9-20-2022 1:30 PM

The Digital Extreme: Cinema's Reality Crisis in a Nostalgic Age

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Theory and Criticism
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Abstract

This thesis examines the trajectory and legacy of two streams of filmmaking born in the 1990s: extreme film and the digital film, which eventually fuse into the *digital extreme film*, a watershed moment of postmodern filmmaking. I analyze the rise of the digital extreme, probing its disturbing aesthetic, its grainy, blurry glitches, dark, mundane reality and connections to fear, surveillance and nostalgia. Looking at filmmakers as disparate as pop-culture mainstays like Martin Scorsese, breakout directors like Jane Schoenbrun, avant-garde artists like Michael Snow, and arthouse auteurs such as Catherine Breillat and Olivier Assayas, I consider what the moment of cinema's *digital extreme* says about labour, alienation and the relationship between violence, technology and illusion. The digital extreme does not advocate for a dialectical posthumanity, nor a nihilistic non-humanity, but postulates a literal after-humanity, documenting what remains of us, in our state of crisis, when both illusion and reality are stripped away.

Keywords:

Violence, Technology, Alienation, Illusion, Nostalgia, Extreme Film, Digital Film, Digital Extreme, Olivier Assayas, Catherine Breillat, Jane Schoenbrun, Martin Scorsese, Michael Snow

Summary for Lay Audience

This thesis examines what I call the "digital extreme" in cinema. I analyze the trajectory and legacy of two streams of filmmaking born in the 1990s: the extreme film and the digital film, which eventually fuse into the *digital extreme film*, a watershed moment of postmodern filmmaking. Taking a closer look at violent, technologically distanced filmmaking in our modern nostalgic age, I argue that the traditional parameters of past, present, and future have shifted. As a corollary to this fractured sense of progress, we have been forced to alter our traditional conceptions of violence in everyday society and its relationship to the technology that disseminates it. In an aesthetic sense, this shift was laid bare in the disturbing and shocking images of art-house and mainstream cinema of the past twenty years. This thesis examines the rise of the digital extreme, with its blurry glitches and dark, mundane reality, probing its disturbing aesthetic and its connection to fear, surveillance and nostalgia. Throughout the thesis, I draw on Baudrillard's theory of the artwork and simulacrum, Steven Shaviro's analysis of "post-cinematic affect" and Svetlana Boym on "social nostalgia" to illuminate digital extreme's dark contours. Looking at filmmakers as disparate as pop-culture mainstays like Martin Scorsese, Canadian avant-garde artists like Michael Snow, arthouse auteurs such as Catherine Breillat and Olivier Assayas, and breakout director Jane Schoenbrun, we consider what the moment of cinema's *digital extreme* says about labour, alienation and the relationship between violence, technology and illusion in an increasingly vicious world. I finally argue that the digital extreme does not advocate for a dialectical posthumanity, nor a nihilistic nonhumanity, but postulates a literal after-humanity, documenting what remains of us, in our tortured state when both illusion and reality are stripped away.

You know, Brown, if by any stretch of imagination I could accuse you of being literary, I might accuse you of sponsoring this illusion that one comes to grips with reality only through the commission of evil. It's all the rage.

William Gaddis, *The Recognitions*

You know, I know this steak doesn't exist. I know that when I put it in my mouth, the Matrix is telling my brain it is juicy and delicious. After nine years, you know what I realize? Ignorance is bliss.

The Wachowskis, *The Matrix*

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Introduction: After the After

Everything I know is only matter / Everything I love will turn to dust / We're moving from the party to the after / It's another sleepless dream / We live inside a memory.

CFCF, "After the After," 2021

When the present appears to be caught in a ceaseless spiral of negativity, what happens to both the past and the future? As we can see with the effects of COVID-19, rapidly accelerating climate change, political distrust, and the encroachment of psychically totalizing social media, we have been led towards a totalized dismantling of the conventional symbolic order. It seems like today we need spectacle and escapism, art and life, more than ever; but even that appears to be slipping away. We are caught in a perpetual nostalgia matrix, proliferated by technology that disseminates opinion and ideology. The media conglomerates acknowledge this desire for nostalgia: Marvel's marketing for behind-the-times film projects like *Thor: Love and Thunder* (2022) exploits an already out-of-date nostalgia for the golden 80's reified by cultural moments like *Stranger Things* (2016-present). Our faith in the arthouse world is also shifting: online communities and subcultures have a different relationship to the movie theatre than previous generations, and distribution companies that straddle the lines of arthouse and mainstream claim more and more stake in the cultural matrix with each new release, powered by memes and youth culture word-of-mouth. These companies exploit what 'good filmmaking' looks like on a visual and emotional level, but lack the structural complexity of their forebears, despite acknowledging a nostalgia for a different, better cinema of the past.

When nostalgia becomes the dominant emotion, the relationship people have towards reality itself also changes. There were once ways of seeing that challenged the fixity of authenticity: a belief in spectacle, in illusion, in something-beyond the real and the now. In a nostalgic age, a crisis age like this one, the only remaining spectacle left is comfort and familiarity. In a Marvel Cinematic Universe film, enjoyment is not wrought through the images or the special effects; the visuals are completely perfunctory, and those films look entirely flat and gray. The enjoyment is entirely taken from the spectacle of identification and collaboration, of seeing familiar worlds collide and interact. It is entirely predicated on action figure logic.

This thesis will, however, neither be a total defense of or polemic for or against the mainstream/underground divide. My biases may be made undeniably clear through my selection of films chosen to analyze, but my purpose lies elsewhere. This thesis will analyze the trajectory of two parallel streams of filmmaking born in the 1990s: the extreme film and the digital film, mapping their eventual fusion into the *digital extreme film*, a watershed moment of postmodern filmmaking. Tracing this development, I will also analyze the inner *failures* and *contradictions* within such violent, alienating filmmaking. The tension in what Sveltana Boym calls the "double-edged" sword of nostalgia, of the encroachment of the past as emotional antidote to overcode the here-and-now crisis culture (although crisis and politics will itself wield nostalgia as a new tool) is of paramount importance to these films.[1]

To examine such disparate, aesthetically charged arenas of cultural production demands a wider temporal range: while concerned primarily with a particular Y2K sensibility (a nostalgic arena most popular amongst today's online youth), this thesis will examine films that emerged in

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[1] See Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 58

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the late 1990s moving on to the beginnings of the 2020s and to our crisis present, the post-covid, post-symbolic order.

To open this thesis, we will take a close look at the origins of the digitally-minded nostalgic extreme film. Looking at Troy Bordun's phenomenological theory of extreme cinema and Mattias Frey's analysis of the discourse around extreme cinema, I define extreme cinema and examine Swedish director Lukas Moodysson's *A Hole in My Heart* (2004) and French director Catherine Breillat's *Fat Girl* (2001). Taking cues from Svetlana Boym's theory regarding the constructed nature of nostalgia, I analyze how these 'extreme' films in their extremity push traditional temporal and spatial boundaries, exploiting conceptions of the avant-garde while also mourning its disappearance. These films' eternal returns of the same—in violence, in sexual difference, in pain and alienation—come to reflect a bodily and angry form of filmmaking, one that eventually had to be moderated and technologically mediated through self-reflexive references to an (increasingly slippery) physical medium.

The second chapter looks at two digital films that meditate in different ways on the extreme mediation of our bodies through technology, also calling into question a legitimate desire to reflect or represent reality in traditional ways understood by analog filmmaking. I examine Martin Scorsese's digitally de-aged magnum opus *The Irishman* (2019) and Michael Snow's deliberate attempt to unravel digital cinema's deception, his avant-garde digital treatise **Corpus Callosum* (2002), to see how nostalgias of labour and visual spectacle itself become refracted and altered. I argue that a film like **Corpus* depicts an opportunity for digital films to be *extreme* but also minimal, slow and taxing for the viewer. **Corpus* can be considered an 'extreme' film insofar as it portrays and demands extremities of time and patience—its digitality also speaks more to repetition of code and traditions that have since lost meaning, contorting

bodies and experiences and reframing our regular conception of the time and space of labour and performance.

The third chapter examines the combinatory, explosive nature of the intersection of extreme and digital filmmaking in Hollywood: under the onus of considering extreme digital filmmaking that is often billed both reactionary and 'anti-cinematic,' I look at Olivier Assayas' impossibly stylish *Demonlover* (2002) and the incredibly controversial teen computer-screen horror *Megan Is Missing* (2011), two films that mine the potentialities for horror and violence to erupt at the fringes of conventional society, often embedded within the mainframes of culture itself. Mediated by consumer technologies of the time, these films show an interest in the aesthetics of bodily and mental torture, for both the viewer and filmic subject; blurry, disoriented, suburban, and freakish, these deeply symbolic and misunderstood films closely scrutinize the discombobulated present, but also reveal a nostalgia for sexual violence and a time without technology. Probing the fraught relationship between technology/medium and body/self, these films propose an after-human sensibility for comprehending violence and cinematic reality.

Closing this work is a closer look at the after-human, a potential guise for looking at the world and technology in crisis, during a time when the dialectical symbolic order for mankind's 'progress' has been annihilated. All that remains are violent games and slippery identities. Taking a look at recent films like Jane Schoenbrun's *We're All Going to the World's Fair* (2021) and David Cronenberg's *Crimes of the Future* (2022), I position the afterhuman nexus as a psychic arena within contemporary film that understands the blurring or blending of technology and human society as a reflexive and unpredictable act. I ask: what becomes of consciousness, artistic creation, subjectivity and reality itself when one is totally 'online,' unable to differentiate between themselves, the world, the artwork, the act of violence, and the past? I conclude the

thesis by stating that meaningful avant-garde and extreme art still has that possibility to puncture through the matrix. All these films discussed in my thesis despite their extreme ugliness are 'beautiful' in some capacity, since they shed some light on the increasingly grim world itself. Cronenberg once famously stated that he didn't consider himself fatalistic; instead he argued for new ethics of the extreme, one that playfully and critically uses humour and emotional intensities to live more inventively.

To gaze at the past through a nostalgic lens is not always a betrayal of the present or the future—what is at stake here is the ability to distinguish aesthetic form from the machinations of dread and violence. However, to look at the past is also, in a way, to gaze at the future: what else is at stake, in a much broader sense, is that losing faith in the future beckons a concurrent reification of the past, insofar as the past (fictional and idealized) becomes the stolid present. Accepting the contradictory context, to continue believing in new aesthetic forms and violent aberrations of psychic intensity in our art while still critiquing the social and political excesses of these fundamentally aesthetic forms is the primary goal of this text.

Chapter One: Mapping the Nostalgic Extreme

> We live in a time of technological and spiritual crisis.
>
> Dr. Jennifer Melfi, *The Sopranos*, 2004

1. Cultural Nostalgia for the Extreme, the Visceral, the Ugly, and the Ironic

Contemporary film discourse—either in amateur (read: online) film discussion communities or more academic film theory—one could argue still suffers the after-effects of extreme cinema, which maintains a strong cultural hold despite the apparent disappearance or dissolution of the movement itself. Extreme cinema *per se* has most profoundly and suddenly gone out of vogue; recent political pressures regarding sexual violence, representation, and director-actor ethics have shifted cinematic trends toward a more equitable, less provocative filmmaking style. I would argue this is a forced amnesia when one considers the history of violent, postmodern, and experimental films that dominated festival and media discourse less than 10 years ago. It's not as if those filmmakers went away, but the films of the present build on their provocative aesthetics and are an obvious reaction to the violence of their arthouse predecessors.

While the history of cinema is no stranger to extreme violence, the turn of the millennium came with a higher proliferation of films that featured presentations of violence on the verge of gratuity gaining cult followings and intellectual attention. Peaking in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the acolytes of now-iconic movements like Denmark's Dogme 95 and New French Extremity attempted to move the goalpost of filmic taste into a realm of more severe physical and psychic violence. The body—often dismembered, diseased or defiled—took centre stage. As Tanya Horeck writes in *New Extremism in Cinema*, New French Extremity films self-reflexively

showcase "the bodies of the character and actor and by extension the social body" and even the

"body of the film itself" as "open to metaphorical and allegorical readings" (39). While some

critics, reviewers, and enthusiasts argue that the films should be read as political allegory or are

"deeply humanist" or even critically self-reflexive, there is also another spate of critics, including

Quandt who coined the term "New French Extreme," who argue that the films either document a

lack of humanity or should be dismissed as pretentious and disingenuous. A plethora of

experimental filmic strategies, techniques and debates have been identified by critics as

'extreme:' for example, critics write about extreme reactions and responses or "commentaries

that tended towards extremes" (Palmer, 26; Palmer also argues that the French "cinema of the

body" and "cinema of sensation" kindled a radical dialogue about "extreme forms of aesthetic,

sexual, and social provocation" and important political debate on freedom of speech and artistic

freedom), extreme silence or long stretches without dialogue, extreme still-life staging, unusual

framing and canted angles, affective intensities, hybrid genre blending, thermic shots, non-linear

narrative composition and jarring editing or even exaggerated staccato slow-motion, extreme

close-ups, visual and acoustical disorientation and distortions, distortions of diegetic space,

sudden abrupt, jarring movement (often achieved through digital editing), torturous long takes,

and pornographic regimes that play up sensorial experiences or said more simply, graphic and

violent sexual encounters framed by ordinary and everyday banalities and boredom.[2] Not only

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[2] See Tim Palmer's "Style and Sensation in the Contemporary French Cinema of the Body:" Palmer eloquently argues that "the impact of such films, typically, is divisive. As Jean Bréhat, producer of *Twentynine Palms,* has observed: 'When someone is drawn to the film, it's in an excessive way—either people hate it and decry it, or they become fanatics. There's something really strong about it, it's never in between' (qtd. in Arpajour). We must, however, move beyond such polarizing evaluation to understand the efforts—and ambitions—of this confrontational filmmaking to engage us, both in style and subject material. A hybrid cinema, merging high-art intellectualism with low-art body horror, these films exploit the cinematic medium in dazzling, coherent, and often unprecedented ways. Exploring sexuality and physicality at fascinating extremes, this controversial strand of contemporary French cinema has a rigorous, committed intensity akin to the avant-garde at its most dynamic and compelling—troubling every day, indeed (32)."

was the subjectified filmic body under constant attack, so was the camera and the viewer itself; not necessarily simply reliant on either technological stress or physical discomfort to make its experimental argument, extreme films brought a crushing weight to the entire concept of filmic pleasure and enjoyment, acting as a kind of course-corrective aggressive anti-cinema. As will be articulated in the third chapter, these films often 'broke the rules' of narrative structure, further discombobulating the realm of conventional expectations and storytelling. In the late 2000s and early 2010s, culturally significant extreme films like Lars von Trier's *Nymphomaniac* (2013) and Gaspar Noe's *Enter the Void* (2009) were released to popular acclaim and controversy, but nothing earning similar degrees of popularity and cult status have materialized since then, barring the oblique body horror-phantasmagoria of Julia Ducournau's Palme d'Or winning *Titane* (2021) and David Cronenberg's don't-say-it's-a-comeback *Crimes of the Future* (2022). These films exploit a particular response towards nostalgic posthuman filmmaking, and will be touched on in the conclusion.

This is not to say that art-horror isn't experiencing a total comeback: following the dissolution of these movements, the tactics of extreme cinema have been reined in and rearticulated so as to lay greater claim to both its artistic meaningfulness and marketability: mindie film distributors like A24 helped usher in an era of quasi-extreme films like Ari Aster's folk horror *Midsommar* (2019) and Ti West's exploitation horror throwback *X* (2022). The provocative films affiliated with Tartan Video's "Asia Extreme" label, although not addressed in this thesis, also have helped establish extreme cinema as a para-genre or film movement, in a sense extending its legacy, as did other "hybrid" or transnational films. Despite the legitimizing factor of a Western film distributor brand like Tartan, questions about who or what 'manufactures' a film's extremity still arise: as Chi-Yun Shin puts it in his essay on the topic,

"questions have been raised as to the reductive nature of Tartan's marketing practices, which repackages the films as 'exotic and dangerous thrills.' In addition, the output of the label, and the name of the label itself, invoke and in part rely on the Western audiences' perception of the East as weird and wonderful, sublime and grotesque" (86-87). Playing up the violence and sexual intensity but playing down the subversive elements and moral confusion, these aesthetic restructurings respond to the problems posed by iconic extreme films and reorient their cultural legacy in the present. They demand an answer to whether or not these tactics retain their relevance in a substantially different cinematic culture. As an inevitable result of their disappearance, nostalgia around these movements have begun to surface. This naturally begs the question of what caused them to vaporize in the first place and what their ultimate place in cultural memory will be.

But before we grapple with this, what really defines extreme cinema, and how does it stand in opposition to films made after these discursive changes? The definition of such a diffuse generic category depends on how skeptical one is about the subject's aesthetic validity. In his 2015 dissertation on the "genre trouble" evoked by the subject, phenomenological film scholar Troy Bordun suggests that extreme films "may aim to elicit disgust, unease, tension, anxiety, and shock while also aiming at perceptual pleasure by certain so-called experimental tactics; certain films also solicit pleasure through pornographic tropes" (3). Critically, Bordun's interpretations of seminal phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty invites us to reconsider the cinematic quavering and the bodily destruction, suggesting it could be understood as a process whereby the ego is quashed and aesthetic experience is enmeshed within the spectator rather than locating aesthetic experience in the outside world: Bordun writes "perception, then, creates a situation within which sense-experience is anonymous and general—a perceptual field is opened for our

gaze, a field in which we are always already enmeshed. Horizons of possible experience are laid bare for us as perceptual experience, horizons which we can subtend our gaze. Sensation is thus a depersonalization (Merleau-Ponty 2004: 127, 130). There is no *I* (ego) in our gaze; we 'plunge' into the objects within the perceived horizon and these things think (perceive) themselves in us" (19). This extreme depersonalization following Bordun ultimately leads to the intense "commission of evil" as a form of critiquing reality and the viewer's standpoint.

Another leading film and media industries scholar Mattias Frey attempts to pierce directly through the aesthetic facade of extreme cinema: he suggests in his 2016 text *Extreme Cinema: The Transgressive Rhetoric of Today's Art Film Culture* that "extreme cinema is an international production trend of graphically sexually or violent 'quality' films that often stoke critical and popular controversy" (7). As Frey argues, the aesthetics of extreme film are inseparable from the modes of manufacturing and dissemination that popularize them. The term "extreme film" could be seen as a marketing idea constructed by directors and film festivals; it ignites a particular engine of discourse that grants the violent film an aura of legitimacy. In Bordun's mind, however, extreme film is also connected to an avant-garde tradition that attempts gestures of "hybridity," resisting genre classification in order to "play with formal and aesthetic codes," as well as "the refusal of many filmmakers to craft films within a pre-established generic category or categories" (5). Bordun's response to Frey's *Extreme Cinema* in his essay "The End of Extreme Cinema Studies" suggests that "we are no closer to understanding why this trend is worth studying apart from its instances of cinematic embellishments, and more importantly, why, on a global scale, these films are being produced and championed as a specific kind of film art, an art that has a great appeal for a large number of geographically and culturally diverse consumers" (127). Bordun claims extreme cinema has great importance and aesthetic validity

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that is indeed separate from its institutional origins. However, he concedes that "institutional analysis reveals broader forms of spectatorship than previously accounted for. A study of aesthetics will only lead to aesthetic answers" (133). His claim to a particular "end" to the study of extreme cinema suggests that the place of auteurist extreme cinema analysis is now left in the past; any further research and critique of the subject *per se* is left to the realm of nostalgia.

In her 2001 book *The Future of Nostalgia,* cultural theorist Svetlana Boym suggests that nostalgia functions on both the individual and societal levels. She writes that nostalgia "is not merely an individual sickness but a symptom of our age, a historical emotion. It is not necessarily opposed to modernity and individual responsibility. Rather it is coeval with modernity itself. Nostalgia and progress are like Jekyll and Hyde: alter egos. Nostalgia is not merely an expression of local longing, but a result of a new understanding of space and time that made the division into 'local' and 'universal' possible" (xvi). The contemporary cinema (and media writ large) is an important locale to study this historical emotion, especially with its dependence on the nostalgia cycle to maintain the financial and cultural relevance of intellectual properties. In the late 1990s and early 2000s (a time contemporaneous with Boym's book), issues regarding the "end of history" and its corollary, "the end of culture," came to prominence in both mainstream media (David Chase's *The Sopranos*) and art-house cultural products (Tsai Ming-Liang's *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*). Such now-iconic works from a time fixated on an uncertain future belong to a former generation; where are we now? The iconic extreme films that ignited the movement and followed in the first film's wake (such as Noé's *Irreversible*, Alexandre Aja's *High Tension*, and Pascal Laugier's *Martyrs*) have also become the products of a bygone cinematic era, an era where violence, both sexual and psychic, was the hallmark of a serious cinema that reflexively called into question the nature of a nostalgic emotionally-laden cinema

and spectatorship. Something similar could be said about the burgeoning digital avant-garde, but digitality is not the focus of this chapter. Before I begin my own textual analysis of two extreme films, I will discuss the arguments of both Frey and Bordun in more detail, considering other theories of extreme cinema and also inviting my readers to playfully ponder multiple ways of reading the "extreme."

2. Reading Extreme Cinema Incorrectly

Extreme films have never existed in a comfy spot in the cinematic canon. Despite the significant media attention these films received, their tangible mainstream appeal never materialized. Frey, in *Extreme Cinema*, attempts an objective analysis of the history, intentions, and reception of the extreme film while extolling their fundamentally misunderstood nature: he writes,

> Dismissed as dumbed-down, soul-sold artistic self-satisfaction or venerated as rarefied emanations of artistic genius, these daring, harrowing, and often self-indulgent productions have garnered many calls for attention and yet few comprehensive answers. Most scholarship on extreme cinema comes in the form of microscopic interpretations of individual films, essentially auteurist textual analyses that seek to show how 'extremity' reflects a national culture or illuminates a psychoanalytical subconscious (9).

Frey interestingly suggests that at an institutional level, extreme film is a kind of 'avant-garde' torture porn, one that "exaggerates strategies of popular, cult, and exploitation movies, [and] depends on this image of difference in order to be seen as legitimate and distinguish itself from

these forms" (21).[3] The common postmodern strategies of late 90s and early 2000s

filmmaking—what Frey defines as "recognizing irony, excess, allegory, self-reflexivity" (21)—

is what elevates extreme cinema out of 'low cinema' gore fodder for cinematic thrill junkies and

into the rarefied halls of the high art cinema institution.[4] The varied implementation of these

postmodern devices, which often leave the most aesthetically severe extreme films feeling

impenetrably cold, evoke vastly different audience responses than the *Saw* or *Human Centipede*

franchises. Bordun seems to agree with Martine Beugnet that "*extreme cinema* maintains some

affinities with *postmodern* notions— for example, 'pastiche' and 'schizophrenia,' hyperrealism,

attacks on modernity," (3) but refuses to limit these films to a play of surfaces, ironic reflecting

or genre mixing/blurring and instead foregrounds spectators' "sensuous experiences" of the

extreme.[5] Bordun analyzes what Frey perhaps overlooks - a more profound kinship between

horror and extremity, limiting its visceral play and intensity. I suggest, like Bordun, that this

close linkage of horror and extremity is indeed the wrong way to read the extreme. In this thesis,

I will argue that extreme cinema should not—and more importantly, can not—be reduced to

shock, horror and transgression. Bordun's phenomenological film theory importantly shifts the

extreme's terrain from the realm of "horror" to the "horrible" and raises the important point that

"the violence displayed in extreme cinema has an intensity that registers viscerally, unlike the

spectacle of horror films" (87). This shift in focus from horror to the "horrible" ultimately

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[3] Linda Williams also has classified extreme cinema as "hard-core art," a sub-genre of pornography in her essay
"Hard-Core Art Film: The Contemporary Realm of the Senses."

[4] On postmodernism, also see Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. One
might also look at Susan Broadhurst's study of postmodern art films or "liminal films" that share the aesthetic traits
of repetition, self-consciousness and self-reflexiveness, montage, collage, extreme stylization, eclecticism, pastiche,
playfulness, and the mixing of genres or codes: Broadhurst, *Liminal Acts*: *A Critical Overview of Contemporary
Performance and Theory* (London, 1999).

[5] Borden references here Storey 2006: 129ff; Altman 1999: 156–157.

realigns our cultural task at hand: rather than shrugging off extremity for its own sake, the act of watching extremity on its own terms can be better understood.

While genre classification of extreme films is not the topic of the thesis at hand, it is important to raise this distinction. Frey would argue that anyone who takes the texts of extreme film too seriously falls prey to their manipulative tactics, and would become a follower of what he deems the "aesthetic embrace," when a viewer "ascribes to these films complex regimes of representation and spectatorship positioning, often deriving these insights from the filmmakers' stated intentions in interviews or public performances" (37). This definition of interpreting extreme cinema—let alone any movement of cinema—is clearly myopic. Suggesting that a film spectator, critic or theorist simply attempts to use the director's pure intentions as their exclusive framework for understanding a film is absurd; other than marketers and press agents, it is seems unlikely that any person viewing a film (especially the professional critic) is always in complete agreement with the aesthetic argument made. Frey attempts to nuance this argument by setting a dichotomy on the other end, that of "cynical criticism," whereby a negative critic of extreme cinema "disavows any formal, stylistic, or thematic difference between extreme cinema and the worst splatter or pornography" (38). Frey establishes himself as a middleman between these elements, trying to avoid both a mindless sincerity and a dismissive stance. The irony stands in attempting to construct a middle-ground understanding of the discourse for a film category where genre, movement, and intention remains notoriously slippery. By homogenizing the directors of extreme films as philosophical provocateurs and the responses to these films as unironic lovers or haters, Frey dismisses the inner tensions, complexity, and psychic emotion at hand within these films. *Extreme Film* suggests that these movies and directors have been canonized and reified in a similar way to non-extreme films. This is an erroneous take, however;

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the psychic intensity and complexity of the films calls out for sincere textual analysis, moving beyond marketing tricks and tactics.

It might seem needlessly polemical to propose that there is a right or a wrong way to read the aesthetics and purpose of extreme films. Yet the cultural legacy that extreme cinema sparked is, more often than not, controversy. Their influence and nostalgic objectification—either in popular or academic circles—has been dismissed by Frey as the result of this supposedly intentional pot-stirring. According to Frey, this legacy is not exactly so simply aesthetic brainwashing or pure fan worship, but the result of the institutional underpinnings of art cinema that supports these iconoclastic directors. Although Bordun supports Frey suggesting that aesthetic questions only provide aesthetic answers, I would suggest that studies of the art film industry only give us answers about the art film industry, and leave us with no synthesis of the complex aesthetics or spectatorial responses that these ugly films provide us as viewers and scholars. When we consider nostalgia in the ugly film canon, however, such questions about the industry engine change and a more complicated relationship between the aesthetics of a film and spectatorship begins.

A unique problem confronted by the extreme film directors in the early millennium was the tense relationship between nostalgia, verisimilitude, and pornography. Sexual violence and unsimulated sex on screen were obvious signposts that one is watching an extreme film, allowing spectators to distinguish between these films and more generic thrillers, dramas, and horror films that also displayed on-screen physical and psychological violence. For the purposes of this chapter, two extreme cinema directors will be analyzed: Lukas Moodysson and his experimental gore-porn-horror *A Hole in My Heart* (2004) and Catherine Breillat's cold feminist drama *Fat Girl* (2001). These films, while not explicitly nostalgic, attempt to show what has become of

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reality in a world that has collapsed, leaving behind a cold and violent realm of disgust. Again pointing to extreme cinema's hybridity, the boundaries between pornography and cinematic realism begin to disintegrate.[6] By blending elements of the avant-garde, didactic strategies, and sexual pathos, these films—which would be impossible to market in today's cinematic culture that disavows ambiguous representations of sexual assault—express critiques of nostalgia and conventional filmmaking, ultimately resisting canonization while often collapsing under the weight of their own severity.[7] The question posed is not whether they have aged poorly, but under what societal conditions were they relevant, and if the questions of exploitation and verisimilitude that their hellish scenarios present still hold significant weight for the crisis-laden cinema of the modern moment. To do this, we must begin to read these extreme films incorrectly, under a new kind of aesthetic lens.

3. Extremophiles: *A Hole in My Heart*'s Isolating Prurience

Swedish director Lukas Moodysson's 2004 film *A Hole in My Heart* is one of the most literally *extreme* films in the canon. Expressing itself as sentimentalized violence, in visual, sonic, and thematic terms, the film's overwhelming intensity earned it a polarized critical response. To paraphrase the TIFF catalogue, the film's Sadean excess is used as a "pitch black critique of reality television."[8] Written as a chamber drama, *Hole* is almost set exclusively in

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[6] For more on pornography's extreme aesthetics, see essays by Tim Dean, Harri Kalha and Steven Ruszczycky in *Porn Archives* Ed. Tim Dean, Steven Ruszczycky, David Squires (Durham, NC: Duke University Press: 2014).
[7] Lisa Hatcher's compelling review of *Fat Girl* reads it as an anti-coming-of-age drama and points out that Breillat's camera banishes "dewey-eyed" "retrospective nostalgia", instead coldly depicting "a brutal war of identity that passes for the early stages of sexual interaction, agency, innocence and self-awareness." See: Lisa Hatcher's film review, "*Fat Girl* crushes the Coming-of-Age Flick," available online at https://lisathatcher.com.au/2013/09/23/fat-girl-catherine-breillat-crushes-the-coming-of-age-flick-film-review/
[8] As quoted in twhalliii's film review in *Indiewire*. https://www.indiewire.com/2004/09/toronto-2004-review-lukas-moodyssons-a-hole-in-my-heart-227958/

middle-aged widow Richard's dingy apartment in Sweden filming an amateur pornography that

stars himself, a young woman named Tess, and his friend Geko. Acting as a detached viewer to

this already deranged setup is Richard's physically disabled teenage son, Erik, who attempts to

avoid the sexually violent nightmare in the apartment by hiding in his poorly lit bedroom. These

four, slowly descending into a spiral of excess, appear trapped in their own hells. The characters

are fixated around a nostalgia of patriarchal, titillating sex—ultimately a nostalgia of

pornography itself—and a nostalgia for violence, trying to enact a rearticulation of nostalgia for

the self and of a personal what-once-was. Stylistically, the film breaches a kind of extreme-

collage similar to what late 90s contemporary films like Harmony Korine's *julien donkey-boy*

(1999) were experimenting with. The film seems to be on the verge of constantly collapsing

inwards on its own narrative flow, utilizing jarring cuts to violent and extreme sexual close-ups

or disturbing hallucinations. A sense of consistent temporal perspective has all but evaporated,

and even the distinction between individual mental breakdowns and the collapse of the collective

unit itself becomes blurry. This film treads the line between reality and psychosis and between

deep sentimentality and an elevated disgust for the past in order to make a point about the

continuing rearticulation of violence and sexuality in modern media, all the while establishing

grounds for each character's individual struggles with nostalgia, verisimilitude, and extreme

emotion.

3.1: Nostalgia for Sex

A Hole in My Heart is not a film overly interested in an explicit presentation of *the real*.

It fundamentally distances itself from reality; this remains a common theme throughout the

extreme cinema canon, and is developed further when extreme cinema clashes with digital

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filmmaking. The film's treatment of sexuality, sexual violence, and taboo places it in the realm of allegorical or conceptual filmmaking, with its characters used primarily as stand-ins for particular thoughts and ideas, rather than functioning as unique character studies. The plot, thin as it is, documents the filming of an amateur pornography film in Richard's apartment. As the film progresses, their engagement in increasingly intense sexual acts on camera become more obvious, and this creates degrees of emotional distance amongst and between the small cast. Rather than becoming an explicitly transgressive film, the sadness expressed by the characters and their attempts to create some kind of minor transgressive work shows a futile nostalgia for an earlier era of sensationalized sex acts on screen. Already in 2004, the cracks in the transgressive model of extreme filmmaking were beginning to show.

Since the film is about a middle-aged man and his similarly-aged friend Geko attempting to film a porno with 21-year old Tess, the nostalgia for youthful sexuality reigns supreme. Richard and Geko's sexual willingness—their lack of shame with having sex on camera and eagerness to perform increasingly bizarre fetishistic acts—runs in contrast to the supposedly docile disabled son Erik. Erik, the troubled child with a deformed hand and a deceased mother, plays no part in the transgressive fantasy his father seeks. Unlike the nostalgic Richard, the depressive-cynical Erik imagines that he knows exactly who he is and where his reality is located. Like Moodysson's other films *Lilya 4-Ever* and *Show Me Love*, the characters here are on the fringes of society, being the wayfarers that receive the most severe brunt of society's transgressive harshness. Erik, speaking in private to Tess, discusses the discovery by scientists of extremophiles, microscopic creatures that live among the most dangerous climates on earth, species whose ability to live should be considered a miracle (interestingly, extremophiles can only be observed through the lens of scanning electron microscopes, and thus they too are

technologically screened, objects of a voyeuristic gaze and Erik voices the concern that the light

of filming crews at the bottom of the ocean could perhaps exterminate these remarkable creatures

who have managed to live and survive in complete darkness. He worries: "Imagine if, after they

filmed, everything was just exterminated" while the camera zooms in to an extreme close-up

examination of Erik's own hand). Moodyson's moody film zooms in and magnifies both

spatially and temporally—it zooms in on intense nostalgic-laden dreams, confessions and

childhood desires as a way to escape the graphic violence. Erik also hides from the graphic sex

acts on screen and his own storytelling about surviving and exterminating censors sexual

violence; he obviously sees a parallel between him and the extremophiles, as he will always

consider himself forgotten, someone no one could ever have nostalgia about and would never

experience a memory worth nostalgizing about (at least until the film's sentimental ending when

Tess commits to his friendship). As Boym writes, "nostalgic longing was defined by loss of the

original object of desire, and by its spatial and temporal displacement" (38). Erik uses his lack of

nostalgic desire to separate himself from his transgressive father, and isolates himself from

society as a result. Richard, having lost his wife and now deciding to transplant his nostalgic

desire into making transgressive porn films with a young woman, has succumbed to a nostalgia

for the original desire, and unfortunately has become a retrograde, nostalgic object himself. As

pornography scholar Helen Hester writes in her text *Beyond Explicit*, speaking on Charlotte

Roche's novel *Wetlands*,

> Even as this association of sex with transgression is endlessly reiterated, it is showing
>
> signs of wearing down and losing hold over the contemporary imagination. Sex is
>
> beginning, perhaps, to lose its status as a particularly privileged and iconic site of
>
> transgression. Certainly, if we take the capacity to elicit a visceral affective response as a

sign of being psychically unsettled, and if we take this discomfort to be a symptom of the violation of our most deeply felt, culturally cherished, and ideologically loaded taboos, then, in the case of Roche's novel at least, the sexually graphic has given way to what Helen refers to as her 'hygienic transgressions.' (46)

Erik functions then as a stand-in for the cynical viewer of an extreme film: disgusted, concerned, and capable of seeing beyond the pure viscerality of the situation and wanting to distance himself from it (both temporally and spatially). Tess, on the other hand, is the subject of brutality, a classic example of the long-standing cinematic tradition fixated with women's 'pure souls' that have long since been tarnished by a patriarchal loss of innocence. Tess, the half-willing subject of desire, has sexual feelings of her own and a penchant for voyeurism, and whether or not her explanations for wanting to act in porn as expressed in the film's ambiguous diegesis are true or not matter very little to the film's plot. As it stands, she is simply stuck in the apartment with these strange men, as the apartment transmutates away from a real place and becomes more like a location in a Beckett play or *The Exterminating Angel*. Around the film's halfway mark, Tess flees the apartment after Richard and Geko attempt to film a violent break-in sexual fantasy, and the authenticity of the violence leads to diminished trust between the characters. As Bordun suggests for filmmakers like Breillat, "hard-core pornography is thoroughly a fictional representation, an appearance of what a sexual act might look like" (120). This accidental drive for authenticity, rather than participating in pornography's fantasy-reality, speaks to what Hester suggests as "the contemporary hunger for authenticity," whereby "irony can be positioned as one of the key contemporary modes (...) this does not simply reflect a disinterest in authenticity, but must be viewed as the symptom of a profound and frustrated *desire* for it" (130). Thus, authenticity (the real object of desire) becomes the object of nostalgia. This supposed reality that

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the porn film, with its lack of verisimilitude, fails to deliver is its promise of sexual gratification. Despite initially fleeing the violence that Richard and Geko show her, Tess eventually returns to the apartment after a dissociative experience in a supermarket, bored by the outer world and its "ugliness." Film studies scholar Asbjørn Grønstad in *Screening the Unwatchable: Spaces of Negation in Post-Millennial Art Cinema* views the film as a "metapornographic imagination" possibly inspired by Todd Haynes' *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*, arguing that the film which uses Barbie dolls to re-enact graphic acts also critiques the "staging of the female body as commodity" (145). If the film also meditates on how we as spectators respond to or turn away from (like Erik) the explosive intrusion of vile unwatchabilities, it is also the case that Tess watches us watching her.

Fig. 1: Sanna Bråding as Tess, the object of pornographic nostalgia (Lukas Moodysson, *A Hole in My Heart*, 2004)

Tess' position shown here in Fig. 1 reveals the film's hand as a work focused on perception and desire: coded to strongly mirror the proclivity for pornography to shoot sexual acts—especially oral—from a "POV" perspective, Tess ends up in the submissive position. However, the stare she provides is not that of the gleeful professional sexuality that high-budget pornography provides: blurred, the word "HORA" scrawled onto her arm in pen, and backgrounded by a cheap and easily recognizable IKEA comforter, Tess interrogates the camera itself through an indicting stare, throwing off any possibility that the pornography could feel like a "fly-on-the-wall" situation. Pornography performers often break the fourth wall, so to speak, for the sake of masturbatory closeness: the moment of intimacy sought after by the viewer. It's simply part of the job. Tess' glare into the cheap camcorder—a household, familiar object, a far cry from professional high-budget porn that uses 'real' cameras—provokes the viewer into total alienation. It is almost a declaration of independence, a look of both fear and autonomy that attempts to uncode pornography's sexual fantasy through the disturbing nature of the unwilling victim. This tension between the tortured victim and the digital scene of the torture itself will return in the third chapter.

Early in the film, Erik goes on a different philosophical diatribe when speaking to Tess, suggesting that each person is split in two and spends their entire life looking for their other half—speaking to the titular hole in one's heart. Erik's storytelling censoring of sexuality, his turn to tales of sci-fi split selves and creaturely survival (extremophiles) fantastically obliterate or overcode any claim to the 'real' made in transgressive filmmaking; Erik as 'extremophile' spectator turns away from pornography, extreme violence and the nostalgic nature of where extreme film was heading in 2004, instead embracing the art of extreme survival in a time of deep crisis. On the one hand, Moodysson's film as critics like Grønstad argue, "with its

reshuffled chronology, handheld camera, and violent rapid inserts (...) presents a portrait of lives

in complete disarray, unmoored and without hope."[9] Some critics like Ed Gonzales in *Slant*

Magazine decried the film as "a non-stop spectacle of unmitigated repulsiveness" (Gonzales,

2005). On the other hand, there is a self-reflexive digital blurring and self-reflexive surveillance

aesthetic (using fish-eye perspectives and surveillance angles) that highlights the arbitrariness of

what is screened/seen and what is censored in our banal everyday. As Grønstad writes, consumer

objects like produce labels in the supermarket are "digitally manipulated and blotched" in the

film (and interestingly the other shoppers' faces in the grocery scene with Tess are also blotched

out like in accessed surveillance footage), whereas bodily secretions are "in your face" and

uncensored (147). The digital blurring and censoring in the film also dialogues rhythmically with

painfully extreme close-ups: Erik's extreme storytelling often interrupts the porn shoot (also

blurring it, in a way) and seems to invite the viewer to use another kind of close-up magnifying

gaze to fantasize about the body and nature, overcoming and survival. Film studies scholar

Tanya Horeck also sees Erik as a utopian "truth-teller" in what she reads as Moodysson's anti-

pornography film (147).

Earlier in this chapter we spoke of reading the extreme film incorrectly. Instead of

linking/limiting extremity to bloody horror, as many critics have suggested, I would argue that

Moodysson's magnifying gaze (perhaps most closely linked to Erik as outsider) invites

spectators to read the extreme film "incorrectly" by allowing its genre contamination (its satirical

mixing and spoofing of porn, medical film, home movie and surveillance terror and its mixing of

blotched-out faces, sepia-toned flashbacks, squashed surveillance footage and documentary-style

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[9] To this, one could add other alienating techniques used like "night vision confessionals" and extreme off-kilter angles.

confessionals or interviews shot in infrared night-vision) to shine. Like Erik's extremophiles, the imperfect, shaky close-ups of the medical film genre, the defamiliarized extreme close ups of the eye vessels, epidermis and extreme graphic depictions of an extreme body in crisis or being modified as we see in the labial reduction surgery or open-heart surgery (what Bazin described as "accidental beauty" or Walter Benjamin described as the opening up of the "optical unconscious") shock and instruct. The extremophile story, like extreme cinema, is about surviving in darkness; it blurs or censors (distracts the viewer from the porn shoot), but also magnifies and illuminates unique bodies in moments of crisis, using an extreme super-vision. Even this act of illumination itself is also self-reflexively both embraced and questioned in the film. We are reminded here that the technology that we are surrounded with now, in the crisis era, both censors and is 'helpful' in making sure we do not see upsetting things, but also transforms, guides and magnifies/visualizes our own insides, bringing us face to face with otherwise upsetting "horrible" unseen entities, like the coronavirus. Erik reminds us that we should both embrace but also at times question the filmmaker's light, using a light to examine his own hand, but also inviting the viewer to think about the ethics of using a new technological nexus to read extreme bodies in a time of crisis. Numerous critics have read *Hole in my Heart* not as depersonalized extreme torture porn, but as as a film about "affective experiences" (Grønstad 147) and a humanist film that invites us to rethink our own biology, fate and interconnectedness. For example, Toronto reviewer twhalliii writes:

> The film uses every shocking tool available to a filmmaker (screeching sound, graphic
> visuals, intense sexual situations) to underscore what I believe is the fundamental
> argument of the film; We cannot disassociate ourselves from the primacy of our biology.
> We are alone in the world, yet interconnected with other human beings at the same time.

Whether that means the destiny of the family we are born into, the biological destiny of our physical bodies, or our overriding physical desires and urges, the film presents the human body like no film ever has before.

Subjected to the film's magnifying gaze, the bodies and parts in motion in Moodyson's film (earthworms, humans, organs) shift, squirm and interact. Affective experiences created through the aesthetic play of the magnifying gaze invite the spectator to linger on physical forms, stepping into the sensuous and shocking world of an extreme operating theatre. Although William Brown in *Super Cinema: Film-Philosophy for the Digital Age* argues that the film shot on DV showcases what we might see as the digital super-vision of the CSI shot or key-hole/forensic shots of hearts beating and internal organs (66), we should note that the footage of beating hearts is in fact raw medical film footage documenting open heart surgery. It is not CGI manipulated.[10] As Brown suggests, extending Stacey Abbott's analysis of the forensic shot and the penetration of the human body in science fiction films, in de-personalized CSI shots the human element itself is blurred: there is a "loss of meaning" or a "loss of identity as the (human) body becomes simply another part of the continuum of space" (66). Brown interestingly argues that "the ability of the digital camera to pass through bodies" and enter the body in extreme ways "suggests that human bodies are 'meaningless,' or just a(nother) part of the continuum," concluding that "this could be part of an "antihumanist trend" since "digital technology… more consistently (and perhaps intensely) reflects the insignificance of man through its 'inhumanity'" (66). Elaborating on and modifying this argument, one could argue that the open-heart surgical footage in Moodysson's film which showcases a real body in crisis (framed by the ironic

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[10] The film also includes footage of labial reduction surgery.

statement "I'm going to try to make it real so that it looks real") and graphic depiction of labiaplasty are surreal screenings of the body linked to Erik's extremophile storytelling, enacting a surreal poetry of survival, extinction and transformation. Critic Mariah Larsson in an article entitled "'Close your Eyes and tell me what you see': Sex and Politics in Lukas Moodysson's Films" has also argued that at the end of the film when Erik puts band aids on his eyes this is an attempt to subvert or "avert the corruption of the gaze," destroying the potential for spectators to get visual pleasure (Larrson, 2010, 148). She concludes, however, that Moodysoon's anti-pornography film still argues for conservative censoring. "At the end of the film, Eric puts band-aids over his eyes; in the film's logic this gesture is easily interpreted as a way to avert the corruption of the gaze, an attempt to grasp at an inner truth rather than look at the superficial surface (Larson 2006). The obvious paradox here is that such an injunction would also apply to the film's own recourse to explicit images" (Larrson, 2010, 148). Interestingly, however, Erik's gaze in the film did not linger on the superficial surface; as a spectator he employed a magnifying gaze to scrutinize and analyze bodies in the world.

A *Hole in My Heart* is the only explicitly experimental extreme film that Moodysson has made, and he himself refuses to do the work of decoding the film for the audience, suggesting that he considers the film to be primarily a work of allegory and a critique of extreme cinema itself. Frey, writing on *Hole*'s intentions, suggests that "Moodysson relinquishes interpretive authority over the reception of his work, ultimately throwing up his hands to conclude that the distinction [between pornography and sexual art] is impossible to make" (183). Perhaps, under the realm of the nostalgic, this is true, but to the appropriately cynical extreme film viewer (one that accepts its complicated relationship to the real) a different view begins to glimmer on the horizon. Writing as the middleman between the aesthetic embrace and the cynical critic, Frey

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claims extreme cinema's commitment to realism (eg. unsimulated sex) through authenticity and artistic freedom is a way to "justify their projects and validate their films as art works with serious aims and significant aesthetic value" (189). My question to Frey is perhaps an un-nostalgic sentiment: what realism? Where in extreme cinema and those films digitally blurred like *Hole* does a commitment to Griffith's 'wind in the trees' really exist, when the diegesis is so obviously exaggerated and when extreme techniques (digital blurring, extreme surrealist close-ups, infrared night-vision shots with glowing eyes, fish-eye perspectives, and flickering images) are used? Why would directors blindly adhere to realism in order to deconstruct pornography to make a point about both the media's influence on sexuality and the distortion of reality?

3.2: The Nostalgic Perspective

A Hole in My Heart's most negatively received stylistic aspect is its unrelenting extreme-collage: shots last brief moments before being intercut with either a horrible industrial sound, an electronic dance song, screamed dialogue, or visually moving between a close-up heart under surgery to a character ripping limbs off a Barbie and sticking them into a fake vagina; this constant transgressive energy makes the film a draining watch. However, the film's collage-like perspective also gives it an entirely unique visual aesthetic, only similar perhaps to films like Harmony Korine's *julien donkey-boy* (1999) or Jonathan Caouette's *Tarnation* (2003). It is an explicitly unreal filmic statement, one that takes its influence from mid-century avant-garde cinema, visual art, and music rather than a Bazinian commitment to reality. Frey, however, remains convinced of the extreme filmmaker's interest in reality for its own visceral sake: he writes about "the so-called double standard of realism,"

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If film is ontologically a recording medium and, according to prominent and influential theorists such as Andre Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer, should communicate or reveal reality as one of its essential aims, why are some elements of real life (speaking, smoking, crying) performed, whereas some others (violence, sex) are foreclosed or fabricated? Hardcore art filmmakers aspire to correct this film-cultural tradition; they purport to maximize the consistency of reality and blur what they see are arbitrary divisions between legitimate and illegitimate representations (189).

While to deny that extreme film contains a necessary degree of realism would be an egregious misread, *Hole* is explicitly non-linear and visually surreal unlike most slower and dramatic extreme films. Claiming a universal experience to the extreme cinematic director's goal of re-presenting a strict reality—in an obnoxiously naive Bazinian fashion—would be an even more significant slight against them. It effectively neutralizes extreme cinema to suggest that the tactics used for what can get media controversy (unsimulated sex on screen, the line between art and porn blurred) and a more surreal, difficult-to-articulate cinematic unreality are one and the same. Another answer for this exaggerated bleakness could run the risk of a different kind of naivety, such as scholar William Brown's platitudinous remark about *Hole* where he suggests that "only when we are prepared to look at and to accept ourselves for who we are, no matter how unpleasant things might be, can we properly claim to know and understand each other. To hide away from the 'dark' elements of the world is not to engage with the world in a frank and positive manner" (37). This somewhat shallow observation shows the paucity of genuine confrontation with both extreme cinema and aesthetic-emotional reality in general, as it argues for a kind of baseline moral goodness that comes with confronting the world for 'what it really is.' As a result, it suggests both a cinematic and spectatorial objectivity that effectively neutralizes surreality. On the other hand, phenomenological film scholar Jenny Charmarette's

comments on French director Phillipe Grandrieux's experimental film *La vie nouvelle* (2002)—a nightmarish film set against the backdrop of a dilapidated Eastern European landscape—help us better understand this slipperiness. She writes,

> These dissolutions [self-identity, self-sameness] are nonetheless foregrounded within profoundly material, dense and embodied images. The forms of slippery subjectivity in and around the permeable body-subjects in and of Grandrieux's films are continually exposed to the possibility of their decentering and dissolution; consequently they permeate cinematic experience, and the intertwined nature of filmmaking, film image and cinematic encounter (202).

In terms of cinematic instability, the potential for dissolution, and a greater understanding of the film image's relation to the spectator, Moodysson's film does more to self-reflexively meditate on televised violence[11] and the unstable, pathetic, and sad nature of reality than to help an individual come to a greater understanding of the wind in the trees or "darkness."

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[11] There are references to Reality TV embedded in the film as well (for example, Tess cries when she discusses not getting a chance to join the cast of "Big Brother"). One could read the film as a critique of reality television— whereas "reality" television exploits fantasy (consolidating material dreams of wealth and fame and grounding them in highly gendered performance) to distract from one's actual material circumstance, *Hole*'s heightened anti-reality shows you what you don't want to see and highlights the impossibility of overcoming emotional and financial need through a fake celebration of contact and communication. The relationships we see in Moodysson's film are the polar opposite of those celebrated in an atomised culture.

Fig. 2: Grandrieux's *La vie nouvelle* (2002), a pulsating and slippery sepia-toned world

La vie nouvelle—which starts and ends with a horrific cry—radically provoked and divided

audiences. It was vehemently defended or (more likely) fiercely rejected and met with contempt

and sarcasm; it was also read as "an exploration of 'radical evil' (...) haunted by the recent

Balkan conflict" (Beugnet, 147). According to critic Adrian Martin:

> *La Vie nouvelle* explores a punk-Sadean view of the human animal and crumbling social
> structures (…) it has divided audiences and ignited rejection from an affronted critical
> mainstream. But its advocates believe that this extreme cinema founded on a philosophic
> investigation of evil is also a blow for avant-garde liberty. The films of Philippe
> Grandrieux pulsate. They pulsate microcosmically: in the images, the camera trembles
> and flickers so violently that, even within a single, continuous shot, no photogram
> resembles another. And they pulsate macrocosmically: the soundtrack is constructed
> globally upon unidentifiable, layered, synthesised, ambient noises of breath or wind,
> sucked in and expelled, which underlie the entire film and constitute its disturbed

heartbeat, returning to our ear when all other sounds have disappeared. In the very beginnings and endings of his films, over the credits, there is nothing but this strangely bodily sound.[12]

One of Grandrieux's pulsating images is a dark, blurred silhouette of a man running, seemingly trying to escape, but drawn back into a sticky morass or field (Fig. 2). As Martine Beugnet writes, "It is like a stain on the celluloid, moving to a distant humming sound, its distorting contours on the brink of dissolving in the trembling, snowy texture that fills the screen." For Grandrieux, this trembling and pulsating materiality of the medium reminds us that cinema is itself powered by the body. As he eloquently states in an interview "About the 'insane horizon' of cinema'": "Cinema is made (above all) with the hands, with the skin, with the entire body, by fatigue, by breath, by the pulsations of the blood, the rhythm of the heart, by the muscles. Body and sensation, that is the machine, its absolute power, its obsession. That is its becoming. Invented bodies, comical, grotesque, obscene, the improbable bodies of the stars and the monsters, and light, its palpitation, and the beating of shots, and in us, fear, joy, hope, sadness, the obscure deployment of human passions."[13] Bodies and machines both pulsate in Grandrieux's extreme cinema of fear and hope. In an early example of a computer intrusion into Grandrieux's sonic cinema, in a 1982 short made for TV *Une Génération* a computer image of Mitterrand accompanied by a strange electronic hum appears on a TV screen fragmented "line for line". Later in the film May '68 interviewees discuss the left-wing today as reliving an "ancient nostalgia, an old utopia, a kind of melancholy for Bloom, Lenin, the Battleship

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[12] Adrian Martin, *La vie nouvelle* (Review), http://www.filmcritic.com.au/reviews/v/vie_nouvelle.html (2003)

[13] Philippe Grandrieux, "About the 'insane horizon' of cinema," Trans. Maria Palacios Cruz. Originally published as 'Sur l'horizon insensé du cinéma', *Cahiers du cinéma hors série: Le siècle du cinéma* (November 2000), reprinted online at *Diagonal Thoughts* https://www.diagonalthoughts.com/?p=1423

Potemkin, Vertov," but also realizing that this nostalgia itself is an "assertion of the uncertainty of these times" (Hainge 45). Interestingly, Grandrieux lyrically describes his own Spinoza-ist film built on a "pure block of sensations" as a nostalgic longing for childhood affect, sans melancholy: "My dream is to create a completely 'Spinoza-ist' film, built upon ethical categories: rage, joy, pride (...) and essentially each of these categories would be a pure block of sensations, passing from one to the other with enormous suddenness. So the film would be a constant vibration of emotions and affects, and all that would reunite us, reinscribe us into the material in which we're formed: the perceptual material of our first years, our first moments, our childhood. Before speech. That's the impulse—the desire—which led to the film."[14]

Grandrieux might conjure up childhood fantasies and what we might see as nostalgic affective and perceptual memories to help frame his New Extreme intensities, but the director is clear that the film itself proceeds without any warm sepia tones or sun: "The sun remains hidden" in the film; "things can disappear but they aren't lost. It's like a multiple look, which never ceases to sweep up the pieces, and proceeds without any nostalgia."[15] In *Hole*, however, the severity of the images is softened when Geko attempts to harness his nostalgic dimension/dreams (he falls asleep once during intercourse and has warm sepia-tinged dreams of running through fields) and explain his childhood desire to be an astronaut. Shifting from the aggressive collage to a mournful reverie style, Geko at one point provides a monologue to the audience and the film's amorphic diegetic narrator, speaking of his desires to break free from the regular confines of society. The sad and somewhat obvious irony is that things for Geko have not

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[14] "Artist in Focus: Philippe Grandrieux," https://www.diagonalthoughts.com/?p=1425

[15] Nicole Brenez, "The Body's Night: An Interview with Philippe Grandrieux," Interview recorded 23 October 2022, trans. Adrian Martin, http://www.rouge.com.au/1/grandrieux.html

turned out so idealized. While perhaps falling short from an impactful narrative approach, Geko's shift to reverie reveals a calmer and more patient side of Moodysson's direction, better expressed in his less overtly experimental dramas. Moodysson's films are prone to an aestheticized sentimentality of innocence, jeopardizing any sincere critique of nostalgia he may have. To continue this critique, we will consider a master of un-nostalgia, Catherine Breillat.

4. Anti-Nostalgics: *Fat Girl*'s Hell World

Catherine Breillat's 2001 drama *Fat Girl* (and oeuvre at large) is one of the most discussed films in the extreme cinema canon. Bizarrely, until the brutal end, the film is much less bloody than the average extreme film, and easily much more patient (considering the infamous 25 minute long rape scene that is mostly dialogue). The film's generic confusion and sexual commentary has resulted in a critical consensus focused—rightly, I would add—almost entirely around its political and feminist themes. That being said, I feel that no one has considered Breillat to be a nostalgic director, although I would argue that *Fat Girl* is deeply concerned with nostalgia—or at least the absence of it. Breillat's films are oriented around the violent traumas of womanhood, constructing impossibly cold narratives about patriarchal violence and its relation to beauty and hierarchical structures of any kind (wealth, a film set, a stranger on the street). Within *Fat Girl*, a lingering anti-nostalgia remains, the kind of nostalgia that arises out of trauma in both the moment of action and the apparent dissolution of society's ethical and moral codes. Breillat's nostalgia never succumbs to what-was-once, but rather situates itself in the unfortunate here-and-now—the lingering, permanent present time, when the weight of trauma and disappointment rears its head most profoundly. To contrast *Fat Girl* with *A Hole in My Heart* is to explore what extremity in films about sexual violence, media, and the seemingly decrepit,

cynical society actually means, and what escape routes or lines of flight can be taken there—or why these routes no longer exist.

4.1: The Anti-Nostalgic Youth

Fat Girl's two underage protagonists, Anaïs and Elena, are seemingly empty characters. They hold their sexuality—unquestionably a thing to fear and to discover—and opposing desires, but their personalities are flat and empty. They are waiting for a life of love to come and make them whole and valued; they are too young to be ruined by nostalgia, and believe the future holds what will make them happy. At least, the 15-year-old Elena (the 'hot one') believes so, as her sister Anaïs (the titular 'fat girl') is a genuinely cynical 13-year-old. Anaïs' lack of beauty, especially in comparison to Elena, has caused her to far surpass her sister's maturity; the vicissitudes of misogyny and patriarchal manipulation already appear clear to Anaïs. As the film unfolds, Elena's naivety is exploited: she is raped multiple times by Italian seducer Fernando, and the film ends with her dead after being murdered by a psychopath in a truck stop parking lot. Anaïs, on the other hand, is jealous of Elena but only to a certain extent; she knows Elena is being seduced, and when Anaïs has her own experience of sexual violence at the film's finale, she denies it as rape itself, perhaps under her own self-definition of the sexual encounter or because violent seduction is all she has witnessed. The sisters intentionally discombobulate such generalized conceptions of nostalgia: there is no homeland to look back on, no happy childhood, and (at least for Elena and her mother) literally no future at all. Their lack of excitement extends into the 'sex' scenes—as Bordun makes obvious when discussing Breillat's quasi-pornography: "visibility has not been maximized and there is no cinematic pleasure or arousal. This is the unique feature of extreme cinema" (141). Trauma and sexual assault, especially as children,

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create psychic blockages that deny the development of nostalgia. Boym, citing Kant, "saw in the combination of melancholy, nostalgia and self-awareness a unique aesthetic sense that did not objectify the past but rather heightened one's sensitivity to the dilemmas of life and moral freedom. (...) Nostalgia is what humans share, not what should divide them" (13). The sexual appeal and seductive nature of nostalgia is instead fused into the repulsive Italian college-aged seducer, Fernando. Elena's only conception of romance comes from these nostalgic elements; her life is defined by patriarchy and she sees herself as ensnared within their bonds as a result. Nostalgia could not be what all humans share, because why bother being nostalgic for the original object of desire when you are that desire itself?

Fig. 3: Warmth drained out of sex; only seduction and violence remain in Breillat's horizontal still-life, or the anti-nostalgic world (Catherine Breillat, *Fat Girl*, 2001)

Fat Girl's characters are tricky to identify with as a result: they are capable of appearing like people we might know or relate to ourselves, but the severity of their personalities and their apparent lack of sentimental memories ensure a significant degree of distance is held between the characters and audience. As Bordun suggests regarding spectatorial identification, "conscious memory provides spectators a source for finding themselves in and with the characters and events onscreen, or in other words, identification that fosters thoughts and ideas" (124). We relate easily to victimized characters, and we can find sympathy with the traumatized woman of *A Hole in My Heart,* with her nostalgic affliction; while we desire for these characters to overcome their nostalgic delusions, we can understand their pain through simple identification. The nostalgic identification with a Breillat character, however, is not as straightforward. As Bordun continues, citing Stanley Cavell, "we see neither humans nor imaginary signifiers onscreen but 'human somethings.' We see a thing that is both there—we know it is a real person—but also absent—he is not there in our presence" (125). In a Breillat film, especially *Fat Girl*, our ability to identify with the characters is intentionally annihilated in order to bring the emotional and textural qualities of the film into play. The real experience of trauma is rearticulated, and our nostalgia for the real as something simple dematerializes along with it. Hester, writing again of pornography and authenticity, suggests "the (actual, extra-textual) body in a state of intensity is positioned as central to the discourse of the real, then, and an interest in trauma and *jouissance* can be seen as an important manifestation of the contemporary preoccupation with authenticity" (131). While Breillat's films are often hyperrealistic in *content*, they are frequently unrealistic in *tone*, leading to a kind of cinematic hyperreality where the sexual extremity, coldness, and lack of memory become confrontational. Bordun writes that "the way Breillat materializes sexual images is without representation, as in a painting which stands

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in for the really existing thing, but a re-presentation of the body even if it is a powerful and intentional illusion" (128-9). The scenes of sexual assault in *Fat Girl*—in their cold and ambiguous painterly construction—are intentionally without a clear referant; speaking against Hester's point, the intense reality of Breillat's films are always being called into question, allowing for multiple perspectives and interpretations to flow through these incredibly dark films, abolishing nostalgia all the same.

Elena's pose in Fig. 3—repose, dominated, painterly, pale—speaks to this nature of Breillat/Cavell's 'human somethings': as she is being seduced and raped by Fernando, her entire physical composure—the one 'realistic' thing she has, even though her heightened sexual appeal and youth places her firmly within the realm of pornographic fantasy—has been brought down to the level of corpse. At least Tess, in her POV shot, is in a way sitting up. Figures in bed, or least repose, appear frequently in Breillat films, most explicitly in *Anatomy of Hell*, a film almost entirely spoken from a woman lying down; and in *Sex is Comedy*, a meta-film that depicts a fictionalized Breillat filming the excruciating horizontal sex scenes of *Fat Girl ad nauseum*. As art critic Emma Wilson notes in her text *The Reclining Nude*, "Breillat seeks to hold in her films the feelings mobilized between director and actor, between one body and another, allowing something real and disturbing to happen on screen," also noting that "this is particularly charged in relation to horizontality, where an actress is asked to lie down, to lie out, to be knocked off her axis. Reclining is about exposure and openness (...) impressionability and disorganization. The stillness of the pose brings with it the animality of living and dying, the hesitations of the uncanny where flesh and other non-sentient materials are indistinguishable, alike" (112). Elena's body, limp and trapped under Fernando's weight, has essentially become a sex doll, a vacuum to be filled by the desire of somebody else: essentially, the position any woman actor becomes

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vulnerable to after becoming interpellated psychically by the camera. Becoming a 'human something' includes the necessary joke that this is what you become in the extreme film as well from the perspective of the director; cheekily explored in *Sex Is Comedy*, Elena's body becomes a didactic tool for Breillat as well, showing the reductive nature of viewing another human being on screen in a situation of vulnerability and fear: this is the essential visual component of the 'human something.' The traumatic lack of 'being' or 'doing' that the human figure is reduced to is the film's most extreme element; the traumatized women are left to be battered to dust by the sand, storm, rain, and cold; featureless, defenseless, and slippery.

4.2: The After-Place of the Present

As mentioned, *Fat Girl* is notoriously slippery regarding its genre classifications, as it blends elements of sitcom, teen drama, and—in the end—the slasher film. All of this is set in the undeniably bleak world that Breillat shoots her film: set in clearly the most unpleasant seaside town in France, the visuals, texture, and setting of the film collectively build a profoundly un-nostalgic postmodern hellscape that Elena and Anaïs find themselves in. Set during a family vacation that inevitably goes downhill, the usual hallmarks of vacation (sunshine, family togetherness, wholesomeness, enjoyable memories) are all absent. The film's primary visual colour is either grey or a bruise-like greenish-blue, as it is always overcast; the summertime setting has something sadly winterish about it. On the return drive after the vacation falls apart, the sisters' mother (played tremendously cold by Arsinée Khanjian) drives her Mercedes-Benz down seemingly endless conventional highways, fighting to stay calm as her little car becomes sandwiched on the road between imposingly masculinized eighteen-wheelers. In typical postmodern fashion, the post-industrial present is always at the verge of being a psychosis-

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induced horror; reality is nothing like what is shown through the media, or through tourism advertisements, nothing like what vacations are promised to you as; the present is always a new opportunity for pain and boredom. Anaïs has a keen understanding of this, and despite her childhood naivety is the least disappointed by the vacation's abrupt end, unlike her distraught sister and depressed mother.

Boym compares two distinct forms of nostalgia: restorative and reflective: "restorative nostalgia evokes national past and future; reflective nostalgia is more about individual and cultural memory" (49). Rather than Breillat providing commentary about a fallen France that must be revived, the director understands that what's lost is lost and is never to come back: Boym continues,

Reflective nostalgia does not pretend to rebuild the mythical place called home; it is "enamoured of distance, not the referent itself." This type of nostalgic narrative is ironic, inconclusive, and fragmentary. Nostalgics of the second type are aware of the gap between identity and resemblance; their home is in ruins or, on the contrary, has just been renovated and gentrified beyond recognition. (...) Homecoming does not signify a recovery of identity; it does not end the journey in the virtual space of imagination. A modern nostalgic can be homesick and sick of home, at once (50).

Fat Girl works in this reflective nostalgic mode, and so does much of extreme film, especially the works of Grandrieux and Moodysson. With the lack of clear referent regarding the present (as we feel much more comfortable with idealized, softer views about what the present world outside actually looks like), one of the more extreme forms that Breillat exploits is a sleight-of-hand regarding the France our young protagonists live in. Breillat, like Moodyson departs from a linear time and space trajectory, instead setting up a surreal psychic reality to frame her

characters' journey. Once again disagreeing with critics like Frey who claim that extreme cinema maintains a commitment to realism, Bordun writes that "Anaïs finds her structural and literal setting for her desire. This setting into place of a psychic reality is indeed how Breillat constructs her films, quite apart from the notions of realism. Breillat's goal is to portray the 'reality of feelings' rather than of an objective reality" (163). This proximity to an emotional realm rather than a literal realm keeps the tactics of extreme cinema away from the "wind in the trees," and expands the notion of cinematic realism to include director-actor ethics rather than just a simple duplication of a sentimental reality. The task of the reflective nostalgic—which the extreme cinema director often is—is ultimately to find the location of distance where emotions are heightened and spectatorial sensation is at its most bleak, while still regarding art and performance as zones that can express this dual, contradictory emotion.

5. The Reflective and the Real

Extreme cinema has obviously faltered and lost some of its luster and stature over the last decade, as the impulsive and vulnerable bodies, the pornographic regime, and reflective nostalgia itself have come under attack: critics continuously question extreme films' aesthetic value and commitment to authenticity. Frey regards extreme cinema directors justifying their works as something unsustainable: he writes "much filmmaker rhetoric is inherently negative: their work is *not* obscene or prurient, it is *no* pornography. In this way they defend their artistic intentions against critics, claiming aesthetic value via a claimed distance from, or creative appropriation of, a bad object" (185). Perhaps it is on the shoulders of extreme filmmakers who forget to establish that their films could perhaps actually 'be about anything': many of the filmmakers discussed refuse to suggest their films have any one particular meaning outside of deconstructing the

building blocks of meaning. Composing postmodern films couldn't have lasted eternally; people wanted movies about familiar, reassuring content again during moments of spiritual, economic, cultural, and political crisis. As a result, the postmodern feeling that the world was over and the only remaining response was irony eventually dissipated. Even faith in the artistic separation of extremity from one's real life actions came undone: von Trier came under new scrutiny over his treatment of his female actors on-stage after Björk came out about her negative experience with him when filming *Dancer in the Dark*. Unpleasant, cynical, 'ugly' filmmaking that appears to show the human faults of an auteur has gone out of fashion. As a result, a concrete nostalgia for the New French Extremity or Dogme 95 that would turn into a total reappraisal has yet to occur.

Chapter Two: The Digital and Nostalgia of the Real: Life and Labour as Aesthetic Illusion

> I know this object does not exist, no more than truth does, I maintain the desire for it through a glance that is a sort of absolute, a divine judgment, in relationship to which all other objects appear in their insignificance.
>
> Jean Baudrillard, *The Conspiracy of Art*, 74

1. **The Myth of a Pure Cinema**

Come the 20th century's own bizarre *fin-de-siécle*, the symbolic and contextual elements of avant-garde cinema were diverging and once again resurfacing within the aesthetic sentiments of the mainstream. The monstrous changes made in film aesthetics and technologies of this time led to yet another moment in history when cinema needed to decide what it is, what it stands for, and where it is going. These are the common ingredients in the development of a period dominated by reflexive nostalgic cinema.

As we examined in the last chapter's focus on art cinema, extreme cinema's aesthetic severity emphasised its fractured and inwardly destructive nostalgic sentiments.[16] Concurrently, technological revolutions forced film scholars, critics, and historians to reflect on the nature of the medium itself and its future. Works like Lev Manovitch's 2001 book *The Language of New Media* created a fresh vernacular to discuss this newly intertwining nature of media. Suddenly, the rigid boundaries between cinema and not-cinema (video gaming, the Internet, digital

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[16] The destructive capacity of the nostalgic sentiment lies in its negation of past, present, and future, creating a kind of fiction that has little to do with drama or even storytelling; the story told by nostalgia is that of a kind of psychic-social mental blockage, easily grasping onto emotional and manipulative qualities regarding truth and reality; a tactic often employed in political or artistic crisis. These fictions are inherently unsustainable, and will eventually collapse violently.

animation) became loose. As a result, the clear affect of classical art cinema—shot on film, both

resistant to and dependent on its capturing of reality—suddenly became irrevocably destabilized.

This led to the advent of mainstream digital filmmaking, as championed by a few select

mass-appeal blockbuster filmmakers such as George Lucas and James Cameron, alongside

edgier mainstream filmmakers like Zack Synder and David Fincher—all filmmakers with

massively important digital works made in the late 1990s until the end of the aughts. This

supposed digital turn suggests, according to film historians André Gaudrealt and Philippe

Marion, that the "*cinema is not what it used to be!*" (8). This exchange of one technological

form—analog film shot on 35mm and presented in movie theatres on projectors—for another—

films both shot and presented on digital, now more commonly witnessed outside of the movie

theatre, usually on multiple available home media formats—has resulted in a theoretical uproar.

Acolytes and disbelievers have been butting heads since the turn of the millennium: early cinema

scholars such as Gaudrealt and Marion contend that

> This shaking up of cinema's foundations is accompanied by numerous questions about
> the very identity of the medium, in that the boundaries between it and other media, which
> until just recently were seen as stable and easy to demarcate (something that in reality
> was far from the case), are gradually being erased, revealing to increasing degrees these
> boundaries' true nature, that of a theoretical and cultural construction (something they
> have always have been, but that is a story for another day) (11).

The can of worms that digital animation has opened has paradoxically forced a turn back in time,

allowing us to begin a reconception of what films actually *do/did* in light of the porous

boundaries that have always existed between film and other media. As digital films were getting

more bizarre and exciting, a skepticism was born: questions of labour and detail in crafting the films of old became more obvious and important as the labour cycle of films in the digital era became abstracted. This led to the necessary reaction of critiquing films that relied heavily on digital editing, claiming their computational sterility was indicative of a lack of humanity. This digital unsettles the idea that films are inherently human or have anything to do with being human: as film scholar Nicholas Rombes writes, "it is paradoxical how completely the tables have turned, for now it is film theory that has become domesticated, safe, and predictable, while digital cinema makes possible new and potentially radical new ways of storytelling and introducing interface systems that suggest a form of theory and technique" (5). Cinema has not died; one could say it is still in the process of being born.

Just as cinema has never been a pure medium, cinema has also never been truly or purely humanistic: like extreme film, the emotional and aesthetic effect of digital films lies in their inhumanity, their pure illusion, the severe distance between the viewer and the screen (although in both cases, as with analog cinema, there are still auteurs, bodies, and hands that hover behind the machines). Their glitches and errors show the lack of power people have over the screen image; this is no place for poetry or verisimilitude. Digital cinema operates in the shadow of a nostalgia for the real, a spectre that haunts all discourse of the digital. As will be explored in the next chapter when we discuss the collision of digital cinema with the extreme, images taken by DSLRs and camcorders often come across as uncinematic and banal; aesthetic connotations exploited to generate uncanny and horrific affects. The nostalgia in digital cinema longs for/is for *work*, work to make the images of cinema *mean something*: nostalgia for a more hands-on, craft-oriented, less abstracted world: the analog world. This chapter will focus on two films whose

nostalgic axis is foregrounded as critique, a nostalgia for work, insofar as their digitality is highlighted in order to both critique and subsume themselves into a nostalgia for the real.

The irony of digital cinema is that nostalgia comes built-in and pre-packaged: as film scholar Jason Sperb is wont to remind us, "that sense of time inherent to the fading flickers of celluloid, an affect of the past, haunts digital cinema now; this haunting is, however, less about taking us back to the spaces of film history and more about guiding us forward" (2). Digital cinema will never exist in a pure space: its affects and generic categories run in relation to their analog predecessors, and are always judged in accordance. These are the grounds of analog fetishism: the idea that digital will just never be as good as analog material for capturing aesthetic and artistic products. A student film is shot on video; a real piece of cinema is shot on film. As Alexander Galloway suggests, "this is one indication for why aesthetics and digitality belong to fundamentally different paradigms; perception easily accommodates qualitative difference while digitality continually prohibits it" (225). This baffling statement, claiming digitality *literally* holds no water in the aesthetic realm—or that a digital perception is incapable of moving beyond discrete, mathematical forms—suggests a severe deficit regarding our understanding of aesthetic potential. Galloway goes on to describe that "the analog is the real with no abstraction, no reduction, no sampling or capture. This is not to deny that the analog is a mode of mediation. It is simply to claim that the analog is the mode of mediation that remains within the real" (230). But what is the indexical 'real' so clearly accessible outside the realm of mediation? How can such a fetishism for reality and authenticity be allowed within the discourse around analog technology, whereas digital aesthetics presumably cannot access such high degrees of artistic intensity? Rombes writes, "to ask questions today about the ideological foundations of the digital imaginary smacks of bad faith, of the old academic retreat into the

ivory tower of uncomfortable and anachronistic language that suggests a power that is not there"

(19). This privileging of analog's access to reality over the digital is simply a regressive nostalgic

sentiment that grounds its own reality through the denial of digital's aesthetic potentials.

As we venture forth into the inhuman (what our post-covid, post-structure world is

hurtling towards), it may be important to re-examine these digital works not as artistic failures,

but to consider what Steven Shaviro suggests is the purpose of untangling the 'post-cinematic

affect:' "to develop an account of *what it feels like* to live in the early twenty-first century" (17).

Our aesthetic sensibilities once again need to be re-tuned, lest we fall into the trap of a blind

adherence to reality, purity, and the authentic: categories whose pillars have been challenged

most profoundly by contemporary events and by media theory itself.[17] It is no longer possible to

look at cinema as *exactly one thing*: this chapter is both a defense of the aesthetics of digital

cinema as well as a call to find new ways to critique it; finding fault in digital cinema not in its

uncanniness, but the fact that it isn't uncanny *enough*. The real is no longer simply reality; why

do we expect our films to present it otherwise?

True to the nostalgic spirit, this chapter will be told in reverse chronological cinematic

order: we will begin with an analysis of Martin Scorsese's 2019 self-reflexive mob epic *The*

Irishman. Intended as an indictment of Scorsese's own 'nostalgia films,' this decade-spanning

film attempts to patch up critiques of his films being shameless glorifications of mobster life yet

is itself uncritical of its fantastical qualities: paradoxically showing the death of a genre and

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[17] As Walter Benjamin wrote in "A Short History of Photography," "One thing, however, was not grasped either by Wiertz or by Baudelaire, and that is the direction implicit in the authenticity of the photograph. It will not always be possible to link this authenticity with reportage, whose clichés associate themselves only verbally in the viewer. The camera will become smaller and smaller, more and more prepared to grasp fleeting, secret images whose shock will bring the mechanism of association in the viewer to a complete halt. At this point captions must begin to function, captions which understand the photography which turns all the relations of life into literature, and without which all photographic construction must remain bound in coincidences." (51)

trying to revive major stars through unprecedented digital de-aging technology that does not

work exactly as intended—*The Irishman* attempts to be a first in a new genre of digitally focused

anti-nostalgic films. However, its failures are, in a way, more interesting than its successes.

Utilizing a plot oriented around unions and labour laws, *The Irishman* is both progressive and

regressive in equal measure.

Secondly, this chapter nostalgically reverts to 2002: the early days of digital cinema, to

take a closer look at iconic Canadian avant-garde filmmaker Michael Snow's 2002 film, **Corpus

Callosum*. This visually astonishing treatise on the dehumanized nature of work and the

overwhelming presence of screens in our day-to-day lives, the concept of routine, and the impact

of digitization alongside the ever-changing nature of film viewing is a profound meditation on

the birth of this nostalgic digital spectre. It forces us to beg the question: what is the real material

of this film? How do we account for the real extreme changes and shifts as it disintegrates and

morphs before our very eyes?

Before we begin the cinematic analysis however, it is important to analyze the current

place of aesthetics, filmmaking, and film distribution in a post-COVID world and attempt to

articulate exactly the aesthetic signature of the incredibly strange times we find ourselves in, one

where our relation to media, identity, and work is constantly morphing itself.

2. **Nostalgia for Aesthetics in the Age of Streaming**

> Our modern cultures no longer believe in the illusion of this world but rather in its reality
> (which is of course the final illusion)...

It is hard to analyze digital cinema in a vacuum away from its counterpart in the analog realm, as the core resentment that is built around digital filmmaking is in exactly *what it took away from us*. As Rombes writes, "there is nostalgia today not only for the supposed aesthetic warmth of analog cinema but for the experience of actually, physically going to movies rather than having them come to you via home theatre systems, the internet, and mobile devices" (16). The concepts of the 'real' and the 'authentic' have been in crisis for decades, and discourse surrounding cinema emphasizes its immediate emotional qualities, foregrounding one's personal history and preferences with the medium that supplants any potential analysis of its institutional, intentional effects of manufacturing realism and reality. The turn towards the personal in film critique only affirms this refusal to admit that there never was a 'pure cinema'—there was only ever what we as viewers bring to the experience of being a spectator as intertwined with the machinations of the film industry and its technologies.[18]

As Sperb comments, "there is, in other words, no 'authentic' reality inside or outside the industry and its production (textual or metatextual) when all information is carefully managed for demographic and advertising ends" (12). The nostalgia of going to the small-town movie theatre to see a midnight screening on 35mm is just another part of the entire mechanism, not a way outside of it; it can command nostalgia as these things only occur in our current time as mere replications or retro re-runs (the retro-mania 35mm flashbacks at London, Ontario's Hyland Cinema, for example), utilizing a manufactured 'first happening' where a particular

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[18] However, this form of critique also remains distinct from phenomenological film critique, which studies embodied film viewership within the entire matrix of consciousness and being-in-the-world alongside textual analysis; with a purely emotion-forward critique, one's viewing of the film *becomes* the site of critique entirely, and any potential analysis regarding both structures and the individual is lost. Fundamentally, I see this as a narcissistic criticism.

golden nostalgia for a film premier proudly announced on a marquee most profoundly commands our value judgments about cinema.

Furthermore, as we return to the post-COVID 'new normal,' the concept of the cinema itself as a place and an institution outside the home is rendered both dangerous and obsolete. We live in a time of 4K Blu-Ray players and OLED televisions when chain cinemas can have a difficult time getting sound and aspect ratios correct when presenting films. At the time of writing, the last three consecutive Pixar films have been scrapped as theatrical releases due to COVID-19 concerns and have gone straight to streaming on Disney+; a piece of historical revisionism considering the traditional perspective that Disney's direct-to-DVD sequels were inferior products to their theatrical counterparts.[19] Today, everything streams, going beyond direct-to-DVD: both home media ownership and film pirating have decreased in cultural importance after the market takeover and pure convenience of streaming services. Media as a whole is exclusively digitized; the only spaces left to experience 'real cinema' are those rare theatres lucky and well-funded enough to still occasionally present films on 35mm or 70mm (if one is willing to risk a possible COVID infection while viewing and watching a film with a mask on), and all those cinemas mainly present films on DCP regardless.

The 'real' location of the cinema has now become once again diffuse and unrecognizable: as Gaudrealt and Marion mentioned, "what we take away from this is that cinema needs the big screen to exist and that what is shown on other screens is just a *vortex of moving images*" (14). We now live in a post-cinema world in the most literal sense: *the cinema itself is not long for this world*. This leaves us with important questions to ask in this bizarre time of streaming and waning interest in going to the movies: what does the centrality of the movie theatre in the

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[19] See Rebecca Rubin, "Why does Disney keep sending Pixar movies straight to streaming?" https://variety.com/2022/film/box-office/disney-pixar-turning-red-disney-plus-subscribers-1235149836/

modern world still represent? What institutions and modes of information dissemination does it prop up? Do these institutions still have a marked interest in the illusion and experimentation of digital film or have they themselves fallen back purely on analog fetishism and nostalgia? What can streaming—or its internet-birthed, more historical corollary of torrenting and video piracy—do to the future of film that the cinema itself cannot? Rombes suggests,

> In fact, no matter how abstract or avant-garde a film might have been during the analog era, it was still linked to perceived reality by its materially identifiable and recognizable existence. It was a concrete *thing*. The source of the images on the screen came from a vaguely familiar place, a projector. The migration of film to videotape, and eventually DVD, involved the same thing, even if only on a symbolic level. Although one could not literally see images of a film on the smooth surface of a DVD one could at least hold the object that was the DVD (35).

There is an obvious nostalgia within the *thing-ness* of art that appears to be the determining factor in its ability to effectively transmit an *aesthetic*: as Byung-Chul Han dismisses, "in digital beauty the negativity of the *other* is entirely removed. It is therefore perfectly *smooth*. (...) Thanks to the total digitalization of being, there is a total subjectivizing, an *absolute subjectivity* under which the human being only encounters itself" (25). Once again, a reliance on flaws, humanity, and natural beauty are the cornerstones of philosophical aesthetic experience and judgment: the key phrase being 'authenticity,'—a descriptor that, at this rate, seems to forever describe analog cinema and that digital cinema will never have access to—but why would digital filmmakers want to be called 'authentic' anyways? To finish the Baudrillard quote that functions as the epigraph of this section, "we have decided to temper the ravages of illusion through this cultivated, docile form of simulacrum known as the aesthetic form" (129). *Not only is it time to*

give up our notion of the authentic, but we must give up this singularity of the aesthetic itself:

learning how to see what art does and the pure difference it functions under takes it beyond both

a surface play of verisimilitude and its intended aesthetic purposes. We can move past the

arbitrary quality of the aesthetic form: we can de-age actors (poorly, but interestingly), we can

clone ourselves, and we can annihilate the entire medium of film—digital and analog—with

computer power. Digitality does not uphold or value the traditional structure of the image, as

artist-theorist Hito Steyerl points out in her iconic "Defense of the Poor Image," wherein she

writes that the 'poor image' "transforms quality into accessibility, exhibition value into cult

value, films into clips, contemplation into distraction. The image is liberated from the vaults of

cinemas and archives and thrust into digital uncertainty, at the expense of its own substance. The

poor image tends towards abstraction; it is a visual idea in its very becoming." The fractured,

substanceless nature of the digital image inherently splinters the very material, emotional

grounds that the 'realist' film is built on. We can ask: what happens when the digital image takes

away from the very verisimilitude that a nostalgic film is attempting to construct?

3. *The Irishman* **and the Digital Anti-Nostalgia Film**

We begin our formal analysis with a closer look at *The Irishman*. It would not be

controversial to say Martin Scorsese is a director heavily fixated on nostalgia. His hyper-flashy

pop films like *Goodfellas*, *Casino*, and *The Wolf of Wall Street* emphasize both the 'good ol'

days' and their inevitable collapse, often brought on by hubris and other moral failings of the

anti-heroes that populate his films. As Pam Cook writes, "in Scorsese's case, the loss of the past

is given a tragic dimension, as his flawed, alienated heroes, trapped by history, struggle to

establish and maintain their identity" (168). The consistent downfalls of his flawed and

frequently violent characters is contained within their confrontations with the *new*: their own

regressive natures catch up to them and remind them that they are mere symptoms of larger

social ills, rather than the aberrations they see themselves as.

Also worth considering here is Scorsese's own history as a filmmaker and his contextual

place within the canon: similar to his quasi-successor, Quentin Tarantino, the reflexive and

postmodern nature of his films is what grounds his aesthetics. As the times change, it becomes

easier and easier to go back in time and mourn what is lost; by continually commenting on

'genre films' like the gangster or crime epic Scorsese, as a canonical 'auteur' director, attempts

to 'elevate' them beyond their trappings and give the audience the space to reflexively enjoy

that-which-was-better in times of old. The constant obvious-yet-timely soundtrack choices, the

persistent story-telling narration style, and the vintage props all deliberately accentuate the

timeliness of these scenes: their presence in the past is of critical importance. Realism is not so

tremendously important as attention to (nostalgic) detail, key fixtures that allow the film to be

immersive fiction enhanced by indulgent nostalgia. Scorsese's hey-day appears to be between

the 1950s and the 1970s; the beginning of the 1980s and the introduction of globalization and

neoliberalization seems to bring the downfall of the structures that allow the mobsters to exist as

luxuriously within their salad days as they can.

The Irishman, released in 2019 and distributed by Netflix, is Scorsese's response to the

nostalgic nature of his own films. In two of his major works of the 1990s—*Goodfellas* (1990)

and *Casino* (1995)—that use identical formulas, the primary characters—Ray Liotta's Henry Hill

and Robert De Niro's "Ace" Rothstein, respectively—ultimately survive the collapse of identity

and structure that leads to many of their friends' untimely deaths. Those films, while not exactly

crowned with happy endings, suggest a potential future for these characters beyond the illegal

activities that defined them for decades, even if that might just be committing a smaller and

sadder crime than what they had gotten used to. Despite usually ending up in the place where they started, they get away with their crimes and are not wholly punished for living the good ol' days to their fullest—unlike their companions, who often end up dead or worse. *The Irishman*'s main character, Robert De Niro's Frank Sheehan, does not get such a neutral ending: the film's final shot is of Frank essentially decomposing in an anonymous nursing home at the turn of the 21st century, abandoned by his family, the only one of his friends still alive, simply asking the one person left he can still talk to (his priest) to leave the door open a crack.

The film's plot revolves around Frank's occupation as a hitman within the Bufalino crime family from the 1950s until the mid 1970s, a position he was able to secure through his friendship with their boss, Russell Bufalino (Joe Pesci). Through their connections to the Teamsters Union and its leader at the time, the perspicacious Jimmy Hoffa (Al Pacino), Frank becomes Hoffa's bodyguard and confidante. After Hoffa does time in jail for fraud and the alliance between him and the mobsters begins to irreversibly wane, Frank is tasked with whacking him. After murdering Hoffa, Frank and his mobster associates do time in prison for unrelated crimes, and the unspoken recognition that he was the one who pulled the trigger on Hoffa alienates the other members of his family. This is especially hard on his daughter Peggy (Anna Paquin) who looked up to Hoffa like a father—something the perennially absent Frank could never do. Frank spends his dying days attempting to find God's forgiveness and being continually interrogated by officials still concerned with the missing Hoffa.

The film's bleak ending is punctuated by an overall slower and darker tone than Scorsese's 90's gangster films: rather than the joyful pop explosion of luxury in the idealized mobster lifestyle (magnified and exaggerated in the director's 2013's coked-out yuppie drama *The Wolf of Wall Street*), Frank never seems to achieve anything above a middle class lifestyle.

His legal face is a well-connected union man with mob ties, but a lifetime of murdering-for-hire doesn't seem to provide him with that ability to turn back the clock and overcome the crime and exploitation like other Scorsese film characters. The violence that Frank commits is rarely glorified—he is depicted primarily as a simple man who is good at following orders, while the significance of his actions only dawns on him too late.

The film's vast nonlinear temporal structure—a plot that stretches over 50 years in an ambitious 209 minute runtime—is accentuated by the film's extreme digital de-aging technique that used light-based performance capture software called FLUX to lend verisimilitude that the elderly leads (De Niro, Pacino, and Pesci) would otherwise be incapable of acting the part of their younger selves in all scenes.[20] The film's extremely high budget (estimated to be upwards of $250 million) was spent partially on making the geriatric actors look their age for each chronological part in the plot. This digital de-aging VFX process by Industrial Light & Magic is something that goes far beyond analog traditions of cinematic makeup and costuming; this is a serious digital injunction that seeks to both extend an artist/actor's labour and make a movie look 'more real' through digital processing and editing. At some points, actors were also 'aged,' as ILM VFX supervisor Pablo Helman admits in an interview: "But we also aged up De Niro if he didn't look old enough. For instance, when he goes shopping for a casket." At first, the effect is seamless and stunning: an opening scene of the elderly Frank at the nursing home acts as a framing sequence before launching into the linearly-told flashback featuring the youngest version of De Niro shown in the film. The effect is meaningful, but bizarre: De Niro does not look or physically carry himself like a young man, but his wrinkles and other signs of his age are scrubbed off. In one of the film's more technically contradictory sequences, the young Frank

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[20] See Bill Desowitz, "The Irishman: How Industrial Light & Magic's Innovative De-Aging VFX Rescued Martin Scorsese's Mob Pic," https://www.indiewire.com/2019/12/the-irishman-ilm-vfx-de-aging-1202194908/

beats up a grocery clerk that his daughter accused of touching her; while this scene is supposed to show Frank's threatening loose-cannon nature, the eldery De Niro can barely muster more than a few kicks—it seems sad that he can barely bend down to physically act (Figure 4). It is almost as if the effect is intentional, highlighting the extreme contradiction at the film's heart— by disrupting the diegetic verisimilitude's relationship to time and aging so profoundly, the film is able to come across as a eulogy. Scorsese's films are known for their nostalgic sentiments, but more often also for their hyperviolence; nothing as severe as a New French Extremity film, but much more violent than your average Hollywood film; this is seen most profoundly in *Mean Streets* (1973) and *Taxi Driver* (1976). Those films' youthful explorations of violence as a means of counteracting the terror of masculinity is on display in a most pathetic critical showing in *The Irishman*—to deliberately invert Frank's terror by making him an old man at a time when he shouldn't is to fragment the nostalgia altogether. Despite the physical nature of De Niro's acting and the ability of de-aging digital technology to make his face look younger, the realism is erased by the clear nature of Scorsese and De Niro being old men creating a film about being old men. The broken physical posture pictured on screen unravels the smooth spell of the digital de-aging labored on behind the scenes.

Fig. 4: The 'threatening,' 'young 'hitman Frank Sheehan (De Niro) in Martin Scorsese's *The Irishman* (2019)

The failures of the digital technology employed by Scorsese is precisely what makes *The Irishman* stand out as an important work of digital filmmaking. The film was shot on a hybrid of both digital and analog film, attempting to provide an accurate cinematic 'look' for each particular era that the film's diegesis is set in, alongside a multi-camera set-up (which the crew dubbed "the three-headed monster") that allowed for extra footage to be used to create the digital de-aging effect. It is clear that the nostalgia contained within the film is wrought by pure meditation: as Sperb comments on Fincher's *Zodiac* (a film whose attention to nostalgic detail is similar to *The Irishman*'s), "the *look* of *Zodiac* is (in more ways than one) thoroughly cinematic,

no matter its investment otherwise in the banality of historical documentation. At its cinephiliac

core, then, rests another form of nostalgic pastiche—the look of 1970's cinema as the decade of

the 1970s, and vice versa—in the age of late capitalism" (27-28). *The Irishman* never goes

beyond commenting on the real history of the Bufalinos or of Hoffa himself: the emphasis is

purely on a self-referential cinematic surface, alongside a cinephiliac fantasy of being able to get

any actor you want to be any age you want them to be. The 'real' era of the film is only ever

found through total mediation (as typically noticed by a classic Scorsese needle drop, the

recurrent non-diegetic playing of "In the Still of the Night" by The Five Satins, as played both in

its historically accurate doo-wop era of the 1950's and Frank's sad decomposition in the 2000's

nursing home) of contextual clues themselves mediated through another acoustical medium. The

palpable irony of this attempt to do high-concept digital filmmaking while making a film so

closely aligned with its own nostalgic sentiments only becomes more intense the more it

becomes played for pathos. The film critiques cinematic nostalgia by also relying heavily on

digital deception—creating an almost seamless, yet stuttering 'realistic' world of the past,

through the aesthetic fetishism of the de-aging 'attention to detail' that commands so much

enjoyment. As Roger F. Cook writes, "the incorporation of digital imaging into mainstream

cinema erodes the faith in the power of the cinematic image to represent reality. With its ability

to alter the profilmic event and still generate a sense of even more complete realism, digital

technology is seen to be dangerously deceptive" (159). In particular, Cook is referring to Y2K

science fiction films like *The Matrix* and *The Thirteenth Floor*, films heavily intrigued by—yet

skeptical—of this supposed brushing of the virtual with the real as mediated by the Internet.

Their highly illusory content as science fantasy films was punctuated by an appeal for the real (as

Morpheus comments in *The Matrix*, it is enough to 'free one's mind' beyond the illusion and to

embrace reality—a contradictory statement in a digital film). However, Cook's statement

regarding the *danger* of digital realism suggests that the primary appeal of filmmaking is not

contained within its distance from 'real life' but in its proximity; it remains interesting that

Scorsese's most 'realistic' film yet—one wrought from the aesthetics of slowness, middle-class

reality, and socially dark themes—also turned out to be his most explicitly *digital*.

     The Irishman's reality fetish and its failures also seem to highlight the conundrum of

digital work. Actor's guilds fear that the de-aging process and CGI itself could exploit the

physical work of the actor, even digitally extending or resurrecting dead actors on screen.[21] Yet

digital labour itself creating an aesthetic illusion is also invisible work: the de-aging is entirely

for the viewer to enjoy and appreciate as craft, yet ILM's tremendous and unique work behind

the scenes is now invisible. According to the FX supervisor Helman, "1,750 shots were created

for two and a half hours of footage, which was the equivalent of making two movies in one."[22]

However, the awe typically reserved for such cinematic flights of fancy and other 'great leaps

forward' is muted. The future of aesthetics in film as tied into progression of technology no

longer appears to hold the same appeal—and equal parts controversy—as it once did; it has been

sidelined to the level of gimmick. As Sperb notes,

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[21] This is, strangely, not new. Sperb writes, "as early as late 1991 (the same period in which Arnold [Schwarzenegger]'s body cast was made), an ad agency for Diet Coke recycled colorized footage of Louis Armstrong, James Cagney, and Humphrey Bogart in a commercial featuring Elton John. The classic Hollywood icons appear to walk seamlessly through the spaces of a nightclub while Armstrong plays his trumpet alongside John's piano. The effect was created by the painstaking frame-by-frame insertion of old footage into a newer digital image, recontextualizing the analog material within a carefully staged profilmic situation to create the illusion of "new" footage" (45-46). This rearticulation of the old and the dead in film, as the technology gets more advanced, has led to new legal issues: as Alex Lee reported for *Wired* magazine ("The messy legal scrap to bring celebrities back from the dead" (17.11.2019): "The actors' union SAG-AFTRA has been lobbying for all states to implement protections on the use of images of celebrities after they die. 'I think that's a concern for the actor's union, that this could be abused – though it hasn't yet – in a way that would replace rehiring actors," says Rothman. "And that's concerning for the living.'" https://www.wired.co.uk/article/james-dean-dead-actors-rights
[22] Ibid.

Ironically, the public awareness of CGI's overall potential, and the wonders (if not the details) of postproduction digital work such as that done on [*Terminator:*] *Salvation*, have put an end to the age-old, predigital question: "How'd they do that?" Movie audiences today are savvy enough to know that films can in a sense "represent" anything the mind can imagine—even to a fault—as in they may assume the technology is far more advanced than it really is, while also becoming increasingly desensitized to the novelty of each new visual wonder (this may in turn explain the nostalgic turn back to profilmic sets and practical, in-camera effects in major Hollywood productions, such as the latest *Star Wars* trilogy [2015-2019]). Thus we see increasing indifference to the once awe-inspiring final product (45).

In a contradictory move, the more the digital film camera seems capable of doing and extending the nature of film and even the life of the actor, the more audiences appear disinterested. No matter what, in our current day and age people find what computers can do *boring*—which is fair, as CGI is expensive and is thus reserved for boilerplate Hollywood cash cows like the *MCU*—despite the clear possibility that they are continuing to revolutionize the literal sense of what we recognize as performance. The distance of filmmaking from reality—not its humanity, or the poetic soul contained within it—is what allows both the power of illusion *and* ideological nostalgia to creep in. As Rombes notes, "unavailable or mysterious technologies were always one of the elements that conferred an aura of mystery on movies. (...) At the same time that theorists in the 1970s were busy demystifying the filmic 'apparatus' for students, the students were learning how to make their own movies on videotape" (20). Scorsese would have been one of those students: to him, film enjoyment always came hand-in-hand with an acknowledgement of the real craft and techniques—ideological purposes be damned—and that demystification is one of the important processes of enjoying a film because it forces you to *look at the illusion and embrace it as illusion*.

The Irishman is a broken, nonlinear illusion: it is Scorsese's eulogy to both the gangster film and the idea of film-as-reality in general, that it is always a way of going beyond the world rather than collapsing into it. As Rombes continues, "in fact, I'd suggest that great acting or realistic character development are actually impediments to powerful moviemaking. So-called realism has always been an Achilles heel of movies, which were cursed to have been invented during an era when the realist novel was ascendent" (126). Scorsese wants to have his cake and eat it too: fully indulge in the most mature, sophisticated, and reflexive of his realist gangster narratives while also breaking entirely with the ideological cinematic need for verisimilitude: a trait considered necessary for the crime genre. Both the digital world and the realist narrative are steeped with nostalgia: as Sperb suggests, "digital cinema is a thoroughly historical concept, despite its best attempts at erasing history in a perpetual, virtual present of simulation. Yet within the presence of digital images there remains an affect of the past that can guide us towards the future" (50). Scorsese wants not so much to erase history but to accentuate it, to push it to a breaking point to force us to reckon with the fact that we can never go back to making films in the 1990s: it is 2022, and it is time to look forward. And to look forward some more, it might be time to look backwards: back to 2002, with Michael Snow's **Corpus Callosum*.

4. **Corpus Callosum* and Nostalgia for the Avant-Garde

> Perhaps underground cinema always was more of an idea than a place, an idea activated by our repressed desire: visions not only of alternative ways of being but of alternative ways of making movies. The names and categories come and go, but that feeling you get remains—that feeling when the screen lights go up, that this is it, this is the something I didn't know I was longing for until it appeared.
>
> Nicholas Rombes, *Cinema in the Digital Age*, 72

The turn to a new millennium left experimental film in a strange place. Historically, it was the realm for celluloid freaks to tinker with worlds both abstract and exploitative, usually on a tight budget and reflecting some folky sentimentality. Naturally, the digital revolution led to some of experimental cinema's most radical sea changes. Experimental film's relationship to its cinematic material is nothing to scoff at: Brakhage's non-camera animation, Mekas' Bolex diaries, Conner's 'flicker,' and Wieland's textural structures all were explicitly or implicitly inspired by the materiality of the medium itself. This is not necessarily an analog fetish: these artists worked in times where cinema was the only option. When things turned digital, experimental filmmakers slowly began to change the allowed vernacular, but it took many years before significant digital and CGI-heavy experimental works began to rock the boat. Avant-garde artists like Ryan Trecartin, James Ferraro, and late-period Jean-Luc Godard began to take the signifiers of the Internet era and re-compose them into extreme maximalist tapestries. However, before *I-B Area* and *9/11 Simulation in Roblox Environment*, perennial Canadian auteur *par excellence* Michael Snow at the age of 74 released one of the most significant works of avant-garde digital video art: 2002's **Corpus Callosum*.

Snow, more well known for his essential structural works like the austere *Wavelength* and *La region centrale* moved into the realm of slapstick and humour for **Corpus*, using a dual workplace/family life setting to emphasize the increasingly overwhelming nature of screen culture in our daily lives. The narrative—in classic Snow fashion, borderline non-existent—continually moves between a horizontally-traversing camera passing through an office during the work day and a static image of an viscerally surreal living room where two workers—husband and wife—appear to live with their child. However, this comfort of day-to-day routines is not rendered so easy: the conceit is that, as Malcolm Turvey puts it, "Snow uses CGI in his film to

expand, contract, twist, squeeze, fold, invert, transform, and in general wreak havoc on the human body" (31). Using an extreme palette of digital effects and CGI, Snow completely annihilates the traditional comportment of the human body to visually and self-reflexively depict the mediation of our bodies through technology. This is the exact antithesis of Scorsese's strategy of what to use CGI to seamlessly break (age) or 'fix' (de-age) the human body: while Scorsese is beholden to the chronological facts of the diegesis (although the extreme form of the film is itself nonlinear), attempting to make his digital modification of the body invisible, for Snow the entire procedure is based on highlighting and 'revealing' the extreme degree to which the human body can be manipulated and mutilated. As Turvey continues, "the film foregrounds its artificiality because Snow makes no effort to hide his computer-generated effects. As other commentators have noted, many of the digital manipulations Snow employs are overt, even crude. They are not, for the most part, blended seamlessly with the recorded elements of the shot in which they occur, as they typically are in mainstream narrative films" (33). As one of the few films to use CGI for intentionally avant-garde purposes, *Corpus sticks out as a major moment in time when hyper-digitalization was seen as a potential for cinema to continue moving forward, rather than digitality receding into the background. Grounding the film's aesthetics is, once again, some strange kind of nostalgia, namely nostalgia for a different kind of 'structure' than the mathematical filmic structures directors like Snow and Hollis Frampton toyed with in the 1970's: that of work, home, and school, as the film reckons with the encroachment of digital technologies that interrupt this structure and, in the guise of entertaining, instrumentalize us in our day-to-day existences.

Corpus Callosum is among the short list of experimental films that truly take advantage of the 'post-cinematic affect' regarding the capacities of digital manipulation.[23] As Daniel Strutt summarizes, these affects include "simulations of spatial information of depth and expanse; modulations of time in loops, phases, and parallels; maximalist complexities of form and movement at the limit of comprehension in, for example, swarm and machine effects; [and] breaches of physical form such as morphing and glitching" (21). *Time, movement, and the physical body* are all subject to distortion by Snow's god-like control over the reality of the film. The banality of the workplace always ends up at odds with the regularly hysterical and absurd manipulations, such as a man's penis expanding and taking up the entire screen before suddenly receding, and two actors squished together trying to enter a door and being forced to walk around like some disturbed monolith. Furthermore, the literal movie reel is constantly under attack: at one point the film literally begins to invert itself like a Mobius strip and is forced upside down for a period of time (Fig. 5); later, the credits roll at the film's halfway mark. The film almost concludes with the entirety of the film running in reverse, like some other non-character gained access to the non-diegetic remote control. The film's formal austerity is at constant odds with the overwhelming artifice and humor of the digital images.

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[23] Other avant-garde films using digital technology in innovative ways that one should briefly mention here are Ernie Gehr's *Photographic Phantoms* (2013), Ken Jacobs' *Capitalism: Slavery* (2006), Zoe Beloff's interactive CD-ROM exploration of the dream of technology *Beyond* (1997) and James Nares' *Street* (2011). Also see M. Turvey "Ken Jacobs: Digital Revelationist" and Holly Willis' *New Digital Cinema: Reinventing the Moving Image.*
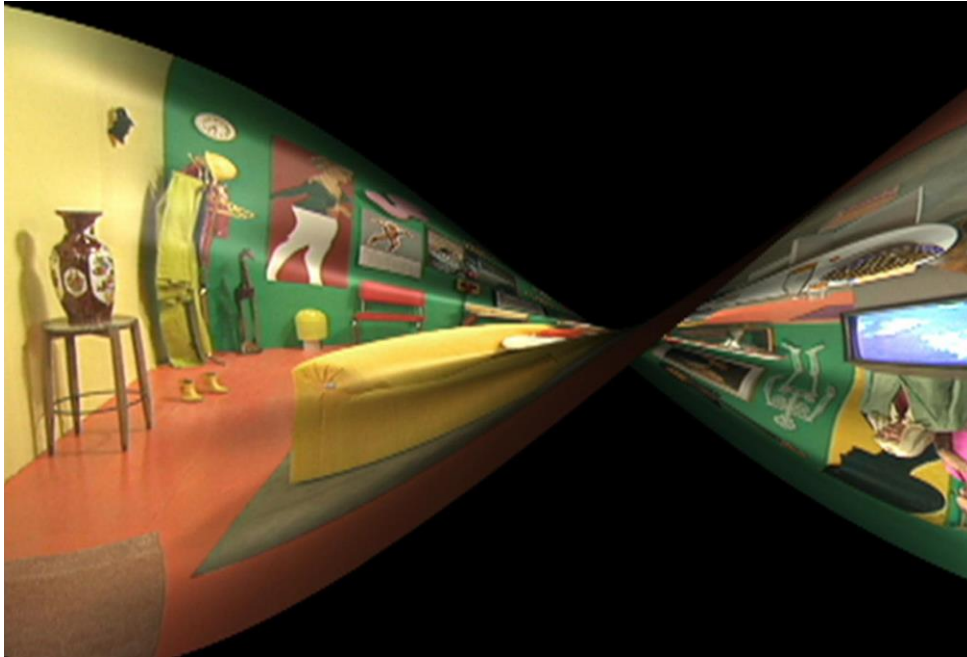
Fig. 5: The Mobius-stripping of the digital film stock, temporally located in its horizontality (*Corpus Callosum*, Michael Snow, 2002)

The anti-nostalgic axis of the film works under two primary prongs: the first, similar to *The Irishman*, focuses on work, namely the destabilization of hegemonic structures of place, mind, and body, and the second regards the actual history of structural and experimental film as it was moving into the 21st century.

The most important visual theme in **Corpus Callosum*, besides the various digital methodologies employed to distort the human body and the film strip, is the persistence of screens in all the film's primary locations. The film's opening shot takes the camera moving into a projection of itself, rendered as a television hanging above the office door. As the film goes on, the computers in the office are always on and rarely out of sight; the primary prop in the home sequence is the television; in the school sequence the children construct a tower of desks so as to reach the hidden camera that is filming them; and the film concludes in a movie theatre. All sequences—with their artifice highlighted—are clearly mediated by this persistent screen

presence. The film's title, suggesting the part of the brain that mediates messages between hemispheres, suggests a tonal clarity in the act of looking, of processing, and of seeing—acknowledging information, media, and context for what they are, and recognizing the deeply McLuhanian (and fundamentally, a bizarrely parallel Canadiana) sentiment that we really do understand information through its technological delivery and not necessary for what it purely is—because information, digital or analog, is never pure; it is perpetually mediated. The characters' placement in hyper-mediated and essential places of routine and banality is not wrought for terror (as will be examined in the next chapter) but rather for punctuating the silent crudeness and visual exploitation that these areas substantiate. The nature of work—once a place where work was expected to be done by hordes of men seeking physical work—is now something abstract: the cubicle farm is co-ed, multiracial, and slickly modern, signifying all the important metrics that neoliberal labour ideology has to offer. The literal product of one's work no longer makes any sense in a tangible output: one is assigned a position as a number-cruncher in a human filing cabinet located in Mississauga, Ontario. Snow's humanistic sensibilities—that despite digital dehumanization, the power of imagination and emotion can still thrive, and perhaps even be accentuated with technology rather than fighting against it—is what allows the film to overcome the typical critiques of structural film that underlie its mathematical, clinical nature. The digitization of our corporeal forms—even those mediated through the digital film camera—is still something subject to emotions and affects; they just aren't emotions we may recognize clearly yet.

Fig. 6: The workplace collapsing under its own incomprehensibility (*Corpus Callosum*, Michael Snow, 2002)

An emotionally excessive moment or electrified performance of two bodies meeting in the workplace like the one seen in Figure 6 shows this fractured sense of normalization: the tragicomic electric bolt of modernity takes the workers out of their stolid positions and illuminates their sexualized, choreographed bodies through a specifically hypermodern device, the electric power that gives them the technology that grinds them down. When the rules of the game are impossible to comprehend anymore after the passage of time and when workers become isolated in cubicles and asked to email 24-7, what is left of our relationship to collaborative labour or the older clock-in, clock-out stable, quantifiable temporal and spatial material of work itself?

This leads to my second point: a sort of reflexive nostalgia about the nature of genre itself. Like Scorsese commenting on the glorification of the mobster film, Snow takes the time to

reflect on the not uncoincidental connections between structural film and the literal medium of digital film: as Steve F. Anderson puts it,

> The majority of structural films are themselves mathematical or algorithmic in conception—characteristics that are consonant with the workings of digital media. (...) Structural filmmakers' fetishistic relationship to their apparatus of production is largely denied to makers of digital media, whose creative interactions largely take place within the domain of software and therefore rarely reference the role of the computer as object-machine (22-23).

The irony here is that while structural films are mathematical in *concept* (namely *Wavelength*'s zoom-in and *Zorns Lemma*'s linguistic substitution game), they are explicitly analog and humanistic in *tone*; they are, however, as close as you can get to something resembling a digital film in the pre-digital era. Those films—and the films Anderson is commenting on—were conceived and made in the 1960s and 1970s, a glorious heyday of creative vision and international renown among the Canadian avant-garde film community. While structural filmmakers were among the first to truly comment on the apparatus as a potential for structure—if we associate the word 'structure' as something architectural and grid-like—they were far from the first to point out the artificial nature of editing and cinematography. Their aesthetic project was regarded more in minimalist temporal and visual concerns: something **Corpus Callosum* revives in an era of maximalist CGI blockbusters like *Star Wars I: The Phantom Menace*.

Snow's real accomplishment with **Corpus* is in this relocation of how to use the seemingly immaterial and heavily mediated medium of digital filmmaking as something that can still meaningfully convey structuralist themes regarding time and visual conflict. As Strutt continues,

Digital images, despite continuing to use codes of realism which serve to orient us in time and space (or merely simulating them), 'naturally' (or by their own automatism) seem to tend towards playing with, transgressing, and overcoming these codes of realism. While cinema has always indulged the notion of the virtual, it is not underwritten by an *essential*, existential virtuality due to its substrate in mathematical abstraction, and, for Rodowick, this change of the relative (im)materiality of the medium seems to cause the subsequent aesthetic and thematic changes (45).

Snow's exploration of CGI to breathe new life into a decades old cinematic project is in itself a necessarily nostalgic sentiment, but continues its social and political journey in a time haunted by the disturbing glow of cyber-capitalism.[24] It's a film that feels both incredibly ahead of its time and is also the last of its era in the realm of structural cinema; a final gasp at privileging the materiality of film—digital or analog, film is fundamentally material regardless—within the context of a Canadian art movement that has long since been relegated to a mere footnote in film history.[25] A film like *Corpus depicts an opportunity for digital films to be *extreme* in a restricted, patient, and taxing form, an aesthetic more in common with the works of Chantal Akerman (who made her own contribution to the minimal digital extreme with her swan song, 2015's *No Home Movie*) rather than going for an 'everything, everywhere, all at once' kind of aesthetic so popular in the contemporary digital sphere. *Corpus is still an 'extreme' film insofar as it portrays extremities of time and patience—its digitality speaks more to repetition of code and traditions that have since lost meaning, contorting bodies and experiences and reframing our

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[24] See Nick Dyer-Witheford, *Cyber-Marx: Cycles and and Circuits of Struggle in High Capitalism* (Chicago and Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999) and *Cyber-Proletariat. Global Labour in the Digital Vortex* (London: Pluto Press, 2015).

[25] There are, however, important new attempts to anthologize Canadian structural filmmaking and also bring it into a more prescient dialogue with the present. See Stephen Brooer and Michael Zryd's *Moments of Perception: Experimental Film in Canada* (2022).

regular conception of the time and space of labour and performance by highlighting its most

extreme excesses and arbitrary qualities. At some point, however, reflections of time, material,

and cinematic space were paved over with a kind of dissociative intensity that gave way to a

more clear portrayal of the 'extreme:' extremity as overwhelm rather than hypnosis. This slow

and minimal digitally extreme cinema is, in a way, a kind of anti- or imperfect cinema, as it

forgoes one of the essential points of cinema: action. Just as global digital labour is no longer

about a Fordist assembly line or the many "tooled up" worker (Marx's "collective worker" who

"draws the wire with one set of tooled-up hands, straightens the wire with another set, armed

with different tools, cuts it with another set," etc. [Marx 464]), but now about isolated spectral

behind-the-scenes bodies stooped over a computer (the stopped bodies that create the de-aging

scenes in Scorsese's film), the slow and minimal digital extreme subverts the over-action, over-

coded action flicks of what we might call digital maximal movies (for example Ang Lee's 2019

action film *Gemini Man* starring Will Smith fighting a younger version of himself). Snow's

under-coded and aggressively patient extreme cinema investigates spectral monotony in office

cubical farms but also mines intensity in such spaces and probes the possibility of imagination

and emotion to resurface in digital art and labor. As Steyerl continues, writing on Juan García

Espinosa's *For an Imperfect Cinema*, "the imperfect cinema is one that strives to overcome the

divisions of labor within class society. It merges art with life and science, blurring the distinction

between consumer and producer, audience and author. It insists upon its own imperfection, is

popular but not consumerist, committed without becoming bureaucratic." By distancing itself so

profoundly from the strict divisions and suggested 'obviousness' of what the digital means

psychically **Corpus* acts as a genuinely progressive corrective for those who want to assume

digital media and art takes us only in one direction. The minimal digital extreme never had a

chance to linger (savant that he is, Trecartin essentially reified what we might call the maximalist aesthetic of digital Internet culture-inspired works).[26] Snow's film comes from a time before what we recognize as 'Internet culture' and social media generously allowed us ways of modifying, extending, twisting, and contorting our bodies for clicks, likes, and subscribers. This digital malleability is now a regular part of our banal lives as mediated by smartphones and streaming services, and punctuates Snow's haunting recognition that, as Rombes articulates, "in the digital age, there is nostalgia for what Raymond Williams termed 'residual culture,' which he defined as 'experiences, meanings and values (...) [which are] lived and practiced on the basis of the residue—cultural as well as social—of some previous social formation" (xxix). That glorious and delirious bygone world of both the avant-garde and a less-abstract form of work is what Snow grapples with in his meditations on digital excess, distortion, malleability, and minimalism.

5. The Digital Overwhelm

> At present, we are wearing the helmet, the digital gear of virtual reality. We hope that even this virtuality is virtual, in other words that will no longer have to deal with it…
>
> Jean Baudrillard, *The Conspiracy of Art*, 59-60

> Now the avant-garde does not work anymore because the system is always two revolutions ahead of us.
>
> Jean Baudrillard, The Conspiracy of Art—, 80

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[26] Although due to space limitations I can't discuss Trecartin's work in depth, for more on his subversive use of low-budget digital effects see the "Beyond Accelerationism: Digital Montage and Duration" entry in Robert Stam, Richard Porten and Leo Goldsmith's *Keywords in Subversive Film/Media Aesthetics* (Malden, MA: Wiley/Blackwell, 2015): 282-284.

The full and unremitting power of the Culture Industry beckons you, seduces you not through Illusion that announces itself as Illusion but through Illusion that corresponds so heavily with reality and in fact improves on it and therefore it is reality itself that becomes surreal.

Nicholas Rombes, *Cinema in the Digital Age*, 57

Nothing can touch us / Because everything in us / Is digital code / I can't see through it / There's no way back / I can't get home.

Disco Inferno, "Can't See Through It," 1996

Reality has clearly become far too much for reality. In the time of COVID-19, the tragic youth of Western society have fallen prey to the pure potency of media understanding and mediation without context or history: they are delivered a sanitized, watered-down version of history in a way that only makes sense because contemporary society feels nothing but crisis and collapse. The relinquishment of freedoms, encroachment of the extreme right-wing, and threats of violence over scarcity have led to an eerie and tense atmosphere. A vast portion of this feeling comes from being 'Extremely Online,' a new form of social being that correlates and subsumes one's understanding of the world with the history and culture of social media.[27] 'Reality,' as its ideological foundations become increasingly obvious, is under crisis because it really feels like the Internet is, fundamentally, reality; and, in a sense, genuinely is since it is a reflection of social drives and contemporary desires. The heavy fear-mongering about the Internet as a substitute for reality came true because it was never wrong: reality is, in a way, a substitute itself for society: a brash, last-ditch appeal for something tangible and authentic that was never really there to begin with.

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[27] See Jay Hathaway's blog "What does it mean to be extremely online?" posted online on Aug 20, 2020 in *The Daily Dot,* https://www.dailydot.com/unclick/what-does-it-mean-to-be-extremely-online/

This fear of grasping for authenticity—in spite of its digital cultural origins—is what motivates yet stagnates a new generation of artists and art-consumers. They have once again fallen into the trap of the 'profilmic event': the resurgence of vinyl records, VHS tapes, and anything obsolete from a bygone era are salvaged and extracted for aesthetic potential. The tangibility of an 'old thing'—especially one that relates to childhood—is elevated to the status of being something 'real' and 'human' that one can work with, experience, and express one's subjectivity with. It can appear hard to find humanity in the smoothness of the world—and the cynical corporatization of smooth art makes it such that serious and meaningful work in the digital era becomes nearly impossible to locate—but it remains important to recognize the necessity of conviction and intensity as ways of puncturing through the safe spaces of aesthetic form.

To live intensely and puncture through stifling safe spaces—and as long-brewing subcultures before the Internet have long since recognized—we must return to illusion, horror, and extremity. The Internet determines this through both its abstraction and its banality: the most disturbing part about the incredibly overwhelming nature of social media is simply how dreadfully dull it is. A kind of shock to the system, a reminder of facetiousness—a truly necessary reminder for an Internet obsessed with aesthetics, authenticity, and consumption—is perhaps the clearest signifier of the desperation and fear that defines our digital existence. In the next chapter, the slippage and overdetermination of reality in both art films and inept digital horrors will be analyzed in order to more closely define the post-cinematic phenomenon of the *digital extreme*.

Chapter Three: The Digital Extreme: Illusion's Cycle

> We could use the term 'photogenic torture' in a deliberate distortion of the common meaning of the word 'photogenic,' but in the service of a return to its more literal meaning. This is not a torture created both in and through the image. It is photogenic in the sense that it is a product of the photograph. The photograph is both scene and means of torture.
>
> Phil Carney, "The Art of Photogenic Torture"

1. The Digital Extreme

Unlike the film camera, the digital camera is able to produce images with meaningful ease: lacking a need for laborious set-up and post-processing, countless poorly-taken images of mundane, uninteresting objects and situations can be created and just as easily discarded.[28] As a corollary to this, digital live-streaming can transmit in real time the quotidian nature of real-life to an essentially infinite audience online. The digital camera makes no promises to aestheticize reality, but it most certainly can capture a lot of it. As discussed in the last chapter, the attempts to use digital cameras as a tool for aesthetic creation is often met with scorn and dismissal; in comparison, the film camera presents reality 'authentically' insofar as it is an aesthetic project that we can recognize *as aesthetic*, while the digital camera's flattened glitches and mundane subjects remain alienated from the artistic world. The film camera needs time, energy, and effort to construct an image worth sharing; cheap digital cameras, now an unquestioned aspect of our normal lives, need to have meaning bestowed upon them.

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[28] As Steyerl writes: "The poor image is an illicit fifth-generation bastard of an original image. Its genealogy is dubious. Its filenames are deliberately misspelled. It often defies patrimony, national culture, or indeed copyright. It is passed on as a lure, a decoy, an index, or as a reminder of its former visual self. It mocks the promises of digital technology. Not only is it often degraded to the point of being just a hurried blur, one even doubts whether it could be called an image at all. Only digital technology could produce such a dilapidated image in the first place."

Fig. 7: an empty, carpeted room, sourced from the 'xvisualtrash09x 'Tumblr blog—a true compendium of 'poor images.'

This is not to say that the project of digital cinema has been a failure—quite the opposite—but it becomes our task to seek why this is the case. The ease with which cheap digital images can instill immediate feelings of dread, as seen in Figure 7, is where we can begin to link the anti-aesthetics of digital filmmaking with a similar form of aggressive art: the extreme film. In continuing reaction to the dissolution of sensible nostalgia for the prior cinemas and the continuing flexibility of contemporary filmmaking via digital filmmaking, the creation of disturbing works that pushed the boundaries of taste and aesthetic enjoyment took on a second life after the advent of video. These new cinematic techniques extended both into the realm of art cinema and of traditional thriller-horror types. The films of this era often appropriated the ability

for the digital camera to capture subjects and objects in their pure mundanity and extend that mundanity into something dark and horrific, often commenting on the state of nature within the Internet and our progressively interconnected digital culture. Not so much leaning into the avant-garde as accidently pushing the boundaries of genre cinema into experimental territory, many schlocky shock-horrors of this era concern themselves with contemporary dread and the unknown terrors of the Internet to generate fear in their images.

Two continually recurring themes in the digitally extreme horrors of this time are the blurring representations between *torture* and *pornography*, namely their intersection within the reaction to torture as a political model and the transmission of sexual torture fetish work as disseminated anonymously through the Internet. The two films analyzed in this chapter, Olivier Assayas' *Demonlover* (2002) and Michael Goi's exceptionally controversial 2011 film *Megan Is Missing* both document and disrupt the verisimilitude of torture porn on the Internet, taking us behind the scenes for a closer looks at the anonymous producers and actors that construct them. These films, in their violence and grotesque natures—the former intentionally artistic, and the latter supposedly didactic—attempt to destroy the reality/aesthetic principle of the film camera by suggesting the implicit terror within the mundane. The frequently diegetic video cameras that show such violence are the exploitative actors themselves: they show how the digital realm, in both its literal and aesthetic principles, can facilitate horror by dismantling our ability to perceive aesthetic objects *as aesthetic*.

2. Nostalgia for the Digital, Already?

As discussed in the previous chapter, the "digital error" is paramount in digital media aesthetics, digital media itself a pendulum-swinging between perfected reality and a glitchy virtuality; as Rombes writes, "there is a tendency in digital media—and cinema especially—to

reassert *imperfection*, flaws, an aura of human mistakes to counterbalance the logic of perfection that pervades the digital" (xxi). Considering the canonical digital art films that Rombes frequently writes about (*julien donkey-boy* (1999)*, Inland Empire* (2006)), this thesis holds significant water; digital film, for a time, and especially in the European realm, defined itself through a purely post-cinematic language, but not one that sacrificed the artificial language of cinema altogether. Their intentional cinematic attempts, recognized as film and allowing us to engage with them *as films*, is what brings them into the halls of cinematic discourse. No matter whatever their perversions or distanciations from regular cinema are, they remain aesthetic products and never genuinely disturb. Even a provocative canonical American auteur like Harmony Korine speaks even while distancing oneself from cinema only in cinematic terms: as Jonathan Foltz notices with Korine's rationale behind *donkey-boy*, "[his] manifesto's emphasis on randomness and contingency might lead us to believe that 'mistakism' is best understood as a set of production guidelines, much in the way that the Dogme 95 'Vow of Chastity' provided a set of rules prohibiting certain abuses of artifice during the filmmaking process" (45). The meaningful irony is both Korine—despite him "[going] out of his way to announce a departure from this movement" (45)—and Dogme itself ends up with a cinema that emphasizes its construction as a *real illusion*. This is not a manufactured illusion that would be congruent with, as Foltz notes, Adorno's plea for "flawed, unprofessional, or otherwise impoverished images" (41) or a poor or glitchy "imperfect cinema" that would break from the culture industry.

We are left in a position where we must ask ourselves *what it is about either digital cameras or extreme situations that art film directors actually wish to represent in their films*? The original Dogme filmmakers like Thomas Vinterberg and Korine have accepted that the hey-day of digital as a truly aesthetic form has long-ended and their contemporary, Lars von Trier,

has accepted that after a certain level of acclaim, the extreme art film is simply a commentary on itself and its forebears: his *Depression Trilogy* has solely dealt with this, especially *Nymphomaniac Vol. 2* (2014). Even another mainstay like Michael Haneke has long abandoned issues of media and screen culture that he once dealt with so deftly with films like *Benny's Video* (1992) and *Caché* (2004). Have the times simply changed or did a particular kind of extreme film fall out of favour for never actually being clear about what it wanted to critique?

What remains is the attempt to create an *intentional and extreme mistake*, that moment of humanity whereby the artifice is breached and the reality of filmmaking comes flooding back in. This is not a meta-reality, but the literal poesy of aesthetic construction and filmmaking affirming itself vis-a-vis reacting against the potential smoothness that digital filmmaking threatens: that super-HD filmmaking (as seen with *The Irishman*) could in fact be a *fake illusion*, a worthless, facile gesture against 'real' art filmmaking that emphasizes its folky analog basis. To consider what it would mean for a film to breach the illusion of filmmaking—either to overtly call out its manufactured, disseminated, centreless core or to simply go much too far in terms of taste and shock—is this chapter's focus.

The films discussed in this chapter, like many films made during the advent of surveillance capitalism and the birth of modern-day social media, emphasize filmmaking born directly out of the technology mediated by the characters in the film. *Demonlover*'s participation in the digital extreme is wrought through this: the film's extreme elements are borne not through the violence exploited by the camera, but by the confusing lack of it. While literal violence is rendered implicit—at least until the film changes psychic course—the characters do business deals with symbolic violence. *Demonlover*'s camera places itself within the surveillance mainframe itself, witness to the character's actions, suggesting a deeply unfeeling and vaporous

spectator—if a real, flesh-and-blood spectator at all. Similarly, the computer-screen collage aesthetic of found footage horror *Megan is Missing* mediates the moral downfall and mistakes of our teenage protagonists vis-a-vis the normal aspects of teenage life itself: video calls, digital photographs, and online chatrooms. However, at a critical point in the film, the bizarre and frequently inept narrative style also enters into zero-budget fake news footage and surveillance recordings that bring to mind sensationalized news and true crime vlogs. The obviously staged aesthetics of *Megan is Missing* is a striking contrast to the film's sequences that are not so seemingly constructed, birthing an aesthetic of the digital extreme that mightily disturbs and lingers.

The immediate take-away, before proper case analysis, is to consider what reflexive nostalgia would mean to either film, regarding either what *reality* in a film is supposed to look as prescribed by a past model of realism like and what *extreme digital aesthetics* in a film are supposed to look like.

3. *Demonlover* and the Corporatization of Extreme Digital Art Films

Unlike Scorsese, Assayas is not so easy to pinpoint as a director so easily fixated on nostalgia: while the former loves his period sets, music cues, and temporal back-tracking, Assayas' films—even his ones set outside contemporaneity—seem shockingly modern in tone and construction. A film like *Demonlover* is rendered as the apotheosis of modernity itself: the film's characters and plot devices are those totally within a complete subsumption of one's body and consciousness into the machinations of an invisible, runaway form of capitalism. Nostalgia is not so easily found in a film where the entirety of the action is set in Augeian non-places: the settings are solely glass-and-concrete hotels, airports, office buildings, parking garages, expensive houses, and luxury cars. Life is mediated entirely through the objects and affirmations

of the present: in the post-Internet realm, the past doesn't even exist, let alone does anyone have the time to dwell upon what came before this machination. The privacy and safety once afforded by nostalgia is now abolished, as your entire life's contents and desires have already been decided for you.

What is oozing out of this non-nostalgia is an incredible tension that permeates every scene in *Demonlover*: every action leads to a Hydra-head effect of questions that pertain either to some form of desire or some obfuscated history. Unsurprisingly, very few of these questions posed are answered directly, if at all. The film's digitality is not wrought through SD Dogme-style imperfections, but by the way the characters seem to act like computer programs; the extremity is not strictly wrought through overt violence at a punishing pace, but through persistent violations of normative continuity, editing, and pacing that lead to scenes of violence with no clear purpose or intent. It is a film designed to construct a form of commentary about the position in society of the digital extreme art film, but barely qualifies as one itself. The film is perhaps the most shining example of Shaviro's *post-cinematic affect*: unsurprisingly, a major chapter in that text is an analysis of *Demonlover*'s 2007 sister film, *Boarding Gate*. As Shaviro writes, "[*Demonlover*] envisions the world as an enormous pornographic video game, with proliferating fractal levels and self-reflexive feedback loops. [...] Rather than separating the actual from the virtual, the film works towards what Deleuze calls their *indiscernibility*, so that they must change places, again and again…" (65). The reality/virtuality index, so easily monitored by the film industry and the film viewer, becomes entirely discombobulated: the film is neither obvious as a real illusion or a fake illusion. The film's realist tone and cinematography is at constant odds with the disorienting pacing and unclear motivations of the characters; one

questions the reality of the characters themselves, yet their presence in the diegetic 'real world' remains unambiguous. Only a single question remains: *how did we get here*?

To quickly summarize, *Demonlover* is ostensibly set in the present turn-of-the-century, generically an espionage techno-thriller that dramatizes the rivalry of two companies: Volf, a French corporation, and the Japan-based Mangatronics. The executives of Volf—Diane (Connie Nielsen), her assistant Elise (Chloë Sevigny), and Hervé (Charles Bering)—are attempting to secure access to an unnamed Japanese production studio that wishes to manufacture three-dimensional CGI hentai, as an acquisition by Volf would help them fund their transition out of the now-obsolete 2D hand-drawn hentai. However, Diane is secretly a double agent working for Mangatronics, and orchestrates a kidnapping of Volf executive Karen to gain access to her portfolio. Volf, with Diane and Hervé, are concurrently attempting to purchase an American pornography website called Demonlover, helmed by Elaine (Gina Gershon); the merger of Demonlover with Volf would ruin Mangatronic's potential stake in the game for a market takeover of 3D hentai. In an attempt to gain valuable information for her espionage mission, Diane attempts to steal Elaine's computer. Accidentally getting caught by Elaine, Diane kills her in self-defense, being knocked unconscious herself in the process. She wakes up later to discover that while she was asleep, the murder had been cleaned up. After meeting with Elise (who sends her a threatening message from Karen, who had been on to Diane since her kidnapping), Diane learns that Demonlover's public face is simply a guise for the website's more serious content: an interactive dark web torture livestreaming website called *Hellfire Club*. After this sequence, the film's narrative becomes slippery and dreamlike, as the espionage thriller genre gives way to psychological horror: blackmailed by Karen for the murder of Elaine, Diane is sent to the torture dungeon of the Hellfire Club and is subjected to livestreamed sadomasochistic torture off-screen.

Returning to her job and having been outed as a spy, Diane is a shell of herself; in a surreal act of violence, Diane murders Hervé following a date where he had attempted to rape her. Assisted by Elise with a helicopter, Diane flees France and ends up in the American desert, where under threat once again, she attempts to escape and fails, her narrative coming to a conclusion with a brief fade-to-black.

In the film's epilogue, a suburban American teenager steals his father's credit card in order to pay for Hellfire Club access, watching Diane in a latex bondage suit and fantasy costume as she helplessly stares back into the camera, watching herself being watched.

In keeping with the critical aspect of the digital extreme, the realm of the violent and vulgar has been folded within the contemporary, and is now culturally ubiquitous. The film's conduit by which espionage is enacted—3D hentai—is treated with as much indifference and dehumanized sentiment as any conventional spy thriller. However, it is clearly no accident that Assayas chose such a niche product of base, computerized desire to be the force that pushes the (fairly abstract) narrative forward. The film's executives could be regular, normal business people who regularly trade in whatever obscure stocks and movements of capital that normally go on in such settings. However, in *Demonlover*, even the act of desire—the incredibly perverse desire wrought by 3D fantasy porn or extreme BDSM—is rendered either as a casual act of capitalism or as punishment for taking something too far. As if acknowledging this, Diane detachedly watches lesbian pornography in her hotel room, and her sex with Hervé has something transactional about it. Despite working within the industry of disseminating pornography, any sentiment of eroticism has long been drained out of the characters. Instead, the battle for authenticity has ended in a stalemate: all that remains in the vortex of virtualized reality is humiliation and debasement, sucking desire out of sexual context altogether.

As Feona Attwood writes, one could define transgressive porn itself as "a refusal of artifice; an upending of bourgeois conventions, and, like other forms of carnivalesque low culture, overtunes civilized values and celebrates the body as 'insistently material, defiantly vulgar, corporeal'." (45). The irony, of course, is in how Assayas wrings his cinematic extremity in exactly how distanced desire itself has been icily cut off from corporeality: as Shaivro continues, "Assayas makes films that are at the same time inhuman in their icy distance, and yet intimate, visceral, and creepy, in the way that they offer us vulnerable body-images, and organize themselves around microperceptions of corporeal affect" (63). A film like *Demonlover* is, conspicuously, deeply concerned with the body and its weaknesses, alongside its desires. To simply claim the film is beckoning a return to physical authenticity—or that we need to embrace the posthuman—shies away from the film's true location of its horror.

Returning to this chapter's epigraph, we need to consider what it is that the image of pornography or torture actually shows, and what individual feeling come alongside with it; either revulsion or pleasure wrought from its taboo nature. Moreover, extreme digital cinema remains more inspired by how it transforms reality rather than reproduces it; what it distorts and disturbs in social life than how it attempts to present it back accurately at itself. As Rombes comments, it's not as if digital cinema is what reminds us of the casual horrors that sustains our day-to-day: it is "a posttraumatic cinema for an era when it's not 'everyday life' punctuated by trauma but everyday trauma (ISIS beheadings, *Charlie Hebdo*-style attacks, a steady stream of real-life snuff videos) punctuated by moments of calm" (3). A film like *Demonlover* tells us that we are no longer just 'under attack' by the forces beyond our control; we allowed the forces within our culture to purchase our safety and become opaque, for the illusion of safety comes at the expense of our humanity. As Elizabeth Walden suggests,

The conspiracy breaks down in *Demonlover*, because ultimately there is nothing to
reveal. The workings of power and its violence have been right before us all along. There
is no secret, no mystery, and, hence, no need for revelation. The truth about our age is
that the violence of power, the pathological effects of the totality, no longer attempt to
hide. We live in an era where 'plausible deniability' is a formality, not a critical
legitimating function. The age of conspiracy is behind us (60).

The realization of the tangible, serious forces that work against you and cause your

disillusionment can have a double or two-pronged effect on aesthetic products: first, total

subsumption into the idea of the 'real illusion' where one's patience is at an end with the facades

of the political world, and suggests that if our aesthetic products are going to be fantastical, then

at least they need to be authentic. On the other hand, it births the realm of the 'fake illusion:' of

media and visuals going so far beyond the pale and entering into intensity and extremity that they

break boundaries of both taste and our casual expressions of desire. The fake illusion suggests

that if the machinations of power function under principles of total lies in order to carry out

obvious violence, then so can aesthetic works.

Considering this from a historical perspective, Carney writes that "it is not so much that

there is an absence, an emptiness as the core of the new culture, as it is that something new

emerges: a violent force that operates on the surface of the photographic spectacle" (95). At this

time, violence in films, and desire wrought from violence, was mediated by its authenticity: "in

effect [*Circus of Horrors*] reflects on the hunger of the spectator for horror: the more real, the

better. In other places in the spectacle 'factual' image making at this time is more candid, frank,

especially in the new wave of documentary and war photography" (95). The staged authenticity

of faked fatal accidents creates cheers and bloodlust; but once the curtain is lifted, all desire ends.

Demonlover suggests that we now live in a position where the opposite is true: desire is all but

impossible to find except when one is rendered *part of the fantasy itself*. Early in the film, while

Diane and the Volf execs are at a business lunch with the hentai production company, Diane

grills one of their executives on rumors that a former artist of theirs had used the likenesses of

minors as the basis for his pornographic drawings. The persons representing the hentai company

do not deny such claims, but mention his contract was terminated and such illegal dives into

transgression for the sake of pornography would not be permitted; they are obliged to

acknowledge the meaningful trauma and exploitation that goes on behind the scenes, but are

attempting to steer the brand into traditional purviews of film quality, like production values and

advancements in technology. Echoing this scene later in the film, while Diane and Hervé are

meeting with Elaine, Diane mentions a lawsuit Demonlover had with the makers of video game

series *Tomb Raider* after they put up illegal pornographic content featuring the likeness of the

game's titular female player character, Lara Croft. Elaine goes on to mention that most content

on Demonlover involves pornographic fantasies of fictional characters: a sub-site within

Demonlover even focuses on pornographic celebrity lookalikes, which had also been receiving

controversy but was generating massive revenue for the company. As Attwood continues in her

analysis of altporn, "where hardcore porn is anonymous, 'real,' sexually intense, dirty and

unrefined, porno-chic texts are celebrity-led, staged and sanitised, knowing and ironic,

sophisticated, glossy, and technically proficient" (45). The times have changed: authentic porn is

itself transgressive again; fantasy porn is the mainstream. As such, *it is not so much the visuals of

sex on camera but the situation that the camera performs that is sexually severe*. The result of

this is that both the 'reality' of porn and the 'fantasy' of porn have become aesthetic signifiers,

and both become erotic subjects themselves. As Diane becomes a subject of the Hellfire Club

herself, it is revealed that a teenage boy at the end of the film has total control as to how

'Diane'—at this point a flesh-and-blood human subjected to being a purely erotic aesthetic object by the live-streamed digital camera eye—is portrayed, and he chooses her fate as a superhero character to be sexualized and dominated. As seen in Figure 8, Diane-as-Zora has become 'out of place,' almost looking green-screened into the film screen; but she becomes an everyday object like the Dr. Pepper can on the young boy's desk. She has become what the French collective of artists and authors Tiqqun describe as the living spectacle of the "Young-Girl" of consumerist society in the presence of the abject and the uncanny: they write "contrary to what is true of traditional societies, which recognized the existence of abject things and exposed them *as such*, the Young-Girl denies their existence and dissimulates them" (56). The disorienting effect of Diane so objectified yet placed around such conventional objects and signifiers show that despite the transgressive, abject quality of her torture, she has simply become furniture. As Shaviro mentions as part of Assayas' directorial intentions, "it is only through a delirious aestheticism, and by embracing the artifice of images and sounds, that his movies are able to 'relate physically with an audience,' and thereby actualize their extreme abstractions" (62-63). The mundane, everyday world is totally subsumed by a reified, ideological reality as dichotomized with a fantasy politics and a fantasy entertainment industry, both of which were sanctioned a long time ago.

Fig. 8: Diane as 'Zora 'in Olivier Assayas '*Demonlover* (2002)

'Realism' as so easily typified by the analog/digital divide and that being which separates

extreme film from mainstream film is rendered a commodity like any other, and this is where the

film's main line of critique lies: whatever the genuine line of exploitation and extremity that is

carried on by intellectual art films, manufacturers exploit this tension and render the violence as

an aesthetic commodity rather than anything that can really shock and awe—despite the erotic

nature of the fantasy, it appears that only real violence can still disturb. As Frey mentions, "both

the disturbing and innovative qualities that aesthetic embracers see in these films revolve around

violations of long-established traditions and borderlines between high and low modes of

filmmaking. In part, censorship and classification boards enforce these codes, but by and large

the artistic and economic motives of these filmmakers and the industry self-regulate" (177).

Extremity and digitality are not inherent aesthetics or ideologies composed from technology

itself; movements like Dogme remain eternally relevant not solely due to their narrative novelty,

but rather through their striking visual aesthetic: to create a film on low-quality SD video now

would be a nostalgic gesture; it would be impossible to easily replicate its novelty and

importance. Moreover, sexually violent films in the art realm wink and nod to low art exploitation film, despite the fact that, as Joan Hawkins puts it, "they can be situated at the intersection of high and mass culture, the place where traditional distinctions between high and mass culture become unhelpful, if not completely meaningless" (113). As *Demonlover* suggests, visual culture itself, despite how badly it wants its violent, pornographic imagery to break free of the culture industry, is a totalizing force that simply beckons us to participate in the capitalist commodity engine. This is true for even 3D pornography, a nebulous and impossible-to-understand cultural product that presupposes a particular market and caters to it; transgression is itself little more than an aesthetic that can easily be bought and sold.

Fig. 9: Transgression and violence as day jobs in Olivier Assayas '*Demonlover* (2002)

As the Internet proliferates and gets larger, fears around its content and accessibility—especially those that break conventions of taste, taboo, and legality—become more obviously part of the mass cultural matrix. The everydayness, the mundanity of the Internet in its use and where one mostly uses it, is the crux of the social-critical critique of *Demonlover*: it is no

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coincidence that Diane's torturer is a suburban American kid, awakening his nascent sexuality as mediated by online images. As seen in Figure 9, perversions quietly infiltrate the privacy of home and youth: violence, transgression, and taboo are only one click away in the corporate matrix, as children fall prey to evil entities that take advantage of the new technologies in order to gain a market share of violence in capitalist online trafficking. As Walden notes, "when the teenager logs onto Hellfire Club, his fantasy, drawing onto common elements of popular culture, is both horrible and banal. It insists that we acknowledge the violence and cruelty that are part of what is otherwise constructed as 'normal' social life" (65). While it would be easy to suggest that the Internet has introduced the reality of violence into our everyday home and the corporate work-sphere, the truth is that it shines a light on the violence that has always existed. It exaggerates and amplifies the domestic violence and disequilibrium that have always existed.

To conclude, we must meditate on why, despite the vast majority of *Demonlover*'s diegetic locations being increasingly abstract and hostile non-places, why it ends in a location as bright and homely as it does: it is simple didactic fear-mongering? Is it to show how similar those zones truly are, or how far apart they may seem? Why is the violence so casual? How did the boy discover a deep web porn site like Hellfire Club anyways? How are we supposed to act as avatars for the surveillance state to protect those we feel the need to shield from harmful poor images? How do we protect those that hover on the boundaries of reality and virtuality? These questions posed by the digital extreme are never answered, and become more frustrating when we attempt to square the film's extreme aesthetics and social critique of violent exploitation that percolates in the everyday mundane online environment. To continue our analysis, we move away from the realm of art films and the experimental to now consider pure psychological

exploitation, the controversial, possibly inept, yet impossibly disturbing American found footage psychological horror film *Megan Is Missing*.

4. ***Megan Is Missing* and the 'Failures' of Extreme Digital Filmmaking**

Considering how a film like *Demonlover* simultaneously critiques and embodies the unfortunately toothless nature of art horror filmmaking—that such overly aestheticized, film-festival friendly films cannot shock and terrify like 'real' horror films can—it is perhaps wont to examine the precise opposite end of the artistic, avant-garde spectrum: the modern safety film. Michael Goi's 2011 found footage psychological horror film *Megan Is Missing* appears to take influence from both historic safety and health education films—those shown in schools to warn children about stranger danger, disease and other fears—and iconic shock horrors like Wes Craven's *The Last House on the Left* (1972) in order to create an intentionally didactic film about the potential horrors of teenagers talking to anonymous strangers online.[29] Although it initially flopped after a scathing response, the film has recently experienced a rebirth of popularity after going unexpectedly viral among teenagers on zeitgeisty social media app TikTok. The film—at one point purely scorned for its inept production, cheesy didactic purpose, and (to be discussed) incredibly dark tonal shift—has now garnered a cult following for being something like a 'challenge film:' something to brag that you stomached all the way through without stopping, or finding a perverse joy in the film's 'traumatizing' elements. The film, mildly ahead of its time considering young people's propensity for finding meaning and emotional security through the Internet, has yet to find an effective place within the critical pantheon; ridiculed or treated like a

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[29] For more on the health education film and safety film, see *Learning with the Lights Off: Educational Film in the United States* ed. Devin Orgeron, Marsha Orgeron, and Dan Streible.

kind of game, the film's affective elements, bizarre found footage construction, "collages" and aesthetic commentary place it meaningfully within the digital extreme, whether this was 'intended' or not. 'Filmed' with a myriad of household technological recording objects, the amateurish nature of the film—how profoundly uncinematic it looks—places it into similar aesthetic camps as Dogme; but without the aesthetic safety cushion of European art filmmaking, its extreme commentary on digital existence, authenticity, and aestheticization is not taken seriously. This section's focus is perhaps not to provide a critical rehabilitation for *Megan Is Missing*—as we will discuss this film's more severe images and tonal shift, such an attempt is misguided, if not entirely pointless—but at least to raise final points on the definition of the digital extreme itself, its connection to fear and surveillance, and how it attempts to go beyond the post-cinematic affect by abolishing sentiments of 'cinematic' filmmaking altogether. Ultimately, the real fear within the digital extreme is to consider what happens when the artificial suddenly crumbles into reality before reversing course back into the aesthetic project; this uncertainty and tension between the mundanity of digital existence and its implicit terrors and ease of access is what concerns *Megan Is Missing*.

Before continuing our analysis, it would be prudent to proceed with the uncomfortable and unfortunate task of summarizing *Megan Is Missing*: as stated in the film's preamble, the 'footage' is composed of the last videos, calls, and other miscellaneous digital traces of disappeared SoCal teenagers Megan (Rachel Quinn) and Amy (Amber Perkins). Furthermore, all the footage is shown in chronological order of the events, despite information being found at differing points of the diegetic events; it is also mentioned that Amy went missing three weeks after Megan's own disappearance. The film is presented in three distinct sections, each with wildly differing tones: Megan is presented in the film's opening third as a 'loose,' adventurous,

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insecure teenage girl, estranged from her parental figures, while her best friend Amy is struggling to let go of the comforting bonds of childhood, and has a close relationship with her parents. Feeling the urge to experiment beyond her years, Megan attends janky house parties held by local high schoolers to use drugs and have sex. Amy, who Megan drags along to such events, feels alienated and ostracized by the other partygoers. Later, Megan begins to talk using an open online chatroom with a boy named Josh, who introduces himself as a local skater kid. Trying to make a friend or romantic connection, Megan and Josh attempt a video chat, but he does not reciprocate the video as he claims his webcam is broken—he sends a single photograph, but otherwise Megan (and the viewer) does not know what he looks like. Video footage is shown of Megan planning to meet up with Josh at a local restaurant; after this plan is made, Megan goes missing.

The film's second arc begins here: a local search begins for the disappeared Megan. Her unexpected absence is transmitted on the news, and footage shown through the TV becomes part of the diegetic collage. Amy is shown as despondent and guilty, and attempts to communicate with Josh herself; he reciprocates, but insults her when she tries to get any information out of him. Information and footage begins to surface of Megan: first, surveillance footage of Megan being grabbed by the arm and taken away by a blurry, unseen figure is dissected and sensationalized by the news: attempts to zoom in on the footage only renders it less visible. Later, as the film begins its shocking tonal shift, images of Megan on a BDSM fetish website are found: strapped to a horrible device that forces her mouth open in a perpetual scream, it becomes clear that Megan has been abducted and is in the process of being brutally tortured. Amy, unaware of these images and shown vlogging outside, is grabbed and taken offscreen. It is

mentioned by the film's 'editor' that the subsequent footage is the unedited tape rescued from a camcorder found in a nearby park's garbage can.

Thus begins the film's truly dark final third: shot in disturbing slow takes, we see Amy in a jail cell in (presumably) Josh's torture dungeon, where she is forced to consume dog food, violently raped, and forced into a plastic barrel that contains Megan's decaying corpse. The film's final, uncut, shot shows the assailant outside digging a hole for nearly ten full minutes— while one can hear Amy begging him to not kill her—as he buries the barrel that contains their two bodies. The assailant picks up the camera and walks away into the night, and the film ends.

As Rombes writes in a section of his book regarding *Paranormal Activity 2* (2010), *Megan Is Missing* "is not an avant-garde film, but only because no one has argued that it is" (97). This is what places it critically at the end of our journey through the extreme, the digital, and the digitally extreme: because it is all about also these things, but there is hesitance to canonize it as such due to the confusion around the film's directorial intent, the extremely graphically disturbing nature of its content, and its poor reception (either as a film or a simply horror). One of the defining characteristics of digital extreme is that it *grapples with the mundane and ordinary, that which surrounds us*. *Megan Is Missing* is a horror film about violence lurking in the mundane and, effective or not, we do not need to wait for either the mainstream culture industry or the artistic cultural industry to reinforce what it considers to genuinely be a well-made and meaningful horror film to look at it as an example of extreme digital discourse and agitation. The fact that no one has yet claimed *Megan* to be an extreme film feels like a misstep, especially regarding its aesthetic similarities to films like *Fat Girl* and *Irreversible* (2002) and obvious differences from typical found footage horror films like *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) and the aforementioned *Paranormal Activity* franchise (2007-present). The extreme vulgarity

with which the film depicts sexual violence, its tortuous long takes that verge on Bela Tarr-esque slow cinema, and fixation on technological mundanity in the vein of Assayas, all these potentially subversive aesthetic tricks of *Megan* are lost in favour of fearmongering and shock. As Alison Taylor writes on the critical reception of *Fat Girl* and Bruno Dumont's *Twentynine Palms* (2003),

> These are reasonable (though I will argue ultimately misguided) responses to the film's shocking elements. Rather, the problem is that, more often than not, this response prefaces a wholesale dismissal of the films, resorting to a normative understanding of what constitutes 'good' filmmaking, and precluding genuine engagement. Among these negative responses, even those that allow that the violence may on some level be an extension of the directors' concerns employ indignation as an excuse to disengage from pursuing the matter further (65).

While it remains important to consider how the films Taylor mentions are part of the European art film industry—and subject to critique as to the intent their scornful critique spurs on itself— she is right to interrogate this exact normative claim of 'good filmmaking' when confronted with a film that so explicitly violates tonal consistency. *Fat Girl* and *Twentynine Palms* both feature slow, tense build-ups that are focused in a particular generic mode before switching, almost without warning, to scenes of extreme graphic violence. As Taylor continues,

> On the one hand, we might think of genre and the expectations it entails as a kind of safety net, insulating the viewer's experience by affording particular cues as guidance. [...] The animosity levelled by many at *Fat Girl* and *Twentynine Palms* suggests that if we are interpreting the shift in generic terms, then the original genre's fortifying qualities have been radically and unexpectedly disrupted. If we take the majority of *Twentynine*

Palms to be a drama about the romantic trials of a dysfunctional couple in the desert, the sudden arrival of a truck full of violent strangers is unlikely to be experienced as a welcome innovation; rather this is apt to be the moment when our 'horizon of expectations' is shattered, as though the rules of the game had been broken (67).

The concerning thing is to reflect on is what *Megan*'s shift to graphic violence tells us; we have been conditioned to judge a movie solely not by how it breaks or confuses formal elements, but by how it reinforces claims of quality and technical skill within the formal elements as *those exact elements that make a film good and worth watching*. Any break with cinematic formal sequencing has long been a characteristic element of avant-garde and experimental filmmaking, but suddenly diverting from this norm within an ostensibly conventional film is met not with intrigue, but with hatred. As Taylor mentions, the "genres clash rather than combine" (67); the generic whiplash caused by such a sudden pivot—and to such a horrible image—leaves one sunk in an affective pit, unable to shake the feeling off for many days afterwards. To consider the film somehow outside the extreme cinema canon would be absurd.

The aesthetic of the digital extreme does not solely spring from postmodern, post-new media ideas of genre overlapping and tonal confusion mixed with extreme violence; like *Demonlover*, the portal to the BDSM dungeon is first found in the everyday home via the computer. However, unlike *Demonlover*, where the subject and onlooker of the torture dungeon themselves are soulless husks waiting for fantasy to pour into them, the torture subject in *Megan*, in classic fearmongering fashion, is a wayward girl who seems to violate the norms of her suburban existence enough so as to naively accept the promises that disguised the true danger. Megan's wayward girl character is, unlike Diane's corporate essence that gets exploited and dehumanized her of her already totally-subsumed self, just supposed to be 'your average

teenager' that uses average communication technology in a supposedly average world. This averageness is suggested to be not enough for Megan (punctuated by intonations of a traumatic family background) and is contrasted with Amy's childlike, pure demeanour that suggests she already has all she needs in life. These characters are archetypal and shallow—intentionally so— in a way that universalizes them, and the totally anonymous assailant is also universalized in his non-existence. Both Megan and Amy's stilted, amateurish performances play in tune with the film's zero-budget sets and crappily-written dialogue. Authenticity for the sake of a true verisimilitude seems to be absent; the film seems more like a weak student project, or worse, a 'so bad it's good' film like *The Room* (2003). Weirdly, the narrative is at consistent odds with the cheap production: as Alexandra Heller-Nichols notes, the film's diegetic footage "predominantly consists of material we believe is shot by the characters themselves with a range of digital technologies such as mobile phone cameras, camcorders, and webcams, thus creating a sense of authenticity through its deployment of diegetically filmed amateur scenes" (52). Of course, this authenticity is in a sense on paper only: the production quality in the film's first two acts is cruddy to the point of profound surreality; this is especially obvious in the film's bizarre news sequences, with cheap digital effects and strange placeholder news items that run along the ticker tape (Figure 10). The distinct feature of the extreme-collage is its aesthetically disparate elements; its terrifyingly incongruous construction reminds one of the horrendous compositions in *A Hole in My Heart* while the horizontality of the amateur ticker-tape brings to mind the Mobius-stripping of the film stock in **Corpus Callosum*.

Fig. 10: The infamously 'bad 'aesthetics of Michael Goi's 2011 found footage psychological horror film *Megan Is Missing*

This juxtaposition in a film that is barely held together by its own formal elements and extremely serious subject matter—even before the tonal shift—develops an instantaneous feeling of dread. Of course, then comes the film's most infamous shot: with a small warning screen presented by the diegetic 'editor' of this footage that suggests photographs of Megan had been discovered on a fetish website that allows the viewer some preparation of imagination before the images are revealed, the film shows its true hand: shown is a steady, silent slideshow of two poorly-taken images ripped from a digital camera showing Megan in a state of absolute torture. This is perhaps the fundamental 'poor image:' as Steyerl wrote,

> Poor images are the contemporary Wretched of the Screen, the debris of audiovisual
> production, the trash that washes up on the digital economies' shores. They testify to the

violent dislocation, transferals, and displacement of images—their acceleration and circulation within the vicious cycles of audiovisual capitalism. Poor images are dragged around the globe as commodities or their effigies, as gifts or as bounty. They spread pleasure or death threats, conspiracy theories or bootlegs, resistance or stultification. Poor images show the rare, the obvious, and the unbelievable—that is, if we can still manage to decipher it.

Megan has, in a way, become the digital debris of the world; this is far removed from the fantastical, aestheticized torture shown in *Demonlover*: in the world of *Megan*, torture is pure, unfiltered reality, coaxed into the realm of sexual fetish by breaking the illusion of the world and giving into nothing but pain, subjection, and humiliation. This is the film's most uncinematic moment, its most extreme, and its most genuinely frightening. It is so bad, so unexpected, that it alleviates the tension of the film's final third: despite the horrible events on screen, *at least those events are in motion*. The freeze-frame, collage-like showing of Megan's torture image can barely even be entered into the generic continuum: it breathes a terrible life all of its own, in Megan's powerlessness and leading to our own viewing paralysis. As Heller-Nichols continues to note, "by establishing a sense of authenticity in these less dramatic moments, it necessarily implies that the more violent and intense climax is just as real. [...] These photographs are taken with a bright flash and imply a lack of compositional forethought: They are constructed as amateur snapshots taken in the heat of the moment" (54). It would perhaps be more accurate to say something different: the tonal shift is as jarring as it is not due to the sudden transition from one kind of constructed realism to another, but from swinging the pendulum as far from one end of the spectrum to the other. By shifting from hyper-artificial amateurish production to a horribly crude but realistic poor surveillance snapshot of Megan's actress Rachel Quinn strapped to a (allegedly real) BDSM torture device is enough to completely shatter the cinematic illusion. As

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mentioned, this is the most 'uncinematic' moment in the film: what is meant by this is that it contains no aesthetic promise; its entire function in the film is to reinforce its didacticism and to shock one meaningfully enough so we understand what the fuss genuinely was with the scenes preceding it; these images colour the rest of the film completely. The moment the everyday technology—phones and cameras—stop taking images of everyday objects, like two teenage girls enjoying their time together, and start taking images of disturbing, intrusive objects like torture devices, do the function or power of those technologies really come into focus. The grainy, blurry glitches of digital cameras capturing childhood birthdays are the same glitches seen in the Abu Ghraib photographs. The dark reality of mundanity is waiting for a shaky DSLR camera to capture it and expose it, to de-aestheticize reality itself.

Figure 11: Amy in 'Josh's 'torture dungeon in Michael Goi's 2011 found footage psychological horror film *Megan is Missing*

Films like *Demonlover* and *Megan Is Missing* are aesthetically influenced by—yet highly critical of—our notion of the safety that screens and everyday reality affords us. Screens here do not create a safe distance between what is viewed and the viewer; they glow, seduce, and ensnare. While *Demonlover* has a distinctly Marxist-economical critique of the screen, *Megan*'s is more invigorating and internally nebulous. Returning to our persistent fixation on nostalgia, *Megan* is a nostalgic film only insofar as it has been influenced by Craven and safety films of yore; otherwise, using a nostalgic found footage frame it seemingly constructs for us a new nostalgia, that of a fearful technology, and a suggestion that technology itself is something to fear, as it both facilitates and cinematically captures the film's horrifying events. On a deeper level, it is not so specifically technologically in itself but society that mis-uses and abuses. Amy's presence in Figure 12—debased, humiliated, overly visible—is a byproduct of herself as a *filmed subject of torture*: an inherent aspect of the violence enacted on her by the camera itself. Not only is the violence against her known to her assailant, but has been recorded and is subject now to reproduction and the limiting terror of the film image itself. Worse, the filmed image casts her as an unwanted character: it radically forces the viewer to look at her body differently. As Catherine Zimmer argues in her book on surveillance cinema,

> The narrative relations established in the films between surveillance and torture exceed a cause-and-effect understanding and (...) point ultimately to an increasingly indiscernible boundary *between* surveillance and torture. Viewed in this light, the phenomenon of torture porn allows for an analysis not only how cinema produces visible violence, but more generally the ways in which, outside of the movie theatre, bodies are produced as visible for, by, and through contemporary acts of torture (44).

Disturbingly, 'Josh' attempts to transform Amy from a child to a woman—visible and subject to the torture of the image—through the act of photographic torture, producing her barely-clothed body as something society recognizes: the lewd, vulnerable woman on screen, created and interpellated by the regular channels of screen society; this time, sped up to a deadly end.

Mimicking the mundane domesticity is the space of both nightmares and nostalgia; for better or worse, the everyday in our post-COVID world is essentially purely spent interfacing with the myriad screens that dominate casual life in the West. Those images on the screen, poor, degraded images of extreme terror and fear (as both *Demonlover* and *Megan* note) have begun to lose their transgressive luster themselves: without the de-familiarizing nostalgic frame and moment of puncture, expectation, and shock, images of violence also become as routine and mundane as any casual image. The new Digital Extreme as it were re-loads the poor, ugly images on the screen; through a surrealist jolt to the senses and an extreme aesthetic that remediates the ordinary and mundane, we see technology as strange. As Taylor notes,

> In negative conceptions, everydayness is associated with the inconsequential, the fruitless and the spurious, in contrast to what is significant and eventful. Regarded this way, the everyday renders us passive—it is something we necessarily endure, and something 'we must extricate ourselves from if we are to live authentically.' This extrication might come in the form of aesthetic experience via high art, or modernist movements like Surrealism that jolt the senses and render the familiar strange. Such encounters to art are thought to disrupt the everyday's circadian temporality, awakening perception from mindless habit (5).

While it would be absurd to consider that Goi is attempting to awaken our dormant sensibilities to the reality of nature after confronting the totally-divorced realm of art itself, one could

consider that a film like *Megan* forces us to consider what the actual 'aesthetic' of digital cinema is: as we discussed in the last chapter, its failure to present reality truthfully ends up creating themselves around a new aesthetic, and its total divorce from verisimilitude altogether awakens a latent reactionary nostalgia for 'well-made movies.' However, the early digital era was short-lived, and the distinction between film footage and digital footage has become both more and less meaningful with each passing year as tastes alter and new forms of nostalgia settle in. A nostalgia for films critical of the everyday seem to have begun: *Megan* was among the first in a clearly transient trend of 'computer-screen films,' where action occurs within regular, home-bound life as mediated by technology, but even such naive claims about what a 'computer' means in the symbolic order has changed. After COVID, our conceptions of routine, the everyday, and our symbolic relation to the house has turned to both safety but also total isolation. *The home is no longer safe; it is our last resort*. This is why Megan's face in the torture device is the signature image of the digital extreme: in a literal sense, it is a pure fusion of the frighteningly non-aesthetic aesthetics of digital photography with the aesthetics of torture disseminated by sources online—either the mainstream news or torture fetishists. But in a symbolic sense, our usual codes of the real and the illusion are breaking once again: the fear of COVID as a symbolic, yet all too dangerous virus led to its politicization and propensity to virtue signaling on the left and the right; trends on TikTok lean more towards the reality of watching a 'traumatizing' film as a challenge rather than engaging with it as an aesthetic object, and political openness has fallen to the wayside in favour of capitalist appropriation of oppressed groups. Megan's tortured face and her encounter with the real device of misery behind-the-scenes turns into something unreal by the digital camera, just to be forced back into reality by the whiplash caused by the film's unintentional artifice itself. This is exactly the position of the modern

subject that *Demonlover* attempted to discover 20 years ago. But despite *Megan*'s possible claims to such aesthetic significance, the film has not been granted the status of art quite yet. As Rombes writes, with the tone of a eulogy,

> Although many of the films deploy shaky, handheld cameras and self-conscious lighting as shorthand for realism, this only serves to reinforce the fact of the camera behind the image. We begin to recognize the visual codes of realism as just that: codes that ultimately erode the very mystique of realism itself. The closer DV takes us to the Real, the more we recognize it as illusion. [...] Alas, are we to be tempted into nostalgia for the digital so soon after its appearance? Do we already yearn for the "good old days" of early DV and the noisy proclamations of the Dogme 95 movement, or are those aesthetics yet to be found in the production of the U.S. military and the ever-growing surveillance apparatus? Does the cycle of incorporation and commodification come so quickly on the heels of the avant-garde today that we are left with the stultifying aura of "history" surrounding such movements as Dogme 95? In perhaps the ultimate cruelty, our ironic sense of theory and our hunger for deconstruction rob us even of the sedate pleasures of nostalgia, which, someone will doubt remind us, is just another myth (82-83).

The hopelessly circular nature of this cycle of realism is indeed what lends it its extremity: the torture is reflected both in the cruel repetitive nature of the everyday and the fact that the avant-garde is whisked away by someone wishing to make a quick buck off its innovations. Even a film like *Megan*, before it got a chance to be critically reappraised was turned into a challenge film; stripped of its aesthetic and critical intensity and made to be an object of endurance and will. This is essentially watching films as a sport. Ultimately, where the nostalgia cycle takes us is here: an acceptance that watching films was never about the films themselves, but of reaffirming what we already know about films, and how they both unsettle the everyday and confirm our order in them. We are left to ask why we keep subjecting ourselves to this: as

Carney mentions, "we are faced with the prospect that torture serves no other purpose than itself. It is this fundamental and inescapable nature of torture that is suffused with the dynamic of desire" (104). We can desire a truly illusionistic, imaginary, and a purely real, authentic cinema all we want, both totally within the bounds of nostalgia and rejecting the past altogether; we will have to be tortured, bound to our bodies, in the process of receiving something that cannot exist.

5. The Internet is Everywhere and it is Terrifying

Returning once again to the epigraph, the act of capturing—of aestheticizing and de-aestheticizing, through a discursive procedure rather than an aesthetic one—is where the torture itself occurs: the torture in viewing it against one's will, of the sympathy and pathos triggered, of the fear in identification, of the vulgar and abject contained within the gory, perverse content. But the freezing—the precise moment where a film stops being a film and becomes a photograph—is what actually orients this affect. Our continual subjection to the machinations of filmic capital—where nothing escapes its tendrils waiting to appropriate anything, knowingly because it knows whatever came before it was equally as inauthentic—is this scene of torture too. Our everyday lives, stuck in the stasis of COVID, have something of a photographic ring (or quality) to it: repetitive, unchanging, waiting for narrative to flood into it. A film suggests life, regardless of its constructed nature; it contains *movement* of some kind, and with movement suggests something beyond the individual and one's nostalgic responses. What films like *Fat Girl*, *A Hole in the Heart*, **Corpus Callosum*, *Demonlover*, and *Megan Is Missing* all have in common is this desire to alienate, to provoke. Interestingly, our propensity to humanize and subjectify our objects by bestowing them with nostalgic properties is what the digital extreme

attempts to annihilate entirely; the digital extreme does not advocate for a dialectical posthumanity, nor a nihilistic nonhumanity, but a literal after-humanity. They are not primers for seeing a life outside of technology, but warn us of holding onto our tortured cycles, our beloved pasts and our desire for violence.

Conclusion: The Afterhuman Nexus

DON'T SAGOGE UP MY ECPHON AND CALL IT PRORRHESIS / DON'T DISSOI UP MY EXORDIUM AND CALL IT VITUPERATION / DON'T POINT AT MY BODY AND CALL IT MY BODY.

Nora Collen Fulton, "Suede", *Presence Detection System*, 2019

1. The Afterhuman Nexus, Tangled

We are almost at the end of our journey; we seem to have crossed a necessary threshold, discussing digital extreme filmmaking as invested in the after-human nexus, but so far we have said nothing about our progress away from solipsistic humanity.

Strangely, despite everything, these films are not purely nihilistic. Dark, certainly, but completely negatory, not so much. Then, why the scorn?

Perhaps the fundamental issue is a misidentification of what these films are trying to say about our mediation; despite showing their negative hand, it becomes easily misconstrued that these films are about technological ascension—which itself leads to another misinterpretation insofar as it is suggested that anything critical of this stance is an anti-technological Luddite. What places the allure of posthumanity over afterhumanity is the presence of a positive dialectic in the former: where posthumanity is predicted by transhumanists to be the next stage of human evolution that comes with the mass implementation of advanced technology and artificial intelligence, afterhumanity moves laterally: this is not what comes next in the great teleological scheme of things, but *what we are becoming despite staying the exact same*.

The posthumanists believe technology and humanity will eventually be indistinguishable, that the organic and the synthetic will come together to bring us to the next stage of consciousness itself—a consciousness greater than one we can easily comprehend ourselves.[30] This is a fascinating kind of nostalgic urge itself: the absence of an easy God—packaged with His theory of redemption and rapture—has manifested itself as the God within the machine itself. The spiritual never died, but became material. It is ultimately the suggestion that the tools that we surround ourselves with—those that manufacture the world we recognize in infrastructure, art, and communication—will one day be imbued with the ability to bring forth the next level of consciousness.

Posthumanity is fundamentally a raging against both time and violence (more accurately, pain): to dissolve the need for death by raising consciousness also dissolves the need to fight and exert anti-morality; it is an ask not just for a better society, but an entirely new organization of the social, psychic, and communal realms. It is also a fight against nostalgia: as Boym relays, "nostalgia, like progress, is dependent on the modern conception of unrepeatable and irreversible time. [...] The nostalgic directs his gaze not only backwards but sideways, and expresses himself in elegiac poems and ironic fragments, not in philosophical or scientific treatises. Nostalgia remains unsystematic and unsynthesizable; it seduces rather than convinces" (13). To be nostalgic towards technology and the progress it uncontrollably seems to afford is the nightmare of the nostalgic individual; the manufactured past is not technological in nature, but purely aesthetic. As such, the posthumanist, tired and stressed by the slippery aesthetic nature of their belief subsumes their frustration into the objectivity of the machine: free from humanity itself, the posthumanist can accept both oblivion and timelessness, discarding the bonds of the social

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[30] See Ray Kurzweil, *The Age of Spiritual Machines: When Computers Exceed Human Intelligence*. New York: Penguin, 1999.

and from it, nostalgia and violence; even the issue of the technological itself becomes moot in the face of a higher consciousness.

The afterhumanist is also a nostalgic, but much more akin to that nostalgic who looks at the world *sideways*: the world is never enough, but the world is also always taking the piss out of itself: the play of symbols, of irony, of ridiculousness, of the gaps between things, are of deep interest to the afterhumanist. Most importantly, the afterhumanist recognizes the completely disparate splintering of human identity as wrought by the current state of the world: the dismantling of formerly conventional communication has led to a distanciation/estrangement between the body and the 'real' identity. People say that we live now in a 'post-truth' society, speaking as if only the corporate news media can be trusted—all other figures, most of all the enemies of Western capitalism (even those figures that benefit from it) are the formulators of the most outlandish lies—but this belies the degree of lying we all do about our identities every single day, whether it be online or in-person. Identity has never been more slippery, yet its presence has become something of a politico-cultural-social lightning rod over the last several years. The necessary reaction—a fixation on the certainty of identity, of easy categorization and pretending transference and identification do not exist—has become both a critical aesthetic and political injunction. The importance of identity *mattering* above all other signifiers in modern life has become the most significant aesthetic object of our current day.

To close this thesis, we will very briefly examine three films that attempt to break this contemporary sacred cow: first, we will simultaneously look at Dario Argento's *The Stendhal Syndrome* (1996), starring Asia Argento, and David Cronenberg's body horror comeback *Crimes of the Future* (2022) to see how this inability to differentiate art from reality—and eventually, becoming art itself in order to enact extreme violence—shows the multifarious nature of desire,

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solipsistic subjectivity, and posthumanity. Secondly, we will look at the relatively new

directorial debut of Jane Schoenbrun, *We're All Going to the World's Fair* (2021), starring Anne

Cobb and Michael J. Rogers. *World's Fair*'s terrifying play on truth, online identity formation,

nostalgia, gender (developing new kinds of intertextuality along the way) places it within a new

canon of what I call afterhuman cinema: here we find a genuine plea for refusing certainty and

the dainty and pathetic essentialization of words and identification.

2. ***The Stendhal Syndrome* and *Crimes of the Future*: Art and Violence as One and the Same**

Both extreme cinema and digital cinema use art to rethink technology and humanity; this

thesis is not concerned with the natural propensity of people to create art, but rather how *extreme*

aesthetics frame questions regarding humanity and how humanity diverges from both technology

and art. Perhaps the question of the extreme aesthetic-cultural nature of/conversation about

'humanity' is the wrong angle: is humanity itself an artwork? Or, moreover, what becomes of

individual identity when confronted with the 'real' of the artwork? Or when that 'real' is found

literally within ourselves? Is the actual relationship between spectator and artist, like painter and

paintbrush, similar to that of the enactment of violence? And what happens to the violence that

lingers within us? How do we identify with the violence subjected itself?

We can approach such questions in many ways: the digital injunction found in both Dario

Argento's *The Stendhal Syndrome* and David Cronenberg's *Crimes of the Future* invites

intriguing answers; the former reaching a kind of ecstasy within its violent enactment, evoking

the overwhelming nature of its titular affliction, which further blurs the borders or makes

differentiating between the self and art fuzzier.[31] The latter locates afterhumanity and its violent

vicissitudes as a kind of performative metafiction, a form of existence where everything becomes

commentary, where everything is not just a 'text' but also the opposite of a text—a total

dissolution of the signifier, whereby magic and evolution occur *against* the survivability of the

species.

The titular 'Stendhal syndrome' refers to a kind of overwhelming trance and psychotic

break, a hallucinatory dizziness that occurs when gazing at a particularly effecting work of art;

the effect can linger for hours, and is said to be deeply disorienting. *The Stendhal Syndrome*'s

protagonist, the intense Anna (played by a magisterial Asia Argento) suffers deeply from this

affliction: as diegetically shown by Italian cinema's first use of CGI, she psychically enters

paintings, even using them as portals to other locations and moments of time. She has no control

over this affliction, and it regularly renders her inert and powerless. Some of the paintings she

sees are significantly of excessive, monstrous femininity, such as Caravaggio's *Medusa* or

Baroque oil paintings portraying grotesque figures. Anna describes falling prey to a painting's

illusionism in the film as immersive madness: "I entered the painting and I felt like I was

suddenly immersed in it. I know it sounds crazy." Anna is a cop for the Roman police; she is on

business in Florence looking for an unknown rapist-murderer, almost immediately revealed in

the film to be the charismatic man Alfredo (Thomas Krestchmann). Once he understands that he

can exploit her affliction, Anna becomes his next target; he subjects her to horrible sadistic

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[31] One can consider both Cronenberg and Argento as 'extreme' auteurs—directors concerned with elements of the flesh, violence, and darkness, but rooted in the conventions of horror more than the extreme postmodernism of the 2000s 'extreme film': Simone Hobbs discusses both Argento and Cronenberg as "extreme art cinema" directors or predecessors and Phil Russell's *Beyond the Darkness: Cult, Horror and Extreme Cinema* also makes a case for Cronenberg as an extreme auteur. Xavier Mendik in a biography of Argento discusses the *Stendhal Syndrome* as noteworthy for both "its extreme images of assault and sexual violence" and the "impassioned performance of the director's daughter, Asia Argento." See Simone Hobbs, *Cultivating Extreme Art Cinema: Text, Paratext and Home Video Culture*; Xavier Mendik's Argento *Senses of Cinema* entry, https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2003/great-directors/argento/ and Phil Russell's *Beyond the Darkness: Cult, Horror and Extreme Cinema*.

sexual assault twice, and the second time she finally gains the upper hand and drowns him in a

nearby river. The body is not found; Anna changes considerably after this incident. Capable once

again of looking at art without succumbing to a hallucinatory fugue state, she takes on the guise

of a classic *femme fatale* (resplendent with a blonde wig and sunglasses)—after masculinizing

herself as the classic film noir detective after her first encounter with Alfredo—and develops a

relationship with a young French art restorer named Marie (Julien Lambroschini).[32]

Figure 12: Asia Argento as Anna as the purely cinematic image of the *femme fatale*, the self-canvas of the art world, in Dario Argento's *The Stendhal Syndrome* (1996)

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[32] Her various gender-performance transformations are essentially her adopting the persona of artist-self, able to reclaim her autonomy through potent, therapeutic strategies of identity signaling. Her relationship with an art restorer shows her newfound ability to therapeutically birth and maintain artworks; she is herself a kind of canvas, but paralyzed in a perpetual scream. Only others can see what her image truly represents.

However, Anna is haunted by Alfredo; she is convinced he is still alive. Worried that she keeps receiving phone calls from him, she comes to meet up with Marie after his work day at the museum, only to find him murdered. She comes home and is confronted by her psychologist; later, her cop partner, Marco (Marco Leonardi)—who has shamelessly been making repeated advances Anna spurns—comes to deliver her news that Alfredo's body was found in the river. He opens the door to find the psychologist dismembered; upon realizing that Anna has, in a way, 'become' Alfredo—something she realizes herself, claiming that he cannot be killed as he is now 'within' her—Marco chases after her and has her arrested for the murder of Marie and her psychologist, and the film ends.

As James Gracey writes in his monograph on the "unsane" Argento, perhaps "mirroring charges" levelled at his own films about the negative effects they have in inflicting pain and discomfort on the viewer, *The Stendhal Syndrome* takes the damning "connection between art and death to its logical conclusion. Connotations of the 'tortured artist' are rife throughout the film, particularly in the scene depicting Anna covering herself in paint and curling up on top of her canvas. She essentially uses her own body as a canvas, redesigning herself through the various guises she adopts and her self-mutilation." *The Stendhal Syndrome*'s afterhuman strength is found in this misidentification between artist and abuser, between reality and art, and between reality and the world of fiction. In a further act of dizzying blurring, the paintings Anna creates in her art therapy in the film of faces contorted in pain or tears of blood were in fact painted by actress Asia Argento herself.[33]

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[33] See Troy Howarth, *Murder by Design: The Unsane Cinema of Dario Argento*.
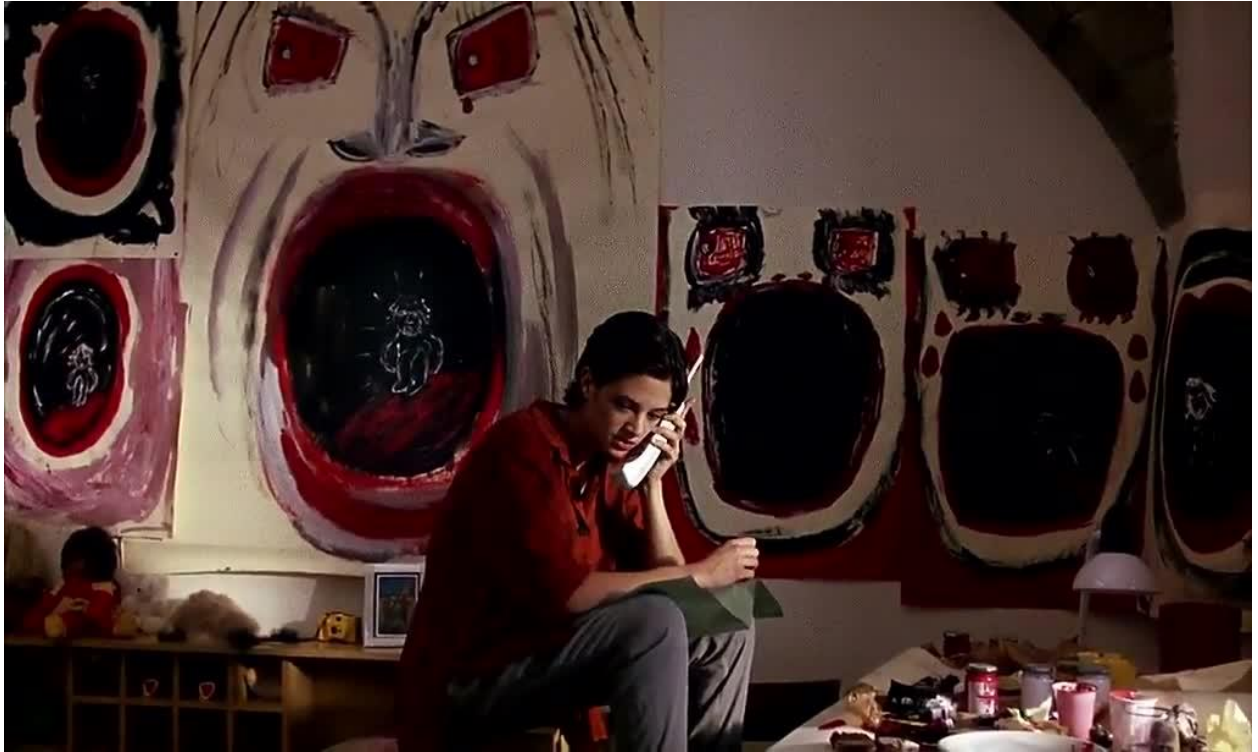
Fig. 13: Anna's therapy paintings. The self as perpetual scream, abject horror as identity and the play between actress and filmic subject in *The Stendhal Syndrome* (1996)

Asia may be doubly aware of the tortured artist imagery, but in the film not only does Anna no longer recognize the signs and symbols that differentiate the world of 'reality'—always at play in an Argento film, as *Stendhal*'s sets are amongst his most surreal and artificial, yet also his most vividly realistic and tourist-esque—and the world of artmaking, her relationship to gender afflicted on her by the true violence enacted upon her leads to another perverse play within a play or painful picture within a picture; the traumatized spectator becoming the canvas itself. As Colette Balmain writes: "Anna tries to overcome her trauma by externalising her anger onto the blank canvas, at the behest of her psychologist, Dr Cavanna (Paolo Bonacelli). With only the tools of her oppressors through which to redefine herself (the ideology and iconography of patriarchy contained within its linguistic and symbolic structures), Anna's attempt at catharsis is

futile and she soon abandons the frame, turning instead to her own body as canvas." As Balmain

astutely argues, Anna undergoes several reconstructions or "restorations," finally emerging as

"iconic femme fatale" (Figure 12), fashioning herself as ultimate object of male desire: a

masquerade (like Anna's glasses) which men are unable to see past, and for which her

psychologist pays the ultimate price: violent dismemberment at Anna's hands near the end of the

film. As Balmain argues, Anna's "adoption of male characteristics" and "symbolic self-

castration" after she cuts her hair after the first attack finally gives way to the disturbing

sequence wherein she attempts to rape Marco (Marco Leonardi), her work colleague and former

boyfriend. Anna has in essence learned to "defamiliarze the conventional signs of both

masculinity and femininity" and "such actions constitute Anna as 'a block of becoming', a site of

pure intensity which deterritorialises, deconstructs without reconstructing traditional

iconographic representations of woman as mother and/or virgin and their opposites, the

temptress and/or murderess." Although Anna restages herself as a noir-ish femme fatale, more

importantly she mixes and blurs iconographic representations and escapes the symbolic plight of

seductress; she is still a vulnerable femme fatale; her blonde wig disguises a scar and she wears a

white dress, pointing to tainted innocence. She often takes off her dark glasses; again

vampishness gives way to vulnerability.

As Balmain mentions, Anna is completely clear about what symbols she is avoiding; she

herself is not a seductress, but a blank canvas; however, she subjects her own canvas to self-

mutilation and lashes out at others. Anna is darkly both spectator and object, hybridized under

the structure of the image itself. Anna's position in the film, how she relates to art and how art

relates to her back, is playfully represented in Figure 14, French artist Orlan's digital work *Entre

Deux*, where the artist's face is blurred in and out of recognition together with Boticelli's *The

Birth of Venus; this extreme blurring of identity, dismantling the structure of the image is the actual position of the Stendhal syndrome: when undergoing her hallucination, something Anna so profoundly reads as 'real,' she attempts to become a creator of *something*, of some experience greater than reality itself, when in fact it becomes more of a forgery: the actual grounds of originality and experience are taken from you, and you come to realize that the subject is always performing and forg-ing a new identity; the observer and observed are in flux.[34] This is also the site of Anna's own torture: rather than Amy in the torture dungeon being filmed as the locus of torture, Anna's fear of the distance between herself and the artwork causes her to become a vertiginous canvas herself, ultimately leading to her demise.

Fig. 14: Orlan's *Entre Deux* (1997), echoing Anna's Stendhal syndrome reaction to Botticelli's "The Birth of Venus" in the film's opening sequence

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[34] On feminist performance-surgery artist Orlan's own role as both the observer and the observed, see Stuart Jeffries "Orlan's Art of Sex and Surgery" in *The Guardian* (1 July 2019), available online at https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2009/jul/01/orlan-performance-artist-carnal-art

Anna's flexible identity is thus tormented by the presence of violence and trauma: understanding her identity is mediated not through how the world sees her as stable and individual—a position she can never find—her own world is disrupted by the extreme presence of *something other* in its certainty, that being either extreme art or Alfredo's extreme violence. Expecting the violence to return in the pattern it always has, she 'becomes' Alfredo, not simply responding to the trauma provided and seeking revenge on the men who have afflicted her, but by representing the stain of violence as a stained canvas, succumbing to its perpetuity, its presence and letting it take over her identity. As Anna questions Marco, asking him why he drove to hand-deliver phone numbers to her that he could have just faxed, his excuse is that he wants "to see [her]." Her response is, simply, "so, what do you see?". Anna's position is like that of a more knowing Madeline/Judy in Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958): as Laura Mulvey famously wrote in her essay on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,' "the female image as a castration threat constantly endangers the unity of the diegesis and bursts through the world of illusion as an intrusive, static, one-dimensional fetish" (25-26). Anna is fully aware that her presence is something clearly far beyond the diegesis, that she is someone in full control of her image in the film but that the works of art that surround her and the violence that inflict trauma on her seek to control her image. Marco stands in as the male film viewer terrified of her claiming too much, of succumbing to the reality of the film: the irony is that she knows his desire to simply fashion her into another kind of image as a substitute for 'liberating' her from the image. This is a kind of afterhuman subject position that she is able to claim: clearly recognizing what the codes, symbols, and controlling gazes imposed onto you are and attempting to fashion, hybridize and morph them through your autonomy; essentially it is the ability to create your own illusion.

While *Stendhal*'s psychic re-unbecoming is within a particular here-and-now—its placement within the extreme film canon undermentioned, odd given its explicit location within dark postmodernity—the rearticulation of art and being is something easily extended into a traditional anti-nostalgic genre format, the science fiction film. Science fiction, a genre used to critique modern technological implementations through exaggeration and fantasy, is iconically explored in the oeuvre of Canadian body horror legend David Cronenberg, and his genuinely strange return to sci-fi horror *Crimes of the Future* does not shy away at contemporary critiques. Cronenberg's mantra—the body is reality—speaks to Baudrillard's emphasis on the unbecoming of the symbolic order, where he says in *The Ecstasy of Communication* that "we are in a system where there is no more soul, no more metaphor of the body—most of the fable of the unconscious itself has lost most of its resonance. No narrative can come to metaphorize our presence; no transcendence can play a role in our definition; our being is exhausting itself in molecular linkings and neuronic convulsions" (50-51). In Cronenberg's 2022 science-fiction body horror film *Crimes of the Future*, the body has undergone inexplicable and unwanted changes as a result of the future collapsing inwards on itself: the body no longer feels pain, and as a result the body itself has become the canvas of choice for the survivors of the future; as National Organ Registry bureaucrat Timlin (the delightfully nervy Kristen Stewart) points out, "surgery is the new sex". The film's fundamental crux is the sudden appearance (and death) of a child who has the apparent ability to consume and digest plastic, inexplicably developing new organs; his father had undergone surgery that allowed him to accomplish the same thing. The presence of unpredictable magic—essentially the anti-miracle child—upsets both the political order (fixated on maintaining *status quo*) and the artwork of neo-organ performance artist Saul Tenser (Viggo Mortensen) and his partner Caprice (Léa Seydoux), who exploit the absence of

pain to use experimental surgery as a form of seductive art-making. The boundaries between the individual, the body, and the artificial nature of the artwork have been abolished; upon the posthuman abolition of pain, the human has attempted to reach the 'next stage' of human evolution—however, the extreme symbolic shift that comes with such a catastrophic event has yet to be grasped fully by the characters, and is constantly under attempt to be squashed by the unseen political powers-that-be within the film. As Baudrillard continues,

> This having been established, there are no more individuals, but only potential mutants. From a biological, genetic and cybernetic point of view, we are all mutants. Now, for mutants there can no longer be any Last Judgement, or the resurrection of the body, for what body will one resurrect? It will have changed formula, chromosomes, it will have been programmed according to other motor and mental variables, it will no longer have any claim on its own image (51).

The mutant standard of the future has lost track of the stable image, especially where parallel evolution—if you could still call it evolution—occurs at both the physiological and symbolic levels. To adapt to the incoming collapse of the symbolic order involves a total rearticulation of the nexus between the body and the individual; Anna's plea asking what does Marco see of her in his own desire becomes that of the world itself, begging it to be released from the nostalgia of the body itself, once a subjectivized and instrumentalized force, now a floppy meat sack waiting once again for meaning to be bestowed upon it. The truth of the body and the truth of the artwork are dissolved—now the playful, ironic wink at the 'reality of the body' that Cronenberg likes to hype up—and the game of signifiers, performing their own transformation once again can commence. Timlin's erotic obsession with artist Saul—her deep desire to consummate some

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form of sexual encounter, upon realizing that Caprice's purpose in the performance is of a quasi-sexual nature—reaches a crisis when Saul informs her that he is no longer capable of having "the old kind of sex". Desire—a form of painting another's body with one's urges and symbolic understandings—is no longer possible in a world where even our bodies have an objectified nature to them; the world of fantasy has been totally dismantled. The truth of sex, of technology, of the body, and the future are all-too-true; mutant sex has little to do with sex's original, fantastical purpose. At the same time, Cronenberg's film—according to him—can also be read as an extreme or fantastical self-portrait of the passionate artist. As he states in a *Rolling Stone* interview, "I'm showing that an artist is exposing this innermost, deepest, most intimate part of himself and offering that up to an audience (...) And doing so is incredibly vulnerable to rejection, to anger, to misunderstanding. This is basically the archetype of what an artist—a serious, passionate artist—is." The role of the artist in *Crimes* is to undertake a kind of radical bodily sincerity, forgoing irony and evolution to attain some kind of higher ideal of 'truth,' a virtue that has become a kind of cudgel in a world determined now by distortions and blurrings of the body and of sex. Saul's inability to engage with the old kind of sex is his admittance that he can no longer fantasize about the body, as his own body is a nebulous canvas that he 'paints' with; no longer purely subject, Saul has fused the subject and object together in order to extract the fantasy of his body out of himself. The film's fascinating focus on spectacle and bourgeois performance arises from here: only-through the lens of a literal 'performance artist' (already an ironic position for an actor, as his body is mediated by a camera and not a spectatorial crowd presence) does the vaguely conceited attitude of the entire operation appear. We see an artist indebted to the terrifyingly afterhuman play of sincerity and irony, an artist that values truth over fiction, appearances and originality over transference and fusion. The viewer sees what the 'new

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sex' looks like: a world without pain, but also without pleasure. Suddenly, beauty can be seen so easily as destruction. The transhuman themes of extreme body modification (as seen in Figure 15) have become parodic, no longer about attaining a higher form of consciousness, but about continually dismantling the grounds of what art is built on, becoming a narcissistic self-concern rather than an explosion of ideas and feelings that are placed elsewhere. The film's satire is wrought through this: the limitations of the transhuman, posthuman project are laid bare, showing its paucity of real philosophy in phenomenology and epistemology: that by continually instrumentalizing the body and expecting it to be truly, ontologically altered by technology do we continually lose the aesthetic grounds that such concepts are built on, alienating ourselves from fantasy and irony in the name of a facetious, cynical 'progress.'

Fig. 15: Scarring and violence as the supplementation of art and identity in David Cronenberg's *Crimes of the Future* (2022); the primacy of the body satirically gives way to evisceration

3. 'Sometimes I Feel Like I Have No Friends:' *We're All Going to the World's Fair*'s Computer Subject Film

To conclude our look at the afterhuman nexus, we will look at one final film, a truly contemporary film, an examination of the finality of truth and tech-mediated social performance. As the symbolic order restructures itself, our psychic relationship to the technology that governs our lives necessarily adapts: with *Crimes*, this symbolic adaptation is made literal. A film like *Megan Is Missing* recognized the timeliness of technology from its own era: computers and websites were seen as documenters, but also portals of negativity, corrupters. The evil that presided within the computer there were entirely primordial human issues, just manifested under the guise of a new medium. *Megan*'s afterhumanity was, as mentioned, in its anti-cinematic qualities, questioning a space where a computer webcam and DSLR photography can be 'cinema.' Jane Schoenbrun's breakout computer horror flick *We're All Going to the World's Fair* almost feels like a corrective against *Megan*'s more reactionary and shallow understanding of Internet youth culture in the contemporary era. In *Megan*, the computer screen imposes itself onto humanity, hiding the totally anonymous evil and materializing the banality and normality of Megan and Amy. In *World's Fair*, things are far from Manichean. The film's diegetic 'location' is perpetually vague, swapping between webcam footage, YouTube videos, computer screen imagery, and regular, non-diegetically localized camera operation with ease. The plot runs simply: a young teenaged girl (androgynous and forlorn, a far cry from *Megan*'s hyper-aestheticized, sexualized teens) who goes by Casey (newcomer Anna Cobb) takes the online 'World's Fair' challenge, whereby she recites the titular mantra, smears blood on her computer screen, and watches an (unseen) video filled with flashing lights. After taking this challenge, Casey records herself and her 'changes,' expecting this challenge (a kind of initiation into a haunted horror MMORPG game) to impact her psyche and body in unexpected ways; we see

Casey watching many video clips posted by others who have taken the challenge. Casey eventually is contacted by JLB, an anonymous individual who seems to want to take care of her and stay in contact with her; he is also deeply interested in the World's Fair challenge. JLB is revealed to the viewer to be a middle-aged man who lives in a large mansion elsewhere in the United States; we can see glimmers of his family existence in the background, but this is never made clear.

Casey's video updates become viscerally upsetting; footage of her sleeping shows her contorting her mouth in a horrible smile; she posts a video of her walking through a local cemetery referring to it as a 'tour of her high school'; she makes vague clips referring to 'dumbass waterfalls' with her muttering about suicidal ideations and an urge to disappear; and she covers herself in a glow-in-the-dark paint to terrorize the camera. JLB, deeply stressed by these updates and concerned Casey could hurt herself or others, suggests to her over Skype that officials should be called in to seriously look at these matters. This suggestion causes Casey to start being upfront about her distaste for JLB, chastising him for insinuating that she was ever in any real danger, and arguing that this whole thing was always a joke, or a kind of farce, playing along with the online expectation for views. She refers to JLB as a pedophile, and in his final plea for her to continue contact with him, she tells him that Casey isn't even her name.

Casey severs her contact with JLB; the film's epilogue again showcases digital storytelling—JLB talking to his webcam, relaying a story wherein he and Casey met later on in Manhattan, shared each other's 'real names,' and reconciled; however, there is no proof given of this event ever transpiring.

While *World's Fair* steps back from some of the visceral horrors of *extreme film* and also does not function under conventional Blumhouse-esque conventions of modern horror;

stylistically it is far closer to what *Corpus Callosum* wrought from the 'digital minimal'

extreme; extremely long takes, crushingly slow pacing, minimal dialogue, and an incredibly

ambiguous diegesis place this in the corners of 'slow cinema', but with far more YouTube videos

woven into the collage than say, an Apichatpong Weerasethakul film. The extreme *mental-*

psychic level of this slowness appears in its most sad form with JLB's final monologue: perhaps

the clearest example of the digital blur in pure *storytelling/narrative form*, JLB's likely-

constructed narrative about him and Casey apologizing and becoming friends again depicts this

hollowed-out core in what used to be a firm ideological institution: truth. The 'truth' of the film

is something separate from what JLB *wants* from Casey, and the fact that they never met in

person—a true COVID film, although the virus is never mentioned—makes his story all the

more disturbing. JLB is able to 'live' through whatever experience he determines is true, because

whatever is said through the medium of technology must be 'true' in some kind of way: a true

reality or a true fantasy? JLB's behaviour is both para- and anti-social towards Casey as he

fashions her into a desired fantasy-image. He appears to be the more damaging and dishonest of

the two. Both him and Casey are supremely lonely; they are the only meaningful cast members

of the film, and appear alienated from their families and their surroundings (rural upstate New

York for Casey, a Long Island suburb for JLB). Both only exist 'chronically online': completely

subsuming their daily lives to the flickering rhythms and images of the machine. As Baudrillard

mentions, "the body as a stage, the landscape as a stage, and time as a stage are slowly

disappearing. The same holds true for the public space: the theatre of the social and of politics

are progressively being reduced to a shapeless, multi-headed body" (19). The film's haunting

opening credits shows the debris and remnants of neoliberal capital: images of dead strip malls

and the ubiquitous empty streets of rural America glide across the screen, personless and in

midwinter. Without the mythologies of the present—whether it be of a nostalgic past, of family, of work, of their geographical locations—both Casey and JLB are incapable of seeing beyond the truth of the online image. However, unlike *Megan*, which suggests the technological interface imposes its evil from elsewhere, Casey's decision to take agency over her online articulation and image-creation suggests a much more Cronenbergian understanding of what technology actually does to the image. Casey is constantly mentioning that her desire to take the World's Fair challenge is double-sided: she has an urge to go *beyond* the image and also *enter* into it, wanting her life to be like the horror movies she enjoys so much. She also mentions a desire for *transformation*: to become someone or something new, but to also to escape, go beyond the bounds of easy image-creation. In our day and age, transformation can be anything: a different gender, a different comportment, a different image.[35]

Fig. 16: Where does the truth in horror really lie? Who can we trust on either side of the screen?
Jane Schoenbrun's breakout computer horror film *We're All Going to the World's Fair* (2021)

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[35] It is worth mentioning that Jane Schoenbrun is a non-binary, transgender filmmaker—the film has already developed a cult audience in online trans communities.

This can decry a return to the original image; this is the position of those that despise both the post- and the afterhuman. JLB is not that individual: JLB understands the power of games, of images, but he got swept up into the fantasy that he created for Casey. While he trusted her, he did not realize his mental impositions and expectations until it was far too late, by which time he had completely lost Casey's trust, and she took agency once again over her own image: it doesn't matter if Casey is her real name or if it isn't, but it's not up to JLB to even have access to determining the truth of such a thing. As Baudrillard continues,

> *Images have become our true sex object*, the object of our desire. The obscenity of our culture resides in the confusion of desire and its equivalent materialized in the image; not only for sexual desire, but in the desire for knowledge and its equivalent materialized in "information," the desire for fantasy and its equivalents materialized in the Disneylands of the world, [...] the desire for play and its equivalent programmed into private telematics (35).

What entices JLB the most about Casey—and this goes for the vast majority of our mediation with content online—is the thirst for a kind of facetious knowledge, of being creeped out, of acknowledging the horror that coexists with our natural social corpus. The spectacle of basic reality has shorted out, and so has the spectacle within our most potent social images; the only thing left to do is indulge in either extreme images or in attempting to fashion another individual—possibly against their will—to conform to a desired image. While the afterhuman films we looked at in prior chapters often accepted violence as the primary gap within the matrices of images, *World's Fair* asks for something better, and demands a kind of reclamation hard to find in films so viscerally different from the usual cultural fare of arthouse or extreme film. Even labeling it just a horror film seems disrespectful. Perhaps transformation is less

transcendence and more grounding; placing yourself within the matrix and demanding your autonomy still be recognized within the dismantling of the symbolic order, rejecting those who reject the social just as easily. The film's signature image is Casey's disappearance into the computer: the sight of her face being illuminated with the World's Fair challenge video, reprised at the film's end before JLB's story (Fig. 17). This image shows the current state of the glow of cyber-capital: no more a 'third place' outside the home, the destructive effects of the crisis age have become imprinted into us: Casey's image brings to mind the aesthetics of Twitch streaming and TikTok videos: permanently shrouded under the locus of the screen's glow, without the easy understanding of parsing the intensity of the information provided and what to do with those people who wish to fashion you into a new kind of image.
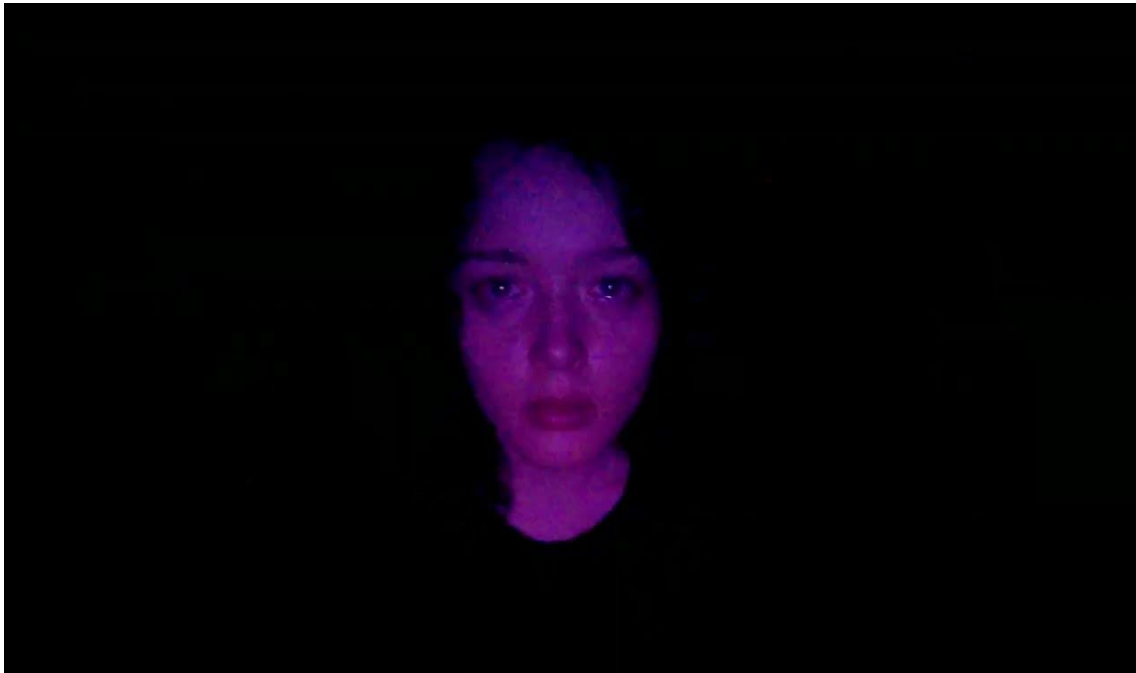

Fig. 17: Casey (Anna Cobb) blurred and shrouded by digital darkness in Jane Schoenbrun's *We're All Going to the World's Fair* (2021)

Similarly, in an equally bizarre (and very trans) film of the 2020s, Julie Ducournau's *Titane* (2021) shows the transformation required by a person through the act of unconditional love, but also foregrounds the simultaneous tension of playing into somebody else's fantasy as a way of overcoming a desire for extreme violence. *Titane* and *World's Fair*, both deeply indebted to Cronenberg's work, still take his philosophy a step further, seeing technology and identity reclamation as acts of the most extreme positivity, pushing beyond the narcissistic, social-media fuelled crisis of identity in order to demand a clearer and more powerful, radical view of both freedom and boundaries in truth and illusion. Baudrillard's assessment that the world is filled with fake illusions, and that we need a real illusion so powerful we can break through the matrix itself is important, but perhaps not the entire answer: we can become the image ourselves in a way that doesn't annihilate that which makes us human, because we never were human to begin with. We were always so much more than that.

4. **After-afterword**

Naturally, a thesis on a topic like this will necessarily be somewhat *gloom and doom*. I implore that this not be the actual takeaway from any of this: the real purpose was to shine a light on the cracks, the gaps, the humour, and sadness easily found in these digital extreme artworks. To shine a light, to make clear, is at its core a positive and joyous moment, a recognition of the power that these artworks hold, allowing to disrupt, but also illuminate the world in a beautiful way. All these films discussed are 'beautiful' in some capacity, as long as they can shed some light on the increasingly grim world itself; meaningful avant-garde and extreme art still has that possibility to puncture through the matrix. Cronenberg once famously stated that he didn't consider himself fatalistic; instead he argued for new ethics of the extreme, one that playfully

and critically uses humour and emotional intensities, for "the more inventive and the more *extreme* we are, the better off we are."[36] Transgression may be dead, but humour will never die, and the potency of extremity and the avant-garde can only ever morph and adapt to the current "crisis" situation, recognizing the psychic locations of violence, technology, the nature of the medium, and the innate desires of the moment all at once. Meaningful extreme art can still be made today; despite the nostalgic nature of some of these films discussed, there is a moving forward in looking back, in extracting that emotion and allowing its contradictions to course through our veins.

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[36] See David Schwartz, *David Cronenberg: Interviews*, 22.

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