancy describes the closed-off world of *Trouble Every Day*: 'il n'y a pas de délivrance, tout est fermé [...] on n'en sort pas et ça recommence – *trouble every day*' (2001, 63 – his italics). Just as Shane and Coré are trapped in a cycle of violence which cannot be broken, so Esther seems unable to escape her spiral of self-dissection. The camera pulls back and rotates, repeating this action twice, fading back into the same repeated shot, until we finally see her full body lying on the bed, her face turned towards the camera. Her eyes are open, unblinking. It seems that she might well have become exactly the cadaver that the earlier bloody aftermath of her wounding had led Sandrine and her colleague to fear (Figure 43).



Figure 43

As with many of the films of the NFE, this final shot is ambiguous. Is Esther dead? Did she leave the room? We are ultimately left unsure as to what exactly has happened. However, what we can say is that Esther's break from the world in which she previously existed seems to be total. Palmer describes the ending as showing 'Esther, an iconic cinéma du corps protagonist [...] left socially isolated, personally traumatized, and dangerously by herself' (2011: 86). This final shot shows her to be completely detached from the world.

As noted earlier, we can compare the conclusion of *Dans ma peau*, both narrative-wise and formally, to a number of other films associated with the NFE: Alex staring upwards in an apparently idyllic field which we know is either representative of a future never to be or a past sadly distant in *Irréversible*; Diane staring out from the screen in *Demonlover*, trapped as a pawn in a sick fantasy game which she might have been involved in selling; La Femme cradling the child of a murdered woman and seemingly on the verge of death herself in *À l'intérieur* (Maury and Bustillo, 2007); and Anna, brutalised and apparently transcendent, staring upwards and away from her flayed body in *Martyrs* (Laugier, 2008). All are examples of *l'image en saignée aveuglante*: the rupture that occurs at the extremity, at the limit. From this point on, we can know nothing more. The ambiguity of this final shot has been addressed by many different commentators. Beugnet locates Esther's transgression in a late-capitalist, neoliberal framework, claiming that 'Esther commits the ultimate transgression – she mutilates, disfigures and thus renders dysfunctional a body that had been shaped to fit, represent and efficiently contribute to the perpetuation of a specific socioeconomic system' (2007, 161). I believe, as I have already discussed, that this is a simplistic reading of Esther's transgression, and one which does not correspond with De Van's later move toward reparation. Tarr states that Esther appears 'close to death' (2006, 81), as well as noting that the suit that covers her damaged body 'could be that of a corpse' (2006, 85). Palmer observes that 'no specific contexts, or explanations, or resolution are granted' and that we see Esther's 'body maimed but her face and emotions at least partly calmed' (2011, 83). Greg Hainge implicitly rejects Tarr's assertion that Esther is close to death, and Palmer's that she is becalmed, or at least asserts that we cannot know whether she is or not. On this point, we are in agreement. For Hainge, 'Esther's facial expression here gives no indication of anything, it is as blank an expression as one could imagine, that provides no clues to the character's internal psychology and leaves us, as the camera tracks back, to contemplate her as a body,

as flesh' (2012, 572-573). I would also agree with Tarr in that, to me, whether or not she is still physically animate, Esther is essentially dead. She has become the known body, that is to say the dead body. She is fully apart from the continuity of bodies that make up our existence. There is something telling about the two pull-backs that occur before the camera's final retreat, each one fading into the next. It is as though Esther is opening onto herself. She has separated herself from the world, and in doing so has destroyed herself. Her exploration of her body has not led to sense, but rather to a complete lack of sense. The body falls away, meaning collapses. This returns us to the idea of 'grasping' that Chamarette describes, which I engaged with in the previous chapter. This represents the theoretical impasse that the NFE reaches: the exposure of the body can only lead to its collapse. Chamarette's description is particularly apt for *Dans ma peau*, wherein Esther is frequently seen to literally grasp at her 'oddly elastic' skin (Palmer 2011, 83), tugging and tearing at it with fingers and teeth (Figures 44 and 45). This elasticity of the body is ultimately shown to have a breaking point – it can only stretch so far. However, the possibility of another approach to the body is examined in De Van's second film, which turns away from this impasse of the impossible grasp and opens instead onto the healing possibilities to be found around a mutual existence, a restorative return to plural being and con-fused bodies. As we will go on to see, this film also plays with the idea of elastic skin stretched to its limits, but this time the skin is allowed to reshape itself into another form.



Figure 44



Figure 45

L'autre ment - Ne te retourne pas

Ne te retourne pas tells the story of Jeanne (Sophie Marceau), a factual writer who is trying to write a novel but finds herself unable to tell a compelling story, in part because she is trying to describe her childhood yet remembers nothing from before she was eight years old. Gradually, Jeanne sees her world begin to fragment around her – the faces of her loved ones begin to change, as does her own. Eventually, her face becomes entirely different (and Marceau is replaced in the role by Monica Bellucci), and she travels to Italy in search of answers. She ultimately discovers that the real Jeanne died in a car accident and that she is in fact Jeanne's friend Rosa-Maria, having adopted Jeanne's personality and effaced her own after the crash. The film details Jeanne's move towards restoration of self, enacted through a process of con-fusion which restores her plurality.¹⁸

¹⁸ For *Ne te retourne pas*, De Van chose two of the most recognisable stars in French cinema to play her leads. While the 'version modeste initiale' (Guichard 2009) was apparently to have starred Emmanuelle Devos and Béatrice Dalle (with all her strong ties to the NFE), the film ultimately starred Sophie Marceau and Monica Bellucci. Marceau has been famous in France since starring as a child in *La boum* (Pinoteau 1980), and continues to be a lead actress to this day. She also crossed over into international stardom, notably appearing in *Braveheart* (Gibson 1995) and as the secondary Bond girl (the one who doesn't get to live happily at the end – and in this case also the surprise villain) in *The World Is Not Enough* (Apted 1999). Monica Bellucci made one of her earliest film appearances in

The opening of the film is constructed much like the later scenes of *Dans ma peau*, in that we are introduced to Jeanne as a composite being, her face hidden, constructed only through snatches of her body, often in reflection, as well as in photographs. We see parts of her body and their distorted reflections in various mirrors and reflective surfaces (taps, pipes, mirrors, tiles). Delaying our visual introduction to the character in this way immediately introduces the idea of the distorted Other which will dominate the film's narrative, and also places us at the location which I described at the end of *Dans ma peau*, with the world's assembled nature presented, its divisions and edges and junctures troublingly exposed as the 'edges, parts and zones' that Butchart described (2015, 235). Jeanne's disconnected limbs, her fragmented form, recall Esther's contortions in her hotel room, where she was also fragmented further by the photographs which surrounded her like shed skin. The fragility of the parts of the whole, unprotected and exposed, is demonstrated in the shot of Jeanne applying eyeliner, a shot which strongly echoes that of Esther pressing a knife to her eye in *Dans ma peau* (Figures 46 and 47). However, where Esther is dismantled throughout *Dans ma peau*, becoming finally a 'raw, chaotically subjective perceptual composite' (Palmer 2011, 88), Jeanne conversely begins this way, and *Ne te retourne pas* is her path to reconstruction, or even redemption.

Francis Ford Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992) and has gone on to appear in blockbusters such as the *Matrix* sequels (The Wachowski Brothers 2002; 2003) and *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* (Turteltaub 2010). Bellucci also went on to play the secondary Bond girl in *Spectre* (Mendes 2015). Bellucci is also, of course, one of the protagonists of Noé's *Irréversible*. This casting opened the film up to criticisms, with some accusing the Cannes festival 'd'avoir surtout souhaité organiser une belle montée des marches' in selecting the film (Morain 2009).



Figure 46



Figure 47

When we finally see Jeanne's face, she is sat before a wall of photo portraits, as though demonstrating the plurality from which she is (or will soon become) temporarily divorced. Tellingly, we also see the haunting presence of the 'ghost' of the young Rosa Maria beside her, almost ignored by Jeanne. Jeanne's meeting with her boss is filmed as shot/counter-shot, indicative of her separation in the same way that Esther's encounters in *Dans ma peau* are shot in this way once she begins her process of dissociation. Jeanne leaves the office building

through a dark tunnel with blinking light, another nowhere space such as those frequented by Esther in *Dans ma peau*, and also reminiscent of the strange tunnel which concluded that film's credits sequence. In much the same way as Esther becomes dislocated from society, distanced from her uncomprehending partner and friends, in *Dans ma peau*, early in *Ne te retourne pas* Jeanne suddenly finds everything around her unrecognisable, though we see no immediate catalyst for this. In photos and videos, her children and husband seem to have new faces, and in her place is a woman she does not recognise (Bellucci). Soon, half her face begins to look like this other woman. In one early scene, Jeanne searches through photographs of her family at home, checking for changes. This leads to a moment of horror as Jeanne stands in the flat, moving from light into darkness, her breath accentuated on the soundtrack – in much the same way as Esther's breathing is drawn to the fore in the swimming pool scene of *Dans ma peau* – and light appears from a seemingly impossible source. There appears here to be a tension, the frantic and distraught closeness which Nancy refers to, as Jeanne collides with the unstoppable, hypermobile fact of plural being from which she is divorced (Figures 48 – 50). The blurred edges of the flat, the impossible light and darkness, as with the tunnel which Jeanne traverses to leave her work at the start of the film, reflect the blurred places and figures which we see in *Dans ma peau*, which represent Esther's dissociation from the world. Jeanne, like Esther, is at this point an *être singulier*, frequently alone or filmed in shot/counter-shot and thus separated from the rest of the world, and her behaviour is equally regarded as somehow threatening and aberrant.



Figure 48



Figure 49



Figure 50

Possible reasons for Jeanne's dissociation are raised by her husband, Téo (Andrea di Stefano):

JEANNE: Je vois des changements partout. La table, et le reste. Partout. Même vos visages et vos yeux, tout change.

TEO: Celui qui reconnaît rien, c'est grave. C'est genre un problème cérébral, une lésion, une tumeur, je sais pas...

Here again we can see a way to understand this through Nancy's analysis of the intruder, a physical change – or the idea of one – which exposes the hitherto unseen inner workings of the body. While an explanation is found by the time we reach the conclusion which takes us away from the idea of physical damage (for the most part), this could have been a perfectly reasonable explanation in itself. The fragility of our human bodies, the way in which the slightest change can bring us simultaneously within and outside ourselves; all this is at play in De Van's films, just as it is in Nancy's work. Just as Nancy engages with the idea that physical damage creates an opening onto the nature of being, allowing a flood of traumatic meaninglessness to fall out of the wound, or perhaps to disappear into it, *Ne te retourne pas* too engages with the idea of the spacing that exists between bodies and within the body, and the anxiety that awareness of this inherent separation (an awareness brought about through intrusion) causes. Téo tells Jeanne, 't'es complètement ailleurs, t'es plus jamais avec nous'. This suggestion of a separation, a forced distancing, highlights the disruption of normalcy which occurs at the limit of bodily exploration, the limit from which Jeanne is slowly (and painfully) returning. Téo's exasperation and fear mirror Vincent's reaction to Esther in *Dans ma peau*. The idea of an 'ailleurs', of a place that is not automatically, inherently and confusionally 'avec nous' exposes the anxiety, the tension of exposure to these spacings which are normally elided, blurred out of sight, by con-fusion. They visit a psychiatrist, and Jeanne tells him that 'tout est tellement autrement'. The psychiatrist tells her that he understands her to be saying 'l'autre ment'. Jeanne expresses horror at this – who is this Other with which she is apparently sharing space? Of course, she will go on to discover this 'other' and to become once more con-fused with her. Her fear of the Other and the loss of self is overcome precisely through an acceptance of plurality.

Ne te retourne pas is distinguished from *Dans ma peau*, and less overtly shocking, in that the bodily disruption is expressed primarily via computer graphic special effects, instead of fake blood and prosthetics. This disruption begins with the eyes, as her family and eventually Jeanne herself begin to alter, one eye changing colour. The bloodless violence of Jeanne's scene of total transformation (where Sophie Marceau fully becomes Monica Bellucci), the surrealism and strangeness, makes it a direct point of comparison with the central restaurant scene in *Dans ma peau*. Both scenes occur almost at the midway point of the film and represent a fundamental change. Both scenes push the central idea of bodily metamorphosis

to its limit. In the case of *Dans ma peau*, the surreal division of Esther's forearm from the rest of her body serves to reinforce the detachment she feels from the people around her, from society itself. Whereas most of the scenes of gore in *Dans ma peau* use explicitly realistic representations of corporeal violence, with both the visuals and the sound aiming to replicate recognisable physical damage, the restaurant scene rather takes a humorously unrealistic approach. Esther's arm becomes a mannequin's arm. The end where it should be dripping ichor is instead flat, white, plastic, sterile. In *Ne te retourne pas*, this central scene is equally surreal. Jeanne sits in the corner of the room, twitching, uncomfortable. Jeanne touches her face as her skin begins to change shape (Figure 51).¹⁹ There is something in her manner which is reminiscent of the scenes of transformation in werewolf films, for example the pain David expresses in *An American Werewolf in London* (Landis 1981), or Ginger's skin-stretching moments of transition in *Ginger Snaps* (Fawcett 2000). Indeed, the entire film plays with typical horror film tropes: vampires, werewolves, ghosts and the living dead. 'Dans les films d'horreur, c'est la morte qui revient harceler la vivante,' notes François-Guillaume Lorrain in his review of the film. 'Ici, c'est la vivante (Monica Bellucci) qui récupère son apparence aux dépens de la morte (Sophie Marceau)' (2009). Lorrain's review is entitled 'Le bal des vampires', and it is interesting that there should be a reference to vampirism as, in terms of Nancy's rejection of outright fusion, the figure of the vampire is terrifying precisely because its infectious bite represents a complete fusion, and thus an overwriting of what was there originally. This sort of replacement is what Jeanne fears, the Other who comes to take her place – rather than another who shares it.

¹⁹ De Van here uses a classic morphing effect of the sort which was popularised by James Cameron in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), before becoming ubiquitous in American genre films of the early 1990s (a useful point of reference here might also be the *Doctor Who* television film [Sax 1996], wherein the hitherto used cross-fades or Scene-Synch effects were replaced with computer-generated morphing for the regeneration of Sylvester McCoy into Paul McGann).



Figure 51

The imperilled body in *Ne te retourne pas* once again stands at odds with Karine Chevalier's description of post-extreme 'violence intériorisée' (2016). The body here is still a site of traumatic encounter and of disturbing malleability. There are a series of analogue scenes which draw the imperilled body of Esther and that of Jeanne together. Consider the introduction to Jeanne, piecemeal, in the opening credits sequence. Her contorted limbs, or so they appear from the angles chosen, resemble Esther's contorted body in the second half of *Dans ma peau*. Equally, as Jeanne approaches the truth of her situation, her body literally begins to warp. This leads us back to the elasticity of skin proposed by Palmer in relation to the previous film, with the internal struggle for identity, or selfhood, expressed externally in the manipulated skin. First, she rolls up her sleeve and her arm appears misshapen, lumpen. Later, after she arrives in Lecce (the location of her original traumatic break), she begins to limp. Finally, prefigured by her distorted appearance in a mirror, her entire body twists into unnatural forms, as she appears to shrink down to the size of a child (Figure 52). She enters a room which then starts to stretch upwards, making her appear even smaller and also appearing to trap her (Figure 53). Jeanne climbs around the room, like a Borrower (Norton 1956) or Alice (Carroll 1865) or Hop o' My Thumb²⁰, until she finally pulls herself up and sees

²⁰ There are other interesting links which we can consider between this film and the others we discuss in this thesis, beyond the central concept of fusion and reconstructive compromise. It is interesting to note that De Van incorporates fairy tale elements into the film. Between 2009 and 2011, a number of television films were

her reflection – she is the little girl that we saw earlier in the film and have continued to glimpse throughout; the girl who we now understand to be Rosa Maria.

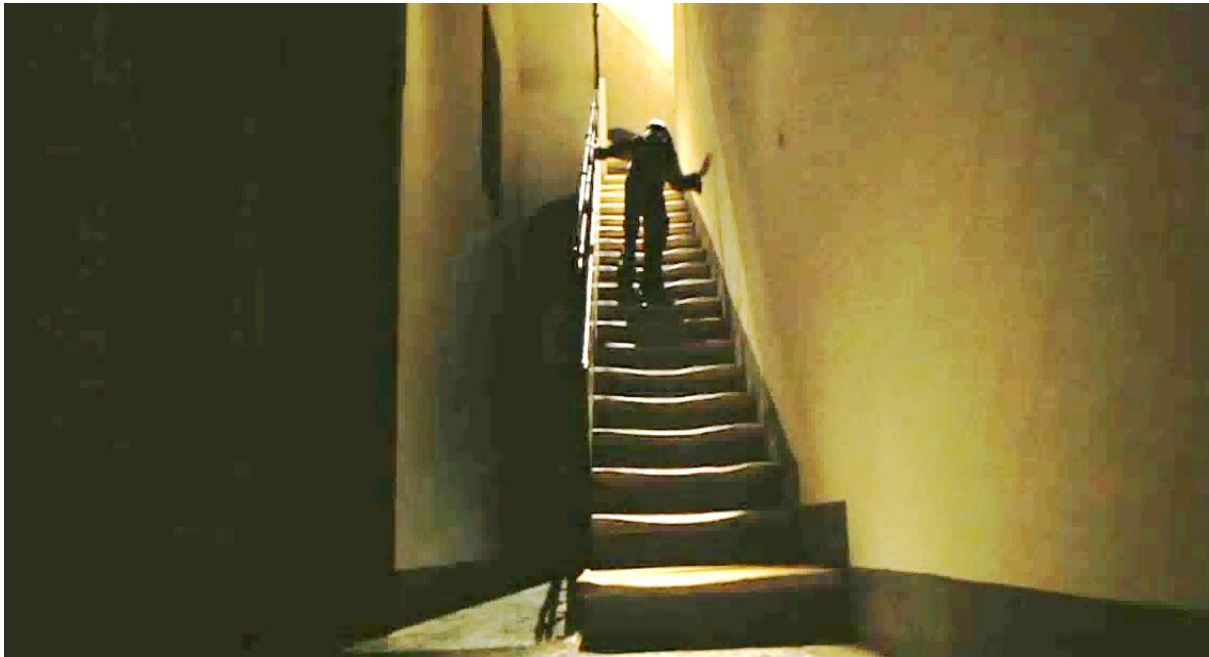


Figure 52

produced by French/German television channel Arte which updated a series of fairy tales. Catherine Breillat made *Barbe bleue* (2009) and *La belle endormie* (2011), while De Van made *Le petit poucet* (2011), aka *Hop O' My Thumb*. It is clear that these films should be examined in greater detail, as they can also offer fascinating perspectives on the transition away from the NFE. In *Ne te retourne pas* the fairy tale elements are not of paramount importance to the narrative, but it is nevertheless interesting to consider them as part of the whole effect of the film. We have already mentioned the werewolf-like transformation sequences. While the werewolf per se is not necessarily part of the fairy tale canon, the idea of wolves in people's clothing, anthropomorphised wolves, means that there is still a proximity here. We can also look at the trope of the wicked stepmother, which De Van touches on briefly. The fluid nature of identity through the film, the changing roles of the characters, means that we cannot be sure of who is a mother and who is not. Jeanne is initially comforted by the fact that Nadia still looks just as she remembers her, making her mother's ultimate transformation all the more upsetting. That she is laughing as this occurs, suggesting the sort of cackling crone figure familiar from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (Hand, et al 1937), for example, serves to bolster this comparison. Moving away from classic fairy tales and their modern interpretations, we can also draw comparisons with Lewis Carroll's modern fairy tale, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). The scenes where Jeanne shrinks down to child size and navigates around a seemingly enormous room echo Alice's adventures after she drinks the Drink Me potion. There is also a visual reference as Jeanne eats an apple whilst returning to normal proportions, just as Alice ate the Eat Me cake (Carroll 1865). As we will go on to explore in the next chapter, Alexandre Bustillo and Julien Maury similarly moved from a film which subjected the body to an incredible level of brutality, its horror almost too immediate, in *A L'intérieur*, to a film which replaces this formal and thematic violence with a far more comfortable, self-aware and fan-pleasing film experience in *Livide* (2011). The latter film's old dark house, with tales of buried treasure and an ancient and terrifying matriarchal figure, also plays heavily with the sort of fairy tale iconography that *Ne te retourne pas* does. While I will not offer an in-depth analysis herein, it is nevertheless interesting that Bustillo and Maury's third film, *Aux yeux des vivants* (2014), goes even further into the fairy tale space through using child protagonists, and initially placing them into the deliberately heightened reality of a film studio backlot.



Figure 53

This idea of an internal struggle being depicted physically reflects the increasingly visible signs of damage on Esther's skin in *Dans ma peau*, as well as bringing us back to Nancy, and his narrative of the development of his own physical philosophy in *L'Intrus*. 'Quel étrange moi!' Nancy exclaims (2000, 35), confronted with his own separation anxiety. His heart transplant, or even the mere idea of it, left him open, unsealed. This uncomfortable confrontation with the self, or some constructed idea of the self, leaves a psychological opening. De Van's filmography engages with this point of tension, this imaginary or unknowable junction where mind and body meet, or where we try to think the body. Nancy highlights this location in saying 'il y a là une ouverture par où passe un flux incessant d'étrangeté' (*ibid*). The cutting of the NFE, the forcing open of the body, attempts to draw meaning from the opening, but only succeeds in closing off any flow of sense. In *Ne te retourne pas*, Jeanne is facing a complete crisis of identity, coming up against an entirely other identity which she cannot comprehend, and losing touch with the world she thought she knew. This reflects the way that Esther becomes detached from her world, unable to function in the way that she did before her injury, her opening. However, where Esther's eventual fate is ambiguous and seemingly unhappy, or at least ambivalent, Jeanne will go on to con-fuse with this other existence, to reach a compromise between the two, a con-fusion which allows for both realities to continue without the need for any sort of violent rupture. The open and receptive body becomes the

site of restoration; acceptance of openness, rather than forcing of an opening which ultimately closes down any possibility of sense.

It is also important to consider another visual analogue which presents itself late on in *Ne te retourne pas* and which provides a contrast with *Dans ma peau*. The only blood which is seen in *Ne te retourne pas* comes very late in the film, where we witness the car crash which killed Jeanne and led to Rosa Maria's traumatic amnesia and displacement of identity. After a truck jack-knives in front of the car that Jeanne's mother is driving, we see the girls violently shaken by the crash, and then see blood running down Jeanne's arm. Rosa Maria holds her hand, almost seems to be caressing it, and the bloody contact of flesh resembles Esther's first encounter with her wound, as she touches herself in shock, as well as her later caressing of her self-inflicted openings (Figures 54 and 55). The appearance of this fleshly, slippery encounter in *Ne te retourne pas* immediately precedes Jeanne's reconstruction or restoration of self, whereas for Esther it is the start of her dissociation.



Figure 54



Figure 55

As Jeanne learns the truth behind her condition, she comes to terms with her plurality. We see a vision of Jeanne and Rosa Maria playing happily in the past, until Rosa Maria looks worriedly at Jeanne, who is still laughing. We then fade to Rosa Maria, that is to say the body that Jeanne has worn unawares since the accident, writing at her desk. The way in which the final scene of *Ne te retourne pas* evolves is a strong demonstration of con-fusion. First, we see only Rosa Maria. It is clear from her expression that she is happier than she has been throughout the film, that her reunion with her family in the previous scene has been successful. The reunion scene was ambiguous in the presence of Jeanne, her ghostly presence sharing a look with Rosa Maria. It appears at first, then, in the final scene that Jeanne has been exorcised, that her excision from Rosa Maria has restored normality. However, the camera then shifts to show Rosa Maria from behind, and we see that she is sat beside someone who is wearing the same dress. We then see from the front that Rosa Maria is sat beside Jeanne. They share a look, one of complicity and acceptance, demonstrating that a compromise has been reached. They are separate, yet sit close together, maintaining a contact. They write together, their hands crossing over. The camera moves around to film them from the side, and they change position slightly until their two faces are together, and they are both one and two, singular and plural (Figures 56 – 59). Contrast this with the way we first see Esther in *Dans ma peau*, sharing her space with her Vincent as she types at her computer, and once again it becomes clear that these films can usefully be juxtaposed as

mirrors to one another, with the restoration of respectful con-fusion appearing at the far end of the spectrum from the intrusive deconstruction that the NFE enacts upon the body.



Figure 56



Figure 57



Figure 58



Figure 59

This conclusion seems to be an acceptance of the status quo, an opening or a reopening onto the world *as is*, rather than the inevitably doomed attempt to push into *somewhere else* that collapses sense at the conclusion of *Dans ma peau*, and many other films of the NFE. This is perhaps part of the problem that these later films face in terms of philosophical engagement – in drawing the film to a close within the parameters of the world, a ‘happy ending’, the traumatic openness of the NFE is replaced with a more traditional conclusion. In removing

the aggressively confrontational aspect of the films, the *violence du cinéma* as Chevalier calls it, have these films made themselves too innocuous, incapable of inciting the sort of reaction which was reserved for their extreme forbears? Quandt describes the directors of the NFE as having 'largely moved on to more refined or mature work, or returned to home ground' (2011, 212). Obviously, we can assert that 'refined' and 'mature' are subjective judgements, and part of this project is an argument for the value of these works, but the loss of the shock factor that in many ways predicates the NFE is clear. We might also contest that times have changed. Where Noé used to incite polemics, now he is criticised for being boring. It is also true that Noé himself has made conscious decisions to shift his focus. Where *Irréversible* was a brutal assault on the spectator, *Love* (2015) contains a sex scene orchestrated to the strains of music from *Profondo Rosso* (Argento 1975). This shift reflects what we have seen in this chapter and what we will go on to see elsewhere: Noé's films have gone from being dangerous political weapons to cinephile-pleasing, consciously arty efforts. Whether or not the later films can ever have the same impact as the NFE did, and still does, it is still important to try and understand them and find thematic markers which unite them. Where De Van's first film suggests a destructive rupture, her second rather indicates that there is a way to negotiate potentially destructive breaks with social norms, mores, or even the very construction of the self, and still survive, even thrive, on the other side. This compromise that De Van looks toward is explicitly represented as a con-fusional experience, drawing two sides of a personality, depicted as two separate bodies, together, and blurring their lines of distinction. This restoration, this return to plurality, is as overwhelmingly positive as the rebirth depicted in *Enter the Void*. Where the extreme films lead inexorably to an ending, the post-extreme films rather offer a becoming. This returns us to Nancy and the importance of presence: 'la présence n'est pas ailleurs que dans le « venir en présence » [...] nous accédons à un accès' (1996, 32). The openings are restored, we are invited to engage in the process of becoming, just as the protagonists are shown to be co-existing and thus continuing to be. In the skin of her heroines, De Van interrogates the possibility of singular plurality across these two films, and ultimately works her way towards a restorative and hopeful conclusion. While the films of the NFE, as we have seen, frequently conclude with a direct address to the camera, an ambiguous plea or challenge, the final shot of *Ne te retourne pas* rather sees two bodies confused, the divide between them hidden, looking away from the spectator and towards a future which seems happy and, most of all, entirely possible. What is important here is the

idea of acceptance. Where the idea of 'extremity' suggests that a boundary is being tested, pushed against, the post-extreme films are less concerned with testing these limits, and more engaged with positive actions towards reparation and restoration of their protagonists through con-fusion.

Chapter 4

Insides and Outsides: The Imperilled Body in Julien Maury and Alexandre Bustillo's *À l'intérieur* and *Livide*

Having examined the concept of con-fusion in relation to Nancy's approach to cinema, through Gaspar Noé's films, and in relation to his position on singular plurality, interrogated through Marina De Van's films, in this chapter we will demonstrate the ultimate strength of Nancy's ontology for the theorisation of the post-extreme films. Here we will use Julien Maury and Alexandre Bustillo's first and second films, *À l'intérieur* and *Livide*, to navigate beyond *l'image en saignée aveuglante* and toward con-fusion in relation to what is arguably the most important Nancean concept: the body. Indeed, as we have seen throughout this thesis, every engagement with Nancy ultimately touches on a 'body'. Whether this is the body of film, with its peculiar, pellicular flesh, or the continuity of bodies touching bodies of which existence itself is, for Nancy, comprised, we are always returned to this point, which marks the beginning and end of Nancy's ontology. Before I offer up an analysis of Maury and Bustillo's work in support of the shift from graphic demolition of the body towards the fruitful, kind restoration of it, I will outline the specific interaction of the body, as described by Nancy, and con-fusion.

As we have seen throughout this thesis, Nancy's ontology is an embodied one. Indeed, there is no ontology without the body, as existence is predicated upon the existence of bodies – '*l'ontologie du corps est l'ontologie même*' (1992, 17 – his italics). With his focus on the body and his rejection of transcendence, Nancy interiorises the soul but he does not remove it entirely. Rather, he makes the soul our view upon our body : '*l'âme est la différence du corps à lui-même, le rapport de dehors qu'un corps est pour lui-même*' (2000, 114). As Jean-Marie Roux asserts, '[Nancy] refuse tout autant le dualisme qui oppose corps et âme que le monisme qui les unifie' (2011, 139). Nancy takes rather, according to Roux, '*une position qui ne confond pas l'âme et le corps, mais ne cantonne pas pour autant celui-ci aux basses sphères auxquelles une telle séparation le condamne souvent*' (*ibid*). The body and soul are located as connected but eternally spaced, together yet apart, neither ever able to fully comprehend the other and yet inherently linked to it. This sounds confusing, and certainly points to a state of con-fusion. Nancy's parallel refusal of monism and dualism centres his thinking upon the body, which is

to say the multiple body composed of body and look upon body (otherwise, Nancy's soul), and forces upon this embodied ontology a sense of motion, with states upheld not through a rigidly defined structure but rather through constant transitions. Negotiating between these poles of immanence and transcendence, Nancy draws his ontology around and through trans-immanent bodies. His is a fluid ontology, one of flux in which and through which we exist. We have already seen how this state of being can be understood, with a series of incomplete fusions which form the state of con-fusion which we exist in – the unbroken continuity of bodies. This movement is expressed through openings – openings of the body, openings onto the world. It is little wonder that Nancy is drawn to cinema, composed as it is of constant motion, of a pregnant kinesis that exposes motion even when all appears still. We are in a constant state of negotiation, then, spaced from ourselves and from others, approaching, con-fusing and withdrawing.

As we have also seen throughout this thesis, there is a traumatic aspect to an ontology of the body. The necessary openness of our bodies, the flux in which we exist and of which we are composed, requires a startling dismantling of our sense of ourselves as individuals. Our physicality is, upon close inspection, fraught with tensions. These tensions Nancy exposes and explores in *L'Intrus*, and we can discern the negotiation with and navigation of these tensions throughout his body of work. Firstly, for Nancy, even writing the body is impossible:

Les « corps écrits » – incisés, gravés, tatoués, cicatrisés – sont des corps précieux, préservés, réservés comme les codes dont ils sont les glorieux engrammes : mais enfin, ce n'est pas le corps moderne, ce n'est pas ce corps que nous avons jeté, là, devant nous, et qui vient à nous, nu, seulement nu, et d'avance *excrit* de toute écriture (2000, 13)

Bodies are written out, reached towards, but they are never truly grasped, never actually 'here'. Nancy offers up the image of the unending flow of bodies, that corporeal flux which we return to again and again when bringing his ontology to bear upon films which revel in corporeality. 'Il n'y a plus qu'une ligne in-finie, le trait de l'écriture elle-même excrite, à suivre infiniment brisé, partagé à travers la multitude des corps, ligne de partage avec tous ses lieux : points de tangence, touches, intersections, dislocations' (2000, 14). We can touch and share in the extended body of bodies, the flow of existence, but we cannot locate ourselves as discrete bodies within it. The body is everything and nothing, or rather a *something* that is always beyond our reach. The body is at once a closed, protected space and an open access

whose edges blur into the space around them, or rather the *bodies* around them as space is itself embodied – giving on to the unbroken continuity of bodies which is the world according to Nancy. The body is, for Nancy, a space where an impenetrable togetherness is in constant tension with a penetrable, fraught separateness – think back to the hidden junctures that the NFE seeks to expose. Bodies are all around us, within us and indeed exactly *us*, yet our bodies are never within our grasp. ‘Le corps n’est pas déchu mais tout en limite, en bord externe, extrême, et que rien ne referme’ (2000, 14). This piecemeal existence, with the worryingly fragmentary state it suggests, is contained within the con-fusion. Con-fusion masks the assembly, makes it ‘sans histoire’ (2000a, 16). We see Nancy gesturing towards such a state of grace when he describes bodies as ‘communauté des corps, exaspérés par l’inscription, rassérénés dans l’excription’ (2000, 51). It is exactly in the giving up of the body, ‘hoc est enim corpus meum’ (2000, 7), that the body is secured, made safe. The body is not held, or in some way selfishly withheld, but rather it is thrown out, offered up into the world.

Nancy’s words in *Corpus* seem to strike out a warning – ‘deux corps ne peuvent occuper simultanément le même lieu’ (1996, 51) – and yet, through his own admission, there can be a moment where the lines of distinction become blurred, the difference or spacing invisible, the bodies con-fused. Remember Nancy’s encounter with ‘l’arbre vert’ in *Making Sense*, in which he outlines this tension of intimacy and separateness: ‘je suis en lui, je passe en lui, je me confonds avec lui – jusqu’au point où cette confusion s’interdit elle-même puisqu’elle résonne en moi précisément comme approche d’une intimité inimaginable’ (2011, 209). The duality of the body as both a whole and a hole, as the fullness of our sense and equally an ever-open wound which cannot be closed, is at play here. The body is present yet absent. Nancy describes the body as collapsing in on itself, absorbed into the black hole of its own existence, falling ‘dans l’abîme où le trou absorbe jusqu’à ses bords’ (2000, 66). This echoes his approaches to singular plural being and the fluid tension of cinema, which we have already considered. The body is at once threatened by exposure, the impossible intimacy that Nancy describes as part of the making sense process where we find ourselves trying to hold on to our sense of wholeness whilst slipping unconsciously into greenness, yet also constructed around a necessary openness, or opening, which both extends outwards towards and welcomes in the other. Con-fusion is that blurred linking material which appears to connect distinct bodies, that which makes them indistinct. It protects us from the dangerous, worrying

edges that are in constant friction around and inside us. That way lies madness – or perhaps madness is our escape from it. For Nancy, bodies are inviolable and ‘la seule entrée du corps [...] c’est un accès de folie’ (2000, 52). This resonates with the themes which we have explored so far. We are part of an unending mass of bodies touching bodies, a conflation of beings which might in itself be seen as traumatic – consider Esther’s view of the blurred mass of people in *Dans ma peau* – but at the same time this weight of bodies, this crush, this flow, blurs our edges, cushions us from the terror of the limit at which we exist (the ‘folie’ that Nancy describes – where to enter into the body requires the complete loss of meaning).

In the films which I will discuss in this chapter, the openness of the body to the other is of paramount importance. In Maury and Bustillo’s first film, *À l’intérieur*, the filmmakers present the destructive encounter of a closed body, the body constructed as one of hermetic oneness and thus dangerously divided – wholeness creating division because it calls for singular-ness, a singularity apart, the *être singulier* which we saw in the previous chapter as antithetical to Nancy’s thinking of the world. When edges are defined, when borders become fixed, the body loses its malleability and becomes rigid, prone to snapping or bursting. *À l’intérieur* is a study in fragility, its central, ripped-from-the-headlines concept so terrible in its brutal intimacy, to borrow Palmer’s descriptor. Their second film, *Livide*, then navigates beyond this dangerous division, this threatening singularity, and moves instead towards a positive reformulation of the body as being inscribed into an unending continuity which elides edges and finds positivity in plurality, examining how an intrusion is not necessarily a destructive event but can instead be read as the opening up of a space for reconstruction. Nancy’s claim in Denis’s *Vers Nancy* that ‘un intrus est toujours menaçant’ (2002) is not overwritten by this more positive mode. As we will see, this event is one of menace and danger and damage, but it is in the response to this damage that the latter film moves towards reparation rather than rupture. The violence of the earlier film gives way to a con-fusion which obscures the dangerous, defined borders and instead reinstates the possibility of plurality.

A l’intérieur

Described variously as ‘un divertissement brillamment abominable’ (Carrière 2007), ‘sinistre, piteusement écrit et abondant en surenchères glauques improbables’ (De Bruyn 2007) or

simply 'primale' (Télérama), *À l'intérieur* is one of the most recognisable post-millennial French horror films, alongside Pascal Laugier's *Martyrs*. Both have received American remakes, in both cases suffering from the alteration of the conclusion to provide more positive endings. As we have seen throughout this thesis, nothing could be further from the necessarily destructive trajectory of the NFE. *À l'intérieur* sees Sarah (Alysson Paradis), a widowed expectant mother, spending Christmas Eve alone in her house, due to be induced the next day. Her home is invaded by a mysterious, predatory woman known only as 'La Femme' (Béatrice Dalle), who attempts to forcibly remove Sarah's baby.²¹ Various visitors to the house are violently dispatched, and ultimately La Femme achieves a pyrrhic victory as she takes possession of the baby just at the moment she appears to die.

Released in 2007, *À l'intérieur* came too late for James Quandt to address in 'Flesh and Blood'. Later, he would refer to it in his 2011 return to the subject, noting that it had been assimilated into lists of NFE films. Quandt returned once more to the subject in 2016 and suggested that there was a concurrent new wave of French horror into which a number of the films fit:

Critical distance allowed by over a decade – an eternity in contemporary culture – reveals some of the article's obvious faults, including its confusion of the specific genre of French horror, which quickly established its own distinctive sanguinary terroir, with its art-house confraternity, an understandable imprecision further complicated by the release of such films as Pascal Laugier's *Martyrs* and Alexandre Bustillo and Julien Maury's *À l'intérieur*.

As Coulthard and Birks state:

A number of French horror films sometimes associated with new extremism, such as *Haute Tension* (Aja 2003), *Martyrs* (Laugier 2008), and *À l'intérieur* (Bustillo & Maury 2007), do not fit within the conventional definition of art cinema and are therefore better understood as belonging to a new French wave of horror' (2016, 474)

Given that we are already dealing with somewhat arbitrary nomenclature, however, it seems sensible to keep the NFE titling for these films. Quandt's observation that the release of *À l'intérieur* and *Martyrs* complicates matters suggests that they should be discussed alongside

²¹ There have been a number of cases of foetal abduction or Caesarean kidnapping. Given the December setting, Maury and Bustillo might have been inspired in this instance by the Bobbie Jo Stinnett/Lisa Montgomery case (Hollingsworth 2004).

other NFE films, and even using Quandt's initial descriptors of the trend, these horror films correspond to the sort of development he sought to describe.²² Where Quandt pointed to the films' propensity to 'wade in rivers of viscera and spumes of sperm' and the filmmakers' apparent desire to 'fill each frame with flesh, nubile or gnarled, and subject it to all manner of penetration, mutilation, and defilement' (2004, 127-128), *À l'intérieur* certainly delivers: it drips with blood, skin and surfaces becoming slick or exploding with it. As Stéphanie Belpêche observes, the film 's'autorise une brutalité extrême qui peut donner la nausée' (2007). Though the initial instances of violence are geared to shock, the eventual Grand Guignol torrent of gore actually has a desensitising effect, distancing us from the true horror of the situation.²³ Ignoring *À l'intérieur*'s merits as a horror film, of which it has many, we can evidently point to its success as a New Extreme work. The images seen on screen are new: we have not seen this sort of peril before. This was problematic for a number of commentators, with Scott Tobias noting that 'there's something unseemly and grossly manipulative about treating the baby like some helpless variation on the "Final Girl" in a *Halloween* knockoff' (2011). This sort of reaction is familiar from the angry, emotional responses to NFE films. It is undeniable that the idea of a pregnant victim is powerfully charged. It might not be the first time that a pregnant woman has been placed in jeopardy on film – the film *Aswang* (Martin and Poltermann 1994), for example, deals with a legendary Filipino demon which feeds on unborn children, and of course there is *Rosemary's Baby* (Polanski 1968) – but the manner of representation here is shockingly direct. In describing the NFE, Quandt spoke of Bruno Dumont 'offhandedly show[ing] us forbidden things' (2004, 131) and this is certainly the case in *À l'intérieur*. Stéphanie Belpêche notes that '[Maury and Bustillo] ont osé toucher au tabou ultime: la femme enceinte' (2007), while Carrière observes that 'Julien Maury et Alexandre Bustillo ne sont pas les premiers Français à se frotter à cet exercice typiquement américain, mais ils sont les premiers à oser, comme leurs modèles anglo-saxons, à aller jusqu'au bout de

²² There are grounds to explore these comparable trends and the politics of naming alongside the work of observers currently trying to claim a new socially aware mode in contemporary American horror cinema, frequently described as 'elevated horror'. This is something which horror critics and fans tend to reject, pointing to a rich history of socially aware horror which has existed since at least the late 1960s (Bradley 2019, and many others)

²³ This potential problem was quickly addressed by Jaume Balagueró, director of Spanish horror film *REC* (2007), who suggested that a subtler remake would actually be a more effective horror film, stating that 'his' remake 'would accent the terror of the pregnancy situation more than the gore' (Jones 2008). This remake, the script co-written by Balagueró, finally appeared in 2016 as *Inside* (Vivas), though Balagueró has distanced himself from the film.

leur propos' (2007), suggesting an extremity of vision from the directors, at least in the French context – though arguably none of the American slasher films cited as inspirations can match the film for visceral horror.

The particular power of *À l'intérieur* comes in large part from the manner in which our spectatorial gaze is made intrusive. The pre-credits scene begins within a womb. We are trespassing; we are seeing that which we should not be able to see – 'forbidden things' indeed, to return to Quandt's description of the sort of images that Dumont brought to the screen in *La Vie de Jésus* (1997). We should not be able to see with our own eyes the actual foetus, and especially not the endangered foetus, yet this is where the film takes us again and again, showing the trauma that an unborn baby is experiencing alongside its mother (Figure 60). The use of an ultrasound scan in the scene following the opening credits codifies the transgression by demonstrating the way in which we are used to seeing a foetus, via the machinery of modern medicine (Figure 61). Between these two perspectives on a foetus, the credits appear over a multiplicity of images overlaid upon each other. We see blood washing across the screen, thick sinuous strands of ichor, with limbs emerging from them, and what appear to be ultrasound images of a foetus: 'indeterminate surfaces, which are at once familiar and strange' (Reardon 2012, 19). These images speak to the forthcoming violence, alerting us to the gory nature of proceedings to come, yet they also bring into the open the inherent violence of the very act of giving birth itself, as well as the hidden gore within us all which is exposed through violence. We might equally see these images as representative of the Nancean flow of existence as an unending continuity of bodies, with the distinct body parts falling back into an indistinct fleshy mass, just as much as they call to the interior of the body and the matrix of the womb (Figure 62). This mass of indistinct limbs also offers up a sense of con-fusion, the shared space standing in contrast the violent detachment which we will see later in the film. The font of the credits, white over the red, drips and twists before disappearing, something flowing yet rooted. Finally, the title appears in red, a messy spill or stain.



Figure 60



Figure 61



Figure 62

There is also something of the forbidden about the tiny hands that we see, perhaps unintentionally but certainly unavoidably calling to mind the images of aborted fetuses used by pro-life campaigners. It is certainly true that, while the narrative is centred around the desire for a living child, the film is constructed visually as abortive. The house can be read as a womb-space, but it is a womb that is under threat. While there is indeed something amniotic about it, with the soft lighting suggesting permeable membranes rather than walls, the bodies within it are unwanted, carelessly and violently disposed of. There is also the visual of the knitting needle brandished as a weapon, a thematic marker for backstreet abortion as much as it is also a clear visual reference to *Halloween* (Carpenter 1978). That such foetal images are taboo, shocking, usually hidden or used with strong political intent suggests that they supersede the fact of the images themselves – as I will go on to argue, the fact that we are seeing a foetus, and logically the inside of a pregnant woman, is less important than the fact that we are seeing *bodies*.

Hard Bodies/Soft Borders

With respect to this idea of transgressed borders, it is notable that many of the French reviewers refer to the 'huis clos' aspect of the film (Malausa, Gester, Regnier, et al). The idea of boundaries is clear – the film retreats into the house after a few early scenes outside, after

which the heroine does not leave. Olivier asserts that the film's tagline ('ouvre moi ta porte ... que je t'ouvre le ventre') 'evokes the fear of pierced borders at its most primal level' (2007). To me, this idea of intrusion, of pierced borders, takes supremacy over the fact of the foetal abduction at the heart of the film. Where Olivier's reading moves away from my own is in his attempt to apply an explicitly political dimension to the carnage within the house. Olivier ties the events of the film to the 2005 Ile-de-France riots and the questions of cultural identity that were discussed surrounding them, whereas for me these concepts are not of particular importance in themselves.²⁴ While the riots return throughout the film, their political weight never touches upon the central tension. If anything, the riots occurring offscreen simply explain the absence of police for much of the film. It is the house, and the events within, that are of foremost importance, and thus the external politics disappear into the purely physical struggle which occurs between Sarah and La Femme. As Wilson observes, 'Sarah is the intersection where the definition of interiors and exteriors is interrogated and destroyed' (2015, 96). Sarah becomes hardened in this way, crystallised. Hers becomes a rigid body that can (and must) be destroyed, her borders transgressed. At the same time, the downstairs of the house is rendered fluid, liminal and uncertainly defined. As stated previously, this stands in contrast to the bodies within the house whose edges are very clearly defined...and defiled. While Wilson asserts that the house is demonstrative of Sarah's isolation, her construction of a 'safe place that is defined by the separation of herself and the outside world' (2015, 98-99), the house is anything but safe. It is a threatening, nebulous space that is penetrated over and over again. La Femme walks in, unseen, as the police tend to Sarah, reappearing from the shadows as a ghostly, invasive phantom. The subsequent ill-fated visitors all move through the rooms of the house and are brutally killed. The house becomes a liminal space where borders disappear into smoky haze, and people seem to be able to shift through the darkness. Consider the first time that we see La Femme after she has succeeded in penetrating the house, which has hitherto deflected her attempt at intrusion (she breaks a window, but the cracked glass does not shatter). Sarah sits on the sofa, watching the television. We see an

²⁴ Olivier does suggest an interesting descriptor for *À l'intérieur* and other associated films such as *Il/s* (Moreau and Palud 2006) and *Frontière(s)* (Gens 2007), calling them 'French border horror'. While such nomenclature is unnecessary, given the number of trend descriptors already available to us, it does underline the fact that borders are an essential consideration of the NFE – as indeed they are in Nancy's ontology.

unclear shape appear behind her, out of her field of vision. La Femme walks to stand over Sarah and then retreats slowly until we can see only her pale face seeming to hover in the darkness in the deep space of the house (Figure 63). There is a clear antecedent to this scene in *Halloween*, where the face of Michael Myers (a character referred to by name in the film's dialogue but in the credits only as 'the Shape', as deliciously ambiguous a name as 'La Femme') appears in a dark doorway before attacking a traumatised Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis) (Figure 64).



Figure 63



Figure 64

Later, too, we see characters stalked by La Femme in a manner which is logically impossible. The house is small, yet they appear to be lost within it, preyed upon by the woman – who possesses a seemingly supernatural ability to appear and disappear at will. Wilson gestures towards the worryingly porous nature of the house when she discusses the scene wherein Sarah has a nightmare of her baby bursting from her mouth: ‘for Sarah, this scene points to anxieties towards her own permeability and position as a boundary between the outside world (that her baby will ultimately be born into) and her womb (where her baby currently resides’ (2015, 98) (Figure 65). That this scene is followed by the arrival of La Femme, knocking at the door and threatening Sarah before striking the glass in her patio doors, demonstrates the link between house and body – both are worryingly violable (Figure 66): the crack in the glass, the scissors in the flesh.



Figure 65



Figure 66

The brutality of the dream sequence calls to mind the maternity-subverting chest-births of the *Alien* series,²⁵ and serves as a precursor to the outlandish violence to follow. For once the

²⁵ It might well be unintentional, but this sequence also strongly echoes the monstrous birth through a face that occurs in *Alien Resurrection* (Jeunet 1997) – which is oddly enough also the specific film from that series that Austin chooses to use in comparison to the bared teeth in *Trouble Every Day* (2012, 107).

violence begins, the series of ruptures, the brutal collision of bodies (and objects!), continues unabated until the finale. There is a dissonance in the confrontation of the unbroken continuity of bodies that Nancy describes, the flow of flesh without borders, with the messy, gushing innards which are on show throughout *À l'intérieur*. For Nancy, 'le corps n'est ni substance, ni phénomène, ni chair, ni signification. Mais l'être-excrit' (2000, 20). There is no place for the blood and ichor that spill forth, the excretions – they are written out as much as the body itself is written out. For meaning to be maintained in the unending continuity of bodies, borders must be elided. Bodies must be spaced from themselves, observed from a distance by themselves in the trans-immanent embodiment of the soul discussed earlier. The pierced, dismembered, fragmented body that is on show in this film, then, represents the end of sense: the messy, unintelligible rush that escapes the wound. This rush, this outpouring, drowns meaning in a deluge – *l'image en saignée aveuglante*. Once again, we might think of this through Chamarette's formulation of the 'ungraspable body' – a grasp does not equal a grip, and in grasping we inevitably slip and fall away from the body.

If we stay with the idea of the house as a body – as representative of Sarah's body – then there is much to be said about La Femme's engagement with it. She tests the limits of the house in cracking a window, then she slips in, unnoticed, exploiting a temporary weakness as the police leave the door open. She rests in the shadows, only emerging once Sarah has gone to bed. La Femme enters the room and watches her, then goes and takes scissors and rubbing alcohol from the bathroom before returning to sit on Sarah's bed. All of these actions are undertaken in the most careless way – La Femme does not move delicately, rather she opens and closes cupboards with a sort of frenzy and slams doors behind her (Figure 67). The horror in these scenes is not from the silent, creeping figure which we saw in earlier scenes – the woman who stands imperceptibly in the park, the dark figure on the doorstep, the silent stranger sliding through the shadows. This horror comes from the act of invasion, the perversion of going through someone else's belongings and the idea that someone might go through ours. Here we see the directors locating the film in a tradition of cuckoo-in-the-nest thrillers. We might point to the machinations of Rebecca De Mornay in *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* (Hanson 1992), or indeed Marina De Van in *Regarde la mer* (Ozon 1997). In a simple yet effective manner, these scenes demonstrate one of the key aspects of intrusion which Nancy describes in *Vers Nancy* – 'il y a de la secousse'. The codes of being are disrupted,

disarranged: La Femme has entered unnoticed, yet this scene of rifling through the cupboards highlights that her very presence is destructive and disruptive.



Figure 67

The cuckoo-in-the-nest genre, referenced by Maury and Bustillo in interviews where they explain their debt to films such as *Mort un dimanche de pluie* (Santoni 1986), is subverted by using the foetus as a target of the violence and a point of audience identification. Given that the film depicts a struggle between two women for control of a child, the weight of academic response to the film shifts, perhaps inevitably, towards gendered readings. Kerner and Knapp, for example, point to the dream sequence as indicative of a connection between pregnancy and the violent or unnatural destabilisation of the normal, noting that it configures pregnancy as ‘a sort of “sickening” invasion’ (2016, 147). However, as we discussed in the literature review, the role of gender in the NFE tends to be overstated. There are various approaches to pregnancy which we can take, thinking with Nancy. To begin, we might observe that pregnancy, with the physical changes it brings to the mother, functions as a disruptor: being pregnant has exposed Sarah to her openness, her *entrouverte* existence, in much the same way as Nancy’s failing heart alerted him to his own (Nancy 2000a, 15). We might also look at the pregnant body, in this case Sarah’s body, as something which problematises Nancy’s overall response to the body. Consider the way in which his depiction of the body might collide with the pregnant body. In *Corpus*, he states that ‘les corps ne sont pas du « plein »,

de l'espace rempli (l'espace est partout rempli) : ils sont l'espace *ouvert* » (2000, 16). The idea of bodies denied fullness is complicated by the pregnant body, a body which gains fullness in carrying the child. In French quite literally 'plein', like a pregnant animal. Similarly, the process of birth itself, wherein the cord connecting the bodies is literally cut, point towards bodily distinction. Pregnancy itself appears at the edges of Nancy's ontology, touched upon but barely engaged with, yet the matrixial nature, the 'wombness' of pregnancy can be found throughout his thinking. We have already considered the *pregnance* of the cinematic image, that underlying motion beneath the stillness an opening on to the *à venir*, the images always open to a new access to the world. We are always waiting – a pregnant pause. We are always attendant to what is coming next. We are always on the verge, always on the cusp. Nancy discusses the body as an openness which necessitates the removal of gender and of unique thought, a body that is 'aphalle et acéphale' (2000, 14). The gender and thinking portions of the body are unimportant to Nancy's body of thought. The body is that which is beyond, that which is *outside*:

On ne le nommera ni « femme », ni « homme » : ces noms, quoi que nous en ayons, nous laisse trop entre fantasmes et fonctions, là où précisément il ne s'agit ni des uns, ni des autres. On dira donc plutôt : *un* corps indistinct/distinct, indiscret/discret, est le corps-éclat sexué glissé d'un corps à l'autre jusqu'à l'intimité, éclatante en effet, de la limite où ils touchent leur écart (2000, 35)

The body is beyond gender. Rather, the presence of the body merely highlights the fragility of the body when exposed, when removed from the unending continuity of bodies. If we consider the way that the body is depicted in *À l'intérieur*, the physicality, the sheer extruding *presence*, of pregnancy is written out just as we are overwhelmed by the sticky reality of it. The physical is diminished as the stakes are reduced to possession and desire – Sarah possesses the baby within her, La Femme desires it. We are thus beyond gendered horror, beyond pregnancy per se. The foetus stands in for our ungraspable body, that which should not be probed. In this way, despite the desire to lean into a gendered reading of the film, the pregnant body can be read as representative of *any* body, the pregnant woman standing in for anybody else. In one of his rare direct engagements with maternity, Nancy highlights the womb as a shared space which unites us all. In *À l'écoute*, he states:

Constitution matricielle de la résonance, et constitution résonante de la matrice : qu'est-ce que le ventre d'une femme enceinte, sinon l'espace ou l'ancre où vient à

résonner un nouvel instrument, un nouvel *organon*, qui vient à se recourber sur soi, puis à se mouvoir, en ne recevant du dehors que des sons auxquels, le jour venu, il se mettra à faire écho par son cri (2002, 72-73)

Nancy locates the womb as an ungendered space: 'c'est toujours dans le ventre que nous – homme ou femme – finissons par ou commençons à écouter' (Nancy 2002, 73). A threat to the womb becomes not a threat to a pregnant woman but a threat to the body. This correlates with the house becoming a stand-in for the womb – all of those within are equal in that they are all bodies that can be destroyed. Interestingly, the first scene of *À l'intérieur* uses sound to draw us into the womb-space. Even before we can clearly see the foetus, we hear the muffled sounds of the outside world, as a baby might. A reverse of the muffled heartbeats that one hears in a pre-natal exam. Despite her ultra-gendered reading of the film, it is notable that Kiva Reardon states, 'the choice in *À l'intérieur* to push the limits and the borders of bodies themselves, as well as to examine the effects of this on the subject, is central to its aim in examining new extremities' (2012, 20). It is *bodies* that matter, the *subject*, not any specific body.

If we take the essential consideration at the heart of the film to be the way that bodies interact with and interrupt other bodies, a telling scene shows La Femme fragmenting – as she rages in pain and anger outside the door which keeps her from Sarah, she lights a cigarette and begins to twitch. Special effects jerk and colour the image, seeming to render La Femme translucent, her skull visible through her skin (Figure 68).



Figure 68

We might read this fragmentation as a response to the limits at which the film is touching. As Nancy describes the moment we attempt to grasp at the body: ‘sitôt touchée, la certitude sensible vire au chaos, à la tempête, tous les sens s’y dérèglent’ (2000, 9). *La Femme*’s fragmentation is a precursor to the physical damage she will sustain later in the film, as well as to the final destruction of Sarah’s body. It represents the breakdown at the limit, the madness of the body. This madness at the edge – the exposure of edges themselves – is key to the power of the film as both an extreme work and a tool to interrogate Nancy’s thought. Where Maddi McGillvray refers to the shots of the foetus as in some way demonstrative of the link between mother and child, ‘the notion that the two are united’ (2019, 14), we might argue conversely that, if anything, they serve to sever such a connection, calling to the separateness of the bodies. We are seeing Sarah *and* the foetus, a portent of their eventual separation. This supports my argument that the possession of the child overwhelms the specific issue of pregnancy. West’s claim that Sarah is ‘not merely an incubator for the unborn child, but its only chance at survival’ (2016, 156) is arguably inaccurate – in the real-life stories of foetal abduction, the child often survived the trauma while the mother died.

Readings of *À l’intérieur* rest on the construction of the body as a territory – a space to be invaded and occupied. Whilst it is sensible to remain sceptical of readings which specifically draw French political parallels from the situation, locating Sarah as a ‘mother France’ figure – such as Olivier, who draws parallels between ‘l’enceinte parisienne’ as both the intra-muros

city and a pregnant (enceinte) woman living in the city (une Parisienne) (2007) – the idea of territory, of the body as 'zone', can certainly be approached from a Nancean perspective. Such a reading allows us to conceptualise this dangerous cartography of the body – as though in detailing it and exposing it, you are ultimately destroying it. The seizing of the body, the grasp, destroys it. We can read this through the film's iconography and structure which, as I stated earlier, is abortive. Abortive not in the sense of the explicit termination of pregnancy – indeed, the survival of the child is of paramount importance to La Femme – but rather in a more general sense of ruptured connections. *À l'intérieur* can be summarised as a series of effacing confrontations. Conversations are one-sided or lead nowhere (the nurse talking at Sarah in the hospital or La Femme cryptically addressing Sarah through the door), relationships break down or are brutally curtailed (husband and wife, mother and daughter, even prisoner and guard), and bodies are destroyed. Indeed, it is entirely possible that none of the main characters survive the film. Sarah is seen opened up, her entrails pouring down from her (Figure 69). The final shot of the film sees La Femme staring out at the spectator until her head falls, possibly showing her death (Figure 70). This ambiguous set-up recalls, of course, the endings of many of NFE films in its ambiguity and gaze that returns the spectator's own – clearly demonstrating that this film has a place within the 'canon' of the NFE.



Figure 69



Figure 70

The way in which these scenes are presented make them particularly useful in expressing the idea of *l'image en saignée aveuglante*, moving as we do from bleeding (Sarah on the stairs, the camera panning down to show the gory mess of her opened stomach) to blinding (the camera pulling back from La Femme cradling the baby, the screen fading into darkness).

Despite the trauma which appears to shut down our connection with the film, to cast our regard into darkness, it must be noted that some observers have sought to find positivity in the conclusion to the film. Reardon suggests, in her reading invoking Kristeva and Bataille, that the violence of the ending, and the liminal space in which we see La Femme, can be read as both a return to the womb and an affirmation of life through an encounter with death. Towards the end of the film, it is revealed that La Femme lost her baby in the same car accident that Sarah lost her husband. Oliver suggests that 'Bustillo complicates the matter by making the attacker more sympathetic before the film's conclusion' before claiming that 'Sarah is not entirely blameless and [...] the violence gains context that problematizes easy conclusions' (2007), while Belpêche asserts that 'contre toute attente, on éprouve de l'empathie pour la prédatrice' (2007). Guy Austin describes the scene of La Femme holding the child as 'a final allusion to the pleasures of motherhood', observing that the Christmas setting allows for them to be seen as 'a darkly ironic Madonna and child' (2012, 110). Alexandra West rather extraordinarily claims that, by the film's conclusion, 'the wrongs of the

crash have been righted, the tragedy ended' (2016, 160). It is clear, however, that the primary concern in the conclusion is intrusive rupture. Throughout the film, we are offered a series of intrusions to negotiate. The first appearance of the baby makes us, as spectator, the intruder into the womb-space. The violation of this space, the intrusion and irruption of violence, introduces the central themes of the film but also outlines the tensions inherent in an embodied ontology that the NFE films ceaselessly probe. In configuring the body as a territory for occupation and invasion, emphasising the edges which are transgressed – such as in what is, for me, the most affecting scene of the film, where La Femme pushes the blade of a pair of scissors into Sarah's navel (Figure 71) – Maury and Bustillo offer up a body which is dangerously hardened, divided, and thus rendered fragile.



Figure 71

It is at these hard edges that the threatening concepts of possession, of cannibalism, of replacement which recur throughout the NFE threaten to overwhelm us. The menacing intruder is a menace precisely because we are closed to it. Finally, there is the intrusive rupture of La Femme, holding the child. On one level we can see this as a break from the expected course of events, as suggested above. The wrong mother has triumphed – this is at odds with the sort of restoration of motherhood we usually encounter in films where the family unit is threatened (*The Hand that Rocks the Cradle*, *Fatal Attraction* [Lyne 1987]), or the wholesome mother figure is juxtaposed with the monstrous mother, as with Ripley and the Alien Queen's fight over Newt in *Aliens* (Cameron 1986). We can certainly read the final

shot as indicative of the destruction of La Femme, the camera pulling back from her still, damaged body and leaving her in darkness. The baby can thus be seen as substituting not just the Final Girl figure – the one whose life is ultimately the most important stake, and the one who survives (the baby certainly seems the most intact at the end) – but also for the figure of unattainable touch. As she holds her prize, La Femme's life is extinguished. In touching at the untouchable, La Femme has destroyed both Sarah and herself: as Nancy would summarise such an encounter, *toucher veut crever, et en crève*.

Livide

In direct contrast to *À l'intérieur*, Maury and Bustillo's second film is concerned not with dangerously delineated, separated bodies broken by penetration but rather with the construction of a plural and porous body, eliding borders just as *À l'intérieur* constructs them. The body is cast not as rigidly defined, easily breakable and hard-edged, but rather as a fluctuating limit, a shared space which is open to others. *Livide* sees the sensitive and empathetic social worker Lucie Klavel (Chloé Coulloud) agreeing to her boyfriend William's (Félix Moati) plan to burgle the house of one her charges, the elderly and comatose Déborah Jessel (Marie-Claude Pietragalla), in order to be able to escape from their depressing lives in a provincial town with few prospects. Once they enter Jessel's house along with William's brother Ben (Jérémy Kapone), however, it becomes clear that the youths have been drawn there for a terrible purpose. Miss Jessel is a vampire, and it seems that Lucie is destined to become the vessel for the soul of Miss Jessel's daughter, Anna (Chloé Marcq).

From its opening shot, *À l'intérieur* is constructed as a series of transgressions, intrusions into spaces. *Livide*, equally, begins with a scene depicting an unexpected intrusion, that of a decapitated head on a beach, serving to introduce the threatening darkness which is feeding upon the town. The beach itself serves as a liminal between-space which links the opening to the conclusion. While the film begins with a destroyed body (further supporting the usefulness of pairing NFE film with subsequent post-extreme film, diptych-style, as one ongoing thought experiment), the conclusion sees a return to the sea but provides a body which has been restored to an ambiguous wholeness. It must also be observed that the

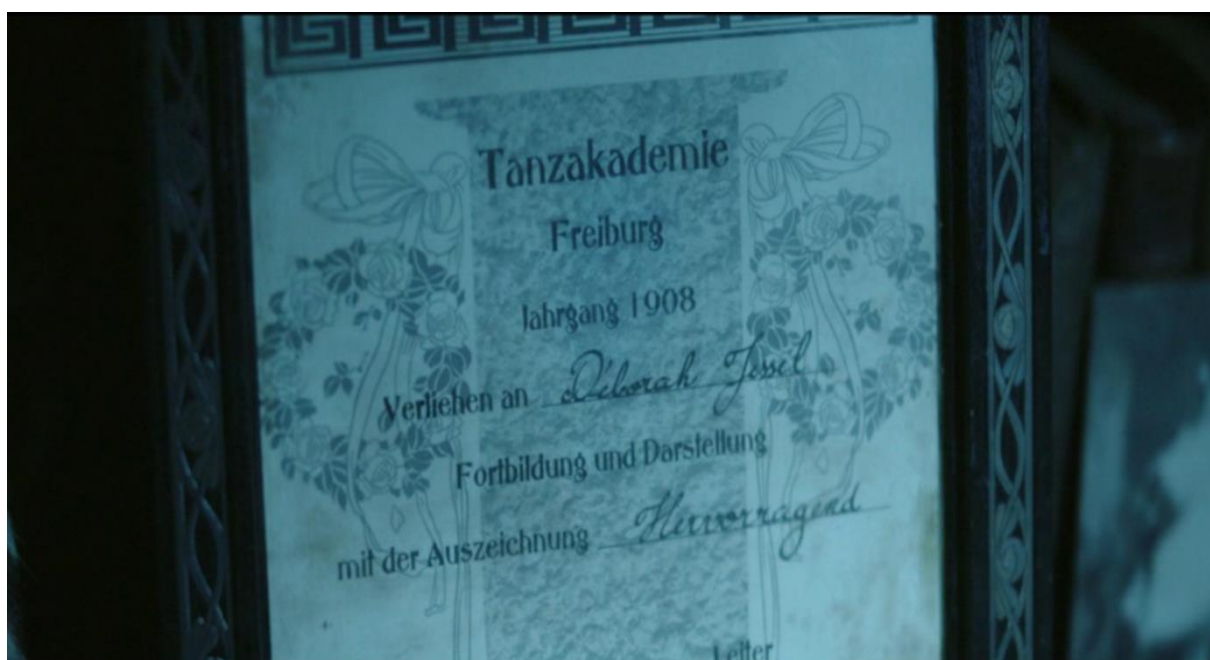
intrusion which opens *Livide* is very different to the previous film, immediately marking it out as a different kind of cinematic experience. Where *À l'intérieur* begins in the unusual space of the womb²⁶, immediately engendering a worrying sense of uncertainty and displacement, *Livide* starts in pleasingly familiar horror territory on a misty beach, complete with atmospheric stone cross. Where commentators highlighted the oddness of *À l'intérieur*'s invasion of the womb, *Livide* offers a traditional horror film opening, reminiscent of a number of Hammer films where the threat of the film is introduced through the revelation of a supernatural murder (*Dracula Has Risen from the Grave*'s [Francis 1968] discovery of a victim inside a church bell is a good example).

This familiarity sets the tone for the film: as it progresses, *Livide* becomes a multi-layered homage to the canon of horror literature and cinema. This follows the return to traditional genre or spectator positioning that we have seen in the two previous chapters with *Enter the Void* and *Ne te retourne pas*, films which are juxtaposed with their NFE precursors in offering more traditional explorations of genre, which invite the spectator to participate as experienced consumers who will recognise the references. Miss Jessel is the name of the deceased governess possibly remaining as a malicious spirit in Henry James's novella *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), with Déborah (perhaps) referring to Deborah Kerr, who played the sensitive governess Miss Giddens in the film adaptation, *The Innocents* (Clayton 1961). Lucie meets with William and Ben (Jérémy Kapone) at a pub called *À L'agneau abattu*. This name (the French equivalent of 'The Slaughtered Lamb') and the image on the traditional English-style pub sign (not a slaughtered lamb but rather the severed head of a wolf, pierced through with a sharp implement) are references to the pub in which two American tourists are warned of the dangerous moors in *An American Werewolf in London*. In a later scene, three children appear in Halloween outfits. For horror fans, these are recognisably the Silver Shamrock masks from *Halloween III: Season of the Witch* (Wallace 1982). The filmmakers then provide a moment of double awareness, almost a Brechtian rupture, as William sings 'happy happy Halloween, Silver Shamrock' to the tune of 'London Bridge is Falling Down', the catchy jingle from the advert within that film. Again, a clear indication that this is a film meant to be

²⁶ Though it must be noted that in utero openings are not unknown – consider *Look Who's Talking* (Heckerling 1989), which begins with a shoal of sperm heading towards eggs.

enjoyed by horror film fans. It is not seeking to break with convention. Rather, it is careful to engage with a specific audience.

The referential tone continues as the protagonists move towards the house. 'Prêt pour une balade dans les landes, j'espère ?' asks William as they leave their car a certain distance from Jessel's house and proceed on foot. This use of the moors as a location is itself a reference to classic horror literature, whether the territory of the titular hound of the Baskervilles (Doyle 1901-1902) or, again, the domain of the werewolf around the village of East Proctor in *An American Werewolf in London*. Lucie, meanwhile, sees a blue flame and tries to pick it up, extinguishing it as she does so. The boys refer to it as a 'feu-follet' – a will o' the wisp. Again, we can see links back to classic horror literature here, with the blue flames preceding the horrors within the house reminiscent of those witnessed by Jonathan Harker on his approach to Castle Dracula in *Dracula*: 'it was commonly believed that on a certain night of the year [...] when all evil spirits are supposed to have unchecked sway, a blue flame is seen over any place where treasure has been concealed' (Stoker 1897, 32). There is also a strong fairy tale element to *Livide*, a journey into haunted realms which reflects the tenebrous voyages undertaken by Oscar and Jeanne.²⁷ The ballet sub-plot within a supernatural setting calls to mind Dario Argento's *Suspiria* (1977), to which there is a direct reference in the certificate showing that Jessel attended the school in which that film is set (Figure 72).



²⁷ Once again, we might suggest the Arte television films as an extension of the post-extreme corpus.

Figure 72

Livide also reflects *Enter the Void* and *Ne te retourne pas* in the move towards restoration and reparation that we have seen in the previous two chapters. The protagonist of *Livide* is depicted as being open to plurality and movement, rather than being dangerously closed off from them. We are introduced to Lucie as a face amongst others, sitting at a bus shelter that is plastered with posters displaying missing youths. Immediately, this places her faces into a continuity of other faces, in much the same way as we first properly see Jeanne sat in front of a wall of portraits in *Ne te retourne pas* (Figures 73 and 74).



Figure 73



Figure 74

When we see Lucie close-up, her eyes are heterochromatic. There is a visual return here to the curious shared face of Jeanne and Rosa Maria in *Ne te retourne pas*: though Lucie's body is not yet opened to the other, the striking multiplicity that her eyes suggest serves to foreshadow her eventual con-fusion with Anna. Madame Wilson (Catherine Jacob), the home carer Lucie is shadowing, almost immediately comments on Lucie's 'yeux vairon'. For Lucie, they are 'une simple décoloration de l'iris', but Wilson claims that 'chaque œil vairon représente une âme différente, les âmes capables d'entrer, partir par ces portes'. We can see the central thesis encapsulated in this supernatural concept: one body that is receptive to others, open to new states of plural being but which, crucially, is not destroyed or effaced by these passing encounters. The idea of the eyes being windows into the soul which permit entry and exit, allowing for physical space to be shared without the need for effacing and destroying the other, expresses this idea of restorative corporeal con-fusion. In the same way as the opening of *À l'intérieur* is strongly Nancean – starting within the body and thus exposed to its openness – so Lucie is presented as being somehow open and exposed. We might see her as 'entrouverte', that strange space between open and closed that Nancy describes in *L'Intrus* (2000, 15). Her openness might be read as a weakness in the same way as Sarah's in *À l'intérieur* – and it is certainly exploited towards the conclusion of the film – but equally it can be regarded as a strength. In *À l'intérieur*, openness is forced, violently opening and thus destroying the body. In *Livide*, Lucie's very openness is seemingly what saves her. It is not just

her eyes that mark Lucie out as *entrouverte*: she later has a vision of her recently deceased mother (Béatrice Dalle) sitting beside her, cords wrapped around her throat from her suicide but still animate, reaching out and caressing her face (Figure 75). This once again places Lucie into a liminal space, somewhere between dead and alive. As with her heterochromia, and equally her job which involves caring for people on the verge of death, Lucie's contact with her deceased mother marks her out as being in a state of flux, of uncertainty.²⁸



Figure 75

Hard Borders/Soft Bodies

In contrast to *À l'intérieur*, Jessel's house in *Livid*, while enchanted, is constructed of solid walls, and it is the beings within that become uncertain, spectral. There are dark corners and shadows, yes, and at one point Ben seemingly disappears through a mirror - the flat, reflective plane of the mirror becoming an opening, carrying Ben away from his friends and into another region of the house – yet the walls of the house are solid in a way that those of Sarah's house

²⁸ Once again, Béatrice Dalle is cast in the role of an othered mother figure. This time she is the natural mother but rendered unnatural in that she is only a hallucination: a spectral, haunting mother. Dalle likewise portrays a mother, this time to a monstrously deformed child, in *Aux yeux des vivants* (2014), the next film directed by Maury and Bustillo.

are not. Whereas in Maury and Bustillo's first film the bodies of the characters stand in contrast to the malleable structure of the house, in *Livide* we see Lucie respond to the rigidity of the house and become open to the other. With her heterochromatic eyes highlighted as being representative of an open body, of a body that can accommodate different souls, we see a return in Lucie to the sort of pregnancy that *À l'intérieur* ironically denied in its crystallisation of the body. Lucie's body is inherently open, awaiting an encounter. Once the trio are trapped in the house, William and Ben are desperate to escape. Once Ben disappears, William begins bashing at a metal shutter. Lucie, however, starts exploring the house, carefully and quietly traversing the rooms. Her intimate approach to the house stands in clear contrast to *La Femme*'s aggressive ferreting through Sarah's belongings. In making contact with Jessel and Anna, Lucie begins to understand the history of their family. Her contact with Anna is telling – first, she approaches Anna's immobile body and sees blood dripping from her nose. She reaches out and touches it and sees a vision of the events that led Anna to be in this situation (Figure 76). This reflects the scene in *Ne te retourne pas* where Jeanne comes to understand her own past, the moment of realisation expressed in two bloodied hands touching (Figure 77). The tactility without penetration, the blood outside the body, both of these show an intimate touch that does not seek to control, possess or destroy, but rather to con-fuse.



Figure 76



Figure 77

From the moth which emerges from the lips of the severed head in the opening scene, via Lucie's eyes as doors for souls to pass through, to the final transference or sharing of souls (once again using moths), *Livide* is concerned with the sort of tension of duality which weighs upon Nancy, most clearly in his approach to body and the soul. As we have seen, the idea of the soul for Nancy is not a transcendental aspect of being which continues beyond the body but rather a perspective upon the body which is also contained within the body. At the conclusion of the film, Jessel slices Lucie's stomach with her fingernail and places a chrysalis inside her, after speaking an incantation. She then places another chrysalis in a cut on Anna's neck. She staples Lucie's eyes shut. Before her left eye closes, Lucie sees an apparition of her mother and reaches out to her. A process occurs. Lucie twitches on the bed, arching her back, and then falls still. A moth flies from her mouth. One falls from Anna's too. They cross over in mid-air and then enter the other body. The film cuts briefly to a shot of the house, representative of the fact that some sort of change of ownership has occurred. It is telling that the transfer of souls (or whatever transfer it is that occurs) is depicted as clinical, almost bloodless. The magical nature of the exchange removes the organs. We might suggest that, for Nancy, the perfect body is an organ-less body, or rather one in which the organs are imperceptible: as Morin summarises, 'when I am healthy, I do not feel my stomach or my heart; they are silent' (2012, 128). Anna is a useful representation of this quiet body. For much

of the film, she appears as a doll on a pedestal. In a flashback sequence just before the transference operation, we see Jessel operating on Anna's damaged body (broken by Jessel herself as she forces Anna to dance). The skin of her back is flayed open, and a clockwork mechanism has been implanted into her spine (Figure 78). This explains her jerking movements – she has been turned into an articulated doll. In some ways, this brings Anna's body far closer to the untroubled body that exists prior to *l'image en saignée aveuglante*: the sort of blissful, imagined wholeness that is so easily destroyed. A vampire, like her mother, she sits astride the border between life and death. Here it is useful to consider Nancy's inclusion of death as an essential and permanently co-existent facet of existence: 'toute sa vie, le corps est aussi un corps mort, le corps d'un mort, de ce mort que je suis vivant' (2000, 17). Anna is, like Lucie – like all of us – a body on the edge.

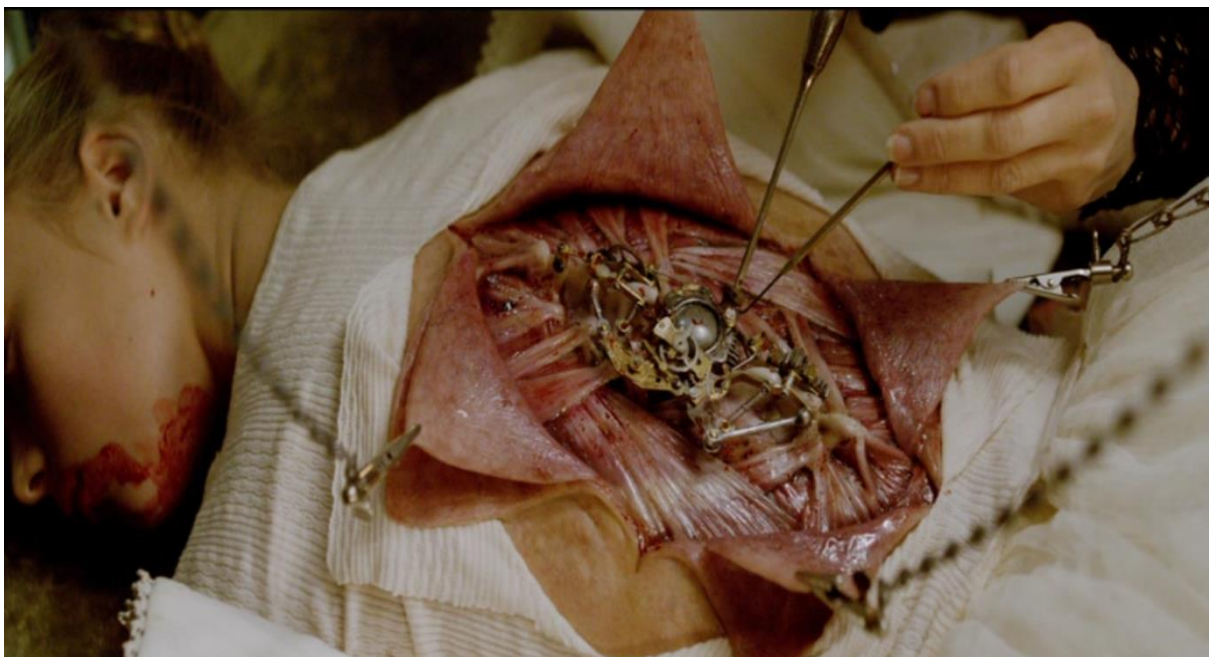


Figure 78

Following the operation upon Lucie and Anna, it appears that an irreversible change has occurred in the skin of the women, that Lucie's body has been taken over. However, in the next scene, Lucie stabs Wilson with a pair of scissors, before ripping Jessel's throat too. She goes to Anna's body and opens her eyes with a razor. Anna now has heterochromia. Lucie cuts her hand and revives Anna with her blood. This is a fascinating merging of bodies: an exchange has occurred, which is then supported and nurtured by further exchanges. We are watching two distinct beings operate onscreen, but the boundaries between them are

unclearly defined. As Lucie takes Anna to see the aftermath of her vengeance, Jessel suddenly rises and attacks Lucie. Anna beats her with her own cane, and Lucie punches her over the banister. She struggles to move in the entrance hall, her body broken, and the girls descend upon her and rip her face apart. The fact that they work in unison to defeat her is telling – together they literally tear apart the old order, installing their new state (in all its confusion) as the status quo.

The conclusion of the films breaks free of the *huis clos* of the house as the women emerge into the daylight, walking towards the cliffs, returning us to the beach. Just as Lucie's eyes suggested plurality, shifting states of being, so the cyclical return to the sea and cliffs, departure points, openings onto the world, give us a keen sense of the way this film moves in an opposing direction to its predecessor. The move into the bright outdoors stands in stark contrast to the oppressive darkness which closes in around *La Femme* and the stolen baby in *À l'intérieur*. Anna's body floats up into the light, her damaged skin becomes clean once more, and she smiles. The sun which has previously caused the damage to her face now seems curative, restorative. Lucie returns the smile, apparently content (Figures 79 and 80). What is important to consider here is the volition which carries them to the cliff, and even beyond it. Whereas *À l'intérieur* is concerned with closing off exit points, with creating a liminal space which cannot be escaped, *Livide* instead offers the possibility of continuation.²⁹ The location of this final scene is equally important – the cliff represents both a border and an opening, a space which both cannot be crossed and which opens out onto the world. The body stood at the cliff-edge, the body on the edge, marks a return to Nancy's location of the body as 'toujours sur le départ, dans l'imminence d'un mouvement, d'une chute, d'un écart, d'une dislocation' (2000, 31). While the idea of bodies constantly sitting at the limit, about to fall or sink or drop off is inherently a point of tension when probed, *Livide* takes us back to this point playfully, ambiguously. The cliff is both an opening and a limit, a multiplicity. Distance and openness encompassed in one location. Anna falls from the cliff and rises into the air, then seemingly vanishes. Lucie watches her, standing happily at the border. She is open to the world, and the world opens onto her.

²⁹ The remake of *À l'intérieur*, *Inside*, fails in part due to its conclusion, which takes Sarah (Rachel Nichols) away from her house for a final battle with The Woman (Laura Harring). The Woman dies while Sarah and her baby survive.



Figure 79



Figure 80

The limit is thus also an opening back onto the world. Just as the openings in *Enter the Void* carry us in ever-maintained circles, so the plurality of *Livide* leads us to a new beginning which is intentionally ambiguous but clearly positive. Lucie looks out into the void, not looking back, and faces new possibilities of being. We also see here a return to the ordered body – despite the ordeal the characters have undergone, their bodies are, in the end, undamaged. Anna's

scars melt away as she floats into the sky, while Lucie's face is perfectly unblemished as it stares back. This is significant, marking the return to order, the return to interiority – the innards of the body have been restored, and the unending continuity is restored. Despite the con-fusion of bodies, the bodies are at the same time shown as apparently distinct and whole. Anna's disappearance leaves a noticeable presence, her con-fusion with Lucie keeping an aspect of her alive even as another appears to die. Nancy's expressive description of the leaving body, the left body, describes this absence in presence, or presence in absence:

Le corps qui s'en va emporte son espacement, il s'emporte comme espacement, et en quelque sorte il se met à pan, il se retranche en lui – mais en même temps, il laisse ce même espacement « derrière lui » – comme on dit –, c'est-à-dire à sa place, et cette place reste la sienne, absolument intacte et absolument abandonnée, à la fois (2000, 31-32)

Anna moves on, yet leaves something behind, or perhaps she remains moving. In *À l'intérieur*, there is only stillness which then sinks into darkness. Even the cry of the baby as the darkness closes in over the image is not explicitly diegetic. We can contrast the bloodlessly clean, positively exposed, ambiguously con-fused bodies of *Livide* to the messy, destroyed, separated bodies which are left at the conclusion of *À l'intérieur* and see the move from destruction of the rigid body, the grasped edges shattered and ruptured, towards the malleability of the shared body, the edges unclear but sustained in a positive compromise.

Having taken care to describe *Livide* as a traditional horror film, filled with recognisable genre codes, it must be observed that the conclusion moves away from what we might expect in the typical conclusion. Lucie, as the 'final girl', might realistically be expected to best the villainous trio of women (Jessel, Wilson, Anna – the latter is certainly menacing throughout most of the film). Even in the more downbeat conclusions, we might see Lucie become the vessel for Anna and end there. This is, as we have seen, not the case. We enter into a new state, a shared existence. The horror film is shed like an old skin in order to move into something else. In Lucie, there is movement. Her eyes mark her out as different from the beginning, but as she begins to explore the house, seemingly unafraid and seeking answers rather than escape, she develops a new agency which brings her to her eventual fate, and beyond. In the character of Anna there is rebellion, witnessed first as she tries to escape her mother's house, compounded by her con-fusion with Lucie and their subsequent actions. In this duality we find a different volition, moving away from the dichotomy of new and old and

into something *different*. The images of this mixing, this two-become-one which also remains two, are loaded yet impossible to decipher with any absolute certainty. The ambiguity that we find at the conclusion of the films of the NFE remains, but the outcome here is certainly more positive. The cliff, like the house, represents not death, nor the simple question of control, but rather a transition of states, or a state of transition.

Livid Insides

Both films have a protagonist who might be seen as embodying the Nancean concept of being 'entrouverte'. Sarah is introduced from an internal perspective: we are aware of her physicality before we are aware of her – she is corpo-real. Her existence as a pregnant woman automatically bestows upon her a certain duality of existence – this duality compounded and focalised through the fact the *La Femme* seeks to divide her baby from her. Lucie's duality is marked upon her physically through her heterochromia – whilst she rejects the suggestion, within the supernatural reality of the film we can assert that Lucie is indeed somehow open towards the rest of the world. However, Sarah is not entrouverte in a useful, positive way. She represents the breakdown that can occur at the limit, when we touch at our borders. Her corpo-reality returns us again and again to her fragility, her body sustaining more and more damage as the film goes on, finally being ripped open – the umbilical cord hanging from her as a literal severed connection. Lucie, conversely, is located in a zone between the living and the dead, as bridging multiple states of being, firstly through her introduction as a face amongst many, then through her work with the elderly and the dying, and finally through her con-fusion with Anna. Whereas *À l'intérieur* is centred around collisions and damage, *Livide* moves beyond the violence into a new state of being which involves a shared existence. Touch in *À l'intérieur* destroys, it ends. Touch in *Livide* develops, it builds. The progression across these films is similar to that of Noé's and De Van's – where the first film explores an encounter with the physical which ends in destruction, the second presents a traumatic encounter which ultimately opens up new possibilities of being. Questions of class, identity and race are used as thematic markers, but they do not stand as strong political positions, but rather as concepts floated as possibilities within the multiplicitous whole of the film. Lucie survives because she is open to the Other, just as Jeanne makes peace with her duality and Oscar falls back into the matrix of creation. Lucie's ultimate fate is unclear – either Lucie survives, or Anna in Lucie's

body, or an amalgam of both. In any case, it is clear that the conclusion of the film presents a positive reading of bodily openness. Once again, we can see the later films moving towards a more hopeful conclusion, one which involves restoration through con-fusion. The trajectory of the body across these two films takes it from a hard, immobile construct which is easily destroyed, towards a malleable, moving body that is receptive to the other and thus able to negotiate trauma and find a way to continue. Whatever happens to Lucie and Anna, the ambiguity makes it a perfect example of con-fusion. The two are opened up and exposed to each other, and we are unsure as to where one ends and the other begins. The disappearance of one body leaves us with another which contains the same ambiguity, allowing for it to continue.

Conclusion

This project set out to give an answer to two questions – 1) What caused the NFE to disappear? and 2) What came after the NFE and how does it respond to what came before? While there might be many answers to these questions, this thesis has provided a clear model of how we can respond to them. The NFE has become a victim of philosophical exhaustion, its drive towards exposing the body ultimately causing it to run into the breakdown of sense and meaning that lies beyond the extremity. There is no way to move forward in this way without resorting to repetition. This is reflected in the way that the body itself is ungraspable, displaced by any attempt to isolate it. Equally, we can see this same idea in a third way if we look at the circling critical response to the trend. These are closed systems, with no way forward. However, the rethinking of the approach to the body offers a way back from, or around, this impasse. In looking not to grasp at and isolate the body but rather to allow it to fall back into a multiplicity, into the unbroken continuity of bodies touching bodies, through a process of con-fusion, we can see a positive reclamation of the body and move back towards sense. This brings us to what came after – a group of post-extreme films which look not to graphically open and expose the body but rather to restore and repair it.

Through a textual analysis of eight films, the move from the NFE to the post-extreme has been clearly demonstrated. In the first place, the dialogue between Nancy and Denis gives us the concept of *l'image en saignée aveuglante* and shows the encounter with and exploration of the breakdown in meaning that occurs at this point. The later film pairings show how this point of breakdown is reached again and again in the NFE, the body repeatedly drawn to a limit beyond which we cannot see. What they also demonstrate, however, is how this point of breakdown can be moved away from, bringing the body back to sense through con-fusion.

This study has added usefully to the study of the NFE in a number of ways. In highlighting the impasse which is reached in terms of the depiction of the body on film, I have described a point of tension which demands exploration. The approach which I have espoused here to navigate beyond this impasse, the move towards con-fusion, is only one possible means of navigation. There must be many other ways in which the impasse can be negotiated. The description of the impasse, and the tripartite way it can be read across film, criticism and theory, is merely a start, but it is an important step in bringing some new direction to the

study of the NFE, which has been looping around with no clear forward progression for too long. With Resmini having highlighted this circular analysis, and Chevalier having indicated the way in which the approach to violence has changed, we can now add to these the concepts which have been described here. The New French Extremity, in its graphic depiction of the body, its extreme proximity, only succeeds in fragmenting it, in losing sight of it in the flowing eruption of blood that spurts from the penetrated skin. There is only negativity to be found. The post-extreme films, conversely, present a much more positive approach to the body. The body is open and receptive, or at least becomes this way through the course of the film. It is this receptivity which ultimately saves the body, protects it from harm, through confusion with another body.

If we look at the concluding shots, or the final shots of the protagonist across the films, we can see the clear movement towards a more positive outcome. Having examined the films as a progression through the chapters, it is useful here to see these shots side-by-side in order to get a clear sense of this progression. Figure 81 shows the frozen moment at the conclusion of *Trouble Every Day*, the body at the edge of what we assume will be its destruction, trapped within a closed system which seems to lead only to the rupture of the body – *l'image en saignée aveuglante*. Beside this in Figure 82 we can see the passionate, tumultuous visuals that conclude *L'Intrus*. Their meaning is unclear. Throughout the film, we shift between scenes with no clear sense of progression. This is the breakdown that lies beyond the bleeding, blinding image – or perhaps more accurately, this is the effect of it. Detached symbols, circling around without any meaning.



Figure 81



Figure 82

If we then consider the following contrasting pairings, the films as diptychs, what becomes apparent is the restoration of meaning, of order, in the second of each pair. From the literal

breaking down of the image or the representation of the body at the limit, separated from the world, we move towards a positive restoration. In the first pairing, of *Irreversible* and *Enter the Void*, we begin at what is perhaps the most vivid, visceral depiction of *l'image en saignée aveuglante*, where the image literally appears to bleed, floating elements pouring toward the spectator, then explode into strobing light which becomes hard to look at (Figure 83). The return from this point is marked in this first instance through a rebirth, brought about through a possession or filling of the body which leads to an uncertainty as to the nature of the birth (Figure 84). Positive, certainly, but a con-fusion of bodies. In the latter two examples, *Dans ma peau* and *Ne te retourne pas* (Figures 85 and 86) and *À l'intérieur* and *Livide* (Figures 87 and 88), we are seeing in slightly different ways the move from the dangerously isolated body towards the birth of a composite body, though the exact nature of the composition remains tantalisingly unclear. In both cases, however, it is certainly positive.

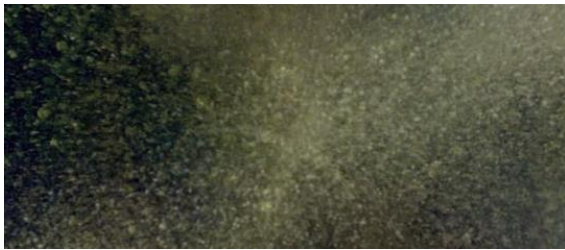


Figure 83

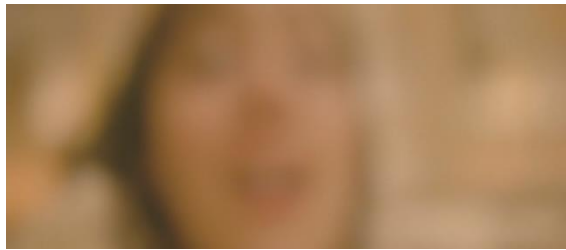


Figure 84



Figure 85



Figure 86



Figure 87



Figure 88

The circling analysis of the NFE, looping endlessly and hitting against the same impasse, has meant that for a long time the critical approach has settled on a continued narrative of fragmentation, trauma and societal collapse. What the post-extreme films offer, clearly and in abundance, is a paradigm shift towards positivity. The vernacular around these films moves from the cutting, ripping, tearing descriptors of the NFE towards restoration, reparation and mutually beneficial compromise in the post-extreme. This positivity through plurality draws us right back to the image which I described in the introduction, of the two figures on the poster for *Intouchables* with the ambiguous space between them. This reading of the films thus opens up a path from the NFE, via the post-extreme films, to the mainstream of French cinema. This allows for a new interpretation of the trend, which has so far been consigned to a space apart or linked with comparable international trends. It is nice to restore a certain Frenchness to the NFE, to mark out its place within a broader context of French cinema.

It is also important to consider what this reading does for Nancy's work. Navigating with Nancy, we have seen the way in which his philosophy is troubled, shut off, by the approach to the body, and the way in which it is reinvigorated by the positive con-fusion of bodies. While film has been the primary focus of this thesis, with Nancy providing a framework through which to think the transformative shift towards con-fusion, the dialogue between Nancy and Denis, the transmission and grafting of ideas between them, equally opens back onto Nancy's oeuvre. With this in mind, the tools engaged in this study, *l'image en saignée aveuglante* and con-fusion, can be mobilised in order to approach Nancy's thought in other areas. In particular, con-fusion seems to offer a useful tool to think through many of the questions posed around identity in Nancy's work. Admittedly, the concept works incredibly well in films which can bend and toy with our perception of reality, at least to an extent, but

might be harder to conceptualise in a real-world context. Yet, as mediation between the poles of impossible fusion and total separation, it offers a useful navigational device.

There are, of course, limitations to this project. The approach taken here, thinking with Nancy, corresponds with my philosophical approach to these films. There are other ways in which these films can be thought. Different studies along similar lines might substitute Nancy for another thinker and achieve different results. Equally, the group of films which I have examined here was necessarily small. I have only gestured towards the other avenues which could be explored. Earlier planned structures for this thesis saw an entire chapter devoted to disability cinema, locating those films as a further progression. I should also like to have given more space to the Arte fairy tale films, which offer their own fascinating approach to physicality which can also be seen as responding to the NFE. Another possible field for enquiry, far beyond the scope of this project, would be to look at the films that directors associated with the NFE have made outside of France. The method of direct analysis which I have adopted here, using comparative diptychs to draw out key points of resonance between the films, works in a nicely poetic manner, where extremity forms the spine of the discussion, around which the two films hinge. However, it must be acknowledged that such an approach has limitations, some of which I have gestured at throughout. Where the director or directorial team's first film is associated with the NFE and their second is post-extreme, the diptych works very well. Where directors have a longer career, the structure is rather more forced. This applies, as I have observed, to directors such as Breillat, Denis and Dumont, whose careers did not begin with the NFE. It will be interesting in future to develop the model further and assess how well it can be extrapolated into a tool for dealing with other developments in French cinema, other evolutions in directorial style and approach. It might be that the diptych structure will evolve into an accordion-like series of articulations, which might take into account moves between or within specific genre types in a director's career.

The NFE is obstinately ingrained in thought around French cinema, but hopefully this study, alongside the work of Resmini and Chevalier, will help to tease out new strands to explore. Thirty years on from the film which marks, for Quandt at least, the inception of the trend, we might only just be getting to know the New French Extremity. We are certainly only just beginning to learn what lies beyond it.

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