

Turning the gaze towards the monstrous: Alternative visions of
humanity in the works of Virginie Despentes, Julia Ducournau and
Paul B. Preciado

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STATEMENTS

Statement of originality

This is to certify that, to the best of my knowledge, the content of this thesis is my own work. This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or other purposes. I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all the assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources have been acknowledged.

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Statement on the use of AI

No content generated by AI technologies has been used in this thesis.

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the work of three contemporary Francophone artists: Virginie Despentes, Julia Ducournau, and Paul B. Preciado. It uses the monster of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as a model to analyse the monsters in the texts and films of these three artists. It argues for an all-encompassing and universal monstrosity, which transcends binary oppositions and speaks to the whole of humanity.

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INTRODUCTION

Monsters have recently made a remarkable return to popular culture, from Guillermo del Toro's recent film adaptation of *Frankenstein* (2025) to Robert Eggers' *Nosferatu* (2024). The recent surge in interest in the Gothic horror canon seems fitting for our current global social and political climate. Gothic horror, as a genre defined by the central figure of the monster that originated in Britain in the late 18th century, originally served as a powerful expression of British society as it entered the age of modernity. At the heart of Mary Shelley's 1818 novel *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*, is a tale of hubris, in which the scientific innovation of the young and ambitious Dr Frankenstein ultimately leads to his downfall. Del Toro's cinematic reanimation of Frankenstein and of its creature feels especially timely in light of recent technological advances, from the generalisation of AI technologies to the promise of live-in humanoid robots. Like Frankenstein's creature, AI represents Man's creation of a human-like entity that has many questioning whether, in the name of progress, we humans have created the very thing that could render us obsolete.

In Shelley's novel, Dr Frankenstein's feverish pursuit speaks to the act of creation: as an author, and like the young scientist she imagined, Shelley self-consciously compared her own writing and the making of the novel to Frankenstein's monster, calling her text a 'hideous progeny' in the 1831 introduction to *Frankenstein*. Dr Frankenstein's obsession to create human life reflects Shelley's own intense preoccupation with the human condition and the origins of mankind. In *Frankenstein*, the unnamed creature reads Milton's *Paradise Lost*, a volume of Plutarch's *Noble Lives of the Greeks and Romans*, and Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*; all of which would have been essential reading for Shelley's own vision of humanist education. British critic Christopher Frayling highlights how the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau has influenced Shelley's novel, emphasising the latter's intertextual nature. In his book *Frankenstein: the first 200 years* (2017), Frayling notes how:

Mary was very familiar with Rousseau's *Émile*, his thought experiment on education originally published in 1762[...] Mary had re-read *Émile* in 1816.[...] Victor Frankenstein is himself a Citizen of Geneva— as Jean-Jacques Rousseau proudly announced himself to be on his title-pages: '*Citoyen de Genève*'—from birth a Genevese'.¹

As well as being influenced by these distant literary figures, Shelley was also inspired by the creative pursuits of her peers. The original idea for her novel arose from a waking dream she

¹ Christopher Frayling, *Frankenstein: the first 200 years* (Reel Art Press Limited, 2017), 34.

had a few days after a night sharing ghost stories with the Romantic poet Lord Byron and Mary's then-husband, Percy Shelley.² Shelley was the daughter of two eminent intellectuals: feminist writer Mary Wollstonecraft and political philosopher William Godwin. Her mother died eight days after giving birth to Shelley, who grew up motherless. The creature's search for a family in *Frankenstein* reflects Mary's own anxieties about parentage and motherhood, as Frayling observes these anxieties were intensified by the grief and emotional turmoil brought on by Shelley's own reproductive trauma, after she lost her firstborn child in 1815.³

Reading the author's diaries, American scholar Ellen Moers draws a parallel between Shelley's process of creation and that of her protagonist, writing:

Frankenstein collects bones and other human parts [...] and through long months of feverish and guilty activity sticks them together [...] in what he calls "my workshop of filthy creation." It is in her journal and letters that Mary Shelley reveals the workshop of her own creation, where she pieced together the materials for a new species of romantic mythology.⁴

The materials of Shelley's 'filthy workshop of creation' find themselves within the pages of the novel itself. Shelley's monster—both the creature she imagined and the novel she authored—was fashioned from the diverse materials of her workshop: the texts that she read as a child and young adult, intellectual and artistic influences, and her anxieties about familial and romantic ties. Shelley's monstrous creations provide a model for this thesis to examine in depth the works of three contemporary Francophone artists: Julia Ducournau (18 November 1983), Virginie Despentes (13 June 1969), and Paul B. Preciado (11 September 1970). Like Shelley, these artists blend fiction, philosophy, and visual spectacle to produce monstrous hybrids; texts and films that speak to the universal human condition. What these artists have in common is that they are at once household names in France and known globally. Despentes' novels have been translated into multiple languages, including Serbian, Lithuanian, and Greek. Ducournau's films have also been distributed worldwide; her latest feature, *Alpha*, was screened during the Miskolc film festival in Hungary. Preciado has written several editorial pieces for the international contemporary art magazine *Artforum*, and his film *Orlando: ma*

² Maurice Hindle, "Introduction," in *Frankenstein: Or the Modern Prometheus* (Penguin Books, 1992), xvi.

³ As Frayling notes: 'the personal themes that run through the text are clearly key to fully understanding it: among them, Mary Godwin's relationship—emotional and intellectual—with her own parents and their writings; her anxieties as a parent having lost her first baby, a daughter, in February 1815; her reservations about some of Percy Shelley's and Lord Byron's overreaching; her distress at being shunned by her beloved father; her personal development as a self-possessed thinker with strong views of her own; the great expectations placed upon her as the daughter of two eminent intellectuals.' Frayling, *Frankenstein*, 30.

⁴ Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (Doubleday & Company, 1976), 95.

biographie politique won the Teddy Award for best documentary at the Berlin International Film Festival in 2023. In addition, they have had a positive critical reception in the Francophone and Anglophone world, where their works are discussed in literary, film and cinema studies and philosophy. More specifically, in the French context, they are voices that are regularly invited to speak on popular platforms such as national radio, podcasts, magazines and television. Throughout her career, Desportes has been a guest of several French TV talk shows, from Thierry Ardisson's *Tout le monde en parle* to Yann Barthès' *Le petit journal*. Julia Ducournau has been featured as the cover girl for *Madame Figaro*, and more recently interviewed alongside Tahar Rahim in a double-page spread in *Paris Match* for the release of *Alpha*. Preciado's work and persona have been the subject of numerous radio programmes on France's public stations *France Inter* and *France Culture*. They share a hybridity in their work. Ducournau is a screenwriter and director and was trained at the *Fémis*, a theoretically inclined film and cinema school in Paris. Desportes has directed films as well as written novels, plays and essays, and Preciado is a filmmaker, essayist, curator and visual artist. All three of these artists are of the same generation; Ducournau is currently in her early forties, and Desportes and Preciado are in their fifties. Their work engages directly with the figure of the monster, is centred on female bodies, but is also concerned with an understanding of humanity more generally.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar 'Horror's Twin: Mary Shelley's Monstrous Eve' (2000) proposes a reading of *Frankenstein* that moves beyond a conventional focus on the antagonistic relationship between the mad scientist and his creation, highlighting the more complex interconnectivity of narrative trajectories in the novel. Crucially, they acknowledge Shelley's original move to shift the point of view from creator to created through the introduction of the monster's monologue. This section is, as they point out, a 'miniature *Bildungsroman*'⁵: a self-authored story of the monster's education and his transition from ignorance to understanding, from innocence to experience. The novel's dual perspective creates a specific space for the monster's tale and reframes the monster, usually the hero's adversary, as a central protagonist. In their respective bodies of work, Ducournau, Desportes and Preciado position the monster as simultaneously object and subject of the narrational gaze, directing the gaze of readers and spectators towards the monster and enabling them to look through its eyes. Gubar and Gilbert also emphasise how the monster's monologue functions as

⁵ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, "Horror's Twin: Mary Shelley's Monstrous Eve," in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, eds. Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert (Yale University Press, 2000), 238.

‘a philosophical meditation on what it means to be born without a “soul” or a history, as well as an exploration of what it feels like to be a “filthy mass that moves and talks”, a thing, an other, a creature of the second sex.’⁶ Gilbert and Gubar’s reading suggests that the monster speaks from the place of the outsider: from someone who knows what it is like to be non-human. Yet paradoxically, the tale told by the monster is a deeply human one; he experiences loss and abandonment, desperation and isolation, he acquires language and learns to speak, longs for companionship and learns how to relate to and delay one’s primal drives. Shelley positions the ‘monster’ as the site of philosophical enquiry, providing a model for contemporary uses of the ‘monster’ to think through the human condition in the films and texts of Ducournau, Despentes and Preciado, who similarly use their works as experimental terrains to write, visualise and theorise visions of humanity in the present.

The recentering of the monster in the work of these three Francophone artists aligns with a global trend that revitalises familiar monstrous figures of the Western literary and artistic canon to think through what it means to be human in the 21st century. Del Toro’s reimagining of Shelley’s creature evolves beyond the stereotypically ghoulish figure immortalised in James Whale’s 1931 film adaptation, which has since widely circulated in popular culture. The monster in Del Toro’s film is a visible, realistic patchwork of flesh and bone. Towering and athletic in stature, his face and body are covered by scars left behind from the piecing and sewing together of disparate anatomical fragments. Following a similar narrational structure to Shelley’s novel, Del Toro’s film is split between the perspectives of Dr Frankenstein and the monster. The story it tells aligns with Shelley’s original text. The theme of parental abandonment, central to Del Toro’s film, equally mirrors the novel; coming to the fore in the final scene in which the creature confronts his dying creator. As he tells his creator about his eternal suffering, Frankenstein asks for forgiveness and refers to the creature as his ‘son’. Upon Frankenstein’s final breath, the creature places his hand on his creator’s chest and tells him: ‘perhaps now we can both be human’.⁷ Del Toro’s *Frankenstein* is one of the examples used by writer Manvir Singh in his recent article ‘How monsters went from menacing to misunderstood’ for *The New Yorker*. Singh writes about the transformation of the monster in contemporary media representations, from a traditionally horrifying and menacing creature to one that has been humanised. Singh refers to this recent trend as ‘the sympathetic turn’. He writes:

⁶ Gilbert and Gubar, “Horror’s Twin,” 235.

⁷ Guillermo del Toro, director, *Frankenstein* (Netflix, 2025), 02: 18:35.

The misunderstood monster, once an occasional changeup, is now the default. [...] Even Frankenstein's creature—most recently reanimated in del Toro's "Frankenstein"—has never been so soulful, so desperate to be understood. [...] Our appetite for relatable monsters—call it the sympathetic turn—is a profound reorientation, if you take the long view. For most of human history, monsters have been embodiments of aberration, breaches in the boundary between the human and everything else.⁸

The sympathetic turn that Singh identifies in his article has a precedent in the rise of feminist cinema and the cinematic re-emergence of the Monstrous-Feminine, defined by film scholar Barbara Creed in her recent book, *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine: Feminist New Wave Cinema* (2022). According to Creed, 'feminist New Wave cinema'⁹ uses what she defines as 'the feminist gaze [which] invokes all the senses. It is compassionate and empathetic; it invites the spectator to situate herself in the place of the protagonist on the screen, to experience what the other is experiencing through affect.'¹⁰ The monstrous-feminine as a concept was originally introduced by Creed in her 1986 essay 'Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection.' In this earlier essay, Creed uses the concept of the abject as defined by Julia Kristeva in *Pouvoirs de l'horreur: Essai sur l'abjection* (1980) as 'ce qui perturbe une identité, un système, un ordre. Ce qui ne respecte pas les limites, les places, les règles. L'entre-deux, l'ambigu, le mixte'¹¹ to define the monstrous-feminine as a figure that symbolises patriarchal fears surrounding female sexuality and its reproductive bodily functions. According to Creed, encounters with the monstrous-feminine in horror films provoke an affective response in male spectators, specifically because the figure invokes castration anxiety by representing a threat to the symbolic integrity of the male subject:

The modern horror film's obsession with blood, particularly the bleeding body of woman, where her body is transformed into a "gaping wound", suggests that castration anxiety is a central concern of the horror film – particularly the slasher sub-genre. Woman's body is slashed and mutilated, not only to signify her own castrated state, but also the possibility of castration for the male.¹²

⁸ Manvir Singh, "How Monsters Went from Menacing to Misunderstood," *The New Yorker*, October 27, 2025, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/11/03/how-monsters-went-from-menacing-to-misunderstood>.

⁹ Barbara Creed, *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine: Feminist New Wave Cinema*. (Routledge, 2022), 2.

¹⁰ Creed, *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine*, 17.

¹¹ Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur: Essai sur l'abjection* (Éditions du Seuil, 1980), 12.

¹² Barbara Creed, "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection," *Screen* 27, no.1 (1986): 52, <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/27.1.44>.

In her most recent study, Creed shifts in focus, from the power of the monstrous feminine to petrify the male viewing subject to her potential to empower and inspire the female viewing subject. Indeed, Creed explains that the monstrous-feminine of feminist New Wave cinema ‘is represented as a liberating and transformative figure’¹³ and ‘is a woman—an empowering, inspirational figure who is engaged in a life-and-death struggle with the violence of the patriarchal symbolic order.’¹⁴

Creed identifies French filmmaker Julia Ducournau as a key proponent of the contemporary and feminist reclamation of the monstrous-feminine. In her 2022 study, Creed uses Ducournau’s voice as a theoretical tool to reconceptualise the monstrous-feminine, identifying her as the defining figure of ‘New Wave Feminist cinema’. Creed notably quotes directly from Ducournau’s own words regarding the female protagonists in her two best-known films, *Grave* (2016)¹⁵ and *Titane* (2021):

The idea was to create a new humanity that is strong because it is monstrous and not the other way around. Monstrosity, for me, is always positive. It’s about debunking all the normative ways of society and social life. That was the case with “Raw” as well. Her monstrosity had her emancipated. (*Ducournau, 2021*)¹⁶

In *Grave*, Justine, the film’s young protagonist, joins her older sister Alex at veterinary school. After eating meat for the first time during a hazing ritual, Justine quickly develops a hunger for raw flesh and blood – preferably human. Creed classifies the female cannibal as one possible representation of the ‘monstrous feminine’ in film¹⁷. In her chapter ‘Female Cannibalism and Eating the Other: *Raw*, *Trouble Every Day*, and *In My Skin*’, Creed turns her attention to three films directed by French women filmmakers: Claire Denis’ *Trouble Every Day* (2001), Marina de Van’s *Dans ma peau* (2002) and Ducournau’s *Grave* (2016). All three films focus on female cannibal heroines, who are, according to Creed, ‘excessively monstrous because she is the antithesis of what woman stereotypically signifies—qualities such as birth, new life, and nurturing.’¹⁸ In these films, Creed also explains: ‘cannibalism represents the utmost in abjection in that it collapses borders, specifically between civilised and uncivilised, culture and

¹³ Creed, *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine*, 4.

¹⁴ Creed, *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine*, 18.

¹⁵ *Grave* is the French title and *Raw* is the English title. Throughout this thesis I will refer to the film by the French title. When using citations that refer to the film by its English title, the title will remain in English.

¹⁶ Creed, *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine*, 4-5.

¹⁷ She writes, ‘red-gowned handmaid, mother-magician, chador-wearing vampire, elderly avenging astrologer, lone nomad, fierce eco-activist, telekinetic lesbian, and cannibalistic queer mermaid—these are some of the disparate faces of the monstrous-feminine.’ Creed, *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine*, 5.

¹⁸ Creed, *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine*, 128.

nature, human and non-human.¹⁹ According to Creed, therefore, the female cannibal, rather than refusing abjection, undermines the very principles that relegated her to the realm of the abject in the first place.²⁰ This strategic positioning suggests that filmmakers such as Ducournau, Denis and de Van reclaim the ‘monstrous feminine’ from its traditional role in horror films, repurposing its abjection to advance a new feminist cinema. This involves rewriting the anxiety originally provoked by feminine monstrosity into narratives of female empowerment; narratives that stage and enact woman’s revolt against, and triumph over, patriarchy.

According to Creed, her definition of the ‘feminist gaze’²¹ as cited above, is central to this repurposing. This ‘feminist gaze’ is, rather than detached and observational, shaped by the filmmaker’s desire to establish an emotional and sensory connection between viewers and the film’s monstrous protagonist. This invitation to engage in an affective identification through the ‘feminist gaze’ has strong gendered implications: it suggests that the feminist spectator—who Creed differentiates from the male spectator²²—empathises and understands the monstrous-feminine through a shared experience: ‘the female protagonist embarks on a journey to confront her ‘other’ and in so doing she brushes up against abjection[...].’²³ It is through the mediation of the gaze that this identification occurs. She continues, ‘this gaze draws an intimate connection between the spectator’s act of looking and the internalisation of what they are seeing and feeling in their bodily responses.’²⁴ This thesis proposes an alternative view of the monstrous figures that traverse the texts and films of Ducournau and the two other 21st-century feminist voices included in its corpus: it argues instead for a conception of an all-encompassing and universal monstrosity, which transcends binary oppositions and speaks to the whole of humanity. Creed’s reading of the ‘monstrous feminine’ notably overlooks the specific Frenchness of Ducournau’s representation of the monster in film. By repatriating her monsters to their cultural homeland, this thesis re-evaluates the figure within a specific French and Francophone context, marked by long-lasting universalist ideals that have notably

¹⁹ Creed, *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine*, 132.

²⁰ She writes, ‘the female protagonists [of feminist New Wave films] challenge patriarchal definitions of what constitutes the proper female role designed to keep women impotent and marginalised.’ Creed, *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine*, 2.

²¹ Creed, *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine*, 4-5

²² In her introduction on pages 17 and 18, Creed clearly opposes the feminist and male spectators: ‘to the male spectator [the female protagonist] might be a monstrous figure[...] but to the feminist spectator she is a woman—an empowering, inspirational figure who is engaged in a life-and-death struggle with the violence of the patriarchal symbolic order.’ Creed, *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine*, 17-18.

²³ Creed, *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine*, 13.

²⁴ Creed, *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine*, 17.

informed French feminist thought. In the concluding pages of her canonical *Le deuxième sexe*, Simone de Beauvoir presents us with her vision of the humanity of tomorrow ('l'humanité de demain')²⁵, imagining a world in which liberty triumphs over oppression. She writes: 'c'est au sein du monde donné qu'il appartient à l'homme de faire triompher le règne de la liberté ; pour remporter cette suprême victoire, il est entre autres nécessaire que par-delà leurs différenciations naturelles hommes et femmes affirment sans équivoque leur fraternité'.²⁶ In her essay, *King Kong théorie*, written in 2006, Virginie Despentes harks back to the universalist hopes expressed by de Beauvoir: 'le féminisme est une aventure collective, pour les femmes, pour les hommes, et pour les autres',²⁷ articulating a contemporary version of a universalist feminism that envisions liberation as a collective effort: one that transcends gendered divisions and categorisations, embracing humanity as a whole.

The influence of de Beauvoir is present not only in their shared project of a universalising vision of humanity but also in the way the works of Ducournau, Despentes and Preciado confront and explore the abject realities of all human bodies. While Barbara Creed puts forward a 'feminist gaze' that looks upon abjection with empathy and compassion, Ducournau, Despentes and Preciado favour an observational, emotionally detached, and often unceremonious view of the body, which is a central concern in their works. This is manifest in their focus on bodily fluids and human flesh as they portray the materiality of the body in ways that coolly expose parts and functions usually perceived as most revolting or disgusting. This again echoes de Beauvoir's own writing, where she portrays bodily functions in abject terms. Menstruation, for instance, is an event 'toujours [...] répugnant et humiliant' and menstrual blood, as seen for the first time by a young girl, is akin to 'des taches suspectes, [la fillette] se croit victime d'une diarrhée, d'une hémorragie mortelle, d'une maladie honteuse'.²⁸ In the works of Ducournau, Despentes and Preciado, blood is a recurring sight, yet it does not produce horror or shame but rather serves as a universal equaliser: all bodies, their films and texts seem to say, regardless of sex and gender, are abject and grotesque. This is how Preciado defines bodies in his 2008 essay *Testo-Junkie: Sexe, drogue et biopolitique* as 'des orifices pénétrables et des extrémités pénétrantes'.²⁹ Showing bodies as penetrable orifices and penetrating extremities introduces the monster as Preciado defines it in his essay 2020 *Je suis un monstre*

²⁵ De Beauvoir, Simone. *Le deuxième sexe II* (Gallimard, 1949), 651.

²⁶ De Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe II*, 652.

²⁷ Virginie Despentes, *King Kong théorie* (Grasset, 2006), 145.

²⁸ De Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe II*, 67.

²⁹ Paul B. Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sexe, drogue et biopolitique* (Grasset, 2008), 265.

qui vous parle ‘le monstre est celui qui vit en transition. Celui dont le visage, le corps et les pratiques ne peuvent encore être considérés comme vrais dans un régime de savoir et de pouvoir déterminés.’³⁰

Ducournau, Despentès and Preciado continue to write, make films, and, in the case of Despentès, perform on stage; and they have done so in the course of this thesis project.³¹ Since the commencement of my research, Ducournau released her latest film, *Alpha*, in August 2025; Despentès published her novel *Cher Connard* in August 2022, and Preciado his latest book, *Dysphoria Mundi : Le son d’un monde qui s’écroule*, in November 2022. While some of these new works will be discussed, this thesis actually focuses on their earlier oeuvre, which all have an established reception, both in the popular and the critical sense. Three of Ducournau’s films were presented at the Cannes Film Festival to an international audience: her short film *Junior* (2011), and two of her feature-length films, *Grave* (2016) and *Titane* (2016), with *Titane* receiving the Palme d’Or at Cannes in 2021, and *Grave* winning several awards at international film festivals, including the FIPRESCI Prize at Cannes in 2016. Her short film *Junior* has so far received little scholarly attention, and its close study in this project allows for a closer investigation of Ducournau’s early style. A similar logic informs the selection of Virginie Despentès’ works for this study. Her early creative endeavours, specifically the short story collection *Mordre au travers* (1999), the novel *Baise-moi* (1993), and its subsequent film adaptation co-directed with Coralie Trinh Thi (2000), are examined as prime case studies of an experimental ‘literary butchery’ at play in the beginning of her literary oeuvre. Using Shelley’s metaphor of Dr Frankenstein’s ‘filthy workshop of creation’, these works can be seen as making up the workbench on which Despentès lays bare the aesthetic and philosophical parts of her monstrous text. *Apocalypse bébé* (2010) and the *Vernon Subutex* trilogy (2015–2017) help demonstrate Despentès’ punk approach to literature and how her oeuvre can be seen as a shared creative and intellectual project with Paul B. Preciado. Their collaboration is explored in the final chapter of this thesis, where Preciado’s French-language texts *Testo-Junkie: Sexe, drogue et biopolitique* (2008), *Je suis un monstre qui vous parle* (2020), and his film *Orlando, ma biographie politique* (2023) are studied in order to examine Preciado’s blending of biographical and fictional writing. In these texts and films, the gap between life and art, between creator and creature, is dissolved as the monster emerges both as body and text.

³⁰ Paul B. Preciado, *Je suis un monstre qui vous parle* (Grasset 2020), 49.

³¹ Despentès has in recent years turned her creative talents to the stage. Reading a selection of Pasolini’s poetry with friend and collaborator Béatrice Dalle at the Maison de la poésie in Paris in 2017. In addition, she has written and directed two plays; *Woke* since 2024, and *Romancero Queer* since 2025.

Jean Hall, in her article ‘*Frankenstein: The Horrifying Otherness of Family*’(1990), highlights the tension that arises when, in Shelley’s original novel, its human characters are faced with the monster. Hall writes:

something in the monster seems to bring out the monstrousness of humanity; otherwise loving and benevolent, when people are touched by the creature they are invaded by malignity. In short, the monster affects other people in the same way he affects Frankenstein: he is a strange touchstone, an alien presence that invades people and perverts their identity. It is not surprising, then, that no one wants a relationship with him. Somehow, he embodies the mysterious force that disintegrates rather than builds the human family – and so he must be resolutely outcast.³²

Hall identifies the way in which the monster operates as a confrontational mirror of the distinction between the human and its monstrous other. The monster’s ‘alien’ presence not only disturbs ideas of self but also ‘disintegrates rather than builds the human family’, as the basic structure that upholds our idea of humanity. This reading resonates strongly with the family and other crucial human relations at play in the works of Ducournau, Desportes, and Preciado. Across their respective oeuvres, monsters destabilise distinctions between human and non-human, self and other, and undo the foundations that define traditional social and familial structures. Ducournau, Desportes, and Preciado rely on monstrosity to challenge and redefine human relationships, from the familial and social to the individual.

This thesis is divided into three chapters. Each chapter is a case study that focuses on one of the three French and Francophone artists and their respective bodies of work. Each chapter begins by placing the artist’s voice in relation to contemporary feminist social and political discourses and establishing their place within the contemporary French artistic and cultural landscape. In Chapter 1 **Julia Ducournau’s monstrous families** this thesis begins with a focus on Julia Ducournau’s cinema. Discussing how Ducournau's films have been defined by critics and scholars as belonging to a movement of feminist cinema, which has developed both globally and in France, this chapter proposes to disentangle the deeply personal aspect of Ducournau’s filmmaking from the wider social and political concerns of contemporary mainstream feminist discourses. This chapter foregrounds the artist’s own voice, using Ducournau’s published words as a foundation for a new critical framework that re-evaluates the central theme of monstrosity in her body of work. As discussed in Chapter 1,

³² Jane Hall, “‘Frankenstein’: The Horrifying Otherness of Family,” *Essays in Literature* (Macomb, Ill) 17, no. 2 (1990): 182.

Ducournau reveals that the inspiration for *Titane* came to her as a dream, evoking Mary Shelley's introduction to *Frankenstein*, where Shelley similarly confesses that the central creative vision of her work — the figure of Dr Frankenstein's creature — also comes from a waking dream. For Ducournau, creative impulse is intimately linked to images, narratives and experiences that haunt her own imaginary. I argue that the intimate nature of her cinema, rather than a political intervention, actually functions as an experimental space where Ducournau questions what it means to be human. In Ducournau's cinema, the female body is at the heart of this experimentation through filmmaking. Section 1 'Trivializing bodies' of the chapter demonstrates how Ducournau trivializes the female body in two of her films, *Grave* (2016) and *Titane* (2021), stripping it of its symbolic weight and breaking codes of erotic representation by showing the female body as primarily trivial and material. Section 2 'From a female gaze to a universal gaze' of the chapter explores how Ducournau liberates the female body from representational constraints through a series of metamorphoses that transform it into something monstrous, as seen in her short film *Junior* (2011) and later in *Grave* and *Titane*. Section 3 of this chapter, 'Renewing family ties' explores Ducournau's reinvention of traditional gendered rites of passage, such as the sexual initiation of the virginal female and the adolescent's entry into manhood. This allows Ducournau to produce new visions of the family unit that destabilise fixed roles and positions beyond generational and gendered differences.

Chapter 2 **Virginie Despentes' monstrous communities** has as its main focus the ongoing multidisciplinary oeuvre of Virginie Despentes. Section 1 'Despentes' zoomorphic writing' examines the figure of zoomorphism in two of Despentes' short stories, namely 'Sale grosse truie' and 'Domina', taken from an early collection entitled *Mordre au travers* (1999). This section proposes an analysis that moves beyond established critical readings of Despentes' work as an exemplary corpus of women's writing. As the previous chapter paid attention to Ducournau's own perspective on her oeuvre, assessing how personal experiences and cultural influences shape the artist's creative process, Chapter Two responds to the avowed influence of punk music and thought on Despentes' writing, and highlights a seldom discussed subculture in France at the end of the 20th century, which the author was actively involved in. Section 2 'Punks and libertines: Despentes contemporary philosophy' investigates the critical reception of Despentes' *Baise-moi* (1993), examining the novel and its subsequent film adaptation together. Despentes co-wrote and co-directed the film with Coralie Trinh Thi. In this close analysis, I discuss how existing critical perspectives have applied different moralising stances towards *Baise-moi*'s infamous excess of sex and violence. Moving away from principled views on the novel and the film, this section foregrounds its philosophical dimension by discussing

its intertextual dialogues with Sade's libertinism. This section then turns to Despentes' novel *Apocalypse bébé* (2010) and its troubling aestheticisation of a violent act of terrorism. In this section, I argue that Despentes' experimentation with French punk aesthetic and Libertine philosophy pushes her writing to the limits of representation, crossing a border that must be destroyed in order to be overcome. Section 3 'Reinventing couples and communities' looks closely at Despentes' trilogy, *Vernon Subutex*, identifying the text as an experimental site for creating new and monstrous types of human relations, articulating alternative visions of coupledom and of community separated from transactional and hierarchical dynamics.

Monstrous couples in Despentes' fiction relate directly to the author's intimate life and to her romantic and intellectual partnership with Paul B. Preciado. In its last chapter, Chapter Three, this thesis discusses Paul B. Preciado, investigating his practice across several media, from text through performance to film. This chapter **Paul B. Preciado's monstrous selves** begins by situating Preciado's work within the often polarising dynamics of contemporary debates on feminism and transgender issues. Through a careful and attentive reading of his essay writing, this chapter details Preciado's concept of the monster, demonstrating how Preciado thinks beyond binaries and the ideological frameworks fuelling the us vs. them dynamics of current debates around trans identities. Section 1 'Staging the monstrous self' examines Preciado's staging of the self as monstrous other and his appropriation of the monster as spectacle trope, putting the confrontational power of the 'freak attraction' to theoretical use, through a close analysis of his essay *Je suis un monstre qui vous parle* (2020). Section 2 'Preciado's self-experiments' is focused on Preciado's *Testo-Junkie: sexe, drogue et biopolitique* (2008) and his deployment of an 'autocobaye' praxis that guides both his life and his writing. Discussing Preciado's interest in bodily self-experiments and sexual scenarios enacted with Virginie Despentes, *Testo-Junkie* is examined as an autonomous body of text that has the capacity to enact and perform the theory it develops. Section 3 'From self to selves: Preciado and *Orlando*' examines Preciado's weaving of fiction and reality in his recent film *Orlando: ma biographie politique* (2023), a cinematic reimagining of Virginia Woolf's novel *Orlando* (1928). It interrogates Preciado's dislocation of the self from his own material body: this process of dematerialisation is ultimately realised through a performed dialogue with the dead. In his work, Preciado presents the self as unrepresentable on its own terms, a creature only able to take shape when coupled or faced by the other.

CHAPTER 1: Julia Ducournau's monstrous families

When Julia Ducournau won the Palme d'Or for her sci-fi thriller *Titane* (2021) at the 74th Festival de Cannes in 2021, she became the second woman, after New Zealand-based filmmaker Jane Campion, in the history of the festival to receive the prestigious award. In a 2021 interview at the Lincoln Centre in New York, Ducournau explains that the inspiration for her film, in which its female protagonist reproduces with an automobile and gives birth to an infant with a metal spine, came from a recurring nightmare. When asked by her interviewer about the film's 'car' motif, she confesses, 'the image of the car was consequential to a nightmare, that was recurring for years. And that nightmare actually inspired the last scene of the film³³[...] so that nightmare [...] was that I was giving birth to car engine pieces [...]'.³⁴ Ducournau's vision of a hybrid creature echoes the original monster of modernity created by Mary Shelley in the 19th-century classic *Frankenstein*. In the introduction that Shelley wrote to accompany the 1831 edition of her novel *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*, she explains how her novel, and its monstrous protagonist, arose from a dream-like vision. Shelley provides a vivid account of her waking dream:

When I placed my head on the pillow, I did not sleep, nor could I be said to think. My imagination, unbidden, possessed and guided me, gifting the successive images that arose in my mind with a vividness far beyond the usual bounds of reverie. I saw—with shut eyes, but acute mental vision,—I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together. I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life, and stir with an uneasy, half vital motion. Frightful must it be; for supremely frightful would be the effect of any human endeavour to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world.³⁵

The highly visual quality of Shelley's testimony transports us from text to image to film, with a series of 'successive images' that conjure a striking portrait of the abominable creature before our eyes, similar to a cinematic projection. While Shelley's visions suggest that text can become a suite of moving images, Ducournau's 21st-century cinema reminds us that films are

³³ The last scene of the film depicts her protagonist giving birth to the aforementioned infant.

³⁴ Julia Ducournau, "Julia Ducournau on *Titane* | NYFF59," interview by Eugene Hernandez, *Film at Lincoln Centre*, September 31, 2021, audio-visual, 06:14.

³⁵ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein: Or the Modern Prometheus* (Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1831), 10.

also texts: hybrid, intertextual assemblages of image, sound, and sensation woven together with other textual, visual and filmic bodies.

While Ducournau's vision for her hybrid monster explicitly came from a dream, it is also produced from an imaginary shaped by the filmmaker's exposure to other films, notably David Cronenberg's *Crash* (1996). Speaking of her first encounter with Cronenberg's cinema in an interview with the French cultural magazine *Télérama*, Ducournau confesses: 'j'ai 15 ans et je garde ça pour moi, comme un secret. C'est dire à quel point son cinéma me touchait intimement. Faire partager à ma famille cet univers si déroutant aurait été une forme d'aveu sur la personne que je m'apprêtais à devenir.'³⁶ For Ducournau, the origins of her creative process are located in adolescence: her passage from childhood to adulthood becomes fused with her becoming a filmmaker through the ingestion 'pour moi, comme un secret' of cinematic culture. At Cannes, and during her acceptance speech, Ducournau notes that audiences perceive *Titane* as a monstrous film, explaining, 'on dit même du mien [her film] qu'il est monstrueux.'³⁷ By acknowledging the monstrosity of her film, Ducournau implicitly embraces Shelley's artistic and intellectual legacy, a legacy in which both the invented creature and the text it appears in are monsters. For Ducournau, the film-as-text is therefore also a monster, inseparable from the creature it produces, a hybrid entity patched together from disparate parts.

Ducournau consistently insists on the personal and intimate nature of her work. This self-conscious idiosyncrasy is often overlooked by critics, who define her films in relation to a broader movement of contemporary feminist cinema, and discuss them as feminist rebuttals of male-dominated Western cinema, or politically-inclined discourses that focus on questions of gender identity and relations in today's world. This moves beyond the political in Ducournau's film, arguing that the intimacy of her filmmaking is directly tied to the monstrous in her work, which does not aim for political relevance in the present, or to intervene in specific social and cultural contemporary debates, but functions as an experimental space for thinking through what it means to be human, aiming to reach a universality in its representation of the human condition. The #MeToo movement, defined by Megan Stubbs Richardson and others, is 'a global phenomenon that flooded social media with testimonies of sexual violence' that 'influenced opinions on sexual violence and socio-legal change across societies.'³⁸ In light of the political climate surrounding her recognition at Cannes and the critical acclaim of her work

³⁶ Guillemette Odicino, "Julia Ducournau," *Télérama*, July 14, 2021.

³⁷ Julia Ducournau, "La Palme d'or est décernée à "Titane" de Julia Ducournau - Cannes 2021," *74th Festival de Cannes*, France, July 2021, 04:10.

³⁸ Megan Stubbs-Richardson et al., "It's a Global #MeToo: A Cross-National Comparison of Social Change Associated with the Movement," *Feminist Media Studies* 24, no.6 (2024): 1330-1331.

that ensued, French and/ Anglophone film scholars have clearly defined Ducournau as a key contemporary feminist filmmaker. Barbara Creed, who coined the ‘monstrous feminine’ concept in her landmark essay in 1986, places Ducournau in what she terms in her new book ‘feminist New Wave cinema’, defining it as films ‘directed primarily by women, telling stories about women who are in revolt against male violence and corrosive patriarchal values including misogyny, racism, homophobia, and anthropocentrism.’³⁹ This categorisation has since been used by institutions: for instance, the *Villa Albertine*, the official cultural institution promoting French art and culture in the United States, lists Ducournau along with French filmmakers Mia Hanson-Løve and Justine Triet as examples of ‘The Feminist New “New Wave” of French Cinema’.⁴⁰ Journalists, such as the French film critic Olivier de Bruyn, have also used and circulated similar categorisations to praise or dismiss Ducournau’s cinema: de Bruyn notably condemned what he defines as ‘féminisme trash’⁴¹ in *Titane* in his review of the film for the French magazine *Marianne*. While Ducournau’s feminism is defined as a central element of her cinema and a major factor justifying her international standing as a filmmaker, her concerns and preoccupations seem to lie elsewhere. According to Ducournau, the monstrous in her cinema is not only a reorientation of the horror genre through a feminist perspective. During her Palme d’Or acceptance speech, Ducournau declared: ‘merci au jury de laisser rentrer les monstres’.⁴² Fellow filmmaker Amélie Bonnin, who directed *Partir un jour* (2025), the opening film of the last Cannes festival, has since publicly remarked on the influence of Ducournau’s words on her own work. In a recent interview, Bonnin explains: ‘en référence à son héroïne mutante, elle remercie le jury d’avoir « laiss[é] entrer les monstres » dans le cinéma c’est-à-dire les gens considérés comme hors normes. Donc c’est plus large que la seule représentation des femmes.’⁴³ Bonnin’s understanding of Ducournau’s speech is confirmed by the filmmaker herself in 2016, on the occasion of the release of *Grave* (2016), where she tells *Les Inrockuptibles*:

soit on sexualise le corps féminin pour plaire aux hommes, soit on le glamourise pour flatter les femmes. Dans ces deux extrêmes, il n’y a aucune vérité. En rendant sa

³⁹ Creed, *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine*, 2.

⁴⁰ Rebecca Leffler, “The Feminist New “New Wave” of French Cinema,” *Villa Albertine Magazine*, accessed January 16, 2026, <https://villa-albertine.org/va/magazine/the-feminist-new-new-wave-of-french-cinema/>.

⁴¹ Olivier de Bruyn, “‘Titane’, Palme d’or de l’esbroufe et de la confusion,” *Marianne*, July 19 2021.

⁴² Ducournau, “La Palme d’or,” 05:37.

⁴³ Nora Bouazzouni, “Amélie Bonnin : « De plus en plus de réalisatrices incarnent des modèles »,” *La Déferlante*, May 7, 2025, <https://revueladeferlante.fr/amelie-bonnin-de-plus-en-plus-de-realisatrices-incarnent-des-modeles/>.

trivialité au corps féminin, je peux le sortir de sa niche et en faire un objet universel qui parle à tout le monde.⁴⁴

In her films, Ducournau transforms the female body into a monstrous thing, using this process of transformation for multiple aims. First, by ‘trivializing the female body’, she manages to expose and dissect various cinematic tropes that eroticise it on the screen before amplifying them to produce a ‘monstrous feminine’ that is neither an object of desire or as a site of fear and terror, but a figure that transcends gender and becomes something everyone can relate to: a universal matter. Ducournau’s cinema gestures towards a vision of ‘universal feminism’, harking back to a classic feminist figure like Simone de Beauvoir while simultaneously offering a way out of truisms and impasses within the debates central to feminism today.

This chapter first examines Ducournau’s trivialization of the female body through her focus on the grotesque materiality of flesh. As this chapter then shows, her films centre on monstrous hybrids that break through binaries of gender and sexual difference towards a universality. Finally, this chapter interrogates how Ducournau’s universal monster is used to rewrite foundational myths and to offer alternative visions of humanity and the shared experiences of familial relations.

SECTION 1: Trivializing bodies

Ducournau’s cinema, despite its international recognition and success, is heavily determined by a very specific cinematic heritage shaped by the filmmaker’s education at the prestigious French national film school *La Fémis*. The Fémis, founded in 1985,⁴⁵ is reputed for producing some of modern cinema’s most renowned *auteurs*. Film scholars such as Alistair Fox and Ginette Vincendeau attest to the school’s dedication to upholding and conserving a distinctively French cinematic tradition, inspired by François Truffaut’s notion of ‘politique des auteurs’⁴⁶ and the legacy of *La Nouvelle Vague*. Vincendeau points to the Fémis as ‘being one of the foremost institutions maintaining auteur cinema at the core of post-war French cinema’s national identity.’⁴⁷ In his article ‘Auterism, Personal Cinema, and the Fémis Generation’ (2014), Fox comments on the ‘personal dimension’ that Fémis directors share, explaining that ‘film schools like la Fémis have imparted a cinematic language and style of

⁴⁴ Serge Kaganski, “Sang Tabou,” *Les Inrockuptibles*, March 8, 2017.

⁴⁵ The École nationale supérieure des Métiers de l’Image et du Son was originally founded in 1943, then became known as La Fémis after being restructured by the French Minister for Culture in 1985.

⁴⁶ See François Truffaut, “Une certaine tendance du cinéma français,” *Cahiers du cinéma*, January, 1954, 15-29.

⁴⁷ Ginette Vincendeau, “‘Why Has Céline Sciamma Become so Iconic?’: The Auteure as Celebrity,” *French Screen Studies (Print)* 23, no. 2–3 (2023): 233, <https://doi.org/10.1080/26438941.2022.2151239>.

filmmaking that is especially conducive to personal expression.’⁴⁸ Likewise, Vincendeau writes how:

Definitions of what constitutes an auteur are changing and often subjective, but core values include a deep personal investment and control over one’s film, the subversion of mainstream genre conventions and the presence of a stylistic and/or thematic consistencies. These features converge to create a singular creative vision, often termed *un regard* [a gaze].⁴⁹

Ducournau’s *regard* is particularly evidenced in the way her films rely on intertextuality and intermediality, mixing high and low cultural references and displaying Ducournau’s ease at invoking and unpacking cinematic tropes and generic themes. For instance, the central character in *Titane* is Alexia. As the main female protagonist, she first appears to illustrate a representation of Ducournau’s *cinephilia*. In the opening sequence of the film, Ducournau clearly borrows from traditional and familiar images of women as objects of viewing pleasure. Drawing on the American tradition of the ‘pin-up’ girl, she creates a visual setting in which an eroticised female body is at the centre of the screen, placed in an especially masculine setting. The scene is set in the industrial-style interior of a modern car sales show, where Alexia is working as a dancer. During the Second World War, ‘pin-up girls’ were two-dimensional feminine companions to soldiers operating war machinery. Ducournau reimagines this icon in our contemporary commodity-driven era: as an accessory for a stylised individual car. The scene is shot in a single take, as Ducournau’s camera follows her protagonist as she makes her way through a crowd of men and automobiles in the large showroom. As the camera navigates the space, it lingers with intent on the flesh of scantily dressed dancers and, equally, on chrome surfaces of the cars on display; effectively conflating the female body and the mechanical machine as equivalent objects of viewing pleasure. The camera shifts from following Alexia’s perspective to bringing the viewer’s gaze onto her body as she begins to dance. Like her fellow dancers, Alexia is dressed in revealing clothing designed to emphasise her legs, buttocks and breasts. These body parts are further brought into focus with movement as Alexia performs. She reproduces several dance moves popularised by MTV music videos in the early 2000s, in particular twerking, and a move known colloquially as ‘the slut drop’⁵⁰. As Alexia leans over

⁴⁸ Alistair Fox “Auteurism, Personal Cinema, and the Fémis Generation,” in *A Companion to Contemporary French Cinema*, eds Michel Marie, Hilary Radner, Alistair Fox, and Raphaëlle Moine (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2014) 215, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118585405.ch9>.

⁴⁹ Vincendeau, “‘Why Has Céline Sciamma Become so Iconic?’,” 233.

⁵⁰ The terms ‘twerking’ and ‘slut drop’ have been deliberately used here to reflect both the terminology used in everyday speech, and to reflect the filmmaker’s desire to reproduce this specific iconography from popular culture.

the bonnet of the car and begins to twerk, the camera moves to frame her buttocks within its central field of vision. Alexia then spins her body to face the camera: again leaning against the car, she drops down and provocatively spreads her legs to perform the aforementioned ‘drop’. Alexia’s performance creates a hyper-sexualised vision of the female body made familiar through music videos, while the camera fragments her body into a series of itemised parts to be gazed at and desired. Much like the ‘pin-up’ girl defined by a set of iconographic codes, Ducournau’s Alexia mobilises the camera to articulate her own personal iconography. She uses popular culture and the globalised signifiers of MTV music videos to hyper-sexualise the body of her protagonist. Alexia’s body also operates through a complex assemblage of signs that point to Ducournau’s dialogue with the high-cultural legacy of French auteur cinema.

Dressed in bright yellow fishnet stockings and stripper heels, the golden colour palette of Alexia’s highly stylised look is a visual nod to the yellow hues associated with the character of Camille, played by the late Brigitte Bardot in Jean-Luc Godard’s iconic film *Le Mépris* (1963). French historian Antoine de Baecque observes how the figure of Camille in Godard’s film transformed the perfect female body into the modern fetish. He writes:

Bardot y figure en effet la femme-document, celle qui illustre une nouvelle façon d’être, d’apparaître, ces gestes, ces poses, cette voix, cet idéal corporel, très éloignés des canons de la beauté des années 1950. Elle est aussi la femme-objet, qui se montre, « sans rien cacher » dirait une publicité, qui se vend par bouts et fragments à son amant, lui faisant soupeser symboliquement chacun de ses morceaux de beauté. [...] un corps insaisissable dans son ensemble et son intégrité [...] La mise à distance de ce corps nu parfait, une distance toute proche — à le toucher — mais en même temps infinie — on ne le touchera jamais —, fait de la Camille du *Mépris* l’incarnation définitive de la femme-mystère, fétiche moderne [...] ⁵¹

Ducournau’s choice of colour palette, Alexia’s bleached blonde hair, and her thick eyeliner all reproduce the distinct femininity of Camille in Godard’s film. While Bardot is often defined through her Frenchness, her body adheres to ideals of perfection circulated by an Anglo-Saxon imaginary: Marilyn Monroe and the hourglass figures of pinups.

The ‘pin-up’ girl served a specific historical function, which, according to Camille Favre, was to aid in channelling the sexual energy of male American soldiers during the Second World

⁵¹ Antoine de Baecque, *La cinéphilie: invention d’un regard, histoire d’une culture, 1944-1968* (Fayard, 2003), 293.

War.⁵² As she explains, ‘[...]l’allusion à leur utilisation comme support masturbatoire apparaît en filigrane dans les lettres des soldats.’⁵³ The utility of the ‘pin-up’ girl in channelling soldiers’ sexual energy stems from the eroticism of these images, albeit a type of eroticism that was highly codified. These codes consisted of, according to Favre, as:

Beauté occidentale aux poses suggestives, elle est sexy mais reste chaste, surprise à son insu dans des situations qui découvrent ses dessous et son anatomie. Elle ne dévoile pas son corps volontairement. Et le voyeur l’est par hasard, sans intention de sa part. Ces mises en scène, qui se caractérisent par l’humour et l’improbabilité des situations, permettent d’érotiser la femme sans en faire un sujet sexuel actif, en lui conservant fraîcheur et naïveté.⁵⁴

While referencing both WWII pin-ups and early 20th-century American television culture, Ducournau’s dancing Alexia also departs from a puritanical American tradition that hinges on the assumed sexual innocence of women. Ducournau’s Alexia nods to the French definition of ‘striptease’ as a form of cultural entertainment famously unpacked in an essay by Roland Barthes. Barthes argues that the ritualisation of the striptease allows for a domestication of eroticism, tied to the unveiling of the female body. He writes: ‘au *Moulin-Rouge*, une conjuration d’une autre sorte se dessine probablement typiquement française, conjuration qui vise d’ailleurs moins à abolir l’érotisme qu’à le domestiquer [...]’.⁵⁵ In Ducournau’s dance scene, the codes of striptease, according to Barthes, are upheld through the professionalism and technical perfection of Alexia’s dance routine. Of the performer, Barthes writes:

on voit ainsi les professionnelles du strip-tease s’envelopper dans une aisance miraculeuse que les vêt sans cesse, les éloigne, leur donne l’indifférence glacée de praticiennes habiles, réfugiées avec hauteur dans la certitude de leur technique : leur science les habille comme un vêtement.⁵⁶

Barthes highlights the paradoxical function of the act of denuding in striptease, suggesting that this domesticated form of eroticism is produced by the simulation of illusion that keeps actual nudity at bay. Eroticism is, as Barthes sees it, a socially and culturally codified visual trick. It stands in contrast to the pornographic, which offers a literal and unmediated vision of nudity that collapses the distance between subject and spectator. In the opening sequence of

⁵² Camille Favre, “La *pin-up*, érotisme et patriotisme américain durant la Seconde Guerre Mondiale,” *Reflexions* 2, no. 38 (2018): 181-186, <https://doi.org/10.3917/infle.038.0181>.

⁵³ Favre, “La *pin-up*,” 38.

⁵⁴ Favre, “La *pin-up*,” 37.

⁵⁵ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Éditions du Seuil, 1957), 139.

⁵⁶ Barthes, *Mythologies*, 139

Ducournau's film, Alexia's professionalism is demonstrated by the fact that she executes her performance with mechanical precision. This technical mastery, her 'science', clothes her, ensuring that the illusion is maintained and her sexuality never exposed. Alexia's body is on display without it ever being fully revealed; she invites the gaze of the viewer without responding to it directly and therefore remains an impersonal icon: an abstracted image of desirable femininity. Following Barthes, Ducournau's strategic distancing of Alexia echoes what de Baecque also identifies, as cited above, as the 'mise à distance' of Camille's perfect nude body in Godard's film. In *Titane*, Alexia holds herself at a distance from others and any transgression is met with homicidal violence on her part. In the first part of the film, an admirer follows Alexia to her car and forcibly kisses her; in response, she brutally kills him. This violence keeps others at bay: Alexia's separation from other bodies is essential to her eroticisation, as she must be desired yet never attained.

Ducournau's rewriting of the modern fetish is a monstrous hybrid: by marrying the low cultural codes of popular culture with French auteur cinema, Ducournau fragments the body of her protagonist not to produce an erotic gaze but to exhibit the traditional fetishisation of female bodies in cinema as a product of intertextual references. In addition to the references to Godard's film in her use of colour, and the heroine's hair and make-up, *Titane's* opening sequence also signals a clear debt to the cinema of David Cronenberg, specifically *Crash* (1996), which Ducournau cites as a point of reference for her film.⁵⁷ In *Crash*, a group of individuals stage traffic accidents as erotic spectacle under the instruction of their prophetic leader Vaughan, whose project is to reshape the human body through modern technology. While in *Crash*, bodies only ever collide with the machine, leaving scars on the surface, Ducournau takes this one step further. In the film's prologue, a young Alexia is involved in a near-fatal car accident with her father. As a result of her injuries, Alexia has a titanium plate fitted into her skull, an operation that leaves her with a visible scar on the side of her head. According to feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti, Cronenberg's film shows 'scarred bodies [as] intensely eroticized because they bear the visible traces of their intercourse with the technological other'.⁵⁸ Alexia's accident and subsequent bodily modifications represent more than 'intercourse with the technological other',⁵⁹ suggesting rather a transformation into a 'technological other'.⁶⁰ This is further reflected in the total control she exerts over her body

⁵⁷ In her interview for *Télérama* Ducournau says that Cronenberg's *Crash* (1996) was 'un vrai modèle.' See Odicino "Julia Ducounau."

⁵⁸ Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses : Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Polity Press, 2002), 238.

⁵⁹ Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, 238.

⁶⁰ Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, 238.

during the opening scene's dance routine. As she twirls and moves agilely across the bonnet of the car, the camera steadily tracks her as she moves through space. This synchronicity between Alexia's mastery over her body and the technical precision of Ducournau's camera work creates the illusion of an effortless, almost automated fluidity and creates a spectacle of mechanical perfection. Much like the dancer figurine in a music box, Alexia is a human automaton. Alexia's body is perfect, not simply in the measure of its feminine forms, but even more so in its mechanical efficiency. With Alexia, Ducournau pieces together a fetish object that combines feminine flesh with technology to produce another monster that joins together human and machine. The scar that Alexia bears on the side of her head reveals her as a monster, and it features front and centre of the film's original French poster. Ducournau's 21st-century poster girl is a reinterpretation of classic tropes applied literally. Reconstructed with metal pins and implants, Ducournau's heroine is the literal embodiment of the "pin-up girl".

In *Titane*, Ducournau starts by defining Alexia, in the opening scene of her film, as a "pin-up girl", built from high and low, French and Anglo-Saxon references. Yet Ducournau follows on from this scene by breaking away with the representational codes she first established. In a following scene, Alexia's naked body appears on the screen, and Ducournau shows Alexia in a graphic sex scene with the car she was previously shown dancing on. The scene is visually confronting, and Alexia's body is shown in a different light. While in the dance scene her body was revealed yet covered by the codification of the erotic striptease, here Alexia is literally and figuratively stripped bare. There is no longer any distance between the spectator and Alexia as the film shifts its register from erotica to pornography. As the car bounces up and down on its suspension, imitating the thrusting movements of intercourse, its head lights beam through the screen dazzling spectators. In the dance scene the conflation between Alexia's body and the body of the automobile was implied by visual cues: Alexia's flashy outfit, bright blonde hair and impressive scar, and the arresting flame design of the car. In this scene, there is a physical merging of Alexia's body and that of the car. This scene breaks from erotic codes by staging the very fantasy it previously only alluded to. Sex between a human and a car is no longer suggested but actualised, revealing a disturbing material reality. This sequence is no longer an intertextual reference to Cronenberg's *Crash*, as Ducournau puts the idea behind Cronenberg's film to the test, using her film as an experimental site. Alexia's passage from a subject performing nakedness to a fully naked body highlights the change in movement from one scene to the next. During her dance, Alexia displays complete control over her body, and she moves through space with an almost uncanny mechanical precision. Her body is sexualised, yet the primal sexuality of her body is domesticated – as Barthes argued –

by the performative ritual. In contrast, Alexia's body during this scene is characterised by an absolute loss of control. The camera alternates between filming the car from the exterior and interior. The shots that show the car as it bounces up and down on its suspension are defamiliarizing for spectators as it appears to move autonomously, as if it were a living being. Adding to the strangeness of the scene, shots of the interior show Alexia, tightly clutching the seat belt straps, as she is tossed unceremoniously about on the car's back seat. As her body shakes rapidly and uncontrollably, viewers struggle to make out the distinct feminine contours of her body, and she is transformed into an indistinct and distorted fleshy mass. The chaos of this sequence jars against the sleek visual perfection of the dance scene that staged the body of the protagonist as a female ideal.

This scene is disturbing in its unfamiliarity and its power to destabilise the pleasure-seeking gaze of the spectator. It also gestures toward a form of irreverent humour, especially in the way Ducournau confronts spectators with complementary yet opposed visions of the female body that appear almost side by side in her film. Here, Ducournau appears to be poking fun at overlapping male fantasies of 'perfect cars' and 'perfect female bodies'. It can be argued that Ducournau, however, achieves this humour at the expense of the integrity of the female body by revealing it in its raw materiality. In his article 'Monstrous Masses: The Human Body as Raw Material' (2016), philosopher John Marmysz discusses the extreme objectification of human bodies in David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983) as well as Tom Six's *The Human Centipede* (2009) and Lars Von Trier's *Nymphomaniac* (2013). In all three films, Marmysz argues that the human body is portrayed as 'raw material' and a 'thing', explaining:

to portray the human body as raw material is to show it as a "thing," as an object susceptible to the impersonal, natural forces of cause and effect. Purely physical objects may be modified, manipulated, stimulated, torn asunder, and sewn back together according to any logic consistent with the laws of physics [...] Such imagery provokes us to consider the implications of embodiment and to reflect on the latent vulnerabilities – as well as potentialities – of flesh and blood.⁶¹

In portraying the body of her protagonist as raw material, Ducournau once again borrows from Cronenberg's cinema. Because her body is displayed in its raw materiality, Alexia becomes a 'purely physical object' in Ducournau's film. In the opening scenes of *Titane*, Ducournau establishes a certain paradigm of the female body as object of viewing pleasure and the

⁶¹ John Marmysz, "Monstrous Masses: The Human Body as Raw Material," *Screen Bodies (Print)* 1, no. 1 (2016): 51–52, <https://doi.org/10.3167/screen.2016.010104>.

unveiling of its sexual difference as erotic spectacle and then breaks away from it. In the car sex scene, she takes this paradigm to its paroxysm; Alexia's female body is completely objectified until borders between its human nature and 'thing' is erased. Ducournau's trivialisation of the human body in *Titane* builds on her exploration of the animality of the human in her debut feature film *Grave* (2016), where Ducournau experiments with shifting borders between the human and the animal realms.

Ducournau's *Grave* is about a young vegetarian who discovers that the women in her family are cannibals. Set during the fresher's week of a veterinary school and filmed on location in a former student residence in Belgium, a group of new students are shown in an early passage of the film being doused in pig's blood by senior students. A close-up shot focuses in on the face of the main character, Justine, gazing admiringly up at the pranksters, her face and hair half-covered in blood. This scene in *Grave* is a reference to Brian De Palma's *Carrie* (1976), where the titular character is drenched in pig's blood during a humiliating prank at her high school prom. Just as Alexia in *Titane* nods to Cronenberg's *Crash*, Ducournau also weaves in a reference to a film from the North American horror canon. By including such intertextual details, Ducournau signals to viewers her extensive global filmic culture and the way it is ingested and regurgitated in her own films. Both Ducournau and de Palma's films centre on young female protagonists whose monstrous transformations are intimately tied to bodily changes and the flow of blood that accompanies female puberty. As aforementioned, in 'Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection', Creed draws on Kristeva's concept of abjection and investigates the pre-eminence of the abject within the American horror film. As Kristeva notes, when confronted with the abject, this disturbance of clear boundaries, one experiences nausea, increased heartbeat, perspiration, and retching: all physical sensations commonly associated with feelings of revulsion and disgust.⁶² The American horror film relies heavily on these cultural distinctions between the proper and improper, the clean and the unclean, the ideal and the abject. In her conceptualisation of the monstrous-feminine, Creed interrogates the cultural associations between the abject and the female reproductive body. In *Carrie*, the pig's blood dumped on her at the prom symbolises her menstrual blood and marks the moment she transitions from victim to monstrous force. Similarly, in *Grave*, the moment Justine is doused in pig's blood foreshadows her awakening to her primal instincts and her discovery of cannibalism. According to Creed, the pig's blood in *Carrie* is deeply symbolic,

⁶² Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*, 10.

merging with menstrual blood to signify shame, horror, and the abjection of the female body, an abjection that begins in the shower scene and culminates in the prom scene. Creed writes:

In *Carrie* the film's most monstrous act occurs when the couple are drenched in pig's blood which symbolises menstrual blood – women are referred to in the film as 'pigs', women 'bleed like pigs', and the pig's blood runs down Carrie's body at a moment of intense pleasure, just as her own menstrual blood runs down her legs during a similar pleasurable moment when she enjoys her body in the shower. Here, women's blood and pig's blood flow together, signifying horror, shame and humiliation.[...] The horror film's obsession with blood, particularly the bleeding body of woman, where her body is transformed into the 'gaping wound', suggests that castration anxiety is central to the horror film[...] ⁶³

Creed's reading centres on the female body and its potential for either visual pleasure or horror in cinema, tied to its associations with castration anxiety. In De Palma's *Carrie*, the shower scene embodies this duality, transforming the eroticised female body into the abject body. The sequence begins as an idealised moment of cleanliness and purity: the steam from the shower, the soft lighting, and Pino Donaggio's delicate score create an atmosphere of sensuality and innocence. The camera fragments Carrie's body, lingering on her skin and body parts as she takes pleasure in washing herself, emphasising the erotic charge of the scene. However, this sense of visual pleasure is abruptly interrupted when she misrecognises the menstrual blood on her hand as blood from a wound. This moment of confusion escalates when the other girls in the locker room tease her mercilessly, pelting her with sanitary products while chanting 'Plug it up!'⁶⁴. For Carrie, menstruation becomes a source of shame and humiliation, and this scene underscores the association between menstruation and disgust, reinforcing cultural taboos surrounding the female body.

Similarly, in *Grave* Ducournau explores prohibitions linked to cultural readings of the female body. Justine is young and virginal,⁶⁵ and her vegetarianism serves as a metonym for her virtue and purity, a literal and symbolic repudiation of the flesh of the other, both human and animal. This state of 'untouched' innocence aligns with Simone de Beauvoir's analysis of the myth of virginity. In *Le deuxième sexe I*, Beauvoir writes: 'tantôt redoutée par le mâle,

⁶³ Creed, "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine," 52.

⁶⁴ Brian de Palma, director, *Carrie*, Red Bank Films, 1976 00:05:07.

⁶⁵ On several occasions Ducournau reveals that she named the protagonist of her film Justine after the character Justine from the Marquis de Sade's *Justine et les malheurs de la vertu* (1791). See for example, her interview with *Variety Magazine*, 'Raw' Director 'Shocked' Two Viewers Fainted During Cannibal Film at TIFF, *Variety*, February 7, 2021.

tantôt souhaitée ou même exigée, elle apparaît comme la forme la plus achevée du mystère féminin [...]’.⁶⁶ Justine’s body has been read as a potential site of sexual exploration, an embodiment of ‘feminine mystique.’ Ducournau has noted how several frames in which Justine’s breasts appear had to be cut for North American releases of the film since Garance Marillier, the actress who plays Justine, was still a minor at the time the film was shot.⁶⁷ Ducournau remarks on a cultural divide: the popularity of gore and body horror cinema in North America suggests that while audiences there are comfortable with scenes of bodily violence, they are less accommodating with viewing nudity. Within this context the female body is systematically censored to protect its modesty, a regulation that is crucial for maintaining the myth of innocence and purity that sticks to the representation of female bodies. Yet Ducournau does not merely show Justine’s body to explore cultural differences or produce viewing pleasure, but rather to present the human body in a new light, highlighting its animality and universality.

The shower scene in *Grave* directly follows a scene in which Justine is covered in paint and locked in a cupboard with a fellow student as part of one of the school’s hazing rituals. This ritual, set up by the school’s senior students to encourage sexual contact between the new students, does not end well for Justine. Unable to control her cannibalistic urges, she bites off a chunk of her fellow student’s lip. While washing off the paint in the shower, Justine is seen reaching into her mouth and pulling out a piece of flesh from between her back teeth. She eats it and sighs with pleasure. While in De Palma’s film the distinctions between pleasure and horror are maintained, in Ducournau’s scene the lines are crossed. It’s not about keeping the clean and the unclean apart but about exploring a site where both can meet. In this sense, it’s not Justine’s body that acts as the abject object, or the source of horror, but also the piece of flesh that she ingests. Dead flesh or a ‘corpse’, according to Kristeva, is ‘le comble de l’abjection. Il est le mort infestant la vie.’⁶⁸ Justine’s cannibalism, her drive towards the destruction of the flesh, allows Ducournau to rework the purpose of the female body in horror. Historically, as Barbara Creed observes, the female body in the genre has been relegated to the realm of the symbolic, specifically in its relation to the phallus and castration anxiety.⁶⁹ However, Ducournau’s visceral depiction of cannibalism moves beyond this psychoanalytic scope to explore the female body in relation to the material world and its immediate

⁶⁶ Simone de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe I* (Gallimard, 1949), 256.

⁶⁷ Julia Ducournau, “Interview de Julia Ducournau et Garance Marillier par les étudiants du MBA Production audiovisuelle,” interview by students from MBA ESG Paris, YouTube, May 20, 2017.

⁶⁸ Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l’horreur*, 12.

⁶⁹ Creed, “Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine,” 44-71.

environment. Ducournau's specific exploitation of the body elicits sensory and bodily responses from viewers. For instance, *Grave* reportedly had audience members fainting in the aisles during its screening at the Toronto film festival.⁷⁰ Reactions such as these align her work more closely with the subgenre of body horror. Citing from the 'Body Horror' chapter of Michael Grant and Pam Cook's *The Cinema Book* (2007), Xavier Aldana Reyes provides the following definition of the subgenre in his recent text *Contemporary Body Horror* (2024) as:

offering a 'spectacular display' of excessive and curious what-if scenarios somewhat undercut by humour and 'comic transgression', most evident in 'gross-out' scenes that draw attention to the special effects, emphasise affect over meaning, and toe the line between the revulsive and the physical excess of slapstick (Grant and Cook 2007: 355)⁷¹

Beyond the initial shock factor and ability to provoke a bodily response from spectators, Ducournau's *Grave* displays 'gross out' scenes that participate in the main character's journey of self-inquiry and knowledge. Ducournau's film replicates the Western tradition of the coming-of-age narrative but invests this tradition with raw materiality. Justine does not simply awaken to an understanding of herself as a social subject, but as a physical being, a carnal body governed by its natural forces and instincts. Soon after her arrival at the school, Justine is forced to take part in another hazing ritual, where she has to eat a pickled rabbit kidney. At first, she refuses on account of her vegetarianism; however, her older sister Alex, who is also a student at the school, quickly steps in and forces her to participate. That same evening, Justine wakes up in the night and starts furiously scratching her legs and thighs. As she turns the light on and pulls up her jumper, she discovers that parts of her body are covered in rash. A close-up shot of Justine's forearm shows rough and reddened skin, and the camera lingers there as Justine frantically scratches the inflamed area. The sensations that Justine is experiencing on screen would be intimately familiar to any viewer. Justine's uncontrollable itch reveals our body's instinctual patterns and locates Justine's own as a site to explore the limits of our human nature. In her book *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (1994), feminist scholar Elizabeth Grosz offers a transformative view of the skin, not as a static protective envelope but as a foundational and dynamic site of contact with the outside world. Grosz explains how 'the skin and the various sensations which are located at the surface of the body are the most primitive,

⁷⁰ Adam Gabbatt, "Cannibal horror film too Raw for viewers as paramedics are called," *The Guardian*, September 15, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/sep/14/cannibal-horror-film-raw-toronto-film-festival>.

⁷¹ Xavier Aldana Reyes, *Contemporary Body Horror* (Cambridge University Press, 2024), 8.

essential, and constitutive of all sources of sensory stimulation.⁷² The focus on self-scratching produces a ‘gross-out’ moment, a scene in which the spectators’ senses are stimulated, creating a sense of revulsion or discomfort on a physical level. Its focus on the skin as a universal site of sensory stimulation also offers a view of the human body as an instinctual, animalistic creature. As Justine goes back to sleep, the scene transitions to a shot of a running horse on an equine treadmill. At the same time, the audio track merges the sound of Justine’s breathing with that of the breathing horse. This visual and aural transition acts as a metaphor for Justine’s bodily transformation, and an equivalence between human and animal.

In other parts of the film, ‘gross-out’ scenes, in which Justine is shown eating and vomiting up her own hair, biting down on a raw chicken breast, eating a piece of rotten meat in the shower, or eating her sister’s severed finger, frame Justine as an animal being observed. Using close-ups to emphasise her nose, her mouth and facial expressions, Ducournau adopts an observational gaze that isolates Justine as an object of study, inviting spectators to look on as if documenting her behaviour. Ducournau’s observational gaze imitates the anthropomorphic gaze of the nature documentary, which often endows human attributes to its animal subjects. Here, the reverse occurs, as Ducournau lets us watch on as the human protagonist regresses into a purely instinctual and animal state. These ‘gross-out’ sequences are devoid of human speech as viewers experience them entirely through sound and image. In the sequence that shows Justine devouring her sister’s finger, the intensity of the extra-diegetic music track and the excess of the imagery make the absence of dialogue especially felt. There is an emphasis on sensorial experience as Justine smells, tastes, nibbles, and then hungrily devours the finger. As she eats, the deep bass notes of Jim Williams’ original score saturate the audio track. The musical grave notes clash with the almost-canine-like innocence displayed by Justine as she approaches her ‘meal’, creating a moment of humorous incongruity. Later in the film, ‘the dog ate it’, ‘Gros Quick⁷³ a bouffé mon doigt⁷⁴’ is the excuse provided by Alex to the girls’ parents to justify the missing finger.

In framing Justine this way, Ducournau seems to suggest that *Grave*, and perhaps her oeuvre as a whole, could be defined as working towards documenting and observing what makes us both human and non-human. Ducournau’s ‘gross-out’ scenes and the use of body horror codes clearly animalise Justine. It trivializes her, insisting on its fleshy materiality by demonstrating that a human body is like any other being, beholden at times to primal drives

⁷² Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* (Allen & Unwin, 1994), 57.

⁷³ Gros Quick is the name of Alex’s dog.

⁷⁴ Julia Ducournau, director, *Grave*, Wild Bunch, 2016, 00:48:19.

and guided by instincts. Justine's body is less determined by its sex but by its belonging to the realm of living bodies, ultimately concerned most by the necessity of their own survival.

Justine's older sister, Alex, functioning as both a friend and rival figure, plays a crucial role in her younger sister's journey of self-discovery. When Justine first arrives at the school, she seeks out her sister for support and guidance. Having just experienced her first taste of the school's brutal hazing culture, Justine is reunited with Alex during the school's inaugural party. On this first evening, they share a moment of sisterly bonding. Justine and Alex are shown sitting on the roof of the school's dormitories and sharing a beer. Justine shows vulnerability in this moment as she opens up to her sister and asks her, 'tu me trouves bizarre comme fille ?'⁷⁵ Instead of replying, Alex responds by showing her sister how to urinate standing up. A mid-range shot shows Justine and her sister from behind, the two figures standing against the backdrop of the surrounding rooftops and the night sky. A bright light from the school's rooftop shines onto the pale skin of the buttocks of the sisters while the rest of their bodies are obscured in the relative darkness of the night. The following close-up shot reveals a trickle of urine running down Justine's inner thigh; later, as Justine awkwardly pulls her leggings back over her exposed backside, the sisters break out in a fit of laughter. This scene in Ducournau's film, depicting a moment of bonding through public urination, recalls familiar scenes from American 'buddy movies' of the late 1990s and early 2000s. In such films, these scenes are between male characters symbolising masculine solidarity and 'grossing out' audiences to produce laughter rather than disgust. As an example, Adam Sandler's *Big Daddy* (1999) shows Sandy (Adam Sandler) and Julian (Cole Sprouse) urinating together against the back door of an upmarket New York restaurant. By citing American filmmakers, from Cronenberg and de Palma to Sandler, Ducournau inverts the puritan and male perspectives contained within their films, but also cannibalises them, directing viewers to consider the universal appeal of a female body trivialized beyond recognition.

Borrowing from the androcentric imaginary of the buddy movie, Ducournau recycles the urination cinematic trope to express a form of sisterly bonding, inverting gender representation. In the second part of her seminal text *Le deuxième sexe II*, Simone de Beauvoir discusses how young girls learn about their sexual and social inferiority through the very experience of urination. De Beauvoir writes:

dans la société occidentale contemporaine, les mœurs veulent généralement qu'elles (les filles) s'accroupissent tandis que la station debout est réservée aux mâles. Cette

⁷⁵ Ducournau, *Grave*, 00:40:32

différence est pour la fillette la différenciation sexuelle la plus frappante. Pour uriner, elle doit s'accroupir, se dénuder et partant se cacher : c'est une servitude honteuse et inconmode. La honte s'accroît dans les cas fréquents où elle souffre d'émissions urinaires involontaires, au cas de crise de fou rire, par exemple ; le contrôle est moins sûr chez elle que chez les garçons. Chez ceux-ci, la fonction urinaire apparaît comme un jeu libre qui a l'attrait de tous les jeux dans lesquels la liberté s'exerce ; [...] Le jet peut être dirigé à volonté, l'urine lancée au loin : le garçon en tire un sentiment d'omnipotence.⁷⁶

In de Beauvoir's reading, it is both culture and nature that inform gendered toiletry practices, suggesting that it is the fact of having a penis or not having one that renders the act of urination an exciting game for the young boy and a shameful chore for the young girl. In Ducournau, urination is a joyful, liberating and collective experience that purposefully ignores physical differences, instead highlighting the resemblance — from behind — of female and male bodies.

Grave also departs from the horror movie genre in its reliance on comedy. According to John Phillips, 'humour always de-eroticises any text in which it is predominantly found'.⁷⁷ Humour is introduced in Ducournau's scenes that put the materiality of bodies centre stage. In this way, Ducournau's cinema recalls the work of the Renaissance writer François Rabelais, where the grotesque is used to explore deeper truths about human existence. In *Rabelais and his world*, Mikhail Bakhtin writes:

In grotesque realism[...] the bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a private, egotistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people. As such it is opposed to severance from the material and bodily roots of the world [...].⁷⁸

In the urination scene, Ducournau uses intradiegetic lights to fragment the sisters' bodies and draw the viewer's gaze to the fleshy skin of their buttocks. Although partially nude, bodies are not subject to an erotic gaze. As in grotesque realism, the human body is brought down to its material level via images of the lower body stratum, as Bakhtin explains: 'the essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity.'⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Simone de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe II* (Gallimard, 1949), 21.

⁷⁷ John Phillips, "'Laugh? I nearly died!": Humour in Sade's Fiction," *The Eighteenth century (Lubbock)* 40, no.1 (1999),16.

⁷⁸ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Indiana University Press, 1968), 19.

⁷⁹ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 19-20.

Ducournau's cinema is not about making women monstrous but rather about creating a monster, a grotesque hybrid that is both human and non-human, living thing and man-made machine. This process is described by the filmmaker as a 'transformative arch'⁸⁰, a movement that starts with a rethinking of the potentiality of the female body in cinema. Ducournau works to give back the female body 'sa trivialité [...] et en faire un objet universel'⁸¹ in her cinematic oeuvre. In this section, we examined how the monstrous protagonist in *Titane* breaks away from the eroticisation of the female body in cinema, by showing it as a purely physical object and a machine. In *Grave*, Ducournau explores the female body beyond sexual differences and transgressing borders between human and animal.

SECTION 2: From a female to a universal gaze

Since Laura Mulvey famously defined the 'gaze' of classical Hollywood cinema as 'male' in her 1975 essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', feminist film scholars have explored the possibility that its counterpart, the 'female gaze', can offer.⁸² Mulvey's critique emphasises how women are positioned as passive objects of visual pleasure, reflecting male desire, while men occupy the active role of spectatorship. In response, feminist theorists and filmmakers alike have sought to reimagine cinematic representation, asking whether a distinctly female gaze might challenge these dynamics. Historically, feminist scholars have been cautious to define or name any specific gaze as 'female' or 'feminine,' wary of the risk of essentialising female experience or foregrounding the existence of a singular, universal female viewing subject. It is only recently that feminist film theorists have openly begun to define and to claim the idea of a 'female gaze.' For instance, in her essay *Le Regard féminin: Une révolution à l'écran* (2020), Iris Brey adopts a phenomenological approach to film spectatorship. Brey's conceptualisation of the 'female' gaze shifts the focus from a cinematic representation of women as specular objects towards an embodied representation of female experience. For Brey, the key distinction between what has historically been defined as the 'male gaze' and what she proposes as a 'female gaze' is the representational shift of the on-screen woman from passive object to active subject. This revolution, according to Brey, has allowed for the emergence of a distinctly 'female gaze', one that she defines as 'un regard porteur d'une

⁸⁰ Ducournau, interview, "NYFF59," 20:20.

⁸¹ Kaganski, "Sang Tabou."

⁸² See notably, Mary Anne Doane, "Film and Masquerade," *Screen (London)* Vol. 23, no. 3-4 (1982-01): 74-88; Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Indiana University Press, 1984); bell Hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (South End Press, 1992).

expérience spécifique - celle de ressentir une expérience vécue féminine'.⁸³ The 'female gaze', therefore, according to Brey, is one that centres female experience and embodiment while rejecting the voyeuristic and objectifying frameworks of the 'male gaze'. For Brey, the female experience that the 'female gaze' conveys on occasion attempts to replicate the real-world lived experience of women within patriarchal societies, as she states: 'il arrive qu'un film explore ce que traverse un personnage féminin dans un univers social proche de notre réalité, c'est-à-dire le patriarcat.'⁸⁴ While the focus of Brey's essay is on defining a cinematic gaze that would express a certain female subjectivity, albeit within potentially resistant patriarchal models, in her essay 'Pour un regard féministe' (2020), Émilie Notéris considers the possibility of a gaze that would itself have the potential to challenge patriarchal structures. She defines this 'feminist gaze' as:

un regard critique et sensible qui se préoccupe de la place des femmes au cinéma mais pas uniquement, qui la questionne et la remet en jeu, qui dans un contexte et au sien d'une industrie hétéronormée, blanche et patriarcale peut impulser différemment. Un regard qui circule qui rend possible la connivence et les échanges entre femmes derrière et devant l'écran. Un regard qui distribue davantage le pouvoir à l'intérieur du cadre et en hors-champ.⁸⁵

Notéris' foregrounding of the 'feminist gaze' is suggestive of the push for female filmmakers to engage with the gender politics of the film industry and society at large. And while the notion of the 'feminist gaze' may have a potentially positive impact on women behind and in front of the screen, as Notéris hopes, it risks imposing a new series of representational restraints on the depiction of women and the female body in cinema, potentially limiting creative freedoms. In this context, Ducournau's assertion that she seeks to 'sortir le corps féminin de sa niche'⁸⁶ is significant. The 'niche' that Ducournau refers to could be understood as the traditional, restrictive frameworks in which the female body is portrayed in cinema. This 'niche' is its role as a reflection of male desire, either conforming or resisting the image of the idealised woman of the 'male gaze'. Brey's 'female gaze' and Notéris' 'feminist gaze' propose convincing representational frameworks that would serve to emancipate the female body from its mirroring function. However, as we have seen in the previous section, as a filmmaker, Ducournau also borrows from these traditions to trivialise the female body.

⁸³ Iris Brey, *Le regard féminin* (Éditions de l'Olivier, 2020), 49.

⁸⁴ Brey, *Le regard féminin*, 41.

⁸⁵ Émilie Notéris, "Pour un regard féministe," *Débordements*, February 20, 2020, <https://debordements.fr/pour-un-regard-feministe/>.

⁸⁶ Kaganski, "Sang Tabou."

Ducournau's work therefore seeks to go beyond a binary opposition between male and female or feminist gaze. Her cinema does not merely depict the female body as a reflection of male desire, nor does it fully align with visions of women-centric cinema as defined by Brey and Notéris. Instead, Ducournau aims to liberate the female body as an object of desire, an aspirational figure for women, or even as a site of purely subjective experience. Rather than leaning into contemporary debates about the representation of women in cinema, Ducournau liberates the female body from discursive restraints, ultimately breaking away from a closed circuit of recognition that relies on pre-existing theoretical, social, and cultural assumptions about gender and cinema spectatorship.

In *Grave*, Ducournau merges together representations of desire and hunger, cannibalistic and sexual urges, while inverting the traditional subject-object dynamics of the gendered gaze. This inversion occurs during instances when the camera converges with Justine's own perspective, making her an active viewer rather than an object being gazed at. Justine's discovery of her desire for her schoolmate Adrien is shown in a scene that adopts the protagonist's viewpoint as Adrien plays a game of football with a group of other male students. A camera shot tracks Adrien's movements as he runs across the pitch and passes the ball, and as he blows mucus out of his nose and spits onto the ground. His body is filmed as it moves, as the camera focuses on parts of his bare torso. In one instance, the camera focuses on his lower abdomen while his head and legs are cut out from the frame. These shots of Adrien are interspersed with mid-range shots of Justine, standing alone against a low-standing wall, dressed in a white lab coat. In contrast to Adrien, Justine is completely still as she watches him intently.

In 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,' Mulvey famously identified the gendered dynamics at play in classical Hollywood cinema in its production of viewing pleasure. Mulvey categorises 'woman as image' and 'man as bearer of the look'.⁸⁷ She goes on to explain how the cinematic medium is the terrain upon which male fantasy is played out. She writes:

The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*.⁸⁸

⁸⁷Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Feminist film theory: a reader*, edited by Sue Thornham, (Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 62, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474473224>.

⁸⁸ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 62-63.

In this scene, Ducournau is inverting the subject-object relations of the cinematic gaze as it relates to gender. The viewer is invited to share the point of view of Justine as she becomes the subject and bearer of the gaze, and Adrien the object of her desire. Furthermore, Ducournau's use of close-up fragments Adrien's body into fetishised parts. According to Martine Beugnet, 'the close-up shot initially generates a spatial, temporal, and figurative as well as perceptual disruption. It dislocates the body, fragments it and carves it out of its surroundings. At the same time, it ruptures the body of the *récit*, and brings the narrative to a halt, almost like a still picture.'⁸⁹ This statement by Beugnet reiterates Mulvey's own definition of the function of female subjects in narrative cinema: 'the presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of storyline, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation.'⁹⁰ In this scene, Adrien assumes the typical role of 'woman' in narrative cinema, offering a pause in the action and an opportunity for erotic contemplation. Adrien's body is heavily coded for visual pleasure in this scene, his athleticism reminiscent of classical masculine beauty. The erotic impact of this scene is made explicit as Adrien takes hold of his crotch in a gesture of provocation to a fellow teammate. It would then appear that Ducournau is reappropriating the 'male gaze' from a female perspective, in a crude inversion of the power dynamics as observed by Mulvey and Beugnet. However, this scene not only projects an erotic gaze onto the male figure: Justine's sexual fantasy is overlaid by her cannibalistic urges. Justine's instinct to eat Adrien, to incorporate the body of the other into her own body, destabilises not only the opposition between man and woman, but also the subject-object binary. The latter is further deconstructed through the filmmaker's deployment of abjection. In this scene, Ducournau confronts viewers with images of bodies that leak residual fluids. As Adrien moves and runs, his body produces sweat and mucus, while Justine, exhausted from her efforts to remain still, experiences a nosebleed. Both leaking bodies are shown in a series of shot-reverse shots, creating a merging effect between the individual bodies of Adrien and Justine. In *Grave*, Ducournau signals her awareness of feminist strategies that undermine the 'male gaze' all the while pushing the cinematic experience beyond gendered gazes altogether, towards a different mode of viewing. Bodies of male and female characters become similar rather than opposed: they are both defined by what they exert: their secretion of internal fluids.

⁸⁹ Martine Beugnet, "Close-up Vision: Re-mapping the Body in the Work of Contemporary French Women Filmmakers," *Focalizing the Body in Contemporary Women's Writing and Filmmaking in France (Print)* 45, no. 3 (2006): 25.

⁹⁰ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 63.

Bodily fluids are a recurring stylistic motif in Ducournau's cinema. In her first short film *Junior*, which was selected for the 50th *Semaine de la critique* at Cannes in 2011, Ducournau first established her distinctive style and introduced some of her key themes and figures. *Junior*, like Ducournau's other films, explores physical transformation. In *Junior*, the eponymous main character falls ill with stomach flu. After a few days at home, she returns to school, and to her classmates' surprise, has shed her usual tomboy look in favour of a more conventionally girlish style. Ducournau centres the body of the character, experimenting with the grotesque elements of its transformation. During the opening credits, Junior reaches into the back of her mouth, pulling out a finger full of mucus that she proceeds to shove back into her mouth, in a scene that exaggerates the 'gross-outness' of her body and its fluids. The emphasis on Junior's mouth illustrates Ducournau's borrowings from body horror genre tropes while playing a key part in the film's coming-of-age narrative. Ducournau's focus on Junior's mouth highlights the body's orifices as sites where fluids enter and exit, emphasising the natural processes that maintain the body's functionality.

While the secretion of bodily fluids is a normal function of the body, Ducournau relies on these processes to create unusual scenarios. These are then used to depict Junior's metamorphosis from tomboy to teenage girl. In one scene, the skin along Junior's spine breaks open to reveal the soft tissue underneath. Rather than seeping blood, the wound seeps a sticky, transparent liquid. In another, Junior wakes up in the middle of the night to find her body and bedsheets covered in a similar goey liquid. The following morning, as she arrives at school, her teacher mistakes her for a new student. Junior, correcting the teacher, reveals that her actual name is 'Justine Perret'. Junior's transformation into Justine leads to a shift in how she is perceived by others: her friends and classmates begin referring to her as Justine as her appearance becomes more feminine.⁹¹ The shift in Junior's physical appearance from 'boyish' to 'girlish' points to Ducournau's exploration of gender through physical states. While never explicitly stated, Junior's sudden secretion of bodily fluids could be read as a metaphor for commencing menstruation. At the same time, these fluids, in their colour and texture, deviate from menstrual blood and appear to leak haphazardly from various parts of her body. Using these defamiliarizing techniques, Ducournau conflates menstrual blood with the nocturnal emission of boys, drawing a parallel between the strangeness of both male and female experiences of puberty. Beneath the glossy outer shell of Justine's fairy-tale-like

⁹¹ The character of Junior/Justine is interpreted by Garance Marillier, who plays the character of Justine in *Grave*. In using the same actress and the same character name, Ducournau establishes an *auteurist* continuity between her films, as if her cinema was like her protagonists, growing and transforming across space and time.

transformation lurks a more disquieting bodily anomaly. As Justine gets out of bed in the morning after a restless night, Ducournau's camera captures only her protagonist's feet and legs in the frame, as the character attempts to pull on a suddenly too-short pair of trousers. As the fabric is shown falling back around her ankles, viewers are faced with the side of her calf, newly covered in reptilian-like scales. Junior's transformation is not only a metaphor for puberty, as the film abruptly jumps into the fantastic realm. The film crosses gender boundaries and beyond, turning its main character from 'tomboy' to adolescent girl to non-human creature.

The motif of bodily fluids is also present in *Titane*. While in *Junior*, it is the secretion of a gooey, translucent liquid that substitutes for blood, in *Titane*, motor oil is used in its place. In both *Junior* and *Titane*, Ducournau uses similar visual techniques to disrupt the familiarity of bodies by substituting the colours and textures of the fluids they produce. In *Titane*, Alexia's body transforms throughout her pregnancy, yet these external and physical signs are not usually associated with a human pregnancy. Scenes that reveal the non-human nature of Alexia's pregnancy occur throughout the film, where they are depicted in increasingly shocking and disturbing ways. At the start of her pregnancy, Alexia's uterus leaks motor oil rather than blood. As she scratches her swollen abdomen, the taut skin peels away to reveal a hard metal surface underneath. The revelation of the inorganic material brings into question the nature of Alexia's pregnancy since the interior of her body no longer resembles the fleshy textures of human body matter. This ambiguity is furthered when Alexia is shown painfully squeezing motor oil from her leaking breasts. Despite the defamiliarization of Alexia's physical body as if it morphs through the phases of gestation, her emotional response to these alarming changes remains inherently human. As she witnesses the tearing of her skin, revealing the metal underneath, her expression is one of visible distress at this unexpected discovery. In addition, she expresses acute pain pressing down on her breasts to release a residual liquid. In these moments, Alexia resides on the threshold between human and machine, embodying a state of monstrous hybridity.

In his book *Le sexe des Modernes : Pensée du Neutre et théorie du genre* (2021) Éric Marty discusses differences between the American 'drag queen' and the 'travesti' in Barthes and Foucault's writings. According to Marty, the American 'drag queen' is meant to invoke laughter as a parody of femininity, as illustrated by the work of Butler on gender as performance. He explains: 'Butler identifie ainsi l'expérience parodique du drag au processus psychique d'identification de genre, c'est-à-dire cette phase où l'enfant se reconnaît ou non

comme garçon ou fille'.⁹² According to Marty, Butler maps drag as parody onto the childhood phase of sexual identification. In contrast, the figure of the 'travesti' is, according to Marty, not about identification but rather the interruption of gender categorisation 'le Neutre est bien la suspension du paradigme sexuel, et le travesti instrument de cette suspension'.⁹³ As Marty pursues, 'le sujet travesti n'est ni une femme, ni un homme, il libère la « personne » de son assignation sexuée'.⁹⁴ Building on this distinction, Marty's definition of the 'travesti' can be useful to understand Ducournau's own tactics to extract the female body from its 'niches' as either object of desire defined by the 'male gaze' or a representation of a specifically feminine subject cinema.

As previously discussed, Ducournau brings comedy into contact with the female body. In *Grave* scenes in which Justine is the source of humour abound throughout the film. Comic effects often stem from Justine's innocence and inexperience, seemingly at the expense of her protagonist. Yet rather than a form of shallow mockery directed at Justine's naivety, Ducournau actually parodies dominant concepts and ideas. For instance, Ducournau proposes a literal representation of Butler's theory of gender as performance. In her seminal essay *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler defines gender as: 'gender is the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of a substance, of a natural sort of being'.⁹⁵ In a scene in which Justine dresses up in a dress and high heels to attend a school party, femininity clearly appears as a performance. In her analysis of *Grave*, Eve Watson suggests that 'when she totters in high heels and garish makeup to a party in an attempt at a traditional form of feminine masquerade, Justine's masquerade sets her up as an obvious failure[...]'.⁹⁶ Here, Watson uses a notion of femininity as 'masquerade' put forward by Joan Rivière and later adapted by feminist film theorist Mary Anne Doane. In Rivière's original formulation, 'womanliness [...] could be assumed as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it[...]'.⁹⁷ For Watson, Justine's inability to convincingly mask as feminine is a discursive strength of the film, highlighting 'the difficulty of producing representations of womanhood outside of normative femininity and the heteronormative

⁹² Eric Marty, *Le sexe des Modernes: Pensée du Neutre et théorie du genre* (Fiction & Cie/ Seuil, 2021), 145.

⁹³ Eric Marty, *Le sexe des Modernes*, 160.

⁹⁴ Eric Marty, *Le sexe des Modernes*, 162.

⁹⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Taylor and Francis, 2011), 63, <http://USYD.eblib.com.au/patron/FullRecord.aspx?p=710077>.

⁹⁶ Eve Watson, "A psychoanalytic exploration of the film *Raw* (2016), with special emphasis on the capitalist discourse," *Psychoanalysis, culture & society* 25, no.3 (2020): 454.

⁹⁷ Joan Rivière, "Womanliness as a masquerade," *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 9 (1929): 306.

masquerade[...].⁹⁸ Yet, Watson's reading overlooks the pivotal function that humour plays in the scene in exaggerating the failure to masquerade femininity on Justine's part. The dress that Justine borrows from her older sister Alex clumsily covers her t-shirt and jeans. The high heels, also borrowed, are too big and Justine struggles to walk in them. Mary Anne Doane writes of the masquerade as 'doubl[ing] representation; it is constituted by a hyperbolisation of the accoutrements of femininity'.⁹⁹ Doane's theory of the masquerade is performed literally in Ducournau's film, and it is this literalisation by the filmmaker that gives rise to parodic and humorous effects. Justine's awkwardness attracts amused glances from her peers and offers an amusing spectacle for film viewers also. Although the parodying of femininity as masquerade renders this scene comic, femininity is not ridiculed. Ducournau takes the idea of femininity as masquerade seriously, in that it relates to the artificiality and performative nature of gender. As Justine stumbles along in the oversized heels, she resembles a child trying on her mother's clothes. Ducournau stages femininity as a masquerade in its most literal sense — as dress up or play. Moreover, Justine's exaggerated femininity reveals it to be a form of fiction and an artifice, as in the case of Justine, it is not her gender that is in question but her humanity. Justine tries to dress herself up as a woman, but the grotesque spectacle of her inability to perform hints at another revelation. Like Marty's 'travesti', Justine is ultimately suspended outside categorisation, in a site that resists any binary logic.

In *Titane*, Ducournau treats masculinity in a similar way as Alexia's exaggerated disguise as Adrien further exposes the superficiality and artifice of gender. Ducournau's film is split into two distinct parts, with Alexia's transformation into Adrien being the transition point. Alexia borrows the identity of Adrien Legrand, a young boy who disappeared a decade earlier, and meets Vincent, the boy's father, when he comes to the police station where Alexia, as Adrien, is being held. The scene of Alexia and Vincent's first meeting introduces a new perspective. The first shot shows Vincent, who has come to collect his son, standing outside a room with glass windows covered in metal blinds. When an officer enquires whether Vincent would like to undergo a DNA test, he refuses, convinced that he is able to recognise his own son. The next frame is shot from inside the room, and as the metal blinds are lifted, Vincent is shown from the torso upwards, gazing down on Alexia. This shot recalls an earlier frame in which Alexia's biological father is shown in the same position, looking at a young Alexia recovering from her accident in the hospital. In both scenes, the figure of the father is physically

⁹⁸ Eve Watson, "A psychoanalytic exploration of the film *Raw*," 455.

⁹⁹ Doane, "Film and Masquerade," 82.

dominant, looking down at the child, as well as a figure of care and attention. Vincent is depicted as a simultaneously violent and protective father. As they arrive together at the fire station where Vincent works and lives, he threatens to kill anyone who would dare to touch Adrien. Vincent's explicit vow to protect his son from aggression with an affirmation of violence is in sync with dominant codes of traditional masculinity. This is also conveyed by his status as captain of the fire brigade and scenes that depict Vincent's body in training. In the film's opening sequence, Alexia's mastery of her own body produced a spectacle of desirable femininity; similarly, the fire station is represented as a site where idealised masculine subjects are formed. It operates as a microcosm where physical strength, aggression, and dominance are valued above all else. Ducournau pays particular attention to Vincent's obsessive use of steroids and his compulsive fitness routines, exposing how masculinity is acquired not only through discipline and control, but through a performance of repeated acts and physical transformations.

Alexia's arrival disrupts the controlled masculine universe of the fire station as she cannot fully fit in. Vincent attempts to integrate Alexia by altering her physical appearance. He gives her a uniform to wear and places a metal cast over her broken nose. Yet, Alexia's body, already in the midst of her own secret physical transformation (she is pregnant) and performance of 'travestissement' in Adrien, is not able to change further. The scar on her head makes it impossible for Vincent to give her a full shaved head. Her uniform is ill-fitting and her bandaged nose and cap make her stand out against the other uniformed firemen in the group. Her alterity, enhanced by her slight frame, absence of facial hair and non-verbality, make her the target of homophobic jokes. Despite her failure to fit into his world, Vincent becomes more and more attached to Alexia and the film shows how their relationship deepens in time. Several interactions take place within the confines of domestic spaces, inside Vincent's home. During their first meal together, breast milk leaks from her breasts, making a visible mark on her t-shirt. In a later scene, Alexia has removed the bandages she uses to conceal her pregnant belly and is looking through clothes in the wardrobe located in Adrien's bedroom. Finding a woman's dress, she puts it on. Hearing Vincent approaching, she quickly hides in the wardrobe, concealing her pregnancy with a large pillow. When Vincent discovers her, wearing the woman's dress, he reacts with laughter. Opening an old photo album, he shows Alexia photos of Adrien wearing the same woman's dress. Ducournau sets up these moments of potential discovery as suspenseful, yet Vincent's unexpected reactions each time reveal him to be more and more convinced that Alexia, despite her appearance and actions, is his son, pointing to the instability and artificiality of identity. It suggests that who we are is not tied to

material truth, official documentation, biological traits or even recorded memory, but instead shaped by perception and relational dynamics. For Vincent, Alexia's presence as Adrien transcends the visible or physical; his acceptance of her as his son, while hard to comprehend, is evident in its emotional truth. Despite the improbable circumstances that brought them together, Alexia and Vincent transform from unfamiliar strangers to intimate family members.

Vincent's home offers Alexia a safe haven, where she is able to simultaneously live out multiple identities, in contrast with life in the firefighting station and the outside world. Alexia's appearance notably raises the suspicions of Rayanne, a member of Vincent's brigade. While completing a mission together, Rayanne and Alexia are riding in the back of an ambulance. As Rayanne checks the news on his phone, an image of Alexia's face appears on a news segment, arousing his suspicion. Later on, during a party at the fire station, Rayanne threatens to reveal Alexia's identity to Vincent. Rayanne's threat incites Alexia to dance with Vincent. Vincent lifts Alexia onto his shoulder in a classic fireman's carry. The vision of Alexia spinning in slow motion is a suspension of space and time. Within this moment, Alexia seems to fully be herself and Adrien, as the pain caused by her compressed stomach in contact with Vincent's shoulder is evident on her lower face, just as her blissful, closed eyes signal a child-like pleasure at being spun around by her father.

A second dance scene occurs in the fire station, on the night of the 14th of July, for the traditional 'Bal des Pompiers' party. Alexia is carried up by her fellow crewmates onto the roof of a fire engine. As they cheer her on, encouraging her to dance, she slips back into her role as an erotic dancer. Her dancing disrupts the party when several members of the crew begin to look away. Their sense of discomfort is heightened when Vincent walks into the station and into the scene. As Alexia exaggerates the undulating movements of her body in front of Vincent, the slippage between her various identities is reflected in Vincent's reaction as he looks on, his expression conveying both a sense of alienation and recognition. Ducournau opens up the possibility for radical multiplicity of being that, while met by rejection or misunderstanding in the social sphere, are actually welcomed and hosted within the intimate space of the family: throughout the second half of the film, Alexia's ambiguity is more and more recognised and *seen* by Vincent, who appears as an ally rather than an antagonist character.

In her films, Ducournau centres the specular role of female bodies in cinema, where they operate as reflecting mirrors for all spectators alike, regardless of sex or gender. Theorists of contemporary women's cinema, such as British scholar Caroline Bainbridge, have redefined the signifying function of the feminine in film. Bainbridge notably draws on Luce Irigaray's

critique of phallogentrism and the construction of woman as commodity within the masculine economy of exchange when she writes about ‘the dominant ‘specular’ economy [as] “hom(m)osexual economy – homosexual because of the logic of the same that perpetuates it and the pun in French on the word *homme* (man)’.¹⁰⁰ For Bainbridge, using Irigaray’s theory is useful as it allows for thinking of the screen as a reflective apparatus, a mirror: ‘this perspective on the screen as mirror opens up space for understanding the fetishisation of woman in cinema, and it also clarifies how narrative structures appear to be trapped in the myth of the Oedipal relation’.¹⁰¹ In Ducournau’s films, mirrors appear frequently as visual nods to the theoretical literature on women in cinema. In *Titane*, the mirror is used to mediate the gaze of viewers directed at Alexia as the film’s central figure, recalling the mediated gaze in the Greek myth of Medusa. In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Medusa is vanquished by Perseus, who uses his reflective shield to protect himself from her petrifying gaze.¹⁰² Since the turn of the century, Medusa’s power to disarm her adversaries has been reinterpreted into an allegory for female empowerment. This has prompted a reconsideration of her significance in the Western canon, where she is now often portrayed as the original ‘feminist monster’. In the film’s prologue, a young Alexia is seated in the back of her father’s car. Rather than meeting her gaze directly, Alexia’s father looks at her through the rear-view mirror, recalling Perseus’ reflective shield. This moment of indirect gaze occurs just prior to the accident that will leave Alexia transformed. A following scene shows child Alexia in a hospital gown, her shaved head and metal brace as physical markers of her survival and metamorphosis. The mirror reappears later in the film, when an adult Alexia, on the run from the police after committing a series of murders, decides to disguise herself as a missing person, a young man she has seen on a poster at a train station. The scene that depicts her transformation is explicitly violent: after shaving her head and eyebrows with a razor, painfully disguising her breasts and pregnant stomach with tight bandaging, she violently breaks her nose by banging her head on a bathroom sink. As Alexia stares at her own deformed reflection in the mirror, she bursts into laughter. Her crudely shaved head recalls both the earlier hospital scene as well as Medusa’s own beheading. Her disfigured features nod to the mythical figure who, as Pierre Ancet reminds us, ‘possède un visage si atroce qu’il pétrifie celui qui ose s’aventurer jusqu’à elle’.¹⁰³ Yet Alexia’s violent

¹⁰⁰ Caroline Bainbridge, *A Feminine Cinematics: Luce Irigaray, Women and Film* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 19.

¹⁰¹ Bainbridge, *A Feminine Cinematics*, 36.

¹⁰² Ovid, *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*. (Xist Publishing, 2015), 96, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/usyd/detail.action?docID=2128677>.

¹⁰³ Pierre Ancet, *Phénoménologie des corps monstrueux*, (Presses Universitaires de France, 2006), 35-36.

transformation destabilises familiar visual codes of femininity in cinema. Her feminine qualities are erased, her appearance androgenised by a shaved head and bandaged body; furthermore, the bleeding wound at the centre of her face places the shift beyond a gender reversal, making her face difficult to watch: a true Medusa, whose features produce fear and horror. Barbara Creed's original conceptualisation of the 'monstrous-feminine' draws upon Freud's interpretation of Medusa, which he famously associated with castration anxiety; Creed uses this framework to theorise why the female body in horror films becomes a site of terror. Drawing on this, Ducournau presents Alexia as one of Creed's monstrous-feminine heroines, embodying a figure whose horrifying effects on spectators are 'totally dependent on the merging together of all aspects of the maternal figure into one – the horrifying image of woman as archaic mother, phallic woman and castrated body[...]'.¹⁰⁴ Alexia indeed conforms to the image of woman as *mother* (she is pregnant), as *phallic woman* (she is shaping herself into a man) and as *castrated body*, with the open wound on her face as a symbolic representation of the psychoanalytic 'lack' or 'hole' associated with castration. In *Titane*, Alexia is depicted as being in possession of phallic power, especially in her enactment of forms of violence traditionally coded as masculine.

In *Titane*, Alexia commits a series of murders, killing both strangers and her own parents. There is a strong phallic symbolism as Alexia uses a metal hairpin, the leg of a chair and finally a fire poker as her murder weapons. She seems to clearly embody Creed's conception of the monstrous feminine as a 'phallic woman', reclaiming a form of violence typically presented as male in cinema, for instance Hannibal Lecter in the classic *Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991) and the figure of the child killer in the film adaptation of Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (Lynne Ramsay, 2011); creating a full inversion of gendered dynamics in film. However, as a feminist symbol, this reversal only functions in the first part of the film and is destabilised as soon as Alexia directs violence against her own body.

This begins when, after learning of her pregnancy, Alexia attempts to induce an abortion using a metal hairpin. We are never shown Alexia's lower body in the scene; instead, the camera focuses on her facial expressions as she winces in pain, and we hear her muffled screams despite her attempts to stifle them with a wad of toilet paper. Alexia's physical trauma is carried through by the audio track: a clinking of the metal hairpin on the toilet bowl, dull

¹⁰⁴ Creed, "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine," 63.

thuds of the sharp object meeting obstacles of flesh. The scene is confronting to watch and hear as Ducournau relies on cinema's multisensory potential to trigger specific sensations in viewers. In *The Multisensory Film Experience: A Cognitive Model of Experiential Film Aesthetics* (2016), Luis Rocha Antunes explores how films can deploy 'aesthetics of pain' to create multisensory viewing experiences for spectators. According to Antunes, through sound and image, cinema can trigger a sense of pain in viewers despite the absence of physical contact.¹⁰⁵ In response, spectators may wince, tense up, or feel bodily discomfort, as if experiencing the pain themselves. In *Titane*, this makes us acutely aware of Alexia's pain, creating an identification through physical sensation between the character and the viewers, as if they were all sharing the same — monstrous and transforming — body.

Yet these episodes of self-inflicted violence, while creating an immediate physical reaction for viewers, also communicate a form of irony and distance. In the abortion scene, Alexia is wearing a bright blue t-shirt with the words 'Never Give Up' printed in pink. The slogan seems to imitate a motivational message of contemporary feminism, contrasting with what is unfolding in the scene, itself reminiscent of earlier feminist struggles and the fight to make abortions safe and legal for all women. In the scene where Alexia breaks her nose, she responds to her violent transformation with laughter. To associate an image of a woman in pain with the physical sign of humour is striking, given the long-standing cinematic and cultural representation of the female body as a site upon which violence is enacted in order to create spectacles of horror and pain. By mixing violence, pain, and humour, Ducournau confronts spectators with an ambiguous vision of female monstrosity. While her initial acts of destruction turned Alexia into an embodiment of the monstrous feminine as defined by Creed, she later turns violence against herself, complicating the audience's perception of Alexia and revealing the limitations of the feminist reversal she seemed to represent so fully. In *Devant l'image: question posée aux fins d'une histoire de l'art* (1990), art historian Georges Didi-Huberman warns against assumed truths of representation, referring to their presupposed certainty as the 'boîte de la représentation'.¹⁰⁶ It creates, according to Didi-Huberman, 'cette zone réfléchissante où spéculaire et spéculatif concourent à inventer l'objet du savoir comme la simple image du discours qui le prononce et qui le juge.'¹⁰⁷ For Didi-Huberman, confronting

¹⁰⁵ Luis Rocha Antunes, *The Multisensory Film Experience: A Cognitive Model of Experiential Film Aesthetics* (Intellect Limited, 2016) 112-153.

¹⁰⁶ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Devant l'image: question posée aux fins d'une histoire de l'art*, (Éditions Minuit, 1990), 171.

¹⁰⁷ Didi-Huberman, *Devant l'image*, 171.

images that invite us not to know but to look allows us to break through this reflecting zone. He writes:

Celui qui choisit de *savoir* seulement aura gagné, bien sur l'unité de la synthèse[...] Celui, au contraire, qui desire *voir* ou plutôt regarder perdra l'unité d'un monde clos pour se retrouvera dans l'ouverture inconfortable d'un univers désormais flottant [...] c'est ici que la synthèse se fragilisera jusqu'à l'effritement; et que l'objet du voir [...] disloquera le sujet du savoir, vouant la simple raison à quelque chose comme une déchirure.¹⁰⁸

In *Titane*, as Alexia breaks her nose and looks into the mirror, her laughter shatters our presuppositions about the representation of female bodies in cinema, from their fetishisation through the 'male gaze' to their reclaiming as 'monstrous feminine' ideals.

The image of Alexia's laughter also recalls an alternative conceptualisation of Medusa, by French writer Hélène Cixous. In her seminal essay 'The Laugh of the Medusa' Cixous rewrites the vision of Medusa not as petrifying but as laughing. She writes: 'il suffit qu'on regarde la Méduse en face pour la voir. Elle n'est pas mortelle. Elle est belle et elle rit.'¹⁰⁹ It is in this essay that Cixous introduces her theory of 'écriture féminine', a form of writing that would break the old patterns of representation anchored in what she terms 'le dogme de la castration'.¹¹⁰ Cixous's theory of 'écriture féminine' is not one that would simply respond to patriarchal frameworks of representation, but would entirely break free from them, creating a new way of writing altogether. Alexia's violent transformation and her laughter can be read as an attempt to show on screen an experience of 'écriture féminine', demonstrating not a simple appropriation of phallic power but a rescripting of the female body as a site where previous boundaries are shattered. Ducournau does not use cinema to illustrate social debates or issues. Instead, she replaces discourse with images and sensations that lead towards new experiences, both physical and theoretical. Using the body as 'écriture féminine', a site for exploration, Ducournau reveals its potential to take on multiple forms: a female body, through pregnancy, a male body through 'travestissement', a human-machine hybrid created through an accident, and a collective human body, feeling pain, expressing humour in a film that despite its violence, expresses the power of love and empathy.

¹⁰⁸ Didi-Huberman, *Devant l'image*, 172.

¹⁰⁹ Hélène Cixous, *Le rire de la Méduse et autres ironies*. (Galilée, 2010), 54.

¹¹⁰ Hélène Cixous, *Le rire de la*, 54.

SECTION 3: Renewing family ties

Julia Ducournau's cinema and its focus on the female body also zoom in on specific moments of transition: childhood to adolescence in *Junior*, adolescence to adulthood in *Grave*, and adulthood to motherhood in *Titane*, which are reimagined as sites of transformation, disruption, and monstrosity. The previous section explored how Ducournau defamiliarizes the female body by making its normal functions, such as menstruation and maternity, appear strange and uncanny. This defamiliarization can be read as a comment on the cultural construction of the female body as 'other' in relation to a male body that has long been positioned as universal in the Western world. Yet Ducournau's female characters are not simply women, but hybrid multiple beings, whose transformations exceed the boundaries of gender and sexual difference. Narratives of transformation in Ducournau's films are not merely about 'becoming woman' but about a broader unmaking of individual identity. Ducournau uses the female body to create a universal monster embracing a multiplicity no longer constrained by restrictive binary frameworks. In doing so, she does not seek to erase the notion of difference, but instead to dispel the myth of woman's eternal 'otherness' by forging 'un objet universel qui parle à tout le monde'¹¹¹ In the section 'Mythes' of the first volume of *Le deuxième sexe I*, de Beauvoir hopes that one day women will relinquish themselves from writing and re-writing narratives of otherness: 'peut-être le mythe de la femme s'éteindra-t-il un jour : plus les femmes s'affirment comme des êtres-humains, plus la merveilleuse qualité de l'Autre meurt en elles'.¹¹² Ducournau adopts and adapts this idea of universalism in feminism. She does so by perverting the rites and rituals found in universal myths to rethink the relations between mother and child, father and mother, human and animal, and offering an alternative vision of humanity and its shared foundation: the family unit.

In *Grave*, Ducournau explores rites of passage associated with adolescence: sexual initiation, sibling rivalry, and the transition to adulthood. The film's protagonist, Justine, experiences a journey of self-discovery set against the backdrop of the veterinary school and its brutal hazing rituals. On her first night, Justine is woken up by senior students to participate in a hazing for first-year students. With her roommate, Adrien, Justine is ushered through the school's corridors and stairwells until reaching a rooftop. Justine, Adrien and the other first-year students are then shown crawling on their hands and knees across the roof. Most of the students are still in their underwear or pyjamas, and the diegetic lighting beams against their

¹¹¹ Kaganski, "Sang Tabou."

¹¹² De Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe I*, 241.

exposed skin. As they crawl in single file across the roof, their bodies seemingly converge into one. In the following shot, the mass of human bodies comes to a stop in front of a wall of senior students dressed in lab coats and balaclavas. The bodies of the first-year students are filmed from behind, partially obscured by the darkness, with only their backs and shoulder blades visible. This sequence recalls a similar scene from Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1975 film *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma*. Pasolini's *Salò* is an adaptation of the Marquis de Sade's *Les Cent Vingt Journées de Sodome, ou l'École du libertinage* (1785). Pasolini's film is set in a remote manor, on the outskirts of the Italian village Salò, during Italy's fascist years under Mussolini. The film chronicles the ritual, psychological, and physical torture of a group of youths by four older men and their personal militia. During one ordeal, the youths are led, on leash and naked, crawling on hands and knees, towards a high table where they are hand-fed raw meat by their torturers. During an interview at the Marrakech film festival in Morocco, Ducournau explained that Pasolini's film was one of 'ses premiers chocs cinéphiles'.¹¹³ Her readiness to share her cinematic heritage suggests that such references are explicit in her films. In *Grave*, the hazing scenes revisiting Pasolini's *Salò* contain two intertextual layers, as they also allow Ducournau to adapt the Marquis de Sade's infamous 'école de libertinage', and his character of Justine, in a contemporary setting and from text to film. Scholars Martine Beugnet and Emmanuelle Delanoë-Brun, in their article 'Raw Becomings: Bodies, Discipline and Control in Julia Ducournau's *Grave*' (2021), define the school's *bizutage* as a backdrop for 'methodical and ritualised social regulation'.¹¹⁴ Indeed, the *bizutage* culture of the veterinary school implies order and regulation, but is inherently perverse in nature. As in the Sadean universe, regular moral laws and codes of everyday life in polite society are inverted as Justine struggles to find her place within this other world. Ducournau's character takes after her namesake in the Marquis de Sade's 'Justine fictions'.¹¹⁵ Although contemporary readings, such as James Fowler's in his article 'Justine philosophe: Sade's 'Les infortunes de la vertu' Revisited' (2010), convincingly attempt to reframe Sade's Justine as a spiritual hero in the face of libertine

¹¹³ Timé Zoppé, "Masterclasse Julia Ducournau : « L'aspect grotesque du corps, particulièrement à l'adolescence, c'est quelque chose qui me charme énormément »,» *Troiscouleurs*, November 16, 2020, <https://www.troiscouleurs.fr/cinema/cinema-news/masterclasse-julia-ducournau-laspect-grotesque-du-corps-particulierement-a-ladolescence-cest-quelque-chose-qui-me-charme-enormement/>.

¹¹⁴ Martine Beugnet, and Emmanuelle Delanoë-Brun, "Raw becomings: Bodies, discipline and control in Julia Ducournau's *Grave*," *French Screen Studies (Print)* 21, no.3 (2021): 205.

¹¹⁵ Following James Fowler, I am using the term "Justine fictions" here to refer to the figure of Justine as she manifests across all three versions of Sade's narrative: *Les Infortunes de la vertu* (1787), *Justine ou les Malheurs de la vertu* (1791), *La Nouvelle Justine ou les Malheurs de la vertu* (1797). See, James Fowler, "Justine philosophe: Sade's 'Les infortunes de la vertu' Revisited'," *Dalhousie French Studies* 92, (2010): 33-41.

philosophy, she is predominantly conceived as a victimised character, naïvely clinging to virtue in a brutal upside-down world.¹¹⁶ In an early party scene, Ducournau establishes Justine as the perfect victim figure. A toy lamb hanging from a rope acts as a visual cue foreshadowing her loss of innocence. The party itself is riotous and carnivalesque, filled with debauchery and abandon. The image of the lamb evokes the expression ‘like a lamb to the slaughter’, or the French ‘douce comme un agneau’, underscoring Justine’s vulnerability as she enters a new world she does not yet understand. This symbolism ties closely to Simone de Beauvoir’s own assessment of Sade’s Justine, whom she famously described as a lamb: ‘bêlante’,¹¹⁷ or ‘bleating’ in *Faut-il brûler Sade* (1955), an animal incapable of speech and marked by passivity and helplessness.

In *Grave*, Justine’s feelings of alienation are clearly enhanced by her sexual inexperience. Like Sade’s character, Justine is a virgin. Yet Ducournau’s film deviates from the Sadean narrative and its climactic staging of a young virgin’s deflowering. Instead, Ducournau shifts the focus to queer sexual experiences, nodding to other narratives present in Sade’s oeuvre. Justine’s roommate, Adrien, is an openly gay character and, contrasting with Justine, he immediately embraces the school’s hazing culture. When viewed through the lens of Sadean sociability, Adrien embodies a kind of ultimate and privileged insider: in libertine philosophy, homosexuality and the practice of sodomy represent the ultimate rejection of societal norms and moral constraints. This is because sodomy subverts the reproductive end-goal of sexual intercourse. As Jean-Marc Rohrbasser and Jacques Véron highlight ‘prenant le contrepied des philosophes des Lumières aux convictions populationnistes, Sade rejette vigoureusement l’assimilation de la « propagation » humaine [...] à une loi nécessaire de la nature.’¹¹⁸ Sodomy, therefore, is a means for Sade to perform philosophical transgression in his texts since, as Rohrbasser and Véron argue, ‘le frein par excellence à la propagation de l’espèce humaine serait pour Sade une pratique généralisée de la sodomie’.¹¹⁹ Adrien’s preference for homosexual relations over heterosexual relations diverts the primary purpose of intercourse from reproduction to pleasure and undermines society’s assumed ‘natural’ moral laws. Justine’s friendship with Adrien serves as an introduction point to her surrounding environment: it is by witnessing Adrien engaging in sexual relations with other male students that Justine witnesses human sexual relations for the first time. She first sees Adrien kissing

¹¹⁶ Fowler, “Justine Philosophe,” 33-41.

¹¹⁷ Simone de Beauvoir, *Faut-il brûler Sade* ?(Gallimard, 1955), 37,

¹¹⁸ Jean-Marc Rohrbasser and Jacques Véron, “Le marquis de Sade et la question de la population,” *Population* 74, no. 3(2019): 252, <https://doi.org/10.3917/popu.1903.0251>.

¹¹⁹ Rohrbasser and Véron, “Le marquis de Sade,” 264.

another male student. Later, she sees him receiving fellatio from a fellow student before he unceremoniously shuts the door. Justine ends up losing her virginity to Adrien after walking in on him watching pornography and masturbating. Ducournau stages Justine's sexual initiation in a way that subverts dominant Western expectations surrounding the loss of virginity for young women.

This rite of passage is usually portrayed within heteronormative frameworks, in which a young woman's virginity is something reluctantly given or offered to a male partner in exchange for romantic love. For instance, Catherine Breillat's film *À ma soeur!* (2001) explores the sexual initiation of two adolescent sisters, Elena and Anaïs. Breillat's film depicts the older sister's sexual initiation in conventional terms, as Elena is seduced by an older male student, Fernando, who attempts to coerce her into having intercourse with him. Reluctant to give up her virginity, Elena agrees to engage in anal intercourse instead. For film scholar Emily Fox-Kales, Breillat's portrayal of Elena's negotiations around the giving away or withholding of her virginity demonstrates how 'the film interrogates the tension between desire and shame embedded in the construct of virginity itself'.¹²⁰ While Elena may have a say in the terms of her sexual initiation, her younger sister Anaïs, on the other hand, does not, and is brutally raped at the end of the film. Breillat's film explores the sexual initiation of two sisters through the lens of heterosexual desire, and as an experience that can potentially involve violence and signifies loss. Ducournau simultaneously borrows and complicates this narrative by interweaving sexual initiation, sibling love and rivalry with cannibalism. Ducournau replaces the older male figure typical of the traditional sexual initiation narrative with Justine's older sister, Alex. Justine has been brought up in a family of strict vegetarians, and assumes her sister follows the same dietary restrictions. However, her sister quickly forces her to eat a raw rabbit kidney as a part of one of the school's hazing rituals. Once she has ingested meat for the first time, Justine begins to notice bodily changes and a new hunger, which coincides with her newfound physical attraction for Adrien and later morphs into animalistic desires. Justine's first act of cannibalism involves her sister Alex, who accidentally cuts off one of her fingers whilst giving Justine a bikini wax. After taking one look at the blood and the gaping wound on her hand, Alex faints. While Alex lies unconscious on the floor beside her, Justine eats her finger. Creed reads Justine's act 'as a symbolic act of fellatio with queer/incestuous undertones'.¹²¹ In this scene, sexual and cannibalistic awakenings are profoundly intertwined.

¹²⁰ Emily Fox-Kales, "À ma soeur!: Erotic Bodies and the Primal Scene Reconfigured," *Journal for Cultural Research* 14, no. 1 (2010):16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14797580903363058>.

¹²¹ Creed, *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine*, 137.

Yet Ducournau's trivialisation of the female body in 'gross-out' scenes such as this one allows for a more literal interpretation of Alex's finger, as a material piece of human flesh rather than a 'symbolic fellatio'. Within queer and lesbian communities, the finger is an important signifier of female pleasure: to see Alex's finger as a finger actually reinforces the 'queer/incestuous undertones' that Creed identifies in the scene. Justine's first act of cannibalism, when read within the context of female pleasure initiated and passed down from older to younger sister, can also be read as a masturbatory act, this time a 'symbolic fingering' in which Alex is more an accessory than a participant.

Justine's consumption of her sister's flesh blurs the boundaries between the sisters' bodies and destabilises the distinction between their individual identities. Beauvoir observed in *Le deuxième sexe I*, that 'pour s'accomplir'¹²² the female subject looks for a close friend or a sister, acting as her double, taking her beyond the 'limites de son moi' and as a 'témoin qui le lui restitue'.¹²³ The sisters' shared cannibalism in *Grave* both confirms and perverts this idea, testing Beauvoir's view of sisterly relations to its own limits. Ducournau also complicates traditional representations of sexual initiation by shifting the focus away from an individual and heterosexual narrative of heterosexual desire, instead placing female pleasure at the centre; using Justine's transgressive act of eating human flesh and the incestuous consummation of her sister's body to expose and deride how masturbation is also tabooed, despite it being a universal practice and its discovery a collective rite of passage on the journey to adulthood.

While in *Grave*, the sisterly bond is used to depict an adolescent's sexual initiation; in *Titane*, Ducournau explores the rites of passage associated with manhood through the father-son dyptich. Vincent's embrace of Adrien upon his 'return' reminds us of the parable of the prodigal son, where a father welcomes back his estranged child with open arms, offering love and forgiveness despite past transgressions. Adrien's reappearance, even if played by Alexia, provides Vincent with a second chance to fulfil his role as a father. A central theme of the biblical parable of the prodigal son is redemption, in particular for the returning son. This dynamic is both maintained and inverted in Ducournau's film, in which Vincent seeks redemption for past wrongs through the correction and formation of his son, as he sets about moulding Alexia-Adrien in his image. In religious or mythical tales and myths, a key element of the archetypal hero's journey towards adulthood is when a father imparts his wisdom and skills to his departing son. In *Titane*, Vincent is seen teaching Adrien a lesson in a scene that

¹²² De Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe II*, 106.

¹²³ De Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe II*, 107.

contains a reference to another family relationship, that of a mother and a son. The fire brigade is called to a house, where a distressed mother is concerned about her adult son's welfare: Vincent, Adrien and Rayanne enter the son's bedroom to find him lying on the bed unconscious, next to a box of pills. As Vincent and Rayanne work to resuscitate him, the mother suffers a cardiac arrest. Vincent then instructs Adrien on how to perform CPR (singing the tune of the Macarena song to mark the rhythm of the chest compressions) until the woman regains consciousness. This scene of life and death, with saviours and victims, reflects a strange symmetry of familial relations. Vincent and Adrien are in sync as they apply lifesaving procedures on a mother and her son, an act that both mirrors and inverts their own relationship, strengthening it just as it emphasises the fragility of human life.

This scene opens a portal between life and death. Vincent's skills, as he is able to resuscitate both victims, are on display, and his profession as a fireman grants him a god-like power. Vincent embraces this by explicitly declaring himself God to his troop in a previous scene. Vincent's God complex impacts his relationship with Adrien/Alexia. By accepting Alexia as Adrien without question, Vincent effectively acts, to himself and to the world, the return of his son and reclaims his role as a father. Ducournau constructs Vincent as a delusional character, disturbing conventional depictions of father-son relationships. This is most evident during an intimate scene in the bathroom, where Vincent asks Adrien to help him administer a dose of steroids. A low-angle shot shows the side of Vincent's bare buttocks. As Alexia/Adrien strikes the flesh with the needle, Vincent jerks forward and exhales in discomfort. This shot of Adrien pressing the syringe into the flesh of Vincent's buttocks is voluntarily ambiguous: while the two characters are engaged in a practice of care where one is administering and the other at the receiving end, the phallic symbol of the syringe and Vincent's nudity as well as bodily reaction implicitly nod to sexual intercourse. This transgression is reinforced moments later, when Vincent tenderly kisses Adrien on the cheek. In this scene, Vincent's incestuous desire is visually obvious but only for an instant, as Vincent's actions quickly morph back into something else. He then sits Alexia as Adrien on the edge of the bathtub, applies shaving cream to her face and proceeds to shave it. The ambiguity nonetheless remains, sustained by the viewer's knowledge that Alexia's female body is hidden but present throughout the film. In this scene, two familiar ideas on family are played out and subsequently inverted: first, the common belief that a child must care for an aging parent, and second, a young man's first shave as a practice passed down from father to son. Ducournau's depiction of these common tropes helps her transcend relational boundaries: parent-child paradigms are unmade through a radical approach to interdependence. While transgression is hinted at, it is never realised as such;

instead, Vincent and Adrien-Alexia relate to one another through what are ultimately gestures of care.

Ducournau's *Titane* plunges viewers into Vincent's redemptive fantasy, as he reclaims his role as a father to his missing son. As their relationship unfolds, Ducournau flirts with transgression, hinting at societal taboos surrounding incest as well as homosexuality. Yet these taboos can only be transgressed within the confines of Vincent's own delusional world, ruled by his belief that Alexia is indeed Adrien. Alexia's disguise as Adrien, the fact that she is a woman posing as a man, complicates the father-son dynamic and overlays their growing physical and emotional connection with a narrative typical of a heterosexual romance. Alexia becomes the object of Vincent's paternal and platonic desire in her role as his son. Vincent's desire for his son subverts the conventions of the heterosexual romance, in which the woman is typically the object of a man's desire, while at the same time maintaining it: Alexia's body is at the receiving end of his desire. For her part, Alexia conforms to Vincent's world view not simply by 'dressing' as his son but by being a 'cinematic woman', a screen or reflection of male desire. Alexia neither actively resists this role nor adopts it willingly; rather, she grows into it through sheer necessity to survive. To a certain extent, Alexia's transformation into Adrien is mediated through subjugation, manifesting in a physical power imbalance that defines her early interactions with Vincent. This imbalance is intensified as the film progresses: Alexia physically weakens as her pregnancy develops, becoming increasingly dependent on Vincent. Her physical journey culminates in the final scene, where Alexia gives birth to her child, assisted by Vincent.

As Alexia goes into labour, her maternal body is exposed: for Vincent, it becomes a moment of shattered illusion. Yet Vincent quickly switches roles, from father to caregiver, reverting to his fireman training as he lifts Alexia and places her in the right position for delivering her baby. A following shot shows Alexia from behind, lying on her back as Vincent spreads her legs open and tells her to start pushing. In this moment, Vincent calls her Adrien; she responds by telling him her real name. A following high-angle shot shows Alexia holding Vincent's head to her chest in an embrace that conflates love-making, giving birth, and the image of a mother nursing a child (see fig. 12). This scene undoes the separation of roles within the family unit as both Vincent and Alexia merge into a plurality of positions. Alexia is at once Vincent's patient, his son, potential lover, and mother, as well as being the mother of the child being born. After giving birth, Alexia dies. Vincent's attempts to resuscitate her fail, and end as he brings his lips to hers, in a final kiss reminiscent of classic love story endings, from *Romeo and Juliet* to *Esmeralda*. In this moment, the narrative arc of the heterosexual romance

deployed by Ducournau is complete. The final shot shows Vincent lying on the bed, holding the newborn's arm to his chest. His hands are covered in motor oil, and the infant has a metal spine. In the absence of the child's mother, Vincent is both father and mother, embodying multiple roles once more. With this final scene, Ducournau reimagines the traditional family unit, opening familial relations to a radical multiplicity.

This moment is sanctified by Bach's *La Passion Selon Saint Mathieu*, further elevating Ducournau's vision of the monstrous family unit from narrative transgression to universalising myth. In an interview with me, Jean-Christophe Bouzy, the head editor for all of Ducournau's films, emphasised that this final scene was visually and narratively built upon Bach's composition. He explains: 'c'est typiquement une scène où on a toujours eu ce morceau-là, [...] quand on s'est retrouvés à la détection, [...] on a vu cette scène-là pour la première fois depuis des mois sans musique et [...] il manquait vraiment quelque chose, c'est-à-dire que le tout avait été monté, toute cette acmé, cette espèce de voilà d'apothéose avait été montée sur la musique complètement'.¹²⁴ Ultimately, it is through their, what Bouzy refers to as 'travail sensoriel',¹²⁵ a collaboration between editor and director, that Ducournau and Bouzy create an emotional register that secures the audience's surrender to Ducournau's intimate and deeply personal vision. As Bouzy asserts: 'on doit accepter, on doit faire accepter le spectateur, et ça passe aussi par la chorégraphie, la musique.'¹²⁶

The family in Ducournau's cinema functions as a perverted structure, both literally and symbolically. In *Titane*, this perversion centres on a longing that exceeds conventional parental affection and collapses traditional parent-child boundaries. In *Grave*, Ducournau depicts a grotesque vision of the family that feeds off itself, centring sisterly relations rather than the hierarchical dynamics of a traditional patriarchal familial structure. The cannibalistic family unit in *Grave* offers a surprisingly utopian vision of self-sustaining, non-hierarchical relations. This reorientation of how families function and how they are seen in Ducournau's cinema aligns with Juliet Mitchell's concept of the 'Law of the Mother'. In her book *Fratriarchy: The Sibling Trauma and the Law of the Mother* (2023), Mitchell defines the 'Law of the Mother' as follows:

Becoming members of human society is initially achieved through the interaction of siblings yet the fundamental rules come from parents in the family. Most of the world today operates upon patriarchal and patrilineal vertical family lines through what has

¹²⁴ Jean-Christophe Bouzy, "Appendix 1."

¹²⁵ Bouzy, "Appendix 1."

¹²⁶ Bouzy, "Appendix 1."

been called the ‘Law of the Father’. When he is four or five years old this Law is instilled in the father’s son and in his daughter in so far as she is the same as her brother. This is the world-renowned but much contested ‘Oedipus complex’. Incest with the mother is universally prohibited by the patriarch who threatens his son with castration – which although in the main symbolic may seem potentially actual to a small child. Instead, or rather as well as, [...] prior to this stage, the mother insists on the same prohibitions, but with different effects – she insists that there must be no incest or murder *between* her children, that is between the siblings. On the social, horizontal axis, this prohibition between siblings applies equally to sisters and to brothers as they reach two to three years old – and it is this prohibition that I claim as the *Law of the Mother*.¹²⁷

This law functions across a lateral axis of sibling relations, prohibiting incest and murder between peers to challenge the traditional ‘vertical’ patriarchal structure of the family. Mitchell’s thinking represents a reshuffling of the laws of relationality, from the vertical, psychosexual ‘Law of the Father’ to a horizontal, homosocial ‘Law of the Mother’. This fundamental change is explored further in Ducournau’s latest film *Alpha* (2025), which revolves around family loss and grief. In *Alpha* the eponymous protagonist’s mother is the head of the family. Set in a recent dystopian past, where a fatal virus is spreading, the family’s survival is reliant on the mother’s ability to sustain her sick brother and her potentially infected daughter. The mother is a protector figure, operating across a lateral axis of siblings, creating a network of care and containment. Such monstrous families in Ducournau’s cinema offer a vision of humanity that resonates in the work of Virginie Despentes, where social communities are perpetually caught within a cannibalistic cycle of formation and self-disintegration. In the following chapter, Despentes’ engagement with the Punk aesthetic in her fabrication of ‘monstrous texts’ will be explored. The chapter begins with an investigation of the ‘pig’ motif and zoomorphism in her collection of short stories *Mordre au travers* (1999) to show how the author thinks through a humanity that constitutes itself through its consumption and consummation of flesh.

¹²⁷ Juliet Mitchell, *Fratriarchy: The Sibling Trauma and the Law of the Mother*, (Routledge, 2023) 4, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003347125>.

CHAPTER 2: Virginie Despentes' monstrous communities

Writer and filmmaker Virginie Despentes is one of the leading voices of French feminism today, who uses her voice to speak for the collective. A prime example of this is her 2020 article in French daily newspaper *Libération* entitled 'Désormais on se lève et on se casse', which she wrote in response to Adèle Haenel's *Césars* walk-out.¹²⁸ Despentes' article appeared nearly three years after French journalist Sandra Muller launched the hashtag #BalanceTonPorc across social media, effectively sparking the French equivalent of the #MeToo movement.¹²⁹ The title of Despentes' article at once provides a vivid retelling of Haenel's protest during the *Césars* and proposes a new slogan for the cause, suggesting that 'balance ton porc' should now lead to action: 'désormais on se lève et on se casse'. Despentes' influence is made clear by her prominent place in contemporary popular culture, and she is often invited as a guest speaker on mainstream TV and radio to discuss women and gendered power dynamics. She has featured as a guest on Léa Salamé's series *Les Femmes puissantes* on France Inter, a leading channel on France's national radio station, as well as across mainstream feminist cultural platforms such as Victoire Tuaillon's podcast *Les Couilles sur la table* and Lauren Bastide's *La poudre*.¹³⁰

Nonetheless, Despentes' influence within the French cultural sphere extends beyond her intervention in feminist discourse and debates about women's place in French society today. Despentes is also of course a successful novelist, with several of her titles receiving both critical and popular acclaim. Her 2010 crime-fiction novel *Apocalypse bébé* was awarded the Prix Renaudot. Only a few years later, her *Vernon Subutex* trilogy (January 2015, June 2015, and May 2017) was hailed by critics as the 21st century version of Balzac's *Comédie humaine*, attracting many readers and quickly becoming a best-seller, with the first volume selling

¹²⁸ Virginie Despentes, "Césars : « Désormais on se lève et on se casse », par Virginie Despentes," *Libération*, March 01, 2020, https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2020/03/01/cesars-desormais-on-se-leve-et-on-se-barre_1780212/.

¹²⁹ Sandrine Bajos, "Sandra Muller a lancé #Balancetonporc : «Je l'ai fait pour toutes les victimes»," *Le Parisien*, October 15, 2017, <https://www.leparisien.fr/laparisienne/actualites/sandra-muller-a-lance-balancetonporc-je-l-ai-fait-pour-toutes-les-victimes-15-10-2017-7333434.php>.

¹³⁰ See, Léa Salamé, "Virginie Despentes : "Être puissante, c'est écrire des pages qui portent un coup", *France inter*, December 28, 2019, <https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceinter/podcasts/femmes-puissantes/virginie-despentes-etre-puissante-c-est-ecrire-des-pages-qui-portent-un-coup-4941457>, Lauren Bastide, "Épisode 119 – Virginie Despentes," *La poudre*, August 31, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/episode/0Lq6vkImKmW16DQVJ0czwz>, and Victoire Tuaillon, "Virginie Despentes | Meuf King Kong," *Les Couilles sur la table*, September 12, 2019, <https://www.binge.audio/podcast/les-couilles-sur-la-table/virginie-despentes-meuf-king-kong>.

300,000 copies.¹³¹ While the commercial success of the trilogy bolstered Despentès' reputation as a major contemporary French novelist, some commentators have been more cynical about her rise in popularity. For instance, in her book *Le génie lesbien* (2020), French journalist and activist Alice Coffin suggests that the recent embrace of Despentès as a great writer of today is largely due to her use of a male character as the hero of the *Vernon Subutex* trilogy. As Coffin notes, *Vernon Subutex* is 'bien plus encensé par les critiques que n'importe quel de ses précédents romans' simply because 'c'est le seul à avoir pour héros un homme.'¹³² The rise in Despentès' reputation following the success of *Vernon Subutex* has been reflected in academic scholarship: a 2018 special edition of the *Rocky Mountain Review* is dedicated to Despentès' oeuvre and literary career, and since more than a dozen critical studies have been published on her work, most notably Louis-Thomas Leguerrier's book *Punk rock théorie: Despentès et la destruction de l'identité* (2024) and Michèle Schaal's recent monograph *Grrrl Writing: Virginie Despentès's Authorial Politics* (2026). In her introduction, 'From Margins to Center (?)', Michèle Schaal traces the evolution of Despentès' career and maps her trajectory from marginal to institutionalised writer in the French literary world.¹³³ Schaal argues that despite Despentès' nomination as a member of the prestigious Prix Goncourt jury, an honour that allowed her to 'become part of the French literary establishment'¹³⁴, she maintains that 'marginalization – whether gendered, sexual, racial, religious, literary, artistic, or class-based – remains at the heart of her aesthetics and authorial politics'.¹³⁵

Marginalisation and recognition by the institution are perhaps not as opposed as Schaal suggests. Early in her literary career, Despentès' work was already attracting the attention of a specific subset of France's literary establishment. In 1997, her work was featured in the publication *dix* (1997), an anthology of short stories published by the cultural magazine *Les Inrockuptibles*. In their preface, the editors of the collection, journalists Marc Weitzmann and Sylvain Bourmeau, explained that they sought to go against the grain of what they saw as the mainstream critique and reveal a different facet of the literary landscape. Rather than presenting a homogeneous bloc of writers, grouped together by generation, Weitzmann and Bourmeau

¹³¹ See, Laurence Houtot, "'Vernon Subutex 1' : Virginie Despentès scanne la société française," *Franceinfo : Culture*, January 5, 2015, https://www.franceinfo.fr/culture/livres/roman/vernon-subutex-1-virginie-despentès-scanne-la-société-française_3331907.html, and Raphaëlle Leyris "Avec « Vernon Subutex 3 », Virginie Despentès achève sa trilogie sur la France," *Le Monde*, May 24, 2017, https://www.lemonde.fr/livres/article/2017/05/24/virginie-despentès-en-empathie_5132879_3260.html.

¹³² Alice Coffin, *Le génie lesbien*, (Grasset, 2020), 26, Kindle.

¹³³ Michèle Schaal, "Introduction to Special Issue on Virginie Despentès. From Margins to Center ()," *Rocky Mountain Review* 72, no. 1 (2018): 14-35, <https://doi.org/10.1353/rmr.2018.0001>.

¹³⁴ Michèle Schaal, "Introduction to Special Issue," 16.

¹³⁵ Michèle Schaal, "Introduction to Special Issue," 16.

intended to showcase each author based on singularity, and their approach to literary writing characterised by ‘une articulation nouvelle entre subjectivité et réalisme’.¹³⁶ Their collection included stories from ten writers, including Michel Houellebecq and Marie Darrieussecq, who, like Despentès, would become some of the most influential voices in contemporary French literature.

In the academic field, and the Anglophone world in particular, Despentès’ work was also noticed early on, predominantly by scholars in Gender & Woman studies in the US and in Contemporary French women’s writing in the UK. The latter explicitly confronted French critical approaches to contemporary literature, and especially its tendency to, as Weitzmann and Bourmeau were doing, group together several writers despite their gender. British scholar Shirley Ann Jordan, in her seminal *Contemporary French women’s writing: women’s visions, women’s voice and women’s lives* (2004), writes in her introduction how ‘during the 1990s the idea began to crystallise that a ‘new generation’ of writers was emerging.[...] Women writers were treated as a subset of this new generation, frequently receiving separate, collective coverage[...]’.¹³⁷ Her study instead focuses on the work of six women writers: Marie Darrieussecq, Virginie Despentès, Marie Ndiaye, Agnès Desarthe, Lorette Nobécourt, and Amélie Nothomb, and explores the relationship between writing and life. As she writes: ‘fictionalised accounts invite us to explore between the visions and voices of the text and the lived reality of individual women’.¹³⁸

Across the pond, as the *dix* anthology demonstrates, critics were not interested in treating Despentès as part of a subset of a new generation of *women* writers, but as an individual voice within a broader evolving literary landscape. Despentès herself expresses this resistance towards categorising authors in terms of sex or gender at the time. In her essay *King Kong théorie* (2006), she pushes back against comparisons made by women’s writing and gender studies scholars: ‘on ne me compare qu’à d’autres femmes, Marie Darrieussecq, Amélie Nothomb, Lorette Nobécourt, qu’importe pourvu qu’on ait environ le même âge. Et surtout: qu’on soit du même sexe’.¹³⁹

This tendency to label Despentès as an icon of contemporary women’s writing or as a new ‘Balzac’ whose work embraces all French society is a clear point of contention in the

¹³⁶ Sylvain Bourmeau and Marc Weitzmann, “Préface,” *dix*, eds., by Sylvain Bourmeau and Marc Weitzmann, (Grasset/Les Inrockuptibles, 1997), 6.

¹³⁷ Shirley Ann Jordan, *Contemporary French women’s writing: women’s visions, women’s voice and women’s lives*, (Peter Lang, 2004), 16.

¹³⁸ Jordan, *Contemporary French women’s writing*, 21.

¹³⁹ Despentès, *King Kong théorie*, 120.

Anglophone and Francophone contexts. This critical reception has led to an impasse in our understanding of her work. This chapter offers a third path. It explores the extreme violence in Desportes' texts and films not as an expression of the 'monstrous-feminine'¹⁴⁰: a feminist assault on patriarchal society, but as a work producing new ways of relating from friendship to coupledness to community.

This chapter first examines the representation of sex and violence in two of Desportes' early artistic projects: her collection of short stories *Mordre au travers* (1999), and her novel *Baise-moi* (1994) and its 2000 film adaptation of the same name. It investigates how Desportes experiments with the Punk aesthetic of the French alternative scene to interrogate the boundary between human and beast. Then, this chapter turns, specifically to *Baise-moi*, to examine how Desportes draws on the architecture of the Sadean text to articulate her own Punk philosophy. Then, it turns to a reading of *Apocalypse bébé* and *Baise-moi* to investigate how Desportes' embrace of punk philosophy and aesthetics produces texts that announce trajectories of chaos and destruction. Finally, this chapter examines Desportes' rebuilding of structures of connection and care through the figure of the monstrous couple in *Vernon Subutex* to present a vision of an alternative community.

SECTION 1: Desportes' zoomorphic writing

Marie Darrieussecq and Virginie Desportes have often been discussed in studies focusing on contemporary women's writing and/or filmmaking in French. This is evident not only in Jordan's study as mentioned above, but more recently in Dominique Carlini-Versini's monograph *Figures de l'excès chez Marie Darrieussecq, Virginie Desportes et Marina de Van* (2023), where she writes about bodily excess and corporeality in their respective works. She includes case studies focusing on each of these authors' first works: Darrieussecq's *Truismes* (1996) and Desportes' novel *Baise-moi* and its film adaptation (2000). Marie Darrieussecq's debut novel *Truismes* (1996) is about a young woman who transforms into a sow. This novel has equally garnered the attention of Amaleena Damlé, who includes Darrieussecq's novel as a case study in her book *The Becoming of the Body: Contemporary Women's Writing in French* (2014), among other texts authored by French women writers. As Damlé notes, the motif of the sow in Darrieussecq's *Truismes* allows for an exploration of female corporeality since 'the

¹⁴⁰ Creed, *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine*.

relationship between femininity and the pig is cemented in the cultural imaginary'.¹⁴¹ Another of Desportes' early works, a collection of short stories entitled *Mordre au travers* published in 1999, has received little critical attention. The collection includes eleven stories, all written between 1994 and 1997 during her early career years and after she published *Baise-moi*.¹⁴² In one of the stories included in the collection, entitled 'Sale grosse truie', like Darrieussecq, Desportes deploys the motif of the sow. The narrative does not stage an actual metamorphosis, yet the tale relies on zoomorphism in another way. Zoomorphism, or the attribution of animalistic qualities to a human subject, becomes the stage for an exploration of extreme verbal and physical violence. In Desportes' tale, zoomorphism is not used to present the female body as a site of alienation, but to propose a radical vision of self-acceptance that is universal in nature.

Desportes' tale is about a woman who spies on her adulterous husband. Like in *Truismes*, the female protagonist remains unnamed throughout. The frequent use of *style indirect libre* interweaves an omniscient narration with the female character's perspective. The phrase 'elle l'avait vu'¹⁴³ is repeated five times in the story's second paragraph, centering the female character's gaze on the scene. This emphasis on the acts of looking and spying puts the protagonist in the position of observer rather than actor. As she watches her husband and his female lovers, the narrative voice focuses on both women's physical appearance: 'une blonde[...] au joli sourire' and 'une brune [...] à poitrine énorme',¹⁴⁴ focusing on attributes typically associated with femininity and male desire. The voyeuristic structure is reinforced by the central character's visualisation of the sexual spectacle: 'Elle l'avait imaginé avec chacune d'entre elles, éjaculer dans leurs entrailles et les serrer contre son corps'.¹⁴⁵ She presents herself as a spectator, where active participation is deemed impossible because of her perceived physical undesirability: 'quand elle était avec lui, elle voyait leurs reflets dans les vitrines des magasins. Et elle était si laide'.¹⁴⁶ While the bodies of other women take on distinctive and desirable forms, one possessing 'une taille de gamine' and another a 'poitrine énorme',¹⁴⁷ hers is described as 'épais', 'flasque' and 'informe'.¹⁴⁸ This self-proclaimed deformity stems from

¹⁴¹ Amaleena, Damlé, *The Becoming of the Body: Contemporary Women's Writing in French* (Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 133.

¹⁴² During this period Desportes also published her second novel *Les Chiennes savantes* with the French publishing house Florent Massot in 1996.

¹⁴³ Virginie Desportes, *Mordre au travers*, (Librio 2000), 35.

¹⁴⁴ Desportes, *Mordre au travers*, 35.

¹⁴⁵ Desportes, *Mordre au travers*, 35.

¹⁴⁶ Desportes, *Mordre au travers*, 36.

¹⁴⁷ Desportes, *Mordre au travers*, 35.

¹⁴⁸ Desportes, *Mordre au travers*, 36-37.

the protagonist's overeating, which is revealed through an excessive use of zoomorphic descriptions: 'elle bâfrait comme une vache. Une grosse truie qu'elle était', for instance.¹⁴⁹ By using terms such as 'bâfrer', 'vache' and 'truie', Despentès's protagonist is likened to a farm animal, relegating her character to the non-human realm. It is this alienating transformation, through self-directed violent speech, from human to animal, that announces the act of self-destruction that concludes the tale.

The insistence on physical appearance can be read through Despentès' interest in bodies that deviate from socially accepted beauty standards. It also highlights similarities between her short story and Darrieussecq's novel as discussed in Jordan's study. Jordan explains how *Truismes* narrates a gradual physical transformation that signifies self-disgust. As she writes, 'what comes to the fore are her increasingly acute sense of shame, negative self-perception and lack of autonomy as her body deviates from society's exacting gold standard of sexual desirability'.¹⁵⁰ Despentès' 'Sale grosse truie' uses the same motif of the sow to make a similar point, but uses a different language and literary style, exploring a different type of transformation. Both the distance and similarity between the two texts can be observed in parallel scenes, where the protagonists are facing a mirror. In 'Sale grosse truie', the character addresses her naked reflection: 'à mi-voix elle se répétait : « Sale grosse truie, putain de sale grosse truie, grosse vache.» [...] « Regarde-toi, putain de sale grosse truie, grosse vache, c'est dégueulasse, tu fais vomir'.¹⁵¹ The use of the imperative form externalises the character's inner voice. This linguistic device creates the impression of a split self, with two distinct voices present in a singular body. Within the structure of the text, this confrontation with the mirror serves to destabilise the distance between the narrator's voice and the voice of the protagonist. The female figure thus embodies a duality. She is at once the narrator and the narrated, the looking subject and the looked-at object. The narrator in Darrieussecq's novel spends countless moments in front of a mirror, observing her body's changes; yet it is not until the end of the novel that she is able to accept her transformed self. During an episode in which she visits a marabout¹⁵², Darrieussecq's narrator addresses readers directly: 'il fallait toujours qu'on se mette à quatre pattes devant la glace [...] Il est encore trop tôt pour vous dire ce que j'ai vu dans

¹⁴⁹ Despentès, *Mordre au travers*, 37.

¹⁵⁰ Jordan, *Contemporary French women's writing*, 144.

¹⁵¹ Despentès, *Mordre au travers*, 39.

¹⁵² The Britannica online encyclopaedia defines a 'marabout' as: 'marabout, originally, in North Africa, member of a Muslim religious community living in a ribāt, a fortified monastery, serving both religious and military functions. Men who possessed certain religious qualifications, such as the reciters of the Qur'ān (qurrā), transmitters of Hadith (muhaddithūn), jurists of Islamic law (fuqahā), and ascetics, lived in the ribāt and were held in honour by the common people.' *Britannica*, s.v. "marabout," accessed February 19, 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/marabout>.

la glace, vous ne me croiriez pas'.¹⁵³ While the motif of the mirror operates in Darrieussecq's novel as a site of denial, in which the reality of the female character's physical transformation into a sow is ignored and where the character attempts to reconcile with her self-image, in Despentès' tale, the mirror is a site of radical, if harsh, acceptance. Darrieussecq's character takes pains to conform to society's beauty standards by buying expensive skin or hair care products and dresses to reverse the effects of her physical transformation. Despentès' protagonist ultimately reconciles and accepts her animality. In the final paragraphs of 'Sale grosse truie', the character takes a knife to her own naked body and starts to slash through her flesh: 'avec un gros couteau, elle se mit à taillader son propre ventre'.¹⁵⁴ In 'Mordre au travers: un traité au féminin sur la violence'(2018), Collette Trout explains this extreme act of violence as a critique of society's labelling of women who do not conform to its beauty standards as 'monsters'. She writes: 'Despentès pousse jusqu'au bout, comme le fait Marie Darrieussecq dans *Truismes*, l'idée que la femme qui n'entre pas dans les normes de la beauté est un monstre qui n'a d'autre solution que de se supprimer.'¹⁵⁵ Following Trout's logic, in this scene, the female character internalises the social gaze, and, with this internalisation, comes a transformation of its symbolic gendered violence into a real act of physical harm. Indeed, the gendered element of her verbal and physical self-aggression is evident when considering her use of everyday pejorative speech aimed at women, such as 'sale truie' and 'vache'.

However, the character's behaviour is so extreme and abject that it complicates a straightforward gendered reading of violence in the text. Rather than simply critiquing society's impulse to label women as animals and monsters, Despentès also creates a form of bodily spectacle. The narrator invites readers to bear witness to the character's self-curated physical degradation. We are looking at her on her terms, as she looks at herself in the mirror, unmediated by any other gaze. In the passage that depicts her self-mutilation, moments of explicit violence are mixed in with sexually suggestive imagery: 'carnage, chair déchiquetée, elle hurlait à gorge déployée, et plus elle regardait ce ventre tout maculé de sang, ça l'a rendue comme folle et elle se mit à charcuter là-dedans avec une rage jouissive et délivrante'.¹⁵⁶ By shifting violence from corporal to sexual, Despentès also blurs the line between pleasure and pain using a distortion of language. For instance, she turns the usual expression 'rire à gorge déployée' into 'hurler à gorge déployée'. While Trout reads this scene as a self-destruction,

¹⁵³ Marie Darrieussecq, *Truismes*, (P.O.L, 1996), 43.

¹⁵⁴ Despentès, *Mordre au travers*, 40.

¹⁵⁵ Colette Trout, "Mordre au travers : un traité au féminin sur la violence," *Rocky Mountain Review* 72, no.1 (2018): 111.

¹⁵⁶ Despentès, *Mordre au travers*, 40.

Despentes' ambiguous language opens the possibility of an alternative reading, one centred around the idea of freedom, expressed by the character's 'rage jouissive et délivrante'. She achieves deliverance by using violence to transform her body into actual meat, reconciling the vision she holds of herself as a 'trueie' by literally becoming one. In doing so, the character finds pleasure in this state of fusion between her body and its image. This same disquieting depiction of self-inflicted violence occurs in the mirror scene in *Titane*, discussed in the previous chapter, where Alexia violently breaks her own nose, then laughs at her disfigured reflection. Like Despentes, Ducournau transgresses the boundary between pleasure and pain in moments of metamorphosis. In these moments, the female body is treated by both artists as raw material: matter to experiment with and create new forms of being.

The motif of the 'trueie' is central to 'Sale grosse trueie'. However, this imagery is not restricted to this story, or even to a specifically female-centric experience; Despentes extends this metaphor to the male body in another story of her collection, entitled 'Domina.' In this story, a young woman loses her job as a masseuse, moves in with her boyfriend, and, finding herself in need of a fast way to make money, advertises herself as a dominatrix on an internet site. A few days later, she meets a man interested in her services, and they negotiate a price. At first, the man is described as resembling 'un joli cochon'.¹⁵⁷ The description of him dressed in a green suit and having 'de jolis yeux bleus'¹⁵⁸ does not intuitively conjure the image of a pig. Indeed, Despentes uses the term figuratively, playing on the other meaning of 'cochon', used colloquially to refer to someone who 'likes to play it dirty' in the bedroom. As their relations progress, the male character is also described physically as a pig-like creature: as he undresses, he reveals 'un petit bidon tout rond, la peau déjà un peu distendue'.¹⁵⁹ The transformation of the male body into a pig, and the figure of an all-powerful woman recalls the encounter between Ulysses and Circe in Homer's *Odyssey*. In the *Odyssey*, the goddess Circe transforms Ulysses's men into swine as punishment for exploiting her hospitality and taking advantage of her gifts when they land on her island. Despentes adapts the myth to a contemporary relationship between a dominatrix and her 'gimp'. She maps Circe's authority onto Domina, and retells the metamorphosis undergone by the sailors through her use of zoomorphic language. The latter intensifies as the man's body becomes more grotesque and disformed under the gaze of Domina. Just as in 'Sale grosse trueie', Despentes centres the female character's gaze in 'Domina' by interweaving *style indirect libre* with third-person omniscient narration. Once

¹⁵⁷ Despentes, *Mordre au travers*, 27.

¹⁵⁸ Despentes, *Mordre au travers*, 27.

¹⁵⁹ Despentes, *Mordre au travers*, 28.

again, this gives readers an insight into how the central character perceives the world. As part of their sex play, the man is ordered to get on all fours and behave like a ‘bon clébard’.¹⁶⁰ By writing ‘elle le regardait faire’,¹⁶¹ Despentès relays the scene from Domina’s perspective as she watches her client execute her commands: ‘il s’était couché sur le dos, elle lui donnait son talon à sucer. Il se tortillait comme un gros ver. Il était en érection. Une toute petite bite rose, on aurait dit une bite de caniche.’¹⁶² Comparing the male’s penis with a poodle’s makes for a striking image of transgression, as the boundary between human and animal is crossed. In this moment, the man’s body exists somewhere between the two states. As Domina participates in her client’s fantasy, which involves relinquishing human agency and adopting a canine obedience, Domina finds her own carnal nature stirred. Her next move is to kick the man in the jaw. The text conveys her surprise at this act of involuntary violence: ‘elle s’est réculée avec horreur, parce que ce n’est pas ce qu’elle voulait faire.’¹⁶³ In ‘Domina’, Despentès plunges the reader into a world ruled by the specific logic and rules established in the contract between the dominatrix and her client. However, Domina’s involuntary act of violence breaks this agreement: Despentès uses the collapse of the sexual contract to thrust both the male and female protagonists into a shared realm of animality. In this space, social power and gendered roles are stripped away, leaving only the carnal realities of the flesh.

Despentès’ use of the ‘porc’ across her short stories ties into a French tradition that uses the same imagery to interrogate social and cultural power relations; a tradition that #Balancetonporc also belongs to. It also ties into a particular subculture relevant to Despentès’ life: the French punk movement. In their 1985 song ‘Porcherie’, the French band *Bérurier Noir* uses the metaphor of the pigsty to denounce the rise of the far-right political party, Le Front National, and its founder Jean-Marie Le Pen. The aesthetic and political influences of punk in Despentès’ texts and films have been highlighted by scholars, alongside their discussions on the author’s feminist concerns, either tied explicitly to or treated as adjacent to them.¹⁶⁴ For instance, in her article ‘Un conte de fées punk-rock féministe: “Bye Bye Blondie” de Virginie

¹⁶⁰ Despentès, *Mordre au travers*, 28.

¹⁶¹ Despentès, *Mordre au travers*, 29.

¹⁶² Despentès, *Mordre au travers*, 29.

¹⁶³ Despentès, *Mordre au travers*, 30.

¹⁶⁴ See also, Julie Monty, “Virginie Despentès et Coralie Trinh Thi et le (post)fémisme. La Vengeance de viol dans (le film) *Baise-moi*,” in *Mythes et érotismes Dans les Littératures et les Cultures Francophones de l’extrême Contemporain*, ed. by Efstratia Oktapoda (Brill, 2013), 217-235, and Valentina Denzel, “14 Sadean Confessions in Virginie Despentès’s Punk-Porn-Feminism,” in *I Confess!: Constructing the Sexual Self in the Internet Age*, ed. Thomas Waugh and Brandon Arroyo (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2019) 300-317, and Nadia Louar, “‘Deux Cents Mots et Un Gros Marteau.’ Virginie Despentès’s Skillful Construction of an Authorial Posture,” *Rocky Mountain Review* 72, no. 1 (2018): 125-45, <https://doi.org/10.1353/rmr.2018.0006>.

Despentes', Michèle Schaal highlights Despentes' stylistic use of punk's countercultural ethos to reinvent the fairytale from a punk-rock feminist perspective.¹⁶⁵ More recent research has shown how much Despentes was immersed in the alternative French punk scene of the 1980s and how this experience has shaped her identity as a writer. Louis-Thomas Leguerrier's aforementioned book *Punk-rock Théorie : Despentes et la destruction de l'identité* (2024) argues notably that Despentes' literary style can be compared to punk music recording and is ultimately a tool for working away at fixed identities and social categories. He writes:

Cette reification de la différence en vertu de laquelle elle dépend de l'identité et lui emprunte sa cohérence interne est un problème que les divers courants théoriques et mouvements politiques concernés abordent chacun à leur manière, proposant des solutions qui peuvent grandement varier en fonction des objectifs spécifiques de ceux-ci. En dialogue avec la plupart de ces mouvements, mais sans être épuisée par aucun d'entre eux, la production esthétique de Despentes met en scène ce problème et le donne à penser sous un jour unique, c'est-à-dire à partir du punk comme langage donnant forme à la destruction de l'identité.¹⁶⁶

From the mid to late 1980s, Despentes was indeed part of the punk scene in both Lyon and Paris. This early involvement in the punk movement surpassed her feminist concerns, as she explains in *King Kong théorie* (2006): 'pendant des années, j'ai été à des milliers de kilomètres du féminisme, non par manque de solidarité ou de conscience, mais parce que, pendant longtemps, être de mon sexe ne m'a effectivement pas empêchée de grand-chose.'¹⁶⁷ Despentes' distance from feminism in her adolescence is explained by the author as a form of alienation. For her, feminism belonged to women of previous generations: women such as her mother. In the recent book *'Fear of a female planet' Straight Royeur : un son punk, rap et féministe* (2021), co-authored by Cara Zina, Despentes' close friend and former bandmate, and Karim Hammou, Despentes recalls: 'ma mère était féministe, mais j'étais sortie de ça.'¹⁶⁸ In addition, reflecting on their youth and the relationship with their parents, Zina explains: 'ses parents étaient plus jeunes que les miens. Je crois que c'était compliqué entre elle et eux. Elle avait un tempérament sanguin, elle voulait aller voir les concerts tout le temps, ils étaient dans

¹⁶⁵ Michèle A. Schaal, "Un Conte de Fées Punk-Rock Féministe : 'Bye Bye Blondie' de Virginie Despentes," *Dalhousie French Studies* 99 (2012): 49–61, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43487350>.

¹⁶⁶ Louis-Thomas Leguerrier, *Punk rock théorie : Despentes et la destruction de l'identité*, (Presse Universitaires de Liège, 2024), 24.

¹⁶⁷ Despentes, *King Kong théorie*, 19.

¹⁶⁸ Hammou Karim and Cara Zina, *'Fear of a female planet' Straight Royeur : un son punk, rap et féministe*. (Nada Éditions, 2021), 67.

l'affrontement. Elle avait découvert le punk à la fin du collège.¹⁶⁹ According to sociologist Pierig Humeau, who has written extensively on the French punk scene, difficult relations with family or at school represent a common factor for individuals who joined the punk social spaces in their teenage years. He writes:

Les trajectoires des futurs punks se caractérisent en somme par une origine sociale commune—plutôt populaire [...] ou de petite classe moyenne—, par des trajectoires scolaires assez courtes (ou longues mais sinueuses et parsemées de reorientations multiples), de situations familiales « difficiles » pour ne pas dire conflictuelles, souvent en tension avec les normes dominantes, expliquant en partie leur rapport à l'autorité.¹⁷⁰

Humeau also explains how entering the punk scene relies on a strict system of rites and initiations. He identifies two main models. The first model is the most common and based around a 'groupe de pairs'¹⁷¹: a group of peers are initiated together through shared experiences. He writes:

Tandis que le foyer peut être ressenti comme un lieu de tensions, l'espace public, la rue, les copains offrent un lieu de vie où chacun fait ce qu'il veut, en fonction des codes internes aux groupes de pairs.[...] âges de toutes les premières expériences, il est de bon ton de se faire respecter, de faire ses preuves, de montrer qui on est.¹⁷²

The second model is a 'filiation familiale',¹⁷³ where an older sibling or family member passes on their knowledge to a younger individual. He explains:

Lorsque l'entourage familial participe à la socialisation musicale de l'adolescent, le grand frère est souvent un élément déclencheur.[...] Pour une minorité, les premières expériences punks interviennent en accompagnant un grand frère ou une grande sœur lors des rassemblements associatifs, manifestations et autres assemblées générales.¹⁷⁴

Despentes and her high school friend Zina were introduced into punk by *Bérurier Noir*'s manager, 'Marsu' François Ooghe.¹⁷⁵ According to Humeau, *Bérurier Noir* was key in the alternative punk scene of the 1980s, which itself was significant in two ways: first, it signified a rupture with the proto-French punks of the 1970s, who were a majority of middle class Parisians inspired by American rock music, and secondly because it fused together the *No Future* aesthetic of the *Sex Pistols* and the DIY ethos of the *Clash* — two opposing ideologies

¹⁶⁹ Hammou and Zina, 'Fear of a female planet', 12.

¹⁷⁰ Pierig Humeau, *À corps et à cris : Sociologie des punks français*, (CNRS Éditions, 2021), 135.

¹⁷¹ Humeau, *À corps et à cris*, 135.

¹⁷² Humeau, *À corps et à cris*, 136-137.

¹⁷³ Humeau, *À corps et à cris*, 148.

¹⁷⁴ Humeau, *À corps et à cris*, 148.

¹⁷⁵ Hammou and Zina, 'Fear of a female planet', 28.

that polarised the British punk scene in the 1970s. Furthermore, social and political changes, as well as the arrival of independent radio stations, allowed French punks to produce more original music, galvanising a new generation that came from the ‘classes populaires’.¹⁷⁶

The distinctive music and aesthetic of the French punk scene arose during a period of student militancy and also has its roots in fine arts. In 1977, the Centre Pompidou opened in Paris as a new site for the exhibition of modern art. The Centre Pompidou was commissioned by George Pompidou to promote art and to create an accessible cultural space, responding to a sense of anxiety about the rise of mass culture in France. In his article ‘Bérurier Noir. Sociogenèse culturelle et itinéraire personnel’ (2016), François Guillemot, who was *Bérurier Noir*’s co-frontman, recalls the time he spent as a young man in Paris visiting the public library, the Bibliothèque Publique d’Information, in the newly opened Centre Pompidou: ‘je passais souvent des heures à la bibliothèque publique d’information (BPI) dans les rayons art et histoire, et je trouvais là de quoi nourrir ma culture générale et ma réflexion.’¹⁷⁷ His interest in art and history would lead him to study art at university and eventually at the École des Beaux-arts in Paris. Guillemot’s trajectory as a politicised Parisian educated in a prestigious art school to lead frontman of a French punk band of the alternative scene demonstrates a heterogeneity of influences behind the punk aesthetic in France at that time. French punk aesthetic foregoes cultural hierarchies by mixing high and low cultural objects. This convergence is best illustrated by punk’s interest in animality. Guillemot explains notably that, in art school, his projects centred on animal and meat, citing Rembrandt’s *Slaughtered Ox* and Francis Bacon’s crucifixions as some of his primary inspirations.¹⁷⁸ He goes on to describe one specific art installation in detail:

Cinq kilos d’abats de viande de cheval avaient été répartis sur des tables ornées de dessins, peintures, sculptures et textes le tout habillé d’un montage diapo et d’une bande son. L’installation se présentait comme un atelier-boucherie d’art vivant sur la viande et avait but de questionner le public sur le rôle du boucher et notre consommation de chairs.¹⁷⁹

Guillemot’s artwork merged the butcher’s workbench with the artist’s workshop, creating a parallel between the way both work at matter (flesh in the case of the butcher) to produce work that will be consumed. In her work, Despentès crosses similar lines, also performing as a

¹⁷⁶ Humeau, *À corps et à cris*, 92.

¹⁷⁷ François Guillemot, “Bérurier Noir. Sociogenèse culturelle et itinéraire personnel,” *Volume ! La revue des musiques populaires* 2016/2, no. 13: 1 (2016): 69.

¹⁷⁸ Guillemot, “Bérurier Noir,” 70.

¹⁷⁹ Guillemot, “Bérurier Noir,” 71.

butcher and an artist. The violence in *Mordre au travers* articulates her experimentation with the transformation of the body into matter, into flesh. Working the text like the butcher works the meat, transforming a ‘trueie’ into ‘porc’, and ‘vache’ into ‘boeuf’, Despentès turns her text into a product aimed for consumption. Through zoomorphism, Despentès plunges readers into an imaginary in which all men and woman are animals, and everything, including text, becomes meat, creating a horizontal and equalising relation between objects, people and animals. In a 1988 interview, speaking about his band *Bérurier Noir*, Guillemot stated: ‘on est un groupe du genre humain, et on voudrait faire passer quelque chose d’humain’.¹⁸⁰ In the same punk spirit, Despentès’ writing, through its focus on zoomorphism and on flesh as a literary material, aims to express something about humanity itself and what it means to be human.

SECTION 2: Punks and libertines: Despentès’ contemporary philosophy

The literary butchery at work in her early collection of short stories is also deployed in her later work *Baise-moi*. First published as a novel in 1993, and adapted to film in 2000 by Despentès with Coralie Trinh Thi, *Baise-moi* is a road-trip story that follows two young women, Nadine, a call girl, and Manu, a pornstar, as they set out on a journey filled with sex and violence. Their bloody trail of death and destruction is foreshadowed early in the film. In this scene, Nadine is having sex with a client in a sleazy looking hotel room. In the background, a scene from Gaspard Noé’s *Seul contre tous* (1998) can be seen on the television set. Noé’s film, which came out just in between the publication of Despentès’ novel and her film adaption, is a follow-up to Noé’s first featurette, entitled *Carne* (1991), and centres on the pathetic and grotesque life of an incestuous and murderous butcher, containing explicit and non-simulated sex scenes, as *Baise-moi* also does. Despentès inserts an intertextual reference in one of her film’s first sex scenes, as if pointing to a lineage between Noé’s feature film and her own kind of cinematic ‘butchery’. *Baise-moi* became the object of a censorship controversy in France, when only five days after its release, it was taken out of cinemas across the country and given an X-rating, before being reinstated with an under-18 certificate for screening. While at the time several feature films with a wide release blurred the limits between arthouse cinema and pornography, for instance Catherine Breillat’s *Romance* (1999) Gaspard Noé’s *Irréversible* (2002) or Vincent Gallo’s *The Brown Bunny* (2003), Despentès and Trinh Thi’s *Baise-moi* was an outlier: its censorship publicized the film, which crossed rather than flirted with the border between

¹⁸⁰ François Guillemot, “Bérurier noir : leader du punk français et « groupe du genre humain »,” interview by Florence Dartois, Paris 1988, video, 03:33.

mainstream cinema and porn. As Scott MacKenzie points out, casting two porn actresses — Karen Bach (Nadine) and Raphaëlla Anderson (Manu) — in the two lead roles led many critics to define *Baise-moi* as a porn movie.¹⁸¹ As mentioned, the film also contains unsimulated sex scenes, including a gang rape sequence involving Manu and another female character, Karla. Its release produced a social debate around morality in culture, and scholars have since rallied around *Baise-moi* as an important cultural object, portraying its rape-revenge plot as a clear feminist message of empowerment.¹⁸² These readings have shifted the focus away from the pornographic content of *Baise-moi* and focused instead on its violent content. While decrying the moral panic that led to its short-lived censorship in France, some critics have imposed a new kind of moral order on the film, where the female-perpetrated violence against men is defined as a valid discourse countering a social order dominated by real and symbolic male violence. Michèle Schaal notably refers to the ‘double evidence’ of female victimisation and violence in *Baise-moi*. She argues that Desportes’ heroines are constructed symmetrically: ‘cette double évidence marque plus singulièrement ses héroïnes de romans, car leur construction s’établit symétriquement dans leur victimisation et leur violence. Elles subissent en premier lieu, une violence essentiellement masculine’.¹⁸³ Other scholars have approached *Baise-moi* through a gendered lens. Shirley Jordan writes for instance that ‘Desportes’ female protagonists [...] have internalised the ‘rule’ that the social presentation of the body should involve the elision of the self as anything other than a sexually available object’.¹⁸⁴ Lisa Downing also remarks how ‘these women [Nadine and Manu] cannot be other than the products and constructions of an environment which imagines them’.¹⁸⁵

Yet Desportes’ work is less about performing a shift in power relations and more about maintaining ambiguity and destabilising all moral stances. Investigating the novel and the film

¹⁸¹ Scott MacKenzie, “*Baise-moi*, feminist cinemas and the censorship controversy,” *Screen (London)* 43, no.3 (2002): 317-318.

¹⁸² For discussions of the revenge plot of Desportes’ novel see Shirley Ann Jordan, “Revolting Women? Excess and detournement de genres in the Work of Virginie Desportes,” in *Contemporary French women’s writing: women’s visions, women’s voice and women’s lives* (Peter Lang, 2004), 126. For discussions about female empowerment and the film version see Judith Franco, “Gender, Genre and Female Pleasure in the Contemporary Revenge Narrative: *Baise-Moi* and What It Feels Like For A Girl,” in *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 21, no. 1 (2003): 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509200490262415>, Julie Monty, “Virginie Desportes et Coralie Trinh Thi et le (post)féminisme. La Vengeance de viol dans (le film) *Baise-moi*,” in *Mythes et érotismes Dans les Littératures et les Cultures Francophones de l’extrême Contemporain*, ed. Efstratia Oktapoda (Brill, 2013), 218, and Iris Brey, “Le viol : Paul Verhoeven, Virginie Desportes, Ida Lupino,” in *Le regard féminin* (Éditions de L’Olivier, 2020), 125.

¹⁸³ Michèle A. Schaal, “Une nécessaire rébellion féministe : de la violence au féminin chez Virginie Desportes,” in *Rebelles et criminelles chez les écrivaines d’expression française*, eds. Frédérique Chevillot and Colette Trout (Rodopi, 2013), 237.

¹⁸⁴ Jordan, *Contemporary French women’s writing*, 132.

¹⁸⁵ Lisa Downing, “*Baise-Moi* or the Ethics of the Desiring Gaze,” *Nottingham French Studies* 45, no.3 (2006): 55.

as one helps bring out the inherently hybrid, mismatched nature of *Baise-moi* and its experimental and avant-garde qualities. Dominique Carlini-Versini was the first to critically assess the novel and film together as, she writes: ‘le livre guide le film, et le film explore et met en lumière le contenu sensoriel du livre’.¹⁸⁶ She opens up a new perspective by considering the erotic potential of the film and what she coins ‘la réappropriation du corps féminin à travers l’autoérotisme[...]’.¹⁸⁷ Her study also points to a narrative shift in *Baise-moi* as the two women meet: ‘leur rencontre les libère de la contrainte et du confinement qui les oppressaient dans la première partie du film’.¹⁸⁸ This shift is expressed through bodily changes in the novel and in the film. In the first part of the story, Manu and Nadine both have shaky hands. This commonality is used to draw parallels between their lives. In the case of Manu, she is described as having ‘autant de vernis sur la peau que sur les ongles parce que sa main tremble toujours un peu’,¹⁸⁹ whereas Nadine ‘met du noir sur les yeux, n’arrive pas à dessiner le même trait des deux côtés parce que sa main tremble’.¹⁹⁰ Both women are portrayed as lacking control over their bodies. Hands moving independently appear again when Nadine strangles her housemate: ‘avant même qu’elle en ait l’idée, les mains de Nadine trouvent d’instinct leurs marques le long du cou de Séverine et l’enserrent avec rage, implacablement’.¹⁹¹ Nadine’s act of murder is described as an out-of-body experience: in the sentence, ‘les mains de Nadine’ is the grammatical subject of the verb, as if solely responsible for the act of strangulation.

In the first part of the novel, Nadine’s body-mind split is conveyed through the notion of disguise. Nadine is depicted as putting on a costume when she gets ready to go and see a client: ‘quand elle va travailler, elle a toujours la même tenue, toujours le même parfum, toujours le même rouge à lèvres. Comme si elle avait réfléchi à quel costume endosser et ne voulait plus en entendre parler’.¹⁹² The use of the term ‘costume’ goes beyond the idea of the performance of femininity. The uniform that Nadine uses to turn herself into a call girl creates a separation between herself and her labour, for which her body is the main tool. Nadine receives no physical satisfaction from the sexual acts she undertakes; on the contrary, engaging intimately with her clients is conveyed as an unpleasant sensory experience, described explicitly in the text as a multisensory abject experience: ‘se coucher pour se faire remplir,

¹⁸⁶ Dominique Carlini-Versini, *Figures de l’excès chez Marie Darrieussecq, Virginie Despentes et Marine de Van : Écrire et filmer le corps*, (Brill, 2023), 134.

¹⁸⁷ Carlini-Versini, *Figures de l’excès*, 128.

¹⁸⁸ Carlini-Versini, *Figures de l’excès*, 135.

¹⁸⁹ Virginie Despentes, *Baise-moi* (Éditions Florent-Massot, 1994), 16.

¹⁹⁰ Despentes, *Baise-moi*, 47.

¹⁹¹ Despentes, *Baise-moi*, 64.

¹⁹² Despentes, *Baise-moi*, 47.

servir à tout le monde. Est-ce qu'elle a ça dans le sang? C'est vrai que c'est pour beaucoup d'argent. Elle ne sait toujours pas si c'est pour grand-chose. Mais leur bite pue le moisi quand elle les prend dans sa bouche'.¹⁹³ The use of *style indirect libre* serves to plunge the reader into the lived bodily experience of Nadine. The acts of sexual intercourse and fellatio are reduced to pure mechanics with phrases such as 'se faire remplir' and 'quand elle les prend dans sa bouche' that imply a process void of any pleasant sensation. Although a strong sense of physical disgust with her work is conveyed in Nadine's case, a few lines later this sense of dissatisfaction is undercut by the expression of mental pleasure, as Nadine is portrayed as taking satisfaction in the idea of her work as a 'désir forcené de saccager quelque chose de sacré. Elle aime bien ce travail.'¹⁹⁴ The pleasure and satisfaction she gains are in her mind rather than body; they allow her to construct a self-narrative that produces a sense of ambiguous pride: 'il y a de l'orgueil à se mettre aussi bas, un héroïsme dans la déchéance'.¹⁹⁵ Nadine's idea of herself relies on an inversion of dominant moral logic and a reversal of her bodily sensations.

In Despentès' depiction of Nadine and her relation to her own body, an objectification takes place, which differs from conventional feminist readings of objectified female bodies. Instead, Nadine's body becomes an object through the mechanical way it is put to work. Despentès' rendering of Nadine's body as a tool used for work resonates with the way Julia Ducournau treats female bodies in her cinema as 'purely physical objects'.¹⁹⁶ Nadine's body as tool is later weaponised by Despentès when it comes into contact with a firearm. Nadine is more skilled at holding a gun than putting on eyeliner: 'c'est comme si la main était faite pour tenir un flingue. Métal contre sa paume. Évident. Ce qui manquait au bras'.¹⁹⁷ By transforming the (female) body into a weapon, Despentès also subverts the traditional logic that associates violence with male rather than female characters.

Twenty-five years on from the release of the film, general attitudes to pornography have changed. A genre that Bernard Williams defines in the *Report of the Committee on Obscenity and Film Censorship* as 'a pornographic representation is one that combines two features: it has a certain function or intention, to arouse its audience sexually, and also a certain content, explicit representations of sexual material (organs, postures, activity, etc.)'.¹⁹⁸ Consumed on

¹⁹³ Despentès, *Baise-moi*, 61.

¹⁹⁴ Despentès, *Baise-moi*, 62.

¹⁹⁵ Despentès, *Baise-moi*, 62.

¹⁹⁶ Marmysz, "Monstrous Masses," 51.

¹⁹⁷ Despentès, *Baise-moi*, 154.

¹⁹⁸ Bernard Williams, *Obscenity and Film Censorship: An Abridgement of the Williams Report* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 137.

the Internet rather than in cinemas, it is also less seen as a genre made for and consumed exclusively by men. For instance, Fiona Vera-Gray writes in her groundbreaking study *Women on Porn* (2025):

When we think about porn today, we still mostly think about men. Men as the producers and the consumers. Women as the product. Now this may have been true a decade ago when the internet was still in its teenage years[...] But these days with the internet in our pockets, technology has opened up access to pornography like never before. It means that while men are still pornography's main consumers, women are steadily catching up.¹⁹⁹

Similarly, in her 2018 book *Le corps des femmes : La Bataille de l'intime* (2018), French scholar Camille Froidevaux-Metterie writes about women's evolving relationship to the consumption, and production of pornographic materials:

Nous vivons un moment important d'appropriation par les femmes de leur sexualité [...] elles ont accès à une littérature érotique écrite par des femmes pour des femmes ; elles peuvent accéder à une production pornographique elle aussi pensée et réalisée pour elles.²⁰⁰

Baise-moi was not intended for a uniquely female readership and spectatorship, and it is possible to question the rise of a distinctly feminine genre of pornography as 'écrite par des femmes, pour des femmes.' Paul B. Preciado's conceptualisation of the 'pharmacopornographic regime' offers a useful departure from a division of pornography into binary poles.²⁰¹ Preciado instead groups all material that produces sexual excitement as 'capital sexuel',²⁰² capturing 'la *potentia gaudendi*'²⁰³ as a universal approach to the body's potential to be sexually aroused. In this regime, all bodies are 'techno-bodies', regardless of gender or sex; and everybody is a potential viewer of pornographic or erotic spectacle: 'tout techno-corps, y compris un techno-corps « mort », peut déclencher la force orgasmique de capital sexuel.'²⁰⁴ While *Baise-moi* is more than a porn text and film, it illustrates the universality of the effects of pornographic viewing or reading as defined by Preciado. Despentes' novel is divided into three parts; there is a noticeable shift in the representation of sexualised bodies between its first and second part. In the former, the disjuncture between the reality of sexual experience and its

¹⁹⁹ Fiona Vera-Gray, *Women on Porn* (Penguin Books, 2025), 10.

²⁰⁰ Camille Froidevaux-Metterie, *Le corps des femmes : La Bataille de l'intime* (Éditions Points, 2021), 134.

²⁰¹ Preciado defines the pharmacopornographic regime as: 'les processus de gouvernement de la subjectivité sexuelle, dans ses modes moléculaires (pharmaco-) et sémiotiques (porno).' See Preciado *Testo Junkie*, 32.

²⁰² Preciado *Testo Junkie*, 43.

²⁰³ Preciado *Testo Junkie*, 42.

²⁰⁴ Preciado *Testo Junkie*, 43.

imagined, symbolic realisation defines sex as the commodification of the flesh and intimate relations as bodily mechanics. In the novel's second part, the body takes on a poetical dimension as sexual encounters are experienced through a shared recognition between Manu and Nadine of each other's bodily autonomy.

Despentes positions Nadine as a *voyeuse* and observer and Manu as exhibitionist and performer. In their first scenes together, and despite having never met before in person, Nadine recognises Manu from pornographic films she has watched.²⁰⁵ Their first meeting sets the premise for their relationship. The dynamic between voyeur and exhibitionist can be conceived as one of power and domination, where the exhibitionist is a sexual object performing for the active gaze of the voyeur. It can also be defined through gendered hierarchies, with a male gaze confronting a female body offered as a spectacle. In Despentes' text however, both women are active subjects despite positioning themselves as spectator and performer or voyeur and exhibitionist, changing how female bodies are usually seen. Manu and Nadine's respect and admiration for each other is reinforced by their joint appreciation of pornographic images published in a fictional 'roman-photo' entitled '*Anal et Sperme*',²⁰⁶ purchased in a petrol station on their drive to Brittany. While the narration depicts Manu and Nadine's enthusiasm for the volume as genuine and sincere, its exaggerated title — which also contains an implicit reference to Bataille's *L'Anus solaire* — points to a distance from the cultural perception of such materials as mere 'smut' while allowing their presence in the text. As she flips through the pages, encouraged by Manu, Nadine is struck by a particular image:

Elle feuillette rapidement le reste du bouquin. Double pénétration sur une table de billard. La fille porte des talons à aiguille noirs très hauts, une chaînette à la cheville. Le sexe entièrement épilé, le clit percé. Elle a vraiment beaucoup d'allure.²⁰⁷

The description here divides the female body into many parts. However, this bodily dissection does not only reduce it to a sexualised object but also creates a pornographic spectacle: directing the gaze towards the woman's various adornments, 'une chaînette à la cheville' and 'le clit percé' reinforce efforts to appeal visually and blurs the difference between images found in mainstream beauty magazines ('talons aiguilles', 'elle a beaucoup d'allure') and pornographic ones ('double penetration sur une table de billard'). This passage also complicates scholarly views on Despentes' fictions as a feminist text that offers a female

²⁰⁵ Despentes, *Baise-moi*, 88-89.

²⁰⁶ Despentes, *Baise-moi*, 93.

²⁰⁷ Despentes, *Baise-moi*, 93.

viewpoint for female readers.²⁰⁸ Indeed, it adopts aesthetic norms — ‘sexe entièrement épilé’, ‘table de billard’, ‘talons [...] très hauts’ — that do not divert from idealised representations of women in pornographic images aimed at heterosexual men. This is further complicated by the fact that the volume’s title suggests it aims for a male and queer audience. Despentès mixes pornographic genres and genders as if to suggest that none of it really matters apart from the making and viewing of the pornographic spectacle itself.

Nadine remembers the photographs as she and Manu lead two men back to their hotel room in an unnamed town in Brittany on the night of the first stop of their trip together. Earlier in the day, they had agreed to ‘attraper du loup’²⁰⁹, ie/ bring back men for the night, reversing the usual prey/preyed imagery of men chasing women for sex. The text opens up to the possibility of eroticism, as the scene is described through Nadine’s perspective:

Elle l’embrasse à pleine bouche, sort sa queue qu’il enfonce tout de suite du plus profond qu’il peut, sans même avoir besoin de s’aider de la main. Joli coup. Il la travaille lentement, la creuse en respirant très fort [...] elle bouge doucement de haut en bas, cherche la grosse vague. Coup de hanche et elle se sent basculer l’intérieur, le ventre dénoué et apaisée des chevilles aux épaules.²¹⁰

This description of Nadine’s experience contrasts with the first part and its depiction of her work as a prostitute, in which a client would ‘la creuse[r], transpire[r] abondamment et souffle[r] bruyamment’²¹¹ and from which she drew no bodily satisfaction. After reaching orgasm, Nadine turns to watch Manu and her partner. Nadine and Manu’s eyes meet, and Manu’s eyes are described as ‘calmes et attentifs’.²¹² This explicit sex scene takes up an entire page of the novel, and its language conjures vivid sensual imagery, shifting the text towards erotic production. Rather than reverting to clinical terminology, Despentès uses poetic expressions such as ‘il la travaille[...]la creuse’ and ‘elle cherche la grosse vague’ to evoke the pleasurable depth of sexual experiences. The metaphor of the wave to refer to orgasm is especially evocative. It expresses the sensation of an all-encompassing physical experience and imbues the passage with a form of natural romanticism, contrasting with earlier mechanical depictions of Nadine’s sexual encounters. Nadine’s moment of pleasure is not only her own. It is felt by Manu also and becomes a shared experience in which both characters communicate visually rather than verbally, through the reciprocity of the gaze. In her article ‘*Baise-Moi* or

²⁰⁸ See for instance Jordan, *Contemporary French women’s writing*, 132, and Brey “Le viol,” 126.

²⁰⁹ Despentès, *Baise-moi*, 104.

²¹⁰ Despentès, *Baise-moi*, 108.

²¹¹ Despentès, *Baise-moi*, 59.

²¹² Despentès, *Baise-moi*, 108.

the Ethics of the Desiring Gaze,'(2006) Downing analyses the film and its adaptation of this particular scene, writing that: '[Nadine's] enjoyment of watching Manu's body does not lead her to a depersonalizing objectification of the other, but to respect and friendship and, moreover, to an answering desirous gaze in which watched becomes watcher, rendering the difference between those positions fluid and interchangeable rather than fixed and fixing'.²¹³ Downing makes a vital point here, showing how the meeting of the gaze conveys Manu and Nadine's alignment in this moment of shared pleasure, creating a horizontal relationship between them. Reading the novel and the film together confirms and expands on Downing's observations, as in the text Manu's eyes are described as 'calmes et attentifs'²¹⁴, suggesting a meeting of minds in this highly physical collective experience between the two characters.

The second part of the novel and its turn to erotic writing contrasts with its first part, where sex and violence are joined together in pornographic and explicit scenes. Scholars have been reluctant to engage with Despentès as a bona fide writer of pornography. Shirley Jordan for instance, argues that the novel commits 'pornographic sabotage' and contends that Despentès' works offer a 'disruptive meta-discourse about pornography'.²¹⁵ For Jordan, the experiential rules of pornography as a medium designed to elicit genuine sexual arousal from its readers cannot apply, and Despentès is commenting on rather than producing a pornographic text. Nicole Fayard focuses on the novel's self-reflexivity, seen as an indication of Despentès' parodying of the *femme fatale* and the noir thriller, suggesting that sex scenes should not be taken at face value.²¹⁶ These approaches circumvent how *Baise-moi* uses both eroticism and pornography without merging them. Despentès' choice to start off the novel with the violent depiction of rape could lead to the impossibility of reading sex in the rest of the text as a pleasurable experience, both for the novel's characters and its readers.

Yet there are several ways in which *Baise-moi* allows a clear differentiation between the sexual violence at the start of the novel and the thrilling joyride of sex, and also of violence, that Manu and Nadine embark on in the latter part of the novel. While Despentès draws on the stylistic conventions of erotic literature in part two, her depiction of Manu and Karla's brutal rape is void of any poetic embellishment. Across five pages, Despentès conveys only physical violence, pain and fear. Written from the perspective of Manu, the text is a difficult read, which focuses on physical suffering, taking readers away from sexuality towards life and death: 'le

²¹³ Downing, "*Baise-Moi*," 62.

²¹⁴ Despentès, *Baise-moi*, 108.

²¹⁵ Jordan, *Contemporary French women's writing*, 131.

²¹⁶ Nicole Fayard, "The Rebellious Body as Parody: *Baise-Moi* by Virginie Despentès." *French studies* LX, no. 1 (2006): 63-77. <https://doi.org/10.1093/fs/kni287>.

mec allongé sur elle rigole et tape avec la paume de sa main sur son nez. Explosion derrière les yeux puis douleur sourde dans tout le crâne'.²¹⁷ Survival in this moment becomes Manu's sole purpose as sentences are brief and basic, stripped of anything that isn't a bare necessity: 'surtout rester vivante. Faire n'importe quoi pour rester vivante'.²¹⁸ The emphasis on Manu's thought process, her fear of death and her instinctive reaction when faced with the threat of grievous bodily harm and potential death clearly differentiates the depiction of rape from a sexual spectacle. The full impact of Despentès' depiction of rape is felt through the medium of film in *Baise-moi*'s adaptation. The text is difficult to read, and its visual rendering makes for an extremely difficult viewing experience. As the camera focuses on a man who is forcibly undressing Karla, her screams saturate the audio track. Moreover, as Michelle Royer writes, the film is 'shot on digital video without artificial lighting, it has a documentary feel and an amateurish look that make it even more realistic and disturbing'.²¹⁹ The close-up shot of the forced penetration confronts spectators with the reality of rape, bare of any metonymical or metaphorical representation. Both the novel and the film depict rape for what it is and do not shy away from its reality, marking clearly its alienness from sex as a consenting and pleasurable shared experience.

Despentès' *Baise-moi* can be seen and read as an attempt by Despentès to think through sex: amongst explicit scenes of sexual and violent acts, the novel and the film focus on speech and exchanges, offering a discursive and ultimately philosophical reflection. Scholars have previously noted how Sade can function as a useful reference point when discussing the transgressive nature of Despentès' portrayal of sexual violence in *Baise-moi*. For instance, in her chapter 'Sadean Confessions in Virginie Despentès's Punk-Porn-Feminism' (2019), Valentina Denzel explores how Despentès adapts Sade's philosophical and aesthetic approach to representations of sex and violence in *Baise-moi* to articulate her 'twenty-first-century feminism'.²²⁰ Nicole Fayard also considers the possibility of Despentès' Sadean approach as an alternative model for female sexual autonomy, in her article 'Sadeian Sisters: Sexuality as

²¹⁷ Despentès, *Baise-moi*, 53.

²¹⁸ Despentès, *Baise-moi*, 54.

²¹⁹ Michelle Royer, "The Hijacking of a Genre: French Female Film-Makers and the Road Movie" in *«Parcours de Femmes»: Twenty Years of Women in French*, eds. Maggie Allison, and Angela Kershaw, *Modern French Identities* 73, (2011): 255.

²²⁰ Valentina Denzel, "14 Sadean Confessions in Virginie Despentès's Punk-Porn-Feminism," in *I Confess!: Constructing the Sexual Self in the Internet Age*, ed. Thomas Waugh and Brandon Arroyo (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019,) 315.

Terrorism in the Work of Virginie Despentes' (2005).²²¹ A clearly intertextual moment occurs in one of the dialogues between Manu and Karla before the rape takes place. The young women are discussing rumours circulating about Manu performing in pornographic films in which bestiality is present. During their conversation, Karla expresses moral judgment, telling her friend that she finds it 'trop dégueulasse'.²²² Rather than taking offense, Manu interprets Karla's comments as evidence of the small-mindedness of her 'toutes petites idées, rabougries',²²³ providing Karla with a philosophical mantra that unites mind and body: 'faut s'élargir l'anus et l'esprit suivra'.²²⁴ This guiding principle foregrounds the opening of the body as a way to liberate and grow the mind is a borrowing of Sade's own libertinage. James Fowler defines Sade's 'hedonistic materialism' as follows: 'if we accept that we are entirely material beings, and if we attend to our bodies, then we realise that they infallibly show us how we ought to behave, for they incline us towards physical pleasure, to the exclusion of all competing principles'.²²⁵ For Sade and for Manu, once the body is liberated from the prejudices of the mind, then enlightenment will be achieved.

The conversation between the two women appears at a pivotal moment in the text, acting as a prologue to the violent rape that follows. Manu's embrace of Sade and Karla's inability to 'voir grand',²²⁶ lead to brutal consequences: while Manu survives the rape, Karla is killed by their aggressors. Despentes' intertextual dialogue with Sade allows for an alternative reading of the journey into sex and violence that Manu and Nadine undertake in the novel's second part, which can be seen and read as an experiment, through text and film, of Manu's take on Sadean thought. Sequences of sex and violence follow one another, not to produce a sense of narrative progression but to create a crescendo effect, as Manu and Nadine's behaviour becomes more and more extreme and outrageous, reaching a paroxysm when Manu shoots a child in a café.²²⁷ The ever-expanding violence deployed runs parallel to moments of shared discourses that are self-referential, as in the following passage of dialogue:

²²¹ Nicole Fayard, "Sadeian Sisters: Sexuality as Terrorism in the Work of Virginie Despentes," *Love and Sexuality: New Approaches in French Studies* (Modern French Identities 32) ed. Sarah F. Donachie and Kim Harrison (Peter Lang 2005), 101-20.

²²² Despentes, *Baise-moi*, 50.
Despentes, *Baise-moi*, 51.

²²³ Despentes, *Baise-moi*, 51.

²²⁴ Despentes, *Baise-moi*, 51.

²²⁵ James Fowler, "'Mettons un peu d'ordre à ces orgies': Bodies and Ideas in Sade's *La Philosophie dans le boudoir*," in *The Flesh in the Text*, eds. Thomas Baldwin, James Fowler and Shane Weller (Peter Lang, 2007), 82.

²²⁶ Despentes, *Baise-moi*, 51.

²²⁷ This episode was removed from Despentes and Trinh Thi's film adaptation.

‘– Merde, on est plein dans le crucial, faudrait que les dialogues sont à la hauteur. Moi, tu vois, je crois pas au fond sans forme.

– Bien sûr que non, ça serait contraire à toute éthique.’²²⁸

As the novel foreshadows, ‘leur histoire ressemble à une course droit contre un mur’²²⁹: Nadine and Manu ultimately set off on a journey to nowhere. Their ‘road trip’ in *Baise-Moi* maps onto the Sadean text, where is, as Barthes observes, ‘si donc le voyage est divers, le lieu sadien est unique : on ne voyage que pour s’enfermer.’²³⁰ This *huis-clos* structure fits with the architecture of *Baise-moi*, where a sense of claustrophobia and inertia becomes palpable when acts of violence perpetrated by the two women become more and more absurd. When passing a man urinating in a field on the roadside, Manu shoots him in the leg: ‘elles roulent assez longtemps, croisent un mec en train de pisser dans un champ. Balle dans le genou, balle dans la nuque. Changement de voiture, au cas où...’.²³¹ The use of the expression ‘elles roulent assez longtemps’ expresses temporal indeterminacy and purposelessness. Manu’s random act of violence becomes a way to kill time and fill the gap between one destination and the next. In contrast with earlier events, often accompanied by dialogues commenting on the excitement felt by the protagonists, later events are met with growing unresponsiveness, demonstrating that Manu and Nadine have become desensitised to their own violence. In the Sadean text, this pitfall of a total descent into purposelessness is usually avoided through the imposition of order via pedagogy. Indeed, the legitimacy of libertine philosophy reposes upon its transmissibility: hierarchy and structure are maintained through the initiation of younger characters by older, more experienced members of the community.

The promise of such order appears in *Baise-moi* as Manu and Nadine stage a diamond heist at the residence of a wealthy architect. The diamond heist is another intertextual moment in which Despentès’ text enters into a dialogue with Sade. The figure of the architect is Despentès’ representation of the contemporary libertine: he owns a large country house fitted with secret rooms and an extensive garden. The house and garden are described as balanced and orderly: ‘la maison [...] est pleine de fenêtres’ with ‘chemins sinueux aux bordures éclaboussées de fleurs de couleurs vives’.²³² The architect’s description reflects a similar refinement: ‘le monsieur [...] est de taille moyenne la mâchoire carrée, rasé de près [...] Aussi

²²⁸ Despentès, *Baise-moi*, 121.

²²⁹ Despentès, *Baise-moi*, 38.

²³⁰ Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* (Éditions du Seuil, 1971), 21.

²³¹ Despentès, *Baise-moi*, 164.

²³² Despentès, *Baise-moi*, 212.

bien entretenu et presentable que son jardin'.²³³ Nadine, in particular, is taken by his charms, especially impressed by his collection of literature. As she holds a gun to his head, she addresses him, commenting on his literary tastes: 'vous avez du goût [...] J'ai peine à détester un homme qui lit Ellroy dans le texte et possède l'intégrale de Sade'.²³⁴ However, Nadine resists his charms and, encouraged by Manu, shoots him point blank in the head. His death and brutal murder represent Manu and Nadine's rejection of all orders, including one that would be modelled on Sade's libertine philosophy.

Despentes uses Sade and his model of thought in *Baise-moi* to eventually obliterate its ordering principles. This rejection is also viscerally expressed in Despentes and Trinh Thi's film adaptation, where, during a visit to a local libertine club, Manu fires a gun through a man's anus. In its total rejection of order, *Baise-moi* maintains a horizontal line between its characters as Manu and Nadine are at once choreographers and spectators of an anarchic spectacle. By choosing to work with professionals from the adult entertainment industry in the film adaptation, Despentes imbued the film with a sense of authenticity, also pursued in its mode of production. The low-budget feel of *Baise-moi*, which was filmed on a hand-held digital camera points to an intentional approach, chiming with what Humeau sees as the DIY ethos of the French punk scene: 'participant à une sorte d'horizontalisation des rapports (ou du moins pensé comme telle) entre groupes et publics, le *DIY* apparaît comme le critère d'authenticité artistique qui organise la hiérarchisation des œuvres, et se traduit par des distinctions à la fois esthétiques et politiques'.²³⁵ While Despentes engages with the Sadean tradition, her aesthetic choices take her work in further directions. Neither an attempt to recuperate high literary and cinematic references, nor an exercise in pornography, *Baise-moi* emerges as a self-conscious work of punk art.

Like many of Despentes' novels, *Apocalypse bébé* (2010) is a multi-vocal text, with the narrative unfolding through the perspectives of several characters who play either a minor or major role in the storytelling. The central voice of the novel belongs to Lucie Toledo, who is both one of the narrators and the main character of the novel. Her chapters are written in the first-person narrative, while those adopting perspectives from the other characters are narrated through omniscient narration. Lucie is a middle-aged private detective who has been hired by a wealthy Parisian family, the Galtans, to keep a watchful eye on their troublesome adolescent daughter, Valentine. When Valentine suddenly disappears in the Paris metro, Lucie's

²³³ Despentes, *Baise-moi*, 214.

²³⁴ Despentes, *Baise-moi*, 218.

²³⁵ Humeau, *À corps et à cris*, 13.

investigation takes a turn, and her boss, Deucené, enlists the help of La Hyène, a rogue private investigator and hitwoman with a ruthless reputation. Lucie and La Hyène form the all-female duo of the detective novel, and their search for Valentine will take them on a journey from the inner suburbs of Paris to Barcelona and back again. Their transnational quest to uncover Valentine's whereabouts leads Lucie on a journey of personal discovery. Through her proximity to La Hyène, a self-assured, openly lesbian character, Lucie is exposed to alternative queer and gay lifestyles while in Barcelona. Whilst in Barcelona, Lucie is awakened to queer female desire as she forms a relationship with another woman, Zoska, who becomes her life partner at the end of the novel. When reading Despentès' *Apocalypse bébé*, scholars have predominantly focused on the all-female detective duo in the novel. For instance, in 'Mobile Women in Virginie Despentès's *Apocalypse Bébé*' (2018), Natalie Edwards reads the novel's road trip plot as an exploration of the mobility of the female characters, which allows for a range of performances of multiple femininities and female subject positions.²³⁶ In a similar vein, Leah E. Wilson's 'Collapsing boundaries to Expose Censorship and Expand Feminism in Virginie Despentès's *Apocalypse Baby*' (2018) interprets the boundary-crossing of genre, gender and sexuality in Despentès' novel as a feminist critique of patriarchal society.²³⁷ Finally, in 'Virginie Despentès' queer crime fiction' (2021), Lucas Hollister examines how Despentès' crime fiction novels, namely *Baise-moi* and *Apocalypse bébé*, work to reorient the traditionally masculine genre towards feminist and queer concerns.²³⁸ While these readings provide valuable insights into the novel's feminist and queer dimensions, they tend to overlook or downplay the darker, more troubling elements of the text, particularly the violence displayed in Valentine's suicide-bombing at the novel's conclusion. Edwards reads Valentine's attack as 'a gendered rebellion against patriarchy [...]',²³⁹ situating it within the novel's emancipatory framework, as an extension of the feminist and boundary-crossing trajectories explored in the narrative.

Yet Valentine's attack can be read beyond its gendered or feminist implications, especially in the light of Despentès' controversial op-ed, published in response to the 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris in the French magazine *Les Inrockuptibles*. In this article, Despentès evokes the strong emotional reaction she experienced shortly after the event, she writes 'dans

²³⁶ Natalie Edwards, "Mobile Women in Virginie Despentès's *Apocalypse Bébé*," *Australian Journal of French Studies* 55, no. 1 (2018): 6-16, <https://doi.org/10.3828/AJFS.2018.02>.

²³⁷ Leah E. Wilson, "Collapsing Boundaries to Expose Censorship and Expand Feminism in Virginie Despentès's *Apocalypse Baby*," *Rocky Mountain Review* 72, no. 1 (2018): 146-64, <https://doi.org/10.1353/rmr.2018.0007>.

²³⁸ Lucas Hollister, "Virginie Despentès' Queer Crime Fiction," *French Cultural Studies* 32, no. 4 (2021): 417-27, <https://doi.org/10.1177/09571558211012987>.

²³⁹ Edwards, "Mobile Women," 15.

un premier temps, l'événement déclenche [...] l'amour.'²⁴⁰ As a result, she found herself sliding into the skin of all those immediately involved, she continues, 'j'ai été Charlie, le balayeur et le flic à l'entrée. Et j'ai été aussi les gars qui entrent avec leurs armes. Ceux qui venaient de s'acheter une kalashnikov au marché noir et avaient décidé, à leur façon, la seule qui leur soit accessible, de mourir debout plutôt que de vivre à genoux.'²⁴¹ Desportes borrows from the words of the Mexican revolutionary Emiliano Zapata to describe the attackers as individuals who chose to 'mourir debout que de vivre à genoux'. Her empathy and use of Zapata's famous words frame terrorist violence as a revolutionary act of political contestation, one that she understands and does not explicitly condemn. *Apocalypse bébé* opens with Valentine's disappearance. In the absence of her physical presence within the narrative, Valentine's character is initially constructed through surveillance images and intelligence data that Lucie has gathered. The text provides notably a description of the photographs that Lucie lays out before her client Jacqueline Galtan, Valentine's paternal grandmother:

Valentine suce un garçon, dans un parc, sur un banc, protégée des regards par un buisson d'un mètre de haut. Valentine se fait une ligne sur son cahier de textes, à 8 heures du matin. Valentine vient de faire le mur, elle monte à l'arrière du scooter d'un parfait inconnu qu'elle accoste au feu rouge, en pleine nuit[...]²⁴²

Jaqueline Galtan's surveillance of Valentine through Lucie reflects a multilayered system of control in the novel. In *Surveiller et punir* (1975) Michel Foucault uses Bentham's Panopticon, a circular prison structure that is designed to induce in its prisoners the constant conscious state of being watched by their guards, as a metaphor for the constant self-surveillance of individuals within society.²⁴³ Hired by the Galtan family to monitor Valentine's movements and behaviour, Lucie becomes an extension of this surveillance society, taking on the role of 'watcher' and embodying an all-seeing eye. However, Lucie's vision is ultimately limited, firstly through the novel's layered narrative structure in which Lucie's first-person narrative voice competes with that of the omniscient one, and secondly by a form of myopia that arises from her internalisation of societal norms. In the first chapter of the novel, Lucie's first-person narration conveys competing representations of Valentine. While the aforementioned photographs construct the image of the rebellious teenager, a different perspective is introduced when Lucie encounters

²⁴⁰ Virginie Desportes, "Virginie Desportes sur l'attentat de Charlie Hebdo : "Les hommes nous rappellent qui commande, et comment"," *Les Inrockuptibles*, January 17, 2015, <https://www.lesinrocks.com/actu/virginie-desportes-les-hommes-nous-rappellent-qui-commande-et-comment-102086-17-01-2015/>.

²⁴¹ Desportes, "Virginie Desportes sur l'attentat de Charlie Hebdo."

²⁴² Virginie Desportes, *Apocalypse bébé* (Grasset, 2010), 17.

²⁴³ Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir : Naissance de la prison* (Éditions Gallimard, 1975), 197-229.

a family portrait of Valentine presented by La Hyène. Reflecting on this portrait, Lucie observes: ‘comme toutes les filles de son âge, sur les photos de famille, elle a juste l’air d’une bonne gamine’.²⁴⁴ These two contrasting views of Valentine highlight the duality of the societal gaze on adolescent girls, a gaze that Lucie has internalised and then projected on Valentine. Lucie’s inability to see beyond such norms clouds her vision, and after a series of dead ends in her investigation, Lucie follows La Hyène, leaving Paris for Barcelona, where Valentine’s biological mother resides.

The passage from Paris to Barcelona allows a break from the rigid conventions of bourgeois society, and the crossing of the geographical border between France and Spain exposes Lucie to new ways of life. From the novel’s outset, La Hyène demonstrates a flagrant disregard for social conventions, which initially frustrates Lucie. Lucie’s discomfort comes to the fore in a passage in which she walks in on an orgy taking place in the living room of the apartment where they are staying in Barcelona. Like the description of surveillance images depicting Valentine, here the narration adopts a distinctly visual quality: ‘la vision d’ensemble est si inhabituelle que j’ai du mal à en decoder les éléments’.²⁴⁵ The text’s visual mapping fragments the orgy scene into a series of snapshots in which Lucie acts both as witness and narrator. The paragraphs detailing the sexual activities and physical placement of the bodies are framed by Lucie’s initial disorientation, her difficulty to ‘décoder les éléments’, followed by her inclination to make sense of what she has witnessed as expressed in the chapter’s closing sentences; ‘[d]’examiner, au calme, les images que je viens d’enregistrer.’²⁴⁶ This use of the terms ‘décoder’ and ‘enregistrer’ imbues Lucie’s human mind with a machine-like quality, as if her brain operated like a computer decoding, filing and saving the images that pass in front of her eyes. The mechanical rendering of Lucie’s mind through Despentes’ use of language here recalls an earlier episode in the novel in which Lucie expressed a feeling of nausea after having spent too much time looking at images on her computer screen, while searching the internet for potential clues of Valentine’s whereabouts, a feeling described as ‘un mal de mer informatique.’²⁴⁷ This formulation reflects the convergence of the natural and the technical world in our contemporary era.

Apocalypse bébé, operates a similar rapprochement between the consumption of pornographic images and of surveillance images, illustrating what Paul B. Preciado has defined

²⁴⁴ Despentes, *Apocalypse bébé*, 35.

²⁴⁵ Despentes, *Apocalypse bébé*, 174.

²⁴⁶ Despentes, *Apocalypse bébé*, 176.

²⁴⁷ Despentes, *Apocalypse bébé*, 143.

as the ‘pharmo-pornographic’ regime. In *Testo-Junkie* (2008), Preciado reformulates Foucault’s analysis on the panoptical prison structure by shifting the focus from the execution of an external disciplining force on the individual to an internal execution of power that operates on an intimate bodily level. In addition, Preciado highlights how the nature of power has changed since the last century as today individuals wilfully and regularly consume both pharmaceuticals and pornography through the use of technology. Our present technologies do not simply monitor the body; they hack it, transforming it into a site of control and commodification. In Desportes’ novel, the character of Lucie demonstrates this: her hyper consumption of surveillance images has impacted the way she perceives and processes information from the world around her, transforming her into a technical apparatus: her gaze, for instance, replicates the lens of a camera within the narrational framework of the novel. The novel’s final chapter, also relayed through Lucie’s viewpoint, depicts the aftermath of Valentine’s suicide bombing of the Palais-Royal. Accompanying her family to a literary award ceremony, where her father is to receive a prize for his latest novel, Valentine detonates a bomb hidden inside her vagina. A video recording of Valentine claiming responsibility for the attack filmed from a laptop webcam circulates online after the event. The content of the video is described in detail in the text from Lucie’s perspective:

‘Valentine tendait le bras droit pour descendre la caméra vers son nombril, présentait un cylindre de metal brillant, d’environ quinze centimètres de longueur sur un diameter de trois centimètres – les dimensions seraient connues de tous, rapidement, et comparées à celles d’un petit vibro, ou d’un gros tampon –, elle dégrafait sa ceinture de la main gauche, descendait son pantalon et debout, on découvrirait qu’elle ne portait pas de culotte mais peu de monde trouverait ça sexy, bassin face au caméra, elle posait un pied sur le bureau, angle porno classique, enfilait le tube au fond de son vagin et remontait la fermeture de son jean, donnait un petit coup de reins dans le vide, puis redressait la caméra vers laquelle elle se penchait pour conclure, sobrement :

– Tu la veux? Tu la prends.’²⁴⁸

Valentine’s provocative remarks serve as a direct confrontation with the very system that worked to monitor and control her. Her reappropriation of surveillance technologies (the camera and the internet) disrupts Lucie’s image of Valentine as a rebellious teenage runaway. Indeed, in the novel’s penultimate chapter, which describes the series of events from Valentine’s perspective, the reader becomes aware that Valentine knew she was being followed

²⁴⁸ Desportes, *Apocalypse bébé*, 360.

by Lucie, and that the photos were of scenes staged by Valentine herself. In addition, the intentionally explicit content of the video demonstrates Valentine's awareness of the highly voyeuristic nature of surveillance culture, which she at once plays into by borrowing from the visual codes of pornography, and subverts through extreme violence. The video's title 'Little Girl'²⁴⁹ juxtaposes innocence with aggressive imagery and points to the aesthetic. More than a straightforward claiming of the terrorist attack, Valentine's video functions as an artwork within a literary text—as an unsettling performance piece. This aesthetic dimension, however, is troubling, especially given Despentes' intentional blurring of art and extreme violence, in this case an act of terrorism.

Valentine's video performance draws upon various artistic techniques and movements: her insertion of a device echoes American abject art in the late 20th century, which Jack Ben-Levi and others define as: 'a body of work which incorporates or suggests abject materials such as dirt, hair, excrement, dead animals, menstrual blood, and rotting food in order to confront taboo issues of gender and sexuality'²⁵⁰. Despentes' text directly confronts the taboo surrounding female menstruation by comparing the bomb with a 'gros tampon'²⁵¹. The reclaiming of the abject goes beyond a gendered rebellion, since the object that Valentine inserts into her body is in fact a bomb. Its symbolism, at the same time, points to broader social concerns around contamination and pollution as Valentine's video performance includes a recited text that begins as such: « je suis la peste, le choléra, la grippe aviaire et la bombe A [...] »²⁵². Valentine's use of the first-person furthermore points to her quest for self-representation. Valentine's provocative gesture, which involves the insertion of a bomb into her body, echoes American visual artist Robert Mapplethorpe's 1978 photograph, *Self-portrait*. Mapplethorpe's work is a black and white image of the artist himself dressed in leather boots and crotchless trousers. In the image, Mapplethorpe is leaning forward to reveal his bare buttocks. His head and shoulders are turned towards the camera, and his left hand is holding the braided tail of a leather whip, the handle of which is inserted into his anus.

In Mapplethorpe's photograph, the leather whip, the master's instrument of discipline and control, is not simply received by the body of the slave but absorbed by it. Mapplethorpe's photograph, therefore, blurs the boundary between the instrument of discipline and control and its destined object: the artist's body. In a similar gesture, Valentine recuperates the technology

²⁴⁹ Despentes, *Apocalypse bébé*, 360.

²⁵⁰ Ben-levi et al., *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Selections from the Permanent Collection, June 23-August 29, 1993, Whitney Museum of American Art* (Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993), 7.

²⁵¹ Despentes, *Apocalypse bébé*, 360.

²⁵² Despentes, *Apocalypse bébé*, 359.

of surveillance, the camera, that works to subjugate and control her. Rather than allowing herself to be controlled from the exterior, Valentine uses this technology to represent herself, transforming technologies used for discipline and control into technologies supporting destruction and chaos.

Valentine's video performance, with its provocative visual and textual elements, stands out within the novel as an artwork in the modern sense: a piece of performance art that relates to her quest for a radical form of self-representation. However, Desportes' aestheticization of violence extends beyond Valentine's video, incorporated into the broader structure of the novel itself. Valentine's disappearance and the discovery of her whereabouts are central to the development of the novel's plot and serve as the motivational force behind the unfolding of the narrative. The various and at times contradictory impressions of Valentine that readers encounter throughout the novel, from perspectives shared by her family members and friends as part of Lucie's investigation, present her as an enigma, a mystery to be solved. Valentine's enigmatic nature provides the novel's concluding chapters with a revelatory quality. The novel's penultimate chapter introduces, for the first time, the series of events leading up to Valentine's disappearance and her final act of terrorism from her perspective. Then, the final chapter shifts to Lucie's viewpoint and focuses on the consequences of Valentine's attack. The revelatory quality of the novel's ending points to an apocalyptic structure in Desportes' text, reframing the investigative plot as the story of a rising destructive force announced by the novel's title. Valentine embodies destruction in the novel as a figure that collapses the boundary between the profane and the sacred.

Valentine's profanity is expressed through references to her sexual relations, in particular with her first cousin Yacine. Yacine appears early on in the novel, as Lucie and La Hyène first investigate potential ties between Valentine and her biological mother's extended family. In a chapter focused on Yacine's perspective, their relationship is described in passionate terms. Being an incestuous relationship, it violates normal familial and societal norms, marking Valentine as a morally degenerate character. However, their union also becomes a force of both destruction and transformation within the novel. According to Yacine, when they were together 'Valentine se transformait, elle devenait déesse de la destruction, sacrée et terrifiante'²⁵³. The vision of Valentine as a goddess reflected through the eyes of her lover emphasises her sexual power and aligns her with the figure of the Whore of Babylon from the apocalyptic biblical text the *Revelation of John*, foreshadowing the novel's

²⁵³ Desportes, *Apocalypse bébé*, 156.

apocalyptic ending. In John's *Revelation*, the Whore of Babylon is a sexually deviant figure traditionally associated with corruption and decadence. Yet in Desportes' novel, Valentine is explicitly compared to the figure in Caravaggio's *Martyrdom of Saint Ursula*, aligning the heroine with a saintly figure of religious iconography. While Valentine's terrorist act is abhorrent, events and circumstances leading her to it make her an equally pitiful figure, touched by tragedy and vulnerability. As Valentine recalls her first meeting with her biological mother Vanessa in Barcelona, she understands that the latter is not interested in forming a relationship with her and uses a reference to Caravaggio's painting and its encounter during her childhood: 'Valentine a senti avec un étonnement silencieux un endroit dans sa poitrine se déchirer, comme l'Ursula de Caravaggio. Son grand-père aimait cette toile. Il l'avait emmenée la voir, à Naples'.²⁵⁴ Valentine's pain when realising her mother does not want her deeply humanises her. This moment of vulnerability is simultaneously elevated to a transcendental level through the comparison with Saint Ursula. The imagery of Valentine's chest tearing is linked to the sacrificial moment shown in Caravaggio's painting, as Ursula receives an arrow to her chest. By likening Valentine's heartbreak to Ursula's sacrifice, Desportes not only humanises Valentine, she also sanctifies her, transforming her act of terrorism into a response to deep emotional pain and suffering that becomes a moment of beauty and self-sacrifice.

By aligning Valentine with Saint Ursula, Desportes frames the suicide-bombing not as a nihilistic act of destruction but as a moment of self-sacrifice in the pursuit of a higher purpose. Valentine's rejection of her grandfather's inheritance symbolises her refusal to embrace the materialistic values of her social milieu, and her final act of violence, which she carefully choreographs as a work of art, transcends mere chaos, becoming a deliberate performance that relies on aestheticizing violence. In her death, Valentine becomes a martyr, a figure whose suffering and sacrifice carry a transcendental significance. Her fate in *Apocalypse bébé* echoes that of Manu in Desportes' earlier work, *Baise-moi*. In the final chapter of the novel's second part, Manu is unexpectedly shot in the neck during a robbery. The state of her body is described in graphic terms: 'la tête séparée du tronc par une blessure luisante'.²⁵⁵ The separation of Manu's head from her body also offers a strikingly visual scene, an almost painterly vision with the mention of a 'blessure luisante'. After wrapping Manu's body in a blanket and dousing it with whisky, Nadine sets it on fire. The destruction of Manu's body is conveyed in the text as a multisensory experience: 'le whisky brûle bien. Le corps se recouvre d'une flamme courte

²⁵⁴ Desportes, *Apocalypse bébé*, 324.

²⁵⁵ Desportes, *Baise-moi*, 236.

et uniforme, une couverture qui danse. Le premier truc qui crame, ce sont les cheveux, en grésillant. L'odeur est forte. Puis une nouvelle odeur, celle de la peau. Ça fait penser aux desserts flambés dans les restaurants'.²⁵⁶ The emphasis on sound and smells pushes the representation of Manu's body beyond the textual and creates a multisensory experience for readers. Desportes emphasises the symbolic significance of this moment as the narrative trajectory of the novel draws to a close. Nadine's careful preparation of Manu's body, especially the use of whisky that serves to consecrate Manu's body, elevates the act of burning beyond mere disposal to a sacrificial gesture. Although Manu did not have a say in her death, the ceremonial way in which Nadine treats her body mirrors the ways in which saints and martyrs are honoured after their deaths. The apotheosis of Manu at the end of *Baise-moi* and the aestheticization of Valentine's terrorist attack in *Apocalypse bébé* reveal the complex and ambiguous glorification of violence and destruction in Desportes' work.

Manu's burial and Valentine's suicide-bombing provide closure at the end of *Baise-moi* and of *Apocalypse bébé*, as works that push representational limits to the point of destruction. While Desportes' acts of final destruction may be interpreted as nihilistic, when viewed alongside French punk views on destruction as creation, these acts can be seen as serving a form of optimism. In his study, Humeau highlights the link between punk music artists and political terrorist groups in France in the 1980s, explaining how several members of *Bérurier Noir* were implicated in an attack carried out by a terrorist group, *Black War*, ahead of the 1988 presidential elections in France.²⁵⁷ As Humeau explains, during this period, the porosity between the musical and the political was significant, citing directly from Loran, a member and guitarist of the *Bérurier Noirs*:

C'est un choix. À un moment tu te demandes si tu ne vas pas faire sauter les banques ! [...]

C'est une manière de se mettre en marge de la société. [...] L'intérêt, pour nous, c'est de susciter un maximum de foyers contre-culture que l'on n'est pas obligé de maîtriser.²⁵⁸

For French punks such as Loran, creating punk music was a means to encourage the production of a form of cultural revolution: the destruction of an existing order and the creation of a new one. In *Apocalypse bébé*, Desportes stages a highly stylised terrorist attack; resonating with the punk ethos of creation in destruction described as an 'alternative to terrorism'. In writing her novel, Desportes commits an act of literary terrorism: the depiction of a violent act of destruction that holds the promise of a radically new beginning. Desportes' literary terrorism

²⁵⁶ Desportes, *Baise-moi*, 238-239.

²⁵⁷ Humeau, *À corps et à cris*, 99.

²⁵⁸ Humeau, *À corps et à cris*, 93.

extends beyond the depiction of violence; as a writer, she directly confronts limits imposed by societal, moral, and aesthetic frameworks, and undertakes to surpass them, for new creative possibilities to emerge.

For Lucie, the final terrorist attack signifies both an ending and a new start. Due to her closeness with Valentine, she is forced into clandestinity, spending several weeks in hiding in a house in the North of France, and later, with Zoska, in a house in Brittany. Valentine's attack transforms Lucie's life, and she describes the experience in terms of an identity crisis:

j'ai vécu obsédée, pendant trois mois, par la journée de l'explosion. J'étais dans le ventre de Valentine, dans le corps de François Galtan, j'étais déchiquetée par l'impact, j'étais dans les mains des pompiers. J'ai perdu mon identité. Tout ce que j'étais, avant, et que je tenais pour pas grand-chose. Je me suis diffusée, dans l'espace.²⁵⁹

Although Lucie did not experience the attack firsthand, only watching images on the television and Valentine's video on a computer, she describes an immediate embodied experience. This experience, as described by Despentès in her novel, resonates with the way she writes about her own experience of the Charlie Hedo attack five years later in her op-ed for *Les Inrockuptibles*: as a diffusion of the self with the other. Lucie's positionality in relation to the attack contrasts sharply with how she was earlier positioned in the orgy scene, in which she was distinctly distanced from the 'amas de corps nus'²⁶⁰. Lucie is no longer a passive observer of events in which boundaries between self and other collapse. The physical sensations that she experiences — being 'dans le ventre de Valentine' and 'dans les mains des pompiers' — go beyond identification and empathy, describing an interweaving of selves, and a collective diffusion of identity. Lucie is no longer just herself, and her loss of individual identity is furthered in her identification not only with human bodies but with the non-human too. The ambiguity of the term 'le ventre' in French, either being stomach or womb, points to the possibility that Lucie identifies not only with Valentine but also with the bomb placed into her vagina. Lucie's embodied experience of otherness pushes her towards a form of immateriality: 'je me suis diffusée dans l'espace'. The use of the reflexive verb suggests a layered experience of dissolution. On the one hand, it can be read as a voluntary relinquishing of individuality and Lucie's active embrace of the erosion of the boundary between herself and the world around her. On the other hand, the grammatical formulation necessary here to express both a literal and metaphorical subjective experience, also complicates the expression of agency. Lucie's

²⁵⁹ Despentès, *Apocalypse bébé*, 373.

²⁶⁰ Despentès, *Apocalypse bébé*, 174.

dissolution, therefore, can be read as both a voluntary embrace of intersubjectivity and an inevitable consequence of the explosive force of Valentine's attack. The ambiguity of the passage transforms the notion of subjectivity into something that exists in a state of flux, constantly escaping one's grasp. This dissolution of self also recalls Arthur Rimbaud's famous declaration 'je est un autre'. This statement appears in Rimbaud's 1871 letter to his friend Paul Demeny. In this letter Rimbaud writes: 'le Poete se fait *voyant*, par un long, immense et raisonné dérèglement de *tous les sens*.' This disturbance of the senses leads the poet, according to Rimbaud towards 'l'*inconnu*' and towards 'les horizons où l'autre s'est affaissé !'²⁶¹ It is through this movement towards the other that Rimbaud suggests that the poet may 'see' the world differently and inspire in poetry the expression of '[d]es choses inouïes et innomables'.²⁶² Like the poet, Lucie's destruction, her being 'déchiquetée', allows her to experience a new state of being that annihilates the boundary between self and other, human and non-human, material and immaterial.

Despentes' later *Vernon Subutex* trilogy, and the alternative utopian sociability that forms around its eponymous protagonist, marks a departure from the punk aesthetic that characterises her earlier work. The publication of the trilogy marks a new juncture and exemplifies the author's use of fiction to imagine and build alternative communities. Despentes wrote *Vernon Subutex* both during and after her decade-long relationship with Paul B. Preciado. Their couple, as well as the intellectual and artistic partnership they formed together is reflected in their respective work, firstly, and on a superficial level, through the use of dedication. Preciado's *Testo-Junkie* for instance is dedicated 'À Virginie'. The epigraph of Despentes' *Apocalypse bébé* is a citation from *Testo-Junkie*, '«... como dos vampiros dormiremos sobre tu tumba, calentaremos tus huesos, como dos vampiros vendremos a saciar tu sed de sexo, de sangre y de testosterona[...]»' and followed by the mention 'À B.P.'²⁶³. This practice of call and response, both intimate and exposed, public and private, later developed further: the French publishing house Grasset, when publishing Preciado's collection of essays, included a preface written by Despentes. Despentes' preface provided Preciado with a stamp of approval and recognition, bolstering Preciado's legitimacy and visibility within the French intellectual establishment. In addition to these explicit and evident crossings between their oeuvres, each of their body of work is shaped by the porosity of the romantic and artistic dimensions of their shared lives. *Apocalypse bébé*, with its Spanish setting and its

²⁶¹ Arthur Rimbaud, *Lettres du Voyant* (H. Matarasso, 1954), 137.

²⁶² Rimbaud, *Lettres du Voyant*, 137.

²⁶³ Despentes, *Apocalypse bébé*.

representation of fulfilled and happy same-sex relationships, borrows from Despentés' relationship with Preciado, which began before his gender transition.²⁶⁴ Her writing is also imbued with Preciado's own thoughts, and an evolution in Despentés' approach to the individual and the collective happens after the start of her relationship with Preciado. This transformation can be seen in her essay *King Kong théorie*, published in 2006, one year after she met Preciado.²⁶⁵

In *King Kong théorie*, Despentés moves away from fiction to essay writing, presenting her definition of a new woman, the 'King Kong Girl'.²⁶⁶ This figure is largely based on her reading of the relationship between King Kong and Anne Darrow in Peter Jackson's 2005 film *King Kong*. Despentés refers to the characters as 'la bête'²⁶⁷ and 'la belle,'/'la blonde',²⁶⁸ treating them as archetypal opposites. By referring to Darrow as "la blonde" Despentés gestures back to the original 1933 film of the same title, Hollywood's Golden Age of cinema, and its archetype of the glamorous yet vulnerable female lead. Likewise, "la bête" represents the wild, untamed savage, as the perfect antithesis to the civilised world and its leading lady. In the film, rather than adhering to their predetermined narratives ('la blonde; as ideal victim of 'la bête'), they defy expectations by forming an unexpected friendship, one that Despentés interprets as 'un rapport sensuel évident, ludique, où la force ne fixe pas de domination'.²⁶⁹ In her essay, Despentés imagines new ways for us to relate to one another and to those society sees as monstrous 'others', like King Kong. For Despentés, King Kong stands for 'le chaos d'avant les genres'.²⁷⁰ She continues: 'King Kong est au-delà de la femelle, et au-delà du mâle. Il est à la charnière, entre l'homme et l'animal [...] Hybride, avant l'obligation binaire'.²⁷¹ This creature, neither male nor female but beyond gender and sex divisions is related to the figure that Preciado constructs of and from himself, and which he names a 'singe-humain'²⁷² in his essay *Je suis un monstre qui vous parle*. From the dialogue that expands across their respective bodies of work, emerges the monster as a shared intellectual creation.

²⁶⁴ Preciado writes in *Testo-Junkie* that his and Despentés' relationship started at the same time he began experimenting with testosterone-gel: 'nous nous rencontrons à un moment fractal[...] je viens de commencer à prendre la testostérone'. Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 83. This moment and their relationship will be explored in closer detail in the next chapter.

²⁶⁵ Preciado notes in *Testo-Junkie* that he met Despentés once only briefly at the première of *Baise-moi* in 2000 and met her again properly in 2005; this is when their relationship began. See pages 79-84 in *Testo-Junkie*.

²⁶⁶ Despentés, *King Kong théorie*, 111.

²⁶⁷ Despentés, *King Kong théorie*, 114.

²⁶⁸ Despentés, *King Kong théorie*, 113.

²⁶⁹ Despentés, *King Kong théorie*, 114.

²⁷⁰ Despentés, *King Kong théorie*, 114.

²⁷¹ Despentés, *King Kong théorie*, 112.

²⁷² Preciado, *Je suis un monstre*, 17.

Despentès' *Vernon Subutex* trilogy centres on an alternative social community that forms around its eponymous protagonist, Vernon. It turns the fictional text into a kind of utopia, where social bonds form beyond social class, sex, gender, or political opinions. The three volumes develop themes and ideas present in Despentès' other works, furthering the intertextual, intellectual and emotional bonds between her literary writing and Preciado's philosophical texts. Vernon is a former record dealer who, after being expelled from his flat in Paris, quickly becomes destitute on the streets of the city. With no place of his own, Vernon is forced to rely on old friends and acquaintances: he hops from one to another as they offer him some but never unconditional hospitality. When Vernon eventually goes missing, these disparate individuals band together to find him. United by shared concern for a friend, a community forms around Vernon, organising gatherings in bars or public parks in the city. As Vernon is found, his almost supernatural musical talent as a DJ means that these gatherings expand in size and scale, to finally form the basis of an alternative social structure centered on rave-like events, referred to in the text as 'les convergences'.

Although Vernon becomes the clear leader of this new community, his body and identity are ultimately dissolved within the collective whole as Maxime Goergen observes: 'Vernon Subutex lui-même, qui ayant tout perdu, s'étant absolument dépouillé, est ainsi à même de devenir l'interface des desires et des projections de tous'.²⁷³ While this happens in the second and third volumes of the trilogy, this diffusion, foreshadowed in the narrative as: 'il ne concevait aucune nostalgie de son identité sociale, dont les contours lui paraissaient parfaitement absurdes, à présent',²⁷⁴ Vernon begins the first volume by being a vulnerable body in search of a home, love, and care. His material needs are at the basis of the interpersonal relationships he attempts to form since he is forced to regularly cross the threshold between public and private and make a place for himself in the domestic spaces, and lives, of others. Vernon's quest for shelter is an exploration of intimacy and domestic survival. In the first volume, Vernon's series of failed romantic encounters with women exposes limitations of a heteronormative model, ultimately allowing the emergence of an ideal 'monstrous couple', defined as a radically different union based on caring for the 'other' as a fellow human, outside any prescriptive social and sexual imperatives.

²⁷³ Maxime Goergen, "Vernon Subutex et Le Roman « balzacien »." *Rocky Mountain Review* 72, no. 1 (2018): 174, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/90023697>.

²⁷⁴ Virginie Despentès, *Vernon Subutex 2*(Grasset, 2015), 110.

SECTION 3: Reinventing couples and communities

Despentes uses Vernon's displacement and dispossession to question and challenge the precarious social and sexual foundations of heteronormative coupledness. One way in which Despentes reveals the inherent fragility of such a relationship model is by exposing Vernon's crisis of masculinity. After losing his home and material possessions, her protagonist becomes increasingly anxious about his own virility and his social role as a man. In the beginning of the text, Vernon holds fixed conceptions of masculinity, which he feels he can no longer embody after losing his job and home. His anxiety about the loss of these masculine ideals is reflected early in the first volume through his interaction with a young woman, Céleste. The daughter of one of Vernon's former clients, Céleste bumps into him in a park. Through the narration, Despentes clearly conveys Vernon's insecurities as he attempts to charm Céleste: 'il lui décoche un clin d'œil, et il tourne le dos, tout en se demandant s'il apparaît viril et décidé ou s'il a juste l'air d'un paumé.'²⁷⁵ Vernon's insecurities about whether Céleste perceives him as a possible social and perhaps sexual partner highlight his insecurities. While he strives to take on qualities he associates with masculinity, his fear of appearing as 'un paumé', a 'loser', reveals the extent to which his sense of masculinity is actually defined by his interpretation of a reflected feminine gaze. The term 'un paumé' encapsulates Vernon's lost sense of place since, in his homelessness, he has become a wandering, floating body. By interweaving Vernon's displacement with his diminishing social worth as a man, Despentes also centres the female body as the main anchor of Vernon's exploration of masculine identity.

Vernon's journey in the novels can be read as a series of attempts to regain his place in society and reestablish his masculine status by inserting himself in the domestic lives of various female characters. Yet his precarious social and economic position complicates his ability to successfully perform traditional male roles and to reclaim a space within a home. In the absence of material stability, Vernon is reliant on interpersonal relationships for survival. This material dependency transforms his relationships into transactions, founded on self-interest, where needs are exchanged for the fulfilment of gendered expectations. Such transactional dynamics are particularly evident in his relationship with two female characters, Sylvie and Lydia Bazooka. Sylvie is an old acquaintance from the 'rock and roll' glory days of Vernon's youth, and the former girlfriend of Alex Bleach. Despentes' multifocal narrative, in which chapters told from Vernon's perspective are interspersed with others adopting the viewpoints of other characters on the same events, purposefully produces contrast, in this case between Sylvie and

²⁷⁵ Virginie Despentes, *Vernon Subutex 1* (Grasset, 2015), 110.

Vernon's relationship. The chapter dedicated to Sylvie's perspective precedes the one told through Vernon's eyes. For Sylvie, her relationship with Vernon is clearly driven by self-interest. Rather than helping a friend in need, Sylvie pounces on Vernon's homelessness as an opportunity to seduce him and boost her social status and, by extension, her self-esteem. The narration reveals Sylvie's primary motivations, which are making her friends jealous: 'elle va les faire danser sur le gril de la jalousie avec son amant rocker, indomptable et sentimental'²⁷⁶ and as a way to boost her self-image; 'le désir de Vernon l'a réconciliée avec son image'.²⁷⁷ According to Michèle Schaal, Sylvie embodies the figure of 'la narcissiste beauvoirienne [qui] ne semble exister que si elle séduit des hommes qui font envie et que si elle peut triompher des autres femmes'.²⁷⁸ Indeed, Desportes' archetypal Sylvie brings her female identity into sharp relief, especially as Vernon's perspective is starkly opposed to hers.

Initially, Sylvie's advances provide Vernon with an opportunity to mend a fractured sense of masculinity. Sylvie is perceived within a habitual framework: she is referred to in the text as having a 'total look héroïne Hitchcock'²⁷⁹ for instance. In likening Sylvie to Hitchcock's heroines, Desportes casts Sylvie as an embodiment of the stereotypical vision of desirable femininity produced through the 'male gaze' and therefore as a figure that fulfils gendered expectations in heteronormative relations. Sylvie's fulfilment of Vernon's image of her is explicit as she is defined as 'un de ses grands fantasmes de jeunesse'.²⁸⁰ While for Sylvie the consummation of her relationship is defined as satisfying, validating her needs, for Vernon it proves to be unfulfilling and laborious, as the narration reveals: 'la baise était devenue une corvée [...]'.²⁸¹ The use of the term 'corvée' points to the transactional nature of their relationship, and re-assigns a word usually found in the lexicon of housewives or used to discuss the domestic chores that typically fall on women in the heteronormative home. In her essay *King Kong théorie*, Desportes pursues a Beauvoirian criticism of the traditional heterosexual couple, in which she aligns being a domestic wife with the labour of the prostitute. Challenging society's moralistic stance towards sex work, Desportes writes: 'ce qui compte, c'est de colporter une seule idée : aucune femme ne doit tirer bénéfice de ses services sexuels hors le mariage'.²⁸² This provocative metaphor at once critiques the transactional dynamics of

²⁷⁶ Desportes, *Subutex 1*, 149.

²⁷⁷ Desportes, *Subutex 1*, 152.

²⁷⁸ Michèle A. Schaal, "L'Univers Affectif Féminin Dans Vernon Subutex de Virginie Desportes," *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* (Abingdon) 22, no. 4 (2018): 479, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17409292.2018.1545733>.

²⁷⁹ Desportes, *Subutex 1*, 155.

²⁸⁰ Desportes, *Subutex 1*, 155.

²⁸¹ Desportes, *Subutex 1*, 159.

²⁸² Desportes, *King Kong théorie*, 79.

marital life, in which a woman provides ‘free’ sexual services in exchange for material comforts, and challenges the social stigma surrounding sex work. Because of his homelessness, Vernon is the one reliant on Sylvie to provide him with material comforts, ensuring his survival, inverting traditional gendered role. Vernon’s performance of domestic work — sex as chore — in exchange for material security means that he takes on a usually feminine position, while Sylvie adopts the typically masculine role of provider. While gendered dynamics of the traditional couple are clearly reversed here, this reversal is so extreme that it shifts into a satirical mode, which threatens both the gendered fantasies that Vernon and Sylvie cling to as well as their inversion by the narration. Sylvie’s exaggerated and caricatural sexual satisfaction for instance, which she says has ‘réaligné [ses] chakras’,²⁸³ sharply jars in tone with Vernon’s own impressions of their sex lives as dull labour.

Despentes’ satirical representation of gendered expectations, and their failure, within the heteronormative couple, also reveals the limitations of transactional relationships founded in self-interest. This is pursued further with Vernon’s relationship with Lydia Bazooka, a young journalist working on a book about Alex Bleach. Similarly to Sylvie, Lydia is driven by self-interest, her connection with Vernon allowing her to fulfil her creative ambition and her sexual desires. While Lydia is seen as a more appealing partner for Vernon, he is ultimately unfulfilled by their short-lived intimacy: ‘la petite était de la génération porno, elle simulait avec une ardeur embarrassante[...] Une suceuse d’exception[..] Mais au moment d’éjaculer, il n’avait pas senti grand-chose’.²⁸⁴ The double meaning of the verb ‘sentir’, which signifies both physical and emotional sensations in French, expresses Vernon’s disappointed view of their sexual relationship as well as their lack of emotional connection. Like in his relationship with Sylvie, where he played the role of domestic wife, Vernon occupies the typically feminised position of ‘muse’ in his relationship with Lydia. The latter’s interest in Vernon is linked to her desire to develop creative ambitions while also asserting a certain sexual prowess. Through these relationships, Despentes critiques gendered expectations but also shows how the gendered views on these positions are superseded by economic factors. In the face of Vernon’s homelessness and total dependence on others for survival, roles within the couple remain but can be occupied by male or female subjects alike.

Despentes’ portrayal of Vernon’s relationships with both Sylvie and Lydia sharply contrasts with the depiction of his transformative relationship with Marcia. By way of contrast,

²⁸³ Despentes, *Subutex 1*, 149.

²⁸⁴ Despentes, *Subutex 1*, 221.

the text conveys Vernon's experience of physical intimacy with Marcia as one marked by pleasure and ease of being and the narration dwells on his emotional and physical satisfaction with their sexual interactions: 'il était tellement bien, entre les seins de Marcia, sur le ventre de Marcia, contre le cul de Marcia, entre les lèvres de Marcia[...]'.²⁸⁵ This fragmentation of Marcia's body into its various parts, in addition to the repetition of the prepositions, 'entre', 'sur' and 'contre', transforms her body from a singular and unified entity into a vast terrain of almost Gargantuan proportions. The terrain of her body is experienced both through comfort, as something familiar and homely, and as a frontier, a new land to be discovered and explored. Desportes' portrayal of Marcia's body as simultaneously familiar and strange emphasises the ways in which the bodies of Marcia and Vernon mirror each other, reflecting both sameness and difference. This tension is revealed in a dialogue between Vernon and another male character, Patrice. Marcia is a transwoman, and her anatomical likeness to Vernon is told in the text in a way that directly confronts social anxieties around the distinction between anatomical sex, gender identity and sexual orientation. In the dialogue between Vernon and Patrice, Vernon explains that he is in a relationship with Marcia and comments: 'sa queue était plus grosse que la mienne'.²⁸⁶ In his flippant comparison of the size of his genitals with Marcia's own, Vernon engages in a stereotypically masculine behaviour that centres on anatomy and size as a measure of sexual performance. While Vernon's comment, which focuses on the importance of the size of Marcia's genitals, may be read as an erasure of her gender identity and the reduction of her body to anatomical sex, it can also be read as a demonstration of solidarity and pride – in which he acknowledges Marcia both as the object of his discourse in a typical 'lad' conversation, and also as one of their own.

Desportes' use of a dialogue between two cisgender male characters to bring a transwoman into the fold of masculine solidarity (based on her possession of sizable male genitals) confronts an essentialist stance towards gender and sexual identity. At the same time, the text sheds no doubt about Marcia's femininity. As the discussion between Vernon and Patrice continues, Vernon describes Marcia as 'la plus belle meuf que j'ai jamais approchée, la plus féminine, la plus élégante, la plus classe [...]',²⁸⁷ once again engaging in stereotypically masculine behaviour of classifying Marcia, yet this time on her ability to conform to feminine ideals. Desportes' depiction of her protagonist engaging in behaviours and expressing ideas that can be read as transphobic and misogynistic raises questions about the intentions of her

²⁸⁵ Desportes, *Subutex 1*, 357.

²⁸⁶ Desportes, *Subutex 1*, 321.

²⁸⁷ Desportes, *Subutex 1*, 322.

writing. In staging this difficult dialogue, the author, rather than avoiding social anxieties around gender and sexuality, addresses them head-on. By incorporating such dialogues into her fictional text, Desportes explores the complexity and ambiguity of couple relationships, from the heteronormative to other queer forms of relations between individuals. Desportes does not simplify Vernon's complex views on Marcia into a specific discourse, expressing instead his ambiguous perception of her body as both the same and different, destabilising binary positions and oppositions. Their relationship defies categorisation within traditional poles, from male/female, masculine/feminine, homosexual/heterosexual, developing as a hybrid entity within the novel.

In addition to defying binary categories of gender and sexuality, Vernon and Marcia's relationship stands apart from his earlier transactional relationships. While his time with Sylvie and then with Lydia was rooted in self-interest and material exchange, the relationship between Vernon and Marcia expands within a space of mutual precarity and shared vulnerability. Both of them are guests in someone else's house, they are both homeless, and hosted by a character named Kiko. A wealthy trader with a coke addiction, Kiko hosts frequent large gatherings at his apartment, allowing people to stay with him rent-free, seemingly in exchange for the social prestige and entertainment they can provide. Within this context, Marcia and Vernon share a state of dispossession. As Vernon becomes Kiko's resident DJ, exchanging his cultural capital and talent for a roof over his head, Marcia exchanges sex and physical intimacy in order to stay at Kiko's home. Marcia and Vernon are the same in social and economic terms: this horizontality between them is what guarantees the authenticity and equality that define their relationship, which is then defined completely outside of gender roles and expectations.

Marcia and Vernon's relationship is a new, 'monstrous' proposition central to *Vernon Subutex*, as it rejects the relevance of gender and sex in defining the ideal couple, instead defined by a horizontality of social and economic conditions that leads to the gratifying sharing of emotions and physical connection.

While Vernon's relations with Marcia offer one example of Desportes' experimentation with rethinking the couple, Vernon's platonic relationship with La Hyène sets the foundation for a new relational ethics. La Hyène is a recurring character across Desportes' body of work: a private detective in *Apocalypse bébé*, she returns in the same role in *Vernon Subutex*. The relationship between Vernon and La Hyène is initially set within an oppositional framework. La Hyène is hired by an influential film producer Laurent Dopalet to track down the tapes containing Alex Bleach's final recordings: the rock star's last testament may well contain details of his role in the death of porn star Vodka Santana. La Hyène's mission places

her in a secondary role, as she assists the novel's main antagonist character Dopalet. As she works for him, she serves the interests of a character in direct opposition to Vernon. Yet the indirect conflictual dynamic that separates La Hyène and Vernon in the first volume evolves in later volumes, where opposition and difference become productive forces that foster connection and interdependence between them.

In volume two, Vernon and La Hyène finally meet when Vernon's friends eventually locate him in a park where he has been sleeping rough. He is taken to La Hyène's house, where the group of friends have congregated. At this point, La Hyène takes Vernon into her bathroom and helps him by cleaning his body in the shower. In this passage, Vernon's thoughts and impressions and La Hyène's verbal instructions intersect. La Hyène tells Vernon 'tu sens le cadavre'²⁸⁸ and later comments on his physical deterioration 't'es pas épais'.²⁸⁹ Vernon's uncleanliness contrasts sharply with La Hyène's physical appearance. As she undresses to assist him in the shower, her underwear is described as 'blancs',²⁹⁰ symbolising a tension between her state and Vernon's abject body. The oppositional nature of this interaction is further emphasised by the contrast between Vernon's passivity and La Hyène's assertiveness. While Vernon is described as 'abasourdi',²⁹¹ 'un zombie',²⁹² 'vide',²⁹³ and 'incapable de faire un geste'²⁹⁴, the narration places La Hyène in an active position: she cares for him through gesture and speech: 'elle lui parle', 'elle le déshabille'.²⁹⁵

This scene first seems to play into a dominating/dominated dichotomy within an active/passive paradigm, in which one active subject exerts control or power over another passive one. This framework is typically gendered, with the acting subject being masculine and the passive one being feminine. In this instance, Despentès appears to switch gendered roles: it is Vernon who is depicted as passive and La Hyène who is active. However, La Hyène's activities conform to yet another type of gendered role: rather than being about dominance, her actions provide care, a form of work or labour traditionally associated with females. La Hyène's nurturing actions are highlighted in the text as the narration conveys Vernon's own perception: 'ses gestes sont ceux d'une infirmière'²⁹⁶ and 'Vernon pense qu'elle a une tenue

²⁸⁸ Despentès, *Subutex* 2, 131.

²⁸⁹ Despentès, *Subutex* 2, 131.

²⁹⁰ Despentès, *Subutex* 2, 132.

²⁹¹ Despentès, *Subutex* 2, 130.

²⁹² Despentès, *Subutex* 2, 131.

²⁹³ Despentès, *Subutex* 2, 131.

²⁹⁴ Despentès, *Subutex* 2, 131.

²⁹⁵ Despentès, *Subutex* 2, 131.

²⁹⁶ Despentès, *Subutex* 2, 131.

d'infirmière'.²⁹⁷ This bathroom scene shares parallels with Ducournau's filming of caring gestures shared between Vincent and Alexia-Adrien in *Titane*, as analysed in chapter one of this thesis. In both instances, the male body is shown in a state of utmost vulnerability, both in its nakedness and in its reliance on another for protection. Like in Ducournau's *Titane*, La Hyène's gestures demonstrate genuine care and a desire to establish physical connectedness. La Hyène's caring has a revitalising impact on Vernon's body, as it responds instinctively to her touch with an erection. Despentès inserts an incongruous moment, which suddenly breaks away with the fragility and sweetness of the scene, announcing Vernon's physical state with a striking metaphor: 'il bande comme un taureau'.²⁹⁸ While a common, colloquial expression, the comparison of Vernon's penis with a bull's immediately likens his body to that of an animal, emphasising the physicality of his reaction as well as creating another commonality between him and La Hyène, whose nickname also borrows from the animal world. This passage also creates a grotesque vision of Vernon's body, portraying him as a monstrous hybrid: both human and animal, passive and active, connected to and disconnected from his bodily functions. This grotesque vision voids the scene of any sexual meaning, shifting the tonality of the passage towards the comical, reinforced by La Hyène's reaction: 'elle éclate de rire'.²⁹⁹ La Hyène's laughter further diffuses the passage's potential for erotic undertones and points instead to the symbolic meaning of this scene.

The physical contact between La Hyène and Vernon, one characterised in the text as nurturing and intuitive rather than sexual, reframes Vernon's erection as a symbol of revitalisation and a resurgence of life force. It illustrates Preciado's concept of *potenia gaudendi* defined as 'force orgasmique' and 'la puissance (actuelle ou virtuelle) d'excitation (totale) d'un corps'.³⁰⁰ Vernon's erection signifies a return to life and the regaining of his masculinity as well as the ability to experience pleasure and excitement. This way of relating to one another, where a 'force orgasmique' circulates freely, sets the foundation for the collective dynamics for 'les convergences'.

During the 'convergences', no material goods are sold, nor money exchanged between hosts and participants. The gatherings are organised by Vernon and his group of friends; notably La Hyène, Sylvie, Lydia, Patrice, and others: ex-pornstar Pamela Kant and out-of-work screenwriter Xavier Fardin. In the third volume, from the perspective of Stéphanie, one of the

²⁹⁷ Despentès, *Subutex 2*, 132.

²⁹⁸ Despentès, *Subutex 2*, 133.

²⁹⁹ Despentès, *Subutex 2*, 133

³⁰⁰ Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, 40.

trilogy's peripheral female characters, the site of the 'convergences' is depicted as follows; 'arrivés sur les lieux de la convergence, ça ne l'avait pas surprise, cette étendue des tentes qui se montaient, le calme des gens [...] Il n'y avait pas de buvette. Il n'y avait rien à vendre ni alcool, ni merguez, ni tee-shirt.'³⁰¹ The 'convergences' are depicted in the same terms as the relationship that exists in the monstrous couple: as non-transactional and horizontal. Here, in this social space, only energy circulates and is exchanged between bodies as they dance to Vernon's DJ sets mixed in with Bleach's experimental sound wave recordings. Stéphanie's experience during one of these raves is depicted as orgasmic; 'elle dansait. Et elle ne touchait personne, elle ne frôlait pas d'autres corps, mais elle connaissait cette sensation – elle jouissait. Ça n'avait aucun rapport avec le sexe et pourtant c'était la baise la plus incroyable elle n'ait jamais expérimenté'³⁰² This space emerges as an alternative to what Despentes writes about capitalist society in *King Kong théorie*, 'le viol est un programme politique précis : squelette du capitalisme, il est la représentation crue et directe de l'exercice du pouvoir [...] jouissance de l'annulation de l'autre.'³⁰³ In contrast, the 'convergences' offer a system of relationships in which pleasure is shared with others rather than taken from them. Experiencing the other through pleasure is central to the magic of the gatherings, where bodies positioned as different in the text are brought together through dance and music. These gatherings are depicted through the characters' subjective experiences. Despentes offers readers descriptions of the dynamic from perspectives positioned as both outside and inside the group. In La Hyène's initial 'outsiders' perspective, differences between individuals are emphasised. When she witnesses Vernon and his friends together for the first time, the text describes her reaction:

il se passait quelque chose dans ce groupe qu'elle n'était incapable de définir, mais qui relevait du presque tangible quand on passe du temps avec eux : un plaisir d'être ensemble, qui relevait du mystère. Ils ne s'admiraient pas, ils ne se ressemblaient pas, ils n'avaient pas d'intérêt à se côtoyer [...]'³⁰⁴

This collective of humans appears to defy all social expectations yet shares a desire to be together. Assumed differences provoke not feelings of alienation but instead a shared sense of belonging. Belonging because of, not in spite of assumed differences is expressed in the description of Gaëlle's (another of Vernon's long-term friends) 'insiders' perspective: 'elle

³⁰¹ Despentes, *Subutex 3*, 125-126.

³⁰² Despentes, *Subutex 3*, 131.

³⁰³ Despentes, *King Kong théorie*, 50.

³⁰⁴ Despentes, *Subutex 2*, 189.

[Gaëlle] danse parmi les autres et elle reconnaît leur présence, il n’y a un lien entre eux tous, ils sont heureux d’être ensemble.’³⁰⁵

Despentes’ writing engages in an intimate dialogue with her creative partner and intellectual counterpart, Paul B. Preciado. Her literary text is shaped by a shared philosophical conversation between them, which takes place across their bodies of work. Despentes’ *Vernon Subutex* can be read as a love letter to Preciado, while Preciado’s 2021 film *Orlando, ma biographie politique* can be seen as its reply. Throughout the film, Preciado breaks away from conventional narrative to directly address ‘Virginia’, both Virginia Woolf, as the author of *Orlando* and a reference to ‘Virginie’, Despentes’s first name. In one scene, Preciado, for instance, says: ‘toi, Virginia, tu as bien compris ça, le plaisir qu’Orlando prend [...] à faire de sa vie une oeuvre d’art.’³⁰⁶ By presenting himself as the fictional character Orlando, Preciado also blurs the limits between art and life, between Paul and Orlando, and between the two Virginia/es. In the following chapter, Preciado’s body of work will be examined to show how the monster is used there as a tool for thinking through humanity, and how the figure moves from the shared entity of the couple in Despentes to an understanding of the self in Preciado.

³⁰⁵ Despentes, *Subutex 2*, 286.

³⁰⁶ Paul B. Preciado, director *Orlando, ma biographie politique*, Les films du poisson, 2023. 1:04:04.

CHAPTER 3: Paul B. Preciado's monstrous selves

Paul B. Preciado was born in 1970 in the small Spanish city of Burgos. He grew up during the latter years of Franco's dictatorship, a period that marked the country's transition to democracy. As the only child of a seamstress and a mechanic, Preciado was raised in a typical lower middle-class household.³⁰⁷ When Preciado speaks about his childhood, he frequently reflects on the religious conservatism that shaped his upbringing. For instance, in an interview with *Mouvement* magazine, Preciado explains 'j'ai passé mon enfance dans un contexte très catholique',³⁰⁸ and in another for *Radio France*, he says:

je suis né dans une famille où il n'y avait absolument pas de livres. Je suis né dans les années 70, dans l'Espagne encore franquiste et dans une famille très conservatrice. Mon père avait un garage. Donc chez moi, il y avait des voitures, mais pas de livres.³⁰⁹

In 1993, Preciado travelled to the United States on a Fulbright scholarship to undertake studies at The New School in New York. During his undergraduate degree there, Preciado was mentored by the French-Algerian philosopher Jacques Derrida. This encounter with Derrida and French Theory more largely proved foundational for Preciado. Much of his work continues to be grounded and informed by poststructuralism. Under the recommendation of Derrida in 1999, Preciado travelled to Paris to deliver a seminar at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales. This opportunity marked the beginning of Preciado's lifelong connection with France and the start of his burgeoning intellectual and artistic career. Over the next ten years, Preciado led a nomadic existence, spending periods in various cities across Europe and in New York, while completing his doctoral degree in philosophy and architecture at Princeton University. Preciado published his first few books under his birth name, Beatriz Preciado. His first and second were written in Spanish: *Manifiesto contrasexual*, (2002) and *Testo Yonqui*, (2008). The latter was translated into French by Preciado and published as *Testo-Junkie : sexe, drogue et biopolitique*³¹⁰ that same year.

³⁰⁷ In an episode of *Le Monde's* cultural podcast *Le goût de M* Preciado says: 'je suis né dans une petite classe moyenne'. Paul B. Preciado, "#17 Paul B. Preciado," interviewed by Géraldine Sarratia, *Le goût de M.*, May 22, 2020, <https://podcasts.lemonde.fr/le-gout-de-m/202005212201-17-paul-b-preciado-12>.

³⁰⁸ Jean-Roch de Logivière and Iris Deniau "Paul B. Preciado," *Mouvement*, February 24, 2026, <https://www.mouvement.net/paul-b-preciado>.

³⁰⁹ Paul B. Preciado, "Paul B. Preciado, historien du futur" interview by Laure Adler, *L'heure bleue*, France Inter, November 7, 2022, audio, 07:19, <https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceinter/podcasts/l-heure-bleue/l-heure-bleue-du-lundi-07-novembre-2022-4497616>

³¹⁰ I am referring to Preciado's work using the French title since Preciado translated his own text from Spanish into French.

Testo Junkie has been highly influential in the field of gender studies, offering a groundbreaking framework for understanding the intersection of bodies, power, and identity. In this text, Preciado proposes a new theory of gender, one that brings together considerations of anatomical sex and the social and cultural constructs of gender. He positions the contemporary human subject within what he terms the ‘pharmacopornographique’ regime, which he defines as ‘les processus de gouvernement de la subjectivité sexuelle, dans ses modes moléculaires (pharmaco-) et sémiotiques (porno).’³¹¹ Under this regime, pharmaceutical and pornographic technologies act upon all bodies effecting somatic experiences and shaping socio-cultural perceptions of gender and desire. In addition to his work as a theorist and academic, Preciado is an important contemporary voice within the French and Francophone cultural sphere, especially in the media and the arts. Since the publication of his text *Pornotopía Arquitectura y sexualidad en «Playboy» durante la guerra fría* in 2010, a work based on his doctoral thesis, all his subsequent publications, from text and films, have been primarily in French.

His regular and ongoing column ‘Interzones’ for the French newspaper *Libération*, in which he mixes current affairs with cultural criticism, reflects his status as a mainstay within the world of French journalism. In 2019, Preciado was invited by the Centre Pompidou for a residency. The presentation of a series of talks and public events under the title *Une nouvelle histoire de la sexualité* at the prestigious cultural centre further solidified his role as a key figure in contemporary French intellectual and artistic life. Preciado is also deeply engaged with queer and gay visual cultures. He wrote the introduction of the photobook that accompanied the exhibition of French visual artists *Pierre et Gilles* at the Templon Art Gallery in Paris in 2022. In addition to Preciado’s introduction, the book contains an interview between the artists and French contemporary writer Édouard Louis, the photobook itself acting as a cultural artefact of intellectual life since it brings together the worlds of contemporary art, literature and philosophy. Most recently, Preciado has expanded his creative practice into filmmaking, releasing in 2023 his French-language film *Orlando, ma biographie politique* a film that combines documentary filmmaking and a fictionalised reimagining of Virginia Woolf’s 1928 novel *Orlando: A biography*.

In 2005, as Preciado notes in *Testo-Junkie*, he began to experiment with testosterone gel. A decade into this auto-experimentation, as Preciado documents in his collection of essays

³¹¹ Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 32.

Un appartement sur Uranus (2017), he could no longer ‘pass’ or identify as a woman. After officially changing sex in 2014, Beatriz Preciado legally became Paul B. Preciado in 2015. Preciado’s gender transition and now male identity are key themes in his work, and as scholars have pointed out, are bound up with his feminist politics. For instance, Elliot Evans reads *Testo-Junkie* as ‘feminist archive’, suggesting that ‘feminist thinking flows through his [Preciado’s] body, irreducibly’³¹². Similarly, Leah Wilson argues that Preciado ‘presents his body-text as a necessary feminist revolution’³¹³ and ‘embodies a postpornographic trans*feminism’³¹⁴. In reimagining a text written by a renowned feminist figure such as Virginia Woolf, Preciado continues his exploration of crossovers between historical feminist concerns and contemporary trans and non-binary politics.

Preciado’s film was officially released in French cinemas on the 5th of June 2024. However, at the time of its release, the contemporary French feminist movement appeared divided on the question of trans identities. This division found its most pronounced expression in the world of literary journalism. For instance, in April 2023, French journalist Tal Madesta published the book *La fin des monstres: Récit d’une trajectoire trans*, a memoir of his gender transition. In his memoir, Madesta calls for an end to the stigmatisation of trans people, and a greater understanding and acceptance of the desire to transition. Fragments from Madesta’s book were originally published as editorial pieces in the French magazine *La Déferlante*, a publication that defines itself by its progressive and trans-inclusionary feminist agenda.³¹⁵ One year after the publication of Madesta’s memoir, the city of Paris ordered the removal of the advertisements from its streets for the book *Transmania: Enquête sur les dérives de l’idéologie*

³¹² Elliot Evans, “‘Wittig and Davis, Woolf and Solanas (...) simmer within me’: Reading Feminist Archives in the Queer Writing of Paul B. Preciado,” *Paragraph* 41, no. 3 (2018): 296, <https://doi.org/10.3366/para.2018.0272>.

³¹³ Leah.E Wilson, “Performing the techno-self: Paul B. Preciado’s *Testo Junkie* as a twenty-first century feminist narrative,” *French Cultural Studies* 31, no. 4 (2022):344, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957155820961647>.

³¹⁴ Wilson, “Performing the techno-self,” 350.

³¹⁵ On the magazine’s official website these engagements are detailed as follows on the mission statement webpage: ‘*La Déferlante* est à la fois une revue féministe, un média numérique et une maison d’édition fondées et dirigées par des femmes. Sur tous nos supports, nous donnons la parole aux femmes et aux personnes LGBTQIA+, et rendons visibles leurs vécus et leurs combats. Nous avons comme devise « Le média des révolutions féministes » pour incarner la diversité des luttes. Le féminisme est loin de constituer une grande famille unie, et nous nous en réjouissons : une pensée en mouvement est une pensée vivante. Mais sa diffusion peut aussi faire l’objet de détournements. Nous affirmons ainsi une frontière nette entre les luttes féministes dans lesquelles nous nous ancrons, et les discours fêmo- et homonationalistes qui instrumentalisent la question du féminisme. Dans l’analyse des débats qui traversent aujourd’hui les différents courants féministes, nous ne prétendons pas être neutres : *La Déferlante* prend parti. Nous refusons l’idée que tous les points de vue se valent. Nous nous opposons à toute tentative de neutralisation du débat qui mettrait sur un pied d’égalité les féministes et les personnes LGBTQIA+ luttant pour leurs droits d’une part, et les masculinistes cherchant à annihiler ces groupes, d’autre part.’ See, “Notre Manifeste,” *La Déferlante*, accessed February 16, 2026, <https://revueladeferlante.fr/manifeste/>.

transgenre (2024), written by French journalists Marguerite Stern and Dora Moutot. The decision was taken after the book was widely condemned as transphobic and for promoting hate speech.³¹⁶ As a journalist and minor public figure Moutot gained traction after launching her Instagram account ‘Tasjoui’, an account destined, according to an article for the online edition of *Elle* magazine, to break the taboo on the female orgasm.³¹⁷ For her part, Stern is a former member of FEMEN and was responsible for founding the movement ‘Collages contre les féminicides’. Despite being met with accusations of transphobia, Stern and Moutot continue to oppose what they term the ‘transgenerisme’³¹⁸ movement in contemporary France, defining themselves as ‘fémelliste’³¹⁹ and creating a counter movement that defends a sexual difference political stance towards questions of gender.

Although Madesta on the one hand and Moutot and Stern on the other represent ideologies of two opposing camps in contemporary debates in France, both sides engage directly with Preciado’s thinking in their works. In *Transmania*, Moutot and Stern use Preciado’s thought to support their thesis on the dangers of what they term ‘l’idéologie transgenre’³²⁰, and cite him directly:

Nous sommes en train de changer de “régime de vérité”. C’est ce que nous explique la philosophe [...] Paul B. Preciado : « Nous ne sommes pas dans une Bataille épique entre la “fiction” et “la réalité”, mais au milieu d’un turbulent changement de régime de vérité où ce sont les procédures qui servent à distinguer le vrai et le faux qui sont en train d’être transformées.³²¹

While for Preciado this shift marks a moment of progress and potential liberation, Moutot and Stern reappropriate his thinking to argue the opposite: that these changes represent a threat to established truths about gender and identity. As for Madesta, the title of his memoir *La fin des monstres* explicitly enters into dialogue with Preciado’s essay *Je suis un monstre qui vous parle*

³¹⁶ See “Des affiches publicitaires pour un livre transphobe retirées des rues de Paris,” *Le Monde*, April 17, 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2024/04/17/des-affiches-publicitaires-pour-un-livre-transphobe-retirees-des-rues-de-paris_6228403_3224.html, and Paloma Auzeau, “La mairie de Paris fait retirer des affiches du livre *Transmania* jugé «transphobe»,” *Le Figaro*, April 18, 2024, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/la-mairie-de-paris-fait-retirer-des-affiches-promouvant-le-livre-transmania-juge-transphobe-20240417>.

³¹⁷ See Emilie Poyard, “« T’as joui ? » : le compte Insta pour briser le tabou sur l’orgasme féminin,” *Elle*, accessed February 22, 2026, <https://www.elle.fr/Societe/News/T-as-joui-le-compte-Insta-pour-briser-le-tabou-sur-l-orgasme-feminin-3714197>.

³¹⁸ See Dora Moutot and Marguerite Stern, *Fémelliste*, accessed February 22, 2026, <https://www.femelliste.com/>.

³¹⁹ See Dora Moutot, “D’où vient le terme femelliste ?,” *Fémelliste*, accessed February 22, 2026, <https://www.femelliste.com/articles-femellisme-feminisme/femelliste-definition>.

³²⁰ Dora Moutot and Marguerite Stern, *Transmania : Enquête sur les dérives de l’idéologie transgenre* (Magnus, 2024).

³²¹ Moutot and Stern, *Transmania*, 16.

(2020). Madesta clearly states his disagreement with Preciado's move to reclaim the label of the 'monster' to refer to the trans individual. He writes, 'moi, je refuse de camper ce rôle de bête difforme qui s'agite. Si le bestiaire du monstre naît du regard des autres, alors ce n'est pas moi qui le dessine, mais eux'.³²² Madesta, instead, pushes back against the notion that a gender transition is classified within medical institutions as the correction of an abnormality, rejecting the perceived monstrosity associated with individuals seeking out gender-affirming care. The 'monster' as Madesta would have it, as he states in an interview for the online magazine *Manifesto.XXI* are 'les personnes aux propos et attitudes transphobes'.³²³ A rigid stance towards questions of gender and sexual difference, as represented by Stern and Moutot, has led to the rise of an 'Us vs. Them' politics that created fractures within contemporary feminist movements in France.³²⁴ For individuals such as Madesta, the likes of Stern and Moutot are the monstrous 'Other', defenders of a regressive and exclusionary politics. Meanwhile, for Stern and Moutot, advocates for trans rights such as Madesta represent a threat and a danger to women's rights and sexual freedoms, creating their own version of Madesta's monster.

In contrast, Preciado's vision of the monster circumvents this polarising 'Us vs. Them' dynamic that underpins contemporary mainstream feminist debates about gender. Preciado wrote his essay *Je suis un monstre qui vous parle* following a confrontational speech he gave at the French school of Freudian psychoanalysts. Invited to speak at the 2019 conference organised by L'école de la cause freudienne around the theme of 'femmes en psychanalyse',³²⁵ Preciado gave a lecture he was unable to finish in person. Preciado was only able to utter a few lines before being treated by the congregation like an actual 'monster', chased out of the auditorium and cast out as an unwelcome, menacing figure. In the opening pages of his essay Preciado explains:

Le discours a provoqué un séisme.[...] Lorsque j'ai demandé aux institutions psychoanalytiques de prendre leur responsabilité face à la transformation actuelle de l'épistémologie sexuelle et du genre, une moitié ont rigolé, tandis que d'autres ont hurlé, ou m'ont demandé de quitter les lieux. Une femme a déclaré, [...] "il ne faut pas

³²² Tal Madesta, *La fin des monstres : Récit d'une trajectoire trans*, (La Déferlante, 2023), 10.

³²³ Leane Alestra, "Tal Madesta, *La fin des monstres* : plaidoyer pour le droit à se (re)trouver," *Manifesto XXI*, April 12, 2023, <https://www.manifesto-21.com/tal-madesta-interview/>.

³²⁴ This division has been commented on in the mainstream press in France. See for instance Agnès Leclair "La question trans, nouvelle fracture des associations féministes," *Le Figaro*, April 7, 2022, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/la-question-trans-nouvelle-fracture-des-associations-feministes-20220406>, and Jean-Loup Adénor and Margot Brunet "Comment la "question trans" fracture le féminisme," *Marianne*, May 22, 2022, <https://www.marianne.net/societe/comment-la-question-trans-fracture-le-feminisme>.

³²⁵ Preciado, *Je suis un monstre*, 11.

le laisser parler c'est Hitler." L'autre moitié de la salle a applaudi. Les organisateurs m'ont rappelé que mon temps de parole était dépassé[...] je n'ai pu lire qu'un quart du discours que j'avais préparé.³²⁶

Preciado's identification with the monster has prompted scholars to consider the significance of this definition of the self as monster in relation to his thinking on the place of the trans-body in contemporary society. For instance, in her article, 'Paul B. Preciado and the Contamination of Genre' (2023), Lili Owen Rowlands frames Preciado's statement as an 'autobiographical assertion'³²⁷ that at once allows him to identify with 'the monstered Other of psychoanalysis' and 'evoke the monster of the horror movie'³²⁸. For Owen Rowlands, Preciado's identification with the monster is integrally tied to the "'not-passing" [...] prerequisite for his politics', his use of the term 'monster', however, is a move that she critiques, highlighting the 'risk of glossing over the myriad and multiple ways in which people are monstered'.³²⁹ Yet for Preciado, this monstrous figure was constructed out of a confrontation with psychoanalysis as an institution, and it is not in rebellion with its 'maker' —the school of Freudian psychoanalysis — but rather, it accepts a relationship with it: as Preciado writes, he is their 'égal monstrueux.'³³⁰

Preciado's identification with the 'monster' of psychoanalysis resonates with passages in *Testo-Junkie*, where he draws a parallel between himself and Sigmund Freud. This parallel is physical rather than intellectual: according to Preciado, he resembles Freud because both their faces have been disfigured through surgery. Preciado reveals that during his adolescence, he was diagnosed with a maxillofacial malformation, which caused a protrusion of the jaw. This, combined with his myopia and disproportionate limbs, gave Preciado what he describes as a monstrous appearance: 'je deviens un monstre'³³¹ Freud, too, was afflicted with a malformation of the jaw caused by the mouth cancer that eventually killed him. The damage forced him to wear a jaw prosthesis, which he also referred to as the 'monster' as Preciado takes care to mention in his text: 'n'oublions pas que Freud appelle sa prothèse de mâchoire "le monstre"'.³³² Preciado creates a kinship with Freud through their shared physical deformation as well as their experience of pain and suffering.

³²⁶ Preciado, *Je suis un monstre*, 11.

³²⁷ Lili Owen Rowlands, "Paul B. Preciado and the Contamination of Genre," *Paragraph* 46, no. 1 (2023): 56, <https://doi.org/10.3366/para.2023.0417>.

³²⁸ Owen Rowlands, "Paul B. Preciado," 56.

³²⁹ Owen Rowlands, "Paul B. Preciado," 56.

³³⁰ Preciado, *Je suis un monstre*, 17.

³³¹ Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 8.

³³² Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 327.

The ‘trans-gender subject’ as monster is an invention of clinical pathology that Preciado denounces throughout his oeuvre. In *Dysphoria Mundi*, for instance, Preciado explains that he had to eventually declare himself ‘dysphoric’ to access gender-affirming care.³³³ Yet Preciado does not reject this medical appellation as ‘monster’ but rather embraces it. Preciado’s use of the ‘monster’ is radical and helps define the original contribution he makes to the thinking of gender, but more generally of what it means to be human in our contemporary world. His monster, like Shelley’s Frankenstein, is a hybrid creature: pieced together from textual and visual fragments salvaged and reassembled through a series of experimentation with the body, with written and oral speech, and with film. Like Ducournau’s cinema, the monster allows a challenge to society’s view on humanity and the borders that help to define it. Preciado’s monster is a confrontational presence that works to undo the foundations upon which we build a sense of self.

This chapter first examines Preciado’s staging of his ‘otherness’ as a monstrous spectacle. As this chapter then shows, Preciado defines the self as an ‘autocobaye’, simultaneously the subject and the object of his own experiments. This chapter then investigates how Preciado’s writing transforms an individual narrative of physical metamorphosis into a collective experiment in becoming an ‘Other’. Turning from text to moving image, the chapter looks at the monster in Preciado as a figure that cannot be limited by physicality, exposing the limits of its own materiality. Investigating Preciado’s dialogue with the dead, this chapter explores how Preciado’s monster philosophy reveals the ‘self’ as a monstrous spirit, always diffused and ungraspable.

SECTION 1: Staging the monstrous self

In *Dysphoria Mundi* Preciado declares ‘mon corps est la ville de Wuhan’³³⁴ placing himself at the centre of the Covid-19 global pandemic. Using his own experience with the virus as the centrepiece for a reflection on planetary mutations in the present and the future, this text is an extension of his collection of essays *Un appartement sur Uranus*, in which, according to Evans and Owens Rowland, ‘he put himself at the centre of everything’.³³⁵ In her review of *Dysphoria*

³³³ Paul B. Preciado, *Dysphoria Mundi: Le son du monde qui s’écroule* (Grasset 2022), 15.

³³⁴ Preciado, *Dysphoria Mundi*, 191.

³³⁵ Elliot Evans and Lili Owen Rowlands, “Introduction,” *Paragraph* 46, no. 1 (2023): 6, <https://doi.org/10.3366/para.2023.0414>.

Mundi for *ArtReview*, Hannah Proctor suggests that such ‘bombastic pronouncements’³³⁶ distance Preciado from the many political movements he claims to support. She writes:

Preciado’s declared solidarity with feminist, trans, queer and anti-racist activist movements does not obviously inform his discussion of the experience of COVID-19. Just over two hundred pages into the book Preciado briefly mentions that the pandemic was experienced unevenly: many people still went out to work, some people had no home in which to isolate, while others spent their time at home caring for others.³³⁷

Proctor suggests that by placing himself at the centre of everything, Preciado runs the risk of standing for nothing. Yet Preciado has never openly identified with a specific political movement or presented his writing as anything other than theoretical and literary. Since receiving his doctoral award from Princeton University, the university’s prestigious global standing has clearly opened doors for him in the fields of academia, journalism, and curatorship. In his writing, Preciado expresses a strong awareness of his own privilege, which he admits has at times presented itself as an obstacle to his reception in the Global South. For instance, in *Testo Junkie* he writes about his confrontation with feminist activists during a conference at the University of Chile: ‘les premiers jours, les féministes chiliennes viennent à ma conférence m’accuser d’être une “représentante du régime hétéropatriarcal et colonial” [...]’.³³⁸ Within the specific geographical and political context of a Chilean University, his Spanish nationality and his academic background from a North American university pose a representational issue. Preciado’s anecdote reveals how the potential for an individual to stand for a social or political collective is dependent upon a series of cultural, political, geographical and even linguistic factors. Any such combinations of these factors have the potential to override more traditional classifications, even those that determine gender or sexual identity. In France, Preciado has appeared within popular culture in places traditionally reserved exclusively for those who identify as cis-women. To promote the launch of his film *Orlando, ma biographie politique* Preciado was interviewed by the French women’s magazine *Marie*

³³⁶ Hannah Proctor, “‘Not Only Cringey but Politically Troubling’: Paul Preciado’s Dysphoria Mundi, Reviewed,” *ArtReview*, March 21, 2025, <https://artreview.com/paul-preciado-dysphoria-mundi-reviewed/>.

³³⁷ Proctor, “‘Not Only Cringey.’”

³³⁸ Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 343. It is interesting to note that at the he time attended this conference in Chile he would have been presenting himself as Beatriz Preciado, and therefore as female. The resistance of the Chilean feminists to hearing her speak demonstrates that an individual’s social and cultural markers signify differently in specific geographical and political contexts. It was above all Preciado’s nationality as Spanish and his status as visiting scholar with a degree from an American University that was being opposed. While this is made explicit in the English translation of Preciado’s text, it does not appear in the French: ‘but I am white and Spanish, have earned a PhD at Princeton University [...]’, see Paul B. Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*, trans. Bruce Benderson (The Feminist Press, 2013), 259.

Claire. In the interview, Preciado is referred to by the journalist Catherine Castro as a ‘penseur star’, and his work is presented to the magazine’s readers as ‘une pépite pop et poétique, un mélange de fiction et de documentaire, un autoportrait et une autobiographie collective.’³³⁹

A few years prior, in July 2022, Preciado was featured on the feminist podcast *La Poudre*, a series created and hosted by former *Elle* staffer Lauren Bastide, dedicated to conversations with prominent women in the cultural and political spheres. As founder and host, Bastide claims her podcast as ‘un lieu qui a été pensé en non-mixité’,³⁴⁰ which complicates Preciado’s presence as a guest. In her introduction to the episode, Bastide justifies why Preciado, who by then identified as a man, was invited to speak to the feminist agenda put forward by the program:

je voudrais nous débarrasser d’un éléphant dans la pièce, ou plutôt dans le podcast. Vous n’êtes pas une femme Paul Preciado, vous êtes du moins administrativement un homme trans, même-si je pense que vous vous définissez de façon un peu plus complexe que ça. Or, dans *La Poudre* depuis quatre ans je reçois en geste de non-mixité, que vous devez certainement comprendre, je reçois uniquement des femmes. Il me semble néanmoins, que votre parole, votre expérience, sont absolument essentielles pour comprendre les enjeux des luttes féministes actuelles et vous avez parfaitement votre place dans ce podcast. Vous me rejoignez là-dessus ?³⁴¹

Bastide’s use of the idiomatic expression ‘l’éléphant dans la pièce’, which is in fact not an idiomatic French expression but a borrowing from the English ‘an elephant in the room’, draws attention to Preciado’s ‘monstrosity’ through its implicit reference to David Lynch’s *The Elephant Man*. This expression acknowledges the sense of discomfort potentially provoked by his presence and points to what listeners might see as his encroachment in an exclusively female space. Preciado’s admission into the space is, as Bastide states, only possible thanks to a distinction between speech and body, and to the shared knowledge that his body used to be female. Preciado answers that he feels indeed welcomed while confirming his otherness: ‘je suis très bien ici dans votre espace entouré par des femmes’³⁴². Before introducing her guest as a man and therefore the ‘elephant in the room’, Bastide mentions the recent publication of Preciado’s essay *Je suis un monstre qui vous parle*. In his essay, Preciado explains that he began his speech by asking his audience if any amongst them considered themselves

³³⁹ Catherine Castro, “Avant minuit avec Paul B. Preciado,” *Marie Claire*, July 2024, 78.

³⁴⁰ Lauren Bastide, “Épisode 79 – Paul Preciado.” *La poudre*, July 2022, 00:02:52.

³⁴¹ Bastide, “Épisode 79, 00:05:12.

³⁴² Bastide, “Épisode 79, 00:07:43.

homosexual, trans or non-binary, and whether they would take on board the possibility to transform epistemologies of sexuality and gender in psychoanalysis.³⁴³ His questions were met by ‘fous rires’,³⁴⁴ chuckling, and cries of protest. Shortly after, as aforementioned, Preciado writes, a woman in the audience even interjected: ‘il ne faut pas le laisser parler, c’est Hitler’.³⁴⁵ It is at that moment, he explains, that he was ushered off stage by organisers. This extraordinarily hostile response to Preciado’s speech demonstrates a clear refusal to hear or even see his body and his ideas, contrasting sharply with the way Preciado is welcomed into Bastide’s podcast. Nonetheless, in both incidents, Preciado’s physical presence and speech are framed as spectacles. Preciado provides the details of what transpired during his attempt to deliver his speech at the conference in a short passage of text that precedes the main body of his essay. By including these details, Preciado establishes a situational context that transforms his lecture into a forced performance. His recollections of the laughter, heckling, and cries from the audience are not fit for an academic exchange, but rather for a circus show. Preciado recalls these reactions, recasting the conference room as a stage, and himself as its freakish attraction. Similarly, the introduction that Bastide uses to frame their interaction implicitly defines it as a spectacle. As mentioned, her use of the expression ‘un éléphant dans la pièce’ is a reminder of the monstrous figure in David Lynch’s 1980 film. Bastide’s framing of Preciado draws attention to his physical difference. By drawing the attention of her listeners to this difference and presenting her guest as the focus of a spectacle, her explicit desire for inclusion also contains the potential for exclusion, placing Bastide as the master of ceremony, deciding to whom and when to unveil her monstrous guest. Rather than being seamlessly integrated into the all-female space, Preciado’s dual status as both man and woman, and his willingness to embody and occupy this ambiguous space, highlight his disruptive, uncomfortable otherness, aligning him with the figure of the monster as spectacle.

Preciado appears to be a willing participant in occasions that turn him into a monstrous spectacle. He uses these moments as opportunities to disrupt predetermined orders, to maintain rather than erase his own ambiguous state as a guest and intruder in predefined spaces. With his essay, Preciado reclaimed the hostility he faced in the room, rescripting rejection into an essential framing for *Je suis un monstre qui vous parle* and casting himself as a confrontational speaker, who holds the power to unsettle and disturb his audience. Preciado’s embrace of the ‘monster’ in his essay correlates with what scholars have identified as Preciado’s performance

³⁴³ Paul B. Preciado, *Je suis un monstre*, 11-12.

³⁴⁴ Paul B. Preciado, *Je suis un monstre*, 11.

³⁴⁵ Paul B. Preciado, *Je suis un monstre*, 12

of the self. For instance, in her article ‘Performing the techno-self,’ Wilson argues that in his text, ‘Preciado displays how he crafts his technogender [...] and claims his own representation through the intra-action between his material body and his discursive performance.’³⁴⁶ In *Je suis un monstre qui vous parle*, Preciado starts his essay by acknowledging his audience: ‘chères Mesdames et chers Messieurs’.³⁴⁷ While the direct address from the outset relates to Preciado’s textual project of relaying his speech as it would have occurred, the formality of his language, as evidenced by his use of ‘chères’ and ‘chers’ imbues this introduction with theatricality. The inviting and welcoming way he addresses his audience borrows from expressions used by a master of ceremonies as Preciado takes on various roles: host and guest, setting the stage for the performance that is about to occur and which will be delivered by himself. Preciado continues the introduction by presenting himself to his audience: ‘j’ai l’honneur de me présenter’.³⁴⁸

Preciado turns his essay, understood as the second iteration of an interrupted speech, as a one-man show in which he takes on a plurality of roles: ‘je me sens un peu seul de ce côté de la scène, de courir et de grimper sur les épaules du maître de toutes les métamorphoses’.³⁴⁹ He later makes explicit references to Franz Kafka’s short story ‘A Report to the Academy’, identifying himself with its main character, the ape Red Peter, who learns to imitate human behaviour and speech in order to secure his freedom from a cage. This presentation of the self as ‘singé-humain’³⁵⁰ is a threatening, almost revolutionary figure: ‘je suis le monstre qui vous parle. Le monstre que vous avez construit avec vos discours et vos pratiques cliniques. Je suis le monstre qui se lève du divan et prend la parole, non en tant que patient, mais en tant que citoyen, en tant que votre égal monstrueux’.³⁵¹ Preciado reorganises roles as assigned by psychoanalysis and medical practices: the analysand is no longer lying down, the patient is the subject rather than the object of speech, and everyone in the room is a monster: ‘égal monstrueux’.

In the essay, Preciado uses a rhythmic and almost poetical repetition of ‘je suis’ to structure his essay. He writes, for instance: ‘je suis Frankenstein qui essaie de trouver quelqu’un qui l’aime en se promenant avec une fleur à la main, alors que tous ceux qui passent le fuient.’³⁵² In identifying with Frankenstein, Preciado gestures to the original monster of Gothic

³⁴⁶ Wilson, “Performing the techno-self,” 348.

³⁴⁷ Preciado, *Je suis un monstre*, 13.

³⁴⁸ Preciado, *Je suis un monstre*, 14.

³⁴⁹ Preciado, *Je suis un monstre*, 15.

³⁵⁰ Preciado, *Je suis un monstre*, 17.

³⁵¹ Preciado, *Je suis un monstre*, 17.

³⁵² Preciado, *Je suis un monstre*, 55.

literature while also acknowledging an obvious parallel between his essay and Susan Stryker's 'My words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamonix: Performing Transgender Rage' published in 1994. Preciado proposes a radical departure from Stryker's staging of the transgender subject as Frankenstein's monstrous creature. Instead, Preciado points our attention to the ambiguity of the name itself, as Frankenstein is both the name of the creator and the title of the novel and has become, through metonymy, a shorthand for the monster itself. Preciado's essay encourages a collapsing of the distinction between the text, its monster, and the scientist, writing: 'j'ai fait de mon corps et de mon esprit, de ma monstruosité, de mon désir et ma transition, un spectacle public'.³⁵³ In this assertion, Preciado also reclaims the figure of the monster as a spectacle. Preciado deploys Arthur Rimbaud's poetic logic contained in the famous line 'je suis un autre'³⁵⁴ and, in doing so, he occupies various positions at once: both speaker and object of discourse, creator and created, and a rejected monster as a willing main attraction. *Je suis un monstre qui vous parle* thus functions as a testing ground for Preciado's 'autocobaye' practice, explored in the following section.

SECTION 2: Preciado's self-experiments

Preciado's 'autocobaye'³⁵⁵ method rethinks how the roles of scientist and object of scientific study are assigned. Rather than conflating them into a singular entity, Preciado insists on their distinctions, which he articulates in the text through his identification with both the laboratory rat and the scientist: 'je suis le rat de laboratoire et le sujet scientifique qui mène la recherche [...]'.³⁵⁶ As told in his text, Preciado experimented with the hormonal testosterone gel, both as a substance used in his gender transition journey, but also as a performance-enhancing drug. In *Titane*, Vincent, uses testosterone too, as a drug that enhances his physically masculine appearance, to increase muscle mass and physical strength. Like Ducournau, Preciado also situates his thinking at the boundary between humans and animals. His 'autocobaye' method is defined as a process that opens up the possibility of a simultaneous metamorphosis: 'le rat s'humanise' and 'l'humain devient rongeur.'³⁵⁷

Throughout his essay, Preciado uses a variety of stylistic techniques to shift tone, register and genre, creating a hybrid text that reads at once as a scientific report, detailing

³⁵³ Preciado, *Je suis un monstre*, 37.

³⁵⁴ Rimbaud, *Lettres du Voyant*, 137.

³⁵⁵ Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 133.

³⁵⁶ Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 133.

³⁵⁷ Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 133.

methodology and findings, and a deeply personal narrative account. In a passage that appears under the sub-heading ‘Le diable en gel’, Preciado recounts the practicalities of administering the appropriate dosage of testosterone and its effects on his body, a body which he defines as ‘biofemme’.³⁵⁸ In this passage, Preciado deploys medically informed language to write about the specifics of administering testosterone gel. He provides precise details about the quantity, ‘50mg’, the correct mode of application, ‘par voie cutanée’, and the frequency at which it is to be applied: ‘deux fois par semaine pendant trois mois’.³⁵⁹ Preciado mimics the language and objective tone of medical discourse, taking on the role of a doctor giving out a prescription to a patient. In adopting this instructive register, Preciado positions himself simultaneously as the one giving instruction and the one following. This duality is furthered by the way Preciado shifts between subjective and objective tones when referring to his body. This slippage is evidenced in moments in the passage where Preciado discusses the effects produced by the substance, at times writing ‘mon corps’ and other times ‘un corps de biofemme’.³⁶⁰ This slippage is made explicit in the phrase ‘j’ai toujours été un corps androgyne’,³⁶¹ where the personal ‘j’ is paired with the impersonal ‘un corps’, shifting the focus from a subjective self to a more generalised observation of ‘a body’. Moreover, the apparent interchangeability of ‘mon corps’ with ‘un corps’ creates a distancing effect.

This observational mode is also complicated by the very nature of the effects that testosterone gel produces on the body. Testosterone gel is a medical treatment designed to deliver a specific hormonal dosage to its user. As such, it operates within the body’s endocrine system and the effects it produces are primarily internal and imperceptible to the human eye. Here, Preciado’s shifts into the subjective no longer in contrast with the medical discourse also employed within the text, instead it serves it by relaying details that escape other forms of measurement. Changes Preciado observes within his body belong to the realm of embodied experience: perception and sensation. He writes: ‘elles [the doses] produisent des changements subtils mais déterminants dans mes affects, dans la perception interne de mon propre corps, dans l’excitation sexuelle, dans mon odeur corporelle, dans la résistance à la fatigue.’³⁶² Preciado’s subjectivity here is emphasised by the use of ‘mon propre corps’, where the possessive pronoun ‘mon’ and the adjective ‘propre’ reinforce a sense of ownership. The

³⁵⁸ In Bruce Benderson’s 2013 English translation of Preciado’s *Testo-Junkie*, Benderson translates the French ‘bio-femme’ to English as ‘cis-female’. See Preciado, *Testo Junkie*: trans. Bruce Benderson, 103.

³⁵⁹ Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 133-134.

³⁶⁰ Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 133.

³⁶¹ Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 134.

³⁶² Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 134.

adjective ‘propre’ and the noun ‘corps’, when inverted, also hint at the concept of ‘le corps propre’, recalling Merleau-Ponty’s conceptualisation of the body as simultaneously subject and object. According to Merleau-Ponty, our ability to ‘sense’ collapses the boundary between a subject as conscious of the body and the body as object that is perceived. He writes: ‘si l’on peut encore parler dans la perception du corps propre d’une interprétation, il faudra dire qu’il s’interprète lui-même. [...] les ‘données visuelles’ n’apparaissent qu’à travers leur sens tactile, les données tactiles qu’à travers leur sens visuel’³⁶³ As such, the ‘I’ of the self becomes the ‘I’ of the body: ‘je ne suis pas devant mon corps, je suis dans mon corps, ou plutôt, je suis mon corps.’³⁶⁴ The body’s duality is further reinforced in this passage with the phrase ‘j’ai commencé à distinguer [...] la tendance de mon corps à s’extérioriser’³⁶⁵. Preciado depicts his body as a separate, semi-autonomous entity while at the same time suggesting that self and body are one.

Preciado’s phenomenological framing of the body and his ‘autocobaye’ methodology reveals new discursive possibilities, renewing the observational mode of scientific study by incorporating the documentation of embodied experience as a valuable source of knowledge. Within this analytical framework, affective and sensory experiences are considered in equal measure to scientifically measurable indicators. In the same essay, Preciado uses philosophical language to convey effects that occur on a molecular level. As Preciado writes about his body’s absorption of the hormone, his use of a factual, informative tone shifts towards the theoretical as he writes about becoming one ‘être-avec-la-testostérone.’³⁶⁶ Preciado’s text merges scientific study and philosophical inquiry. His ‘être-avec-la-testostérone’ defined as the final outcome of his experimentation with the hormonal treatment, is preceded by the expression ‘[m]it-sein’, a clear reference to German philosopher Martin Heidegger. Preciado refers to Heidegger’s ‘Dasein’, translated as ‘être-là’ in French and defined as ‘this entity which each of us is himself and which includes inquiring as one of the possibilities of Being[...]’.³⁶⁷ Preciado builds on Heidegger’s ‘être-avec’ to create a contemporary version, entangling the experience of being with a technological and medical substance. Preciado contaminates Heidegger’s concept and ironizes his most famous philosophical concept. According to Charles Guignon, the idea of living an authentic existence is key to Heidegger’s exploration of

³⁶³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Gallimard, 1945), 175.

³⁶⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, 175.

³⁶⁵ Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 133.

³⁶⁶ Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 134.

³⁶⁷ Heidegger Martin, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Blackwell, 1962), 27

Dasein,³⁶⁸ while Preciado's reformulation of these concepts points to their inherent artificiality in this moment. By picking away at the possibility of an entirely authentic being, Preciado signals that his experimentation is not a quest for the truth of being as a man. His text does not offer a narrative of gender transition, where one would travel from being female to being male through the medicalisation of the body. Instead, his 'autocobaye' experiment leads towards undermining the possibility of a gendered existence.

Preciado's hybrid philosophical-scientific-intimate writing allows for a confrontation with dominant medical discourses that focus on external and visible markers of masculinity. By shifting the focus from external to internal transformation, Preciado's 'autocobaye' method ultimately produces claims that disentangle testosterone treatment from an achieved state of masculinity. Preciado writes this in clear terms: 'la testostérone n'est pas la masculinité',³⁶⁹ ostensibly challenging essentialist views that tie gendered identity to biological makeup. Within the same passage, he also reveals how medical treatment is tied to constructivist approaches to gender, which associate masculinity with external attributes and socio-cultural markers. When writing about the specific dosage that he chooses for his experiment, Preciado evokes the notion of virility, a typical attribute of dominant masculinity. He states :

Cette dose de testostérone n'est pas suffisante dans un corps de biofemme pour produire des changements extérieurs reconnaissables en termes de ce que la médecine dominante appelle 'virilisation' (barbe et moustache, masse musculaire apparente, changement de voix...).³⁷⁰

The informative tone of this passage conveys Preciado's intention to relay to the reader how the virilisation of a 'biofemme' is usually determined and measured in standard medical practice. By placing the term 'virilisation' in inverted commas, Preciado indicates explicitly that this terminology is not his own, revealing his reluctance to employ such terminology in his writing and creating critical distance. Moreover, the ellipsis that follows the parentheses, 'barbe et moustache, masse musculaire apparente, changement de voix...' leaves the list of external indicators incomplete, suggesting a vagueness and imprecision to those visual attributes defined by social expectations and created through medical treatment to define masculinity. Preciado's critique of the terminology ultimately reveals the limitations of the scientific method itself, which measures the effects of testosterone on the body in terms of its

³⁶⁸ Charles Guignon, "Authenticity and the Question of Being," in *Heidegger, Authenticity and the Self: Themes From Division Two of Being and Time*, eds Denis McManus (Routledge, 2014), 8.

³⁶⁹ Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 134.

³⁷⁰ Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 134.

success or failure to produce surface-level markers of masculinity. Yet Preciado's confrontation with medical discourse is not limited to a criticism of language, expanding into the field of practice.

The specific dosage that Preciado administers to himself does not conform to the quantity normally advised by medical practitioners to produce 'visible' changes, as he states, '50 mg de testostérone en gel deux fois par semaine pendant trois mois n'est pas facile à détecter à l'oeil nu'.³⁷¹ Preciado's use of testosterone therefore subverts the usual medical purposes of hormone treatment for gender-affirming care, which are to amplify or produce for the first time visible, material attributes of normative masculinity.³⁷² Preciado's non-compliance with the standard practice transforms his use of testosterone gel from a hormonal treatment to enhancing and experimental drug. Like a scientist, Preciado conducts a controlled experiment on himself as 'cobaye', challenging existing frameworks and opening up possibilities for new discoveries. Rather than focusing on testosterone's ability to produce external markers of virility, Preciado's experimentation focuses on its effects on perception, sensation, and embodied experience, notably increased sexual arousal and resistance to fatigue: 'elles [the doses] produisent des changements subtils mais déterminants [...] dans l'excitation sexuelle [...] dans la résistance à la fatigue.'³⁷³ These effects frame testosterone as a performance-enhancing drug, and the passage progresses into the description of the state of high that Preciado also seeks when using the gel. Preciado goes on to compare testosterone gel to other drugs like Prozac, coke and speed as 'un bon shoot.'³⁷⁴ This situates his use in the realm of addiction, already implied by the title chosen for the essay itself: *Testo-Junkie*, reinforcing the transgressive nature of his relationship to testosterone.

Preciado's addictive usage is underscored by the personification of the substance, which he calls 'le diable'.³⁷⁵ Preciado seems to acknowledge the darker side of substance abuse, which is commonly perceived as physically dangerous and immoral, due to its associations with dependency, excess, and the potential for self-harm. Yet for Preciado, an encounter with the 'devil in gel' does not hold purely negative connotations: on the contrary, its transgressive potential is framed as positive, even emancipatory, particularly when seen against the backdrop

³⁷¹ Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 133-134.

³⁷² For instance, listed under 'Gender Affirming Testosterone Regimens (full dose hormone therapy)' on [transhub.org.au](https://www.transhub.org.au) the recommended dose for Testosterone 1% gel sachet, 50 mg, is 'one sachet daily'. On the same webpage the effects and changes listed relate to external markers of 'masculinisation' such as increased hair growth and upper body mass. See "Masculinising," [transhub.org.au](https://www.transhub.org.au), accessed September 12, 2025, <https://www.transhub.org.au/clinicians/masculinising/>

³⁷³ Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 134.

³⁷⁴ Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 135.

³⁷⁵ Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 133.

of Preciado's Catholic upbringing. In his preface 'Pierre et Gilles politiques de la lumière' to a 2022 photobook entitled *Les temps de couleurs*, compiling the works included in an exhibition by French visual artists Pierre et Gilles, Preciado discusses his religious upbringing in Spain and how the Catholic Church and its strict imposition of gender norms shaped his relationship to morality. As he recounts his first communion, Preciado reflects on the frustration that his childhood-self experienced when forced to dress as a 'girl' for the occasion. He writes:

Le jour de la communion[...] on m'a fait porter une robe blanche de « fille » et on a frisé mes cheveux. Sur la photo dans le salon de la maison de mes parents, je tiens un lys dans ma main, je suis triste et en colère, presque vexé que Dieu me voie [...] habillé comme ça.³⁷⁶

He continues: 'pour manger Dieu, je me suis imaginé portant une longue tunique brune [...] comme Saint François d'Assise'.³⁷⁷ Preciado explains that from a young age, he understood that his sinful thoughts, his preference for a masculine expression of gender and his belief that he was really a boy would be condemned in the eyes of the Church. As a response, he writes, he chose to embrace the role of a sinner; 'je ne pouvais pas être un saint, pas même une sainte. Je serai un pécheur.'³⁷⁸ Here, the gendered conventions of the French language prompt Preciado to include both masculine and feminine forms; 'un saint' and 'une sainte', allowing him to playfully criticise society's moral stance towards gender and the gender imbalance that applies even to sanctified figures. In contrast, Preciado's choice to turn away from virtue and become a 'pécheur' allows for an escape from these categories and hierarchisations. In everyday modern French, the term 'pécheur' is commonly used to refer to a person of any gender who commits an act perceived as wrong or immoral.³⁷⁹ Preciado takes advantage of the gendered neutrality of the word 'pécheur' to juxtapose the path of the sinner with that of an existence beyond gender boundaries. In this way, Preciado sees being a sinner as a place of freedom.

In *Testo Junkie*, Preciado's bodily experimentation extends beyond the 'autocobaye' method and the use of his own body as a site of experiment. Preciado's accounts of his sexual life with Virginie Despentes, to whom the text is dedicated, also populate the pages. The text expands from the scope of self-experimentation to make space for effects produced and

³⁷⁶ Paul B. Preciado, "Pierre & Gilles, politiques de la lumière" in *Pierre et Gilles : Les couleurs du temps* (Templon, 2022), 6.

³⁷⁷ Preciado, "Pierre & Gilles," 6.

³⁷⁸ Preciado, "Pierre & Gilles," 6.

³⁷⁹ While 'pécheresse' the feminine variation of the term exists, it remains literary and is rarely used in everyday speech.

sensations experienced by Preciado's body as it comes into contact with his lover's own. Preciado begins by setting out the context and circumstances of their first meeting, and the terms under which they reconnect five years later. Preciado first met Despentès at the premiere screening of *Baise-moi* in 2000. At the time, Preciado was involved with a group of 'activistes queer'³⁸⁰ and the group formed part of the support committee organised by French filmmaker Catherine Breillat that was defending the film against a conservative push to ban it from most cinemas. They later reconnected at a pivotal moment in both of their lives: a juncture Preciado describes as follows: 'nous nous rencontrons à un moment fractal au bord d'une tragédie technogrecque : elle vient de commencer à sortir avec des filles, et moi, je viens de commencer à prendre de la testostérone.'³⁸¹ Preciado's characterisation of himself and Despentès as heroes of a modern Greek tragedy elevates their romance from personal anecdotes involving public figures to collective mythmaking.

Preciado's account of his first sexual encounter with Despentès is strikingly impersonal. The observational, dispassionate tone in which he relays their sexual relations is introduced through his use of the subheading 'Premier contrat sexuel'.³⁸² It reflects the transactionary nature of their first relationship, as an actual exchange of money occurred: 'en entrant dans la chambre, elle me paie'.³⁸³ Preciado establishes a sense of emotional distance, which is reinforced by the matter-of-fact tone in which he narrates the scene, presenting a highly detailed play-by-play report of the encounter, focusing on bodily movements and positions. As in his accounts of his experimentation with testosterone gel, Preciado slips between subjective and objective language. Bodies are fragmented into individual parts through the use of possessive pronouns, such as in the phrase 'ma langue sort de sa bouche' and rendered impersonal and autonomous, as in the phrase, 'les corps se tournent ensemble, les bassins se rapprochent, magnétiquement, sexes en même temps unis et séparés par le tissu du pantalon.'³⁸⁴ In addition to the oscillation between objective and subjective language, the observational mode of Preciado's text is further reinforced by the bird's-eye view used by Preciado, who places himself at a distance from the remembered scene, positioning himself as simultaneously observer and participant.

This focus on sex pushes Preciado's text into a different register, that of pornography. In his pornographic text, Preciado foregrounds the mechanics and materiality of the sexual act,

³⁸⁰ Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 80.

³⁸¹ Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 83.

³⁸² Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 84.

³⁸³ Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 84.

³⁸⁴ Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 85.

yet he does so in a way that challenges the way pornographic bodies usually appear. Through a focus on bodily fluids and animal imagery, Preciado also borrows from mythical writing and produces a narrative of metamorphosis. Describing the way Despentés moves on the bed, Preciado writes, ‘elle étire ses bras, dessine des S avec son corps’³⁸⁵ rendering her body snakelike. Preciado deploys the same image to descriptions of his own body to depict his tongue as it responds to Despentés’ embraces as ‘ma langue s’aiguise comme une flèche’³⁸⁶. This beastly depiction of bodies reinforces Preciado’s positioning of himself as an ‘autocobaye’ — the lab rat in his own experiments. The animalisation of bodies is reiterated in a later passage of text, where he once again uses imagery that blurs the line between human and animal. Describing a moment of shared pleasure, Preciado evokes the image of ‘un animal bicéphale’ to express the metamorphic intensity of the experience. He writes, ‘nous continuons comme ça, tel un animal bicéphale en équilibre, jusqu’à ce que je jouisse dans sa main, jusqu’à ce que ma main jouisse dans sa bouche.’³⁸⁷ This metaphor of the ‘two-headed beast’ conjures up a strong visual image of the interweaving of bodies as they converge to form a singular entity. Moreover, this image of a mythical creature foregrounds the confusion in writing the experience of reaching orgasm. Preciado’s description of an orgasmic hand, ‘ma main jouisse’, is remarkably unusual since it is a body part that usually produces rather than feels sexual arousal and climax. Preciado’s displacement here of the body’s pleasure centre from the sexual organs to the hand reveals an experimental and transformational approach to the body and its capacity to give and receive pleasure.

This experimental process explores how the ‘corps jouissant’, the body caught in the throes of intense pleasure, can be represented and reimagined through writing. Rather than producing scenes that can arouse the reader, Preciado’s focus remains on destabilising expectations and reimagining what the human body is and what it can do. Both his own body and Despentés’ bodies are fused together, even after the sex act is over: ‘je me réveille plus tard, sa main est dans mon vagin. Émergeant de mon bassin, son corps entier est devenu ma bite.’³⁸⁸ Preciado’s description of his imagined penis, so large that its dimensions measure up to those of the human body, is a grotesque hyperbole. Yet Preciado also expresses here a more profound feeling. In an earlier passage in *Testo-Junkie*, Preciado reveals that, although he grew up in an environment that perceived him as anatomically female, he saw himself as having

³⁸⁵ Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 85.

³⁸⁶ Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 85.

³⁸⁷ Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 95.

³⁸⁸ Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 94.

male reproductive organs, using a similarly exaggerated figure of speech: ‘depuis l’enfance je possède une bite fantasmatique d’ouvrier.’³⁸⁹ The translation of such life moments into text allows Preciado to dismantle the rigid mapping of biological bodies, representing them instead in metamorphic terms. Once the body is unfixed from its anatomical imperatives, it is free to take on new forms and functions.

In this passage, Despentés’ body as well as Preciado’s own are used as experimental sites. Preciado transforms their real-life relationship, and its intimate details, into narrative fictions to explore how writing can free up new ways of understanding the body and the relations between the self and other. By reimagining Despentés’ hand as a penetrative organ and her body as an extension of his own, Preciado creates a moment of textual fusion that mirrors his own theoretical discourse. This narrative experimentation points to Preciado’s wider project, which is to reconceptualise the body outside the bounds of sexual difference. Theory intersects with narrative writing as Preciado unveils his vision of a ‘Nouvelle différence sexuelle’,³⁹⁰ configured through an understanding of the body as made up of penetrable orifices and penetrating extremities, ‘des orifices pénétrables et des extrémités pénétrantes’.³⁹¹ He asserts:

Car tout corps, possédant un anus, une bouche ou des orifices oto-rhino, est potentiellement pénétrable. Tout corps possédant une langue, des doigts ou des bras, est potentiellement pénétrant, ou peut devenir port d’insertion prosthétique (dildonique et cybernétique). Tout corps est capable de produire un langage excitant et peut excité à travers le langage, l’image, le toucher, peut sucer ou être sucé. Tout corps est en même temps toxique et addict, valide et handicapé, organique et techniquement supplémenté.³⁹²

In addition, this image of a two-headed animal not only captures Preciado’s reimagining of bodies as fused, metamorphic entities, but also functions in Preciado’s narrative as an important intertextual marker, pointing towards a connection between his text and Despentés’ *Baise-moi*. In Despentés’ novel, a similar merging of bodies occurs when Nadine and Manu are described as resembling ‘une bête à deux têtes’.³⁹³ The connection between Despentés’ fictional protagonists and her presence in Preciado’s text is made explicit through references used in both texts. Preciado’s scene takes place in the same hotel, ‘Terrasse Hotel du XVIIIe

³⁸⁹ Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 87.

³⁹⁰ Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 265.

³⁹¹ Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 265.

³⁹² Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 265.

³⁹³ Despentés, *Baise-moi*, 189.

arrondissement'³⁹⁴ where Despentès filmed a handful of scenes for the movie adaptation of her novel. It is as if this same hotel room was used by Despentès and Preciado to recreate a key scene from *Baise-moi* five years after the release of the film, which also marked their first encounter. Preciado explicitly draws attention to this intertextual connection, recalling a scene from the film in which Manu and Nadine, during intercourse with two young men, experience a moment of shared pleasure; 'elles se regardent d'un lit à l'autre, partagent le plaisir de se faire pénétrer en même temps'.³⁹⁵ In chapter two of this thesis, I analysed this scene from *Baise-moi* and argued that Despentès' particular emphasis on Manu's eyes takes readers beyond the material realm, suggesting that an intellectual connection between the two women also occurs. The journey that Manu and Nadine embark on in pursuit of material pleasure is also a journey about the exchange of ideas.

In Despentès' text, the protagonists experiment with libertine philosophy and the pursuit of material pleasure; in *Testo-Junkie*, Preciado depicts a similar convergence of bodies and minds. While *Baise-moi* remains a work of fiction, Preciado anchors his accounts of sexual encounters in reality. In doing so, Preciado creates a hybrid text that uses reality to test out theoretical ideas. Preciado's self-administration of testosterone gel and his sexual relationship with Despentès are two elements that form the basis of his 'praxis'.³⁹⁶ It is marked by an approach to his own body as 'ce principe d'autocobaye',³⁹⁷ which allows him to adopt a dual position as both subject and object of his experiments. His dual position as both subject and object creates a distancing effect, best captured by the slippage between the use of subjective and objective languages. The oscillation between subjectivity and objectivity produces a text that does not simply offer an account of Preciado's bodily transformations, but expands to a guide on the transformation of all bodies, united by his conceptualisation of a 'Nouvelle différence sexuelle' and understood as 'des orifices pénétrables et des extrémités pénétrantes'.³⁹⁸

Several passages in *Testo-Junkie* depart from theory or life writing, moving into the writing of fiction. Preciado's text notably stages a series of imagined scenes under the heading 'Exercices de reprogrammation de genre'.³⁹⁹ They are invented by Preciado himself and function as part of his project to 'produire une nouvelle plateforme sexuelle et

³⁹⁴ Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 93.

³⁹⁵ Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 94.

³⁹⁶ Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 135.

³⁹⁷ Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 322.

³⁹⁸ Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 265.

³⁹⁹ Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 348.

affective'.⁴⁰⁰ One is entitled 'Devenir un macho d'élite'⁴⁰¹ and the other 'Devenir roi de la sodomie'.⁴⁰² The latter reads like the script for a pornographic film or the description of a scientific experiment: Preciado positions himself as director and begins with what appear to be stage notes. In these introductory lines, he describes the two bodies involved: 'un corps culturellement programmé pour être féminin' and 'un corps qui occupe culturellement la position d'homme',⁴⁰³ the props required: 'gode éjaculateur', 'lait condensé dilué, une seringue',⁴⁰⁴ and the intended effect: 'remasculisation performative'.⁴⁰⁵ The first body is supplemented with a strap-on dildo, and the other body remains unaltered. Their interaction is depicted using the first-person narrative 'je' and it is relayed from the perspective of the body 'programmed as female', who is placed in a dominating role, using the synthetic penis to penetrate the second body 'culturally situated as a man'. The first person narrator directly addresses her partner using the imperative mode, with phrases such as 'viens, rapproche-toi, redresse la tête', and 'absorbe-le'⁴⁰⁶ yet these are included in the text as indirect speech, removing the possibility of an actual dialogue taking place and creating an inner-voice effect. The narrator speaks in an aggressive and domineering manner, using terms that are both degrading and objectifying, such as in 'tu es mon trou lubrique' and 'ce qui te plait, en réalité, c'est d'être mon esclave anal'.⁴⁰⁷ We get the sense that the narrator is not really addressing a partner but instead engaging in an imagined dialogue, and, perhaps, that this fantasy is being played out in the narrator's own imagination. The ambiguous status of this scene is related to the identity of the narrator: since Preciado employs a first-person narration throughout the essay, the 'je' here conflates with the 'je' in the rest of the text. Who, then, is Preciado addressing? One possibility would be that the second person pronoun is a direct address to the reader of the text: after all, it is on the pages that this specific scene actually unfolds.

By provocatively drawing readers into the scene as imagined participants, Preciado plays with modes of address to establish an intimacy between the reader's own body and the textual bodies at play in the essay. The disruption between the self and 'other' is particularly evident in the phrase 'tu es mon trou lubrique'. While essentially reducing the other to a hole to be filled, the use of the personal pronoun 'tu' and the possessive 'mon' collapses the

⁴⁰⁰ Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 135.

⁴⁰¹ Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 349.

⁴⁰² Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 352.

⁴⁰³ Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 352.

⁴⁰⁴ Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 352.

⁴⁰⁵ Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 352.

⁴⁰⁶ Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 353.

⁴⁰⁷ Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 353.

distinction between them. It also rids these bodies of gender specificities as all bodies contain holes. In the first sentence, the narrator — presented as culturally female — calls herself ‘un vrai fils de pute’,⁴⁰⁸ an insult that only exists in the masculine form in French while also adding up both grammatical genders, ‘un fils’ and ‘une pute’. Later the narrator writes: ‘parce qu’en réalité, c’est ça qui te plait. Bouffer la bite de n’importe quel techo-mec que tu rencontres.’⁴⁰⁹ The use of the expression ‘bouffer la bite’ borrows from the typically brutal language of mainstream pornography, where it would be uttered by a male speaker. By disrupting the distinction between self and other, masculine and feminine voices, dominant and dominated positions, Preciado’s sexual fantasy does not simply invert traditional binaries as determined within a heteronormative framework. Within this framework, masculine and feminine subjects are determined through the logic of sexual difference. The masculine is associated with dominance as the one who penetrates, while the feminine is passive and the one being penetrated. Instead, Preciado proposes a scene of metamorphosis in action, a performance that takes its cue from Despentès’s literary work. In her short story ‘Domina’, analysed previously in the thesis, Despentès relies on the logic of role-play to erode the gendered difference between her protagonists. Similarly, Preciado uses a sexual scenario, centred on the act of sodomy, to make bodies equal, stripping them of their gendered and sexual markers and reimagining them as a collective of ‘penetrating orifices and penetrable extremities’. The title of this section, ‘Devenir roi de la sodomie’, is an explicit reference to the figure of the sodomite as found in the writings of Sade. In Sade’s *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* (1795) sodomy is represented as an act that challenges expectations of masculinity. In dialogue three, the lead educator of libertinage, Dolmancé speaks of the rearrangement of gendered bodies that this practice allows:

L’homme qui encule, soit un garçon, soit une femme, commet la sodomie active ; il est sodomite passif quand il se fait foutre. On a souvent mis en question laquelle de ceux façons de commettre la sodomie était la plus voluptueuse ; c’est assurément la passive, puisqu’on jouit à la fois de la sensation du devant et celle du derrière ; il est si doux de changer de sexe, si délicieux de contrefaire la putain, de se livrer à un homme qui nous traite de femme.⁴¹⁰

As the sodomised male body adopts a passive position, it is allowed to effectively ‘changer de sexe’ and to ‘contrefaire la putain’ a position that is considered as ‘la plus voluptueuse’.

⁴⁰⁸ Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 352.

⁴⁰⁹ Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 353.

⁴¹⁰ Donatien-Alphonse-François, le Marquis de Sade., *La Philosophie Dans le Boudoir Édition Intégrale* (CACTUS, 2024), 57.

Preciado extends this logic: the act of sodomy redefines the traditional masculine subject position as well as allowing a reprogramming of the body classified as female.

SECTION 3: From self to selves: Preciado and *Orlando*

In *Testo-Junkie*, Preciado stages fictional scenarios as exercises designed to rethink the body by reprogramming its culturally produced gendered positions. They engage readers in a collective fantasy of sexual scenes that also function as stories of metamorphoses. With *Orlando, ma biographie politique*, Preciado uses film to pursue his theoretical agenda of thinking of autonomous bodies as conceived outside of gender. Preciado's 2023 *Orlando, ma biographie politique* is a contemporary reimagining of Virginia Woolf's 1928 novel *Orlando: a Biography*. Part fiction, part biography, Preciado's film reimagines the story of Orlando as a 21st-century narrative of metamorphosis. Using non-professional actors in a cast of twenty-six trans- and non-binary individuals, Preciado maintains an authorial presence throughout with the use of voice-over. He also appears in the film, notably as a 'surgeon' operating on a book towards the end of the film. More than an autobiographical work or an adaptation of Woolf's *Orlando*, the film can be seen as a collective project, creating an autonomous text assembled from multiple and intersecting narratives.

This plays out in a specific sequence of the film where Preciado, dressed in surgical gear, performs a medical operation on a physical copy of Virginia Woolf's book. The staging of this surgical procedure provides an intertextual bridge to the 'autocobaye' methodology, and the medical discourse deployed in *Testo-Junkie*. This sequence is shot in a realistic-looking hospital operating theatre, and the physical book is treated as if it were an actual human body. As it is wheeled on a gurney by Preciado's assistant Orlandos,⁴¹¹ part of its cover is hidden under a blue sterilising sheet, as if the book possessed a lower and an upper body. In a close-up shot, the book is shown opened to its first pages, just beyond the cover. Preciado's hands are seen using a surgical tool to pierce the gap between the paper and the spine, treating the book's cover as though it were skin. After the insertion of an IV catheter line into the incision, as if penetrating the book's flesh, the following shot reveals that a bag of blood is now hooked up to the book, ensuring that its vital organs remain safe during the surgery.

The procedure that Preciado performs on the book alters its internal composition. It consists of removing, by delicately cutting them out, several images and paintings, including

⁴¹¹ Here the term Orlando is used to refer to the character Orlando in Preciado's film, who is incarnated in this scene by three actors Kori Ceballos, Janis Sahraoui and Ruben Rizza.

some representing Vita Sackville-West, who was famously Woolf's close friend and lover, and to whom Orlando's original manuscript was dedicated. Preciado then replaces the removed images with new photographic portraits, this time representing an array of past and present non-binary and trans individuals, whom he refers to as 'les vrais Orlandos de l'histoire'⁴¹². Preciado's surgical cutting and replacing is reminiscent of the 'profane'⁴¹³ arts carried out by Doctor Frankenstein in the making of his creature.⁴¹⁴ While Doctor Frankenstein sought out fragments of dead bodies, pieced them together to assemble his creature, Preciado's process of collecting images and inserting them creates an entirely new book. It is, however, imperfect as Preciado's surgical cuts leave marks on the pages. The new photographs are crudely sewn into the book with thick black thread, patching over the hollow spaces created by the removal of the original images. Much like the physical appearance of Doctor Frankenstein's creature, Preciado's book is disjointed and disharmonious. The final frame of the sequence shows a close-up of the book's interior, where Preciado is sewing in a colour photograph of himself as a child. The photograph shows a young girl in a pink denim jacket and jeans with a worried look on her face, posing near a procession of giant figures in religious attire, now positioned above the heading 'Orlando as a boy'. Preciado's use of this image of his younger self references Shelley's 1831 introduction to *Frankenstein*, where she wonders: 'how I, then a young girl, came to think of, and to dilate upon so very hideous an idea?'⁴¹⁵ Jean Hall suggests that Shelley here hints that her relationship to her novel resembles Frankenstein's to his monster: '[...] her Introduction attempts to sever the relationship between Mary Shelley the person and the author of Frankenstein, arguing that creator and creation are obviously dissimilar'.⁴¹⁶ While Hall argues that Shelley uses her gender, and girlish innocence, to distance herself from her literary creation, Preciado ironically does the reverse. He places an image of a real 'little girl' as the fictional Orlando boy, creating an equivalence between his film, Woolf's novel, his childhood self as a girl, his surgical work as a writer and as a filmmaker.

This scene also functions as a climactic moment for a film that is structured as a search party for Orlando. Its opening sequence shows Preciado with a large paper sign on which the words 'Orlando, où est tu ?' are written in bold multi-coloured letters. A mid-range shot then

⁴¹² Preciado, *Orlando*, 01:29:00.

⁴¹³ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein: Or the Modern Prometheus* (Penguin Books, 1992), 53.

⁴¹⁴ The young doctor Frankenstein describes his creation of the creature's frame out of human body parts collected from charnel houses as 'profane'. This citation is as follows: 'I had returned to my old habits. I collected bones from charnel-houses and disturbed with profane fingers, the tremendous secrets of the human frame.' Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 53.

⁴¹⁵ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 5.

⁴¹⁶ Hall, "'Frankenstein': The Horrifying Otherness of Family," 185-186.

shows Preciado from a slight distance, capturing him within the partial darkness of twilight. To the left-hand side of the frame, a line of trees, a bench and the glow of a lamp post can be distinguished: a typical street scene easily recognisable as situated in contemporary Paris. As the scene unfolds visually, Preciado's voice is heard in the extradiegetic soundtrack. He recounts an anecdotal conversation in which a person who remains unnamed asked him why he had not written his autobiography. Preciado adopts a narrational mode to convey his response: using reported speech, he quotes his own unexpected and provocative reply: '[p]arce que *fucking* Virginia Woolf l'a écrite à ma place en 1928.'⁴¹⁷ Rather than a simple provocation, Preciado's statement reminds us of the sub-heading of Woolf's novel, 'a biography', and that its fictional Orlando stood in for a real-life figure: Vita Sackville-West, Woolf's friend and lover.

Preciado's identification with Orlando points to his experimentation with fiction as a terrain to experiment with life beyond the limits and impositions of reality. The blending of fiction and reality is a central concern of Preciado's film and operates as both a narrative device and a visual technique in his adaptation of Woolf's novel. Preciado's reimagining of the Great Frost scene, where Orlando encounters the Princess of Russia, whom he affectionately names Sasha, and falls in love for the first time, exemplifies his experimental blend of fictional and real-life elements. The scene opens with a mid-range shot of what appears to be the backstage area of a theatre or a production studio. Towards the far end of the frame, a singular intra-diegetic lamp and the blue light of a computer monitor light up the area around a writer's desk. As Preciado's voice-over ponders the representational ethics of filming the life of a trans person today, the camera slowly pans to reveal a collection of objects that together evoke a painter's canvases and easels. Through his voice-over Preciado engages in a one-sided dialogue with Woolf, notably stating his agreement with her statement 'la fiction ne s'oppose pas à la réalité'⁴¹⁸. As the camera stops moving, it focuses on a singular seated figure holding a book open in their hands, wearing a blue sports jacket and a Jacobean ruff. The figure lifts their gaze to meet the camera and introduces themselves: 'je m'appelle Ruben Rizza et dans ce film je serai l'Orlando de Virginia Woolf'.⁴¹⁹ This practice of self-introduction is a discursive motif that runs throughout the film, performed by each individual as they inhabit the role of Orlando. It is through this visual and rhetorical strategy that Preciado deploys his aesthetic of the

⁴¹⁷ Preciado, *Orlando*, 00:01:03.

⁴¹⁸ Preciado, *Orlando*, 00:22:47.

⁴¹⁹ Preciado, *Orlando*, 00:23:00.

monstrous self as a hybrid figure that embodies the ‘I’ of the self through the mediated performance of the other.

In Preciado’s reinterpretation of the Great Frost scene, the role of Orlando is interpreted by Ruben Rizza and the role of Sasha by Castel Emery. Ruben and Castel are both adolescents, a casting choice motivated by Preciado’s desire to remain faithful to the characters’ age in Woolf’s novel. Preciado uses visual and textual cues to indicate where the scene is located within Woolf’s *Orlando* and its narrative timeline. A sequence of shots shows Ruben as Orlando⁴²⁰ sitting on a stool and reading aloud from the copy of *Orlando* in his hands. As he reads from the text and its description of ‘le grand gel fut le plus dur que nos îls n’eurent jamais connues’,⁴²¹ the literary temporal setting (the period of the great frost) is simultaneously being built around him. Two show runners can be seen positioning a screen printed with an image of a snow-soaked pine forest on the background and adjusting lighting, while two plastic Christmas trees are placed on either side of the frame. All of these props map out a stage area, creating a frame within a frame. This *mise-en-abyme* of the *mise-en-scène* makes viewers highly aware that they are watching a scene twice removed from reality: artificial objects and lights arranged to reproduce a scene created out of words. By having the scene assembled around Ruben-Orlando, Preciado adds an additional visual layering: the distinctive snowy setting on the back screen, in addition to Ruben-Orlando’s ruff, which contrasts sharply with the rest of his contemporary outfit, is a reference to Sally Potter’s 1993 film adaptation of *Orlando* played by the actress Tilda Swinton.

Preciado draws together several textual and visual elements in his reimagining of scene that stages Orlando’s first meeting with Sasha. The staging of their first encounter is particularly significant in Preciado’s film, especially in the way it foregrounds Woolf’s text and Potter’s film to frame the arrival of Emery as Sasha on screen. In Woolf’s novel, Sasha’s arrival allows an exploration of sexual identity as it relates to the physicality of the body and manner of dress. In Woolf’s text, Sasha is described in terms that deliberately produce ambiguity. Sasha’s Russian tunic and mastery of ice skating serves to ‘disguise her sex’⁴²² from Orlando’s initial glances, complicating the latter’s ability to discern whether Sasha is a boy or

⁴²⁰ Throughout this section of analysis focusing on Preciado’s film, I will be using the hyphen between the performer’s first name and Orlando to reflect the duality of their role, and to distinguish between the several different incarnations of Woolf’s protagonist as they appear in Preciado’s film. Whereas I will refer to Castel Emery, either as Sasha, or as Emery, to emphasise the singularity of her role, and to explore the significance of Preciado’s privileging of this particular figure in his film.

⁴²¹ Preciado, *Orlando*, 00:23:05.

⁴²² Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A biography* (Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1929), 31.

a young woman: ‘when the boy, for alas, a boy it must be – no woman could skate with such speed and vigour’.⁴²³

Sasha is introduced in Woolf’s text as an androgynous body that embodies both masculine and feminine traits. Yet an interesting tension arises when a few lines later, through the gaze of her protagonist, Woolf fragments Sasha’s body; ‘but no boy had a mouth like that; no boy has those breasts [...]’.⁴²⁴ In her manner of dress and apparent mastery over her body, Sasha is able to perform masculinity in the eyes of Orlando, whereas her actual body parts and its overall shape eventually break the illusion. Like Woolf, Preciado fragments Sasha’s body through camera work, but doing so in a way that voluntarily moves away from cinematic techniques that fetishise the female body. Preciado avoids a strictly gendered coding through defamiliarizing techniques to separate femininity from the recognisable forms of a female body. Using an extreme close-up shot, Preciado films Sasha’s eyes and the bridge of her nose. The next shot is a close-up of Sasha’s throat and neck, framed by the ends of her blonde hair, the fur collar of her blouse and the silver chain of a necklace. In the following shot, Preciado rests his camera on Sasha’s upper body and sternum, and as she draws her blouse away from her shoulders, the two half-moon-shaped scars that mark her chest are revealed.

Such extreme close-up shots distort our usual expectations of bodies on screen. Captured in this way, bits of the body take on disproportionate dimensions, occupying almost entirely the space of the screen. This exaggerated body takes on new and strange forms, which evoke the vastness of lunar landscapes. Sasha’s body as larger-than-life in Preciado’s film can be compared to Desportes’ description of Marcia’s body in *Vernon Subutex*. In both Desportes’ text and Preciado’s film, non-binary bodies are gigantic bodies, too monumental to be captured and categorised by external gazes. Yet Sasha is not an object of curiosity, but an active knowing subject, therefore resisting another form of fetishisation this time, intellectual rather than sexual. The stillness of Preciado’s camera juxtaposes with the slight yet noticeable movements of Sasha’s body as it is being filmed. The body’s movements when observed against the steadiness of the camera, creates an impression of consciousness, suggesting the body is conscious of being watched and is actively responding and meeting the gaze of the camera. This is unsettling in terms of film spectatorship experience. On-screen bodies are not usually shown as being aware of the gaze they are subjected to, and as actively responding to that gaze. Rather, they are presented as unknowing objects of the gaze passively received by spectators.

⁴²³ Woolf, *Orlando*, 31.

⁴²⁴ Woolf, *Orlando*, 32.

Here, the body's awareness suggests the possibility of a threat, disrupting the spectator's sense of safe viewing, from a distance, controlled images. Spectators are no longer simply passively receiving images but being challenged to perceive the body differently. Much like the bleeding, perspiring and fluid-secreting bodies in Ducournau's cinema, bodies in Preciado's film challenge spectators to perceive the body differently.

Moreover, in this sequence of images, images of bodies are at odds with their textual representations. This friction between word and image arises from a clear disjunction between the visual track and the audio track. Body parts shown on screen are not synchronised with those mentioned by Ruben-Orlando's voice reading from Woolf's text. When Ruben-Orlando reads 'mais jamais un garçon n'eut une bouche semblable'⁴²⁵, the visual track shows the image of Sasha's throat and neck, then as he recites 'des tels yeux comme sortis des profondeurs de l'océan',⁴²⁶ the visual track cuts to an image of Emery's chest and the visible scars of a double mastectomy.

These visible scars point to a past event in the actor's life and contrast with a key moment in Woolf's novel. Orlando's fairy-tale like metamorphosis is described in a way that emphasises ease and simplicity: 'Orlando looked himself up and down in a long looking-glass, without showing any signs of discomposure, and went, presumably, to his bath [...] The change seemed to have been accomplished painlessly and completely and in such a way that Orlando herself showed no surprise at it.'⁴²⁷ The effortlessness of the body's change is reflected in the swift transition between the narrator's use of gendered pronouns. While Orlando's change in sex occurs 'painlessly' in Woolf's fictional world, Preciado exposes how such a transformation in real life will leave visible marks. The image of Emery's chest also includes a silver necklace with a pendant in the shape of Uranus, recognizable through its galactic ring. The pendant therefore functions as a visual reference to Preciado's own oeuvre and more particularly the book of essays, *Un appartement sur Uranus* from 2016. In its introduction, Preciado envisages the notion of subjectivity as a scar: 'ce que nous appelons subjectivité n'est que la cicatrice qui, sur la multiplicité de ce que nous aurions pu être[...] C'est sur cette cicatrice qu'on écrit le nom propre et qu'on affirme l'identité sexuelle'.⁴²⁸ For Preciado, language operates as a system of signs that inscribes sexual identities upon the body, creating a fictional image of the body, what he refers to as 'des fictions politiques'.⁴²⁹ By exposing the actual scars on Emery's chest,

⁴²⁵ Preciado, *Orlando*, 00:25:56.

⁴²⁶ Preciado, *Orlando*, 00:26:05.

⁴²⁷ Woolf, *Orlando*, 117-118.

⁴²⁸ Paul B. Preciado, *Un appartement sur Uranus* (Grasset, 2016), 23.

⁴²⁹ Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 135.

Preciado also points to symbolic social and political scars left on all gendered bodies. Here, Preciado does the exact reverse of what Woolf achieves in her text. While in *Orlando* literary writing is what renders possible, and even frictionless, a transformation from one sex to the other; in Preciado's film, literature and cinema are used to materialise, to make visible and felt, how moving away from social norms and physical markers of gender and sex necessarily implicates physical pain and bodily modifications that leave real and lasting traces. Preciado also suggests that we are all Orlandos: bodies branded on our skin with an 'identité sexuelle' as he writes in *Un appartement sur Uranus*.

Woolf's text experiments with crossing boundaries of gender and sexuality through its staging of cross-dressing, and the wondrous metamorphosis of its protagonist. As such, it has come to be understood as a canonical 'queer' text. Kelly McWilliam for instance, argues that Woolf's 'subversive parody of gender performance' effectively 'queers' Orlando and asserts 'more fluid potentialities.'⁴³⁰ As McWilliam points out, 'Woolf [also] highlighted gender and sexuality as another type of fiction'.⁴³¹ In Preciado, however, the body cannot be seamlessly written over with fiction. The understood artificiality of gender will not provide a complete disguise for what lies under. Rather than imagining an ideal body defined by 'queer fluidity' through writing, Preciado uses film to maintain a tension between flesh as a stubborn anchor of being and the possibility of embodying multiple selves in the same body.

Preciado's film interacts with *Orlando* as text, as an object of critical commentary and the subject of previous adaptations on screen. The unveiling of Emery's body is one of two instances that can be considered partial nudity in the film.⁴³² It references a scene in Potter's *Orlando*, in which Orlando's female body is revealed. In Potter's work, the transformation is as magical and smooth as it appears Woolf's novel. The scene begins with a shot of Orlando, still dressed in his ambassador's clothes, in a Georgian-era distinctive ruffled shirt and a wig. As Orlando gets up from bed, the wig falls to reveal long cascading natural hair. Potter's camera lingers on the wig on the bedsheets, and as Orlando moves out of the frame, we see a nightshirt being thrown on the bed. A close-up angled shot shows Orlando's face as the character splashes water on it over a sink. Sunlight makes visible specks of dust floating in the air, creating a sparkling effect and a sense of enchantment. In the next frame, Orlando turns towards a mirror: the 'looking glass' in Woolf's description, filmed from behind, the viewer is

⁴³⁰ Kelly McWilliam, "'Gender Fiction': Critiquing Performativity and Queerness in *Orlando*," *Journal of Interdisciplinary Gender Studies* 6, no. 1 (2001): 49.

⁴³¹ McWilliam, "'Gender Fiction'," 49.

⁴³² The second instance occurs at the beginning of the film. This scene is discussed in a following analysis that focuses on Preciado's vision of a monstrous humanity.

shown Orlando's reflected nude body in the mirror, which has transformed into a distinctly female body with curved breasts and hips. The camera transitions back to a close-up shot of Orlando's face, who addresses the screen: 'no difference at all... the same person... just a different sex' (*Orlando*, 1993, 00:57: 34).⁴³³ Her gaze shifts from her reflection in the mirror to meet the camera as she utters the final words, 'just a different sex'.

In interviews Potter gave on the occasion of the film's release, she explained her intention to capture with the figure of Orlando the idea of 'an essential self' that would exist beyond gender and beyond time.⁴³⁴ Scholars and critics have either overlooked or contested this intention in favour of interpretations grounded in contemporary understandings of gender and female subjectivity in cinema. As film scholar Kate Ince points out, 'one aspect of the film on which much critical commentary has focused is the contrast between the universalist androgyny of Woolf's text and the queer post-modern reconstruction of a female genealogy in Potter's film'.⁴³⁵ In her article "'Same Person...Just a different sex': Sally Potter's construction of Gender in "Orlando'" (2001). Catherine Craft-Fairchild argues that: 'stepping outside historical or present-day ideology to get to an essential self remains impossible, the act that Potter's film actually engages in — pointing up the constructions with which it works — is both satisfying and useful.'⁴³⁶ Craft-Fairchild also discusses the way Potter displays Orlando's body in the second part of the film, clearly critiquing its perceived failure to avoid an essentialisation of the female body:

By contrast, Potter's emphasis on Orlando's beauty, at her first appearance and again during the scenes involving Shelmerdine, would be regarded as a "transformation of the female body into a fetish" an overly eroticized object that allays the anxiety aroused by its visible lack [...] Like the figure in that painting [Botticelli's *Venus de Milo*]; Potter's scene is beautiful, but also static and dead.⁴³⁷

Yet it is important to note that *Orlando* is an exploration of masculinity as much as it is an exploration of femininity. And it is in moments where the protagonist turns away from gendered expectations that the tension between an essential self and a constructed social

⁴³³ Sally Potter director. *Orlando*, British Screen Productions, 1993, 00:57:34.

⁴³⁴ See for instance Verina Glaessor, "Fire and Ice," *Sight and Sound* 2, no.4 (1992): 14, <https://www.proquest.com/magazines/fire-ice/docview/1305510934/se-2>, and David Ehrenstein, "Out of the Wilderness: An Interview with Sally Potter," *Film Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (1993): 7, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1213104>.

⁴³⁵ Kate Ince, *The Body and the Screen: Female Subjectivities in Contemporary Women's Cinema* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 60.

⁴³⁶ Catherine Craft-Fairchild, "'Same Person...Just a Different Sex': Sally Potter's Construction of Gender in 'Orlando,'" *Woolf Studies Annual* 7 (2001): 44, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24906451>.

⁴³⁷ Craft-Fairchild, "'Same Person...Just a Different Sex'," 39.

identity emerges. For her part, Sally Potter demonstrates her conviction that Woolf's narrative, and by extension her film adaptation of it, gives space to an understanding of the self as a composite: a patchwork, pieced together from external fragments of social performance and the intrinsic qualities that form an 'essence'. Speaking about the pivotal metamorphosis in an interview with Manohla Dargis, Potter explains:

I felt it important that the change be motivated. What Orlando is doing as a man at that point is facing the ultimate test every boy grows up holding somewhere in his psyche, that he may have to go to war, fight, kill or be killed. That is the moment Orlando realises he cannot, will not, be a man in the sense he is being asked to.⁴³⁸

Potter's statement demonstrates, on the one hand, how manhood is learned and constructed by social and cultural expectations, and on the other, how in this pivotal moment her protagonist enacts free will, turning away from violence and choosing a different path. Moreover, Potter's comment emphasises how the obligation to enact and participate in violence plays a role in the transition from boyhood to manhood.

Preciado's succession of Orlandos maps onto the narrational structure of Potter's film, itself organised into seven key chapters identified with subtitles: 'Death', 'Love', 'Poetry', 'Politics', 'Society', 'Sex' and 'Birth'. Potter's fragmentation of the narrative is rejigged by Preciado through casting and the reliance on different performers. Preciado relies on Ruben Riazza to play Orlando during his adolescence phase. The re-imagined 'Great Frost' scene, in which Riazza faces Castel Emery corresponds to the chapter on 'Love' in Potter's adaptation. As in Woolf's text, for both Potter and Preciado, masculinity functions as the narrative's point of departure. While the representation of Orlando's journey as a man is bound up in fiction in Woolf's text and in Potter's adaptation, Preciado's integration of real-life stories of gender transitions allows for a different interrogation of masculinity, lending his film a documentary nature. Ruben-Orlando candidly discusses some of the difficulties he faced in the beginning of his transition in a sequence that is embedded within the 'Great Frost' scene, shifting from the fictional to the real. He explains:

je marchais de manière très caricaturée[...]je faisais exprès de prendre une voix très grave, d'avoir toujours l'air en colère [...] je me suis rendu compte que c'était ridicule

⁴³⁸ Manohla Dargis, "Sally Potter: A Director Not Afraid of Virginia Woolf," *Interview* (New York, N.Y. 1977) (New York), 1993, 43

parce que la masculinité peut se présenter de plein de formes différentes[...] j'ai encore du chemin à faire avec ça[...] j'ai eu un beau parcours avec la masculinité.⁴³⁹

Preciado's weaving of fiction and reality offers a unique perspective on masculinity. Riazza's comments about his attempts to adopt a masculine tone of voice, facial expressions, and way of walking reveal an understanding of gender as defined by Butler, as 'stylization of the body' through 'a set of repeated acts'.⁴⁴⁰ Furthermore, the use of the terms 'chemin' and 'parcours' underscores masculinity as a process, contradicting gender as represented as an instantaneous transformation in Woolf's text and in Potter's adaptation.

The question of masculinity continues to play a significant role in Preciado's film, particularly when the character transitions from adolescence to adulthood. This transitional phase is represented by two different Orlandos: Ruben Riazza as adolescent Orlando, and Elios-Levy as Orlando in adulthood. Preciado enters into a dialogue with Potter's own commentary on manhood and violence, particularly her assertion that the ultimate test of manhood is the expectation that boys must, at some point, prepare for war. In one of the scenes, Orlando, played by Elios Levy, equips himself for battle. It opens with an establishing shot of the exterior: 'L'armurerie de la Gare de l'Est', a real store that exists in Paris today. The following shot shows Elios-Orlando from behind as he gazes into the shop window. On display is a variety of modern firearms and an assortment of bows and arrows: objects typically used for hunting and recreational sports. With his back still turned to the camera, Elios-Orlando moves along the side of the shop window, passing an old-fashioned suit of armour. Elios-Orlando is himself dressed in black tracksuit-pants, a blue t-shirt and is wearing a single arm piece of armour and a hood of chainmail over his head and shoulders. The contemporary sportswear and blue t-shirt create a visual coherence in style and colour with his adolescent incarnation as Ruben-Orlando, while the change from ruff to chain mail marks a transition from courtly fashion to a knight's attire made for battle. After entering the shop, Elios-Orlando addresses the vendor: 'apparemment, c'est chez vous que je peux trouver mes attributs de la masculinité'.⁴⁴¹ The term 'attributs' highlights the constructed nature of masculinity, suggesting that it can be acquired through the acquisition of external objects as signifiers. As the shop vendor directs Elios-Orlando to a selection of weapons, Preciado's voice-over narrates the scene: 'Orlando commença alors à apprendre ce que voulait dire être un homme dans une société patriarcale: ne pas simplement avoir les droits de faire usage de la violence mais plutôt

⁴³⁹ Preciado, *Orlando*, 00:30:00.

⁴⁴⁰ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 45.

⁴⁴¹ Preciado, *Orlando*, 00:48:06.

l'obligation de le faire'.⁴⁴² As Elios-Orlando leaves the store with his weapon of choice, an automatic assault rifle, another Orlando, this time Julia Postollec enters the shop shortly after to relinquish their weapon. This other Orlando is dressed like Elios-Orlando, with contemporary clothes and a chainmail hood. While Elios-Orlando has painted eyebrows, Julia-Orlando is wearing a thin line of iridescent blue liner across their eyelids. This intentional use of makeup as an external marker is used to reinforce the narrational parallel between these two figures. The armoury in Preciado's film functions as a transitional space where gendered identities are negotiated and where masculinity can be both acquired and relinquished, reflecting the fluid, even cyclical, and constructed nature of gender.

In Preciado's reimagining of Orlando, we are reminded that the passage from one gender to another, rather than marking a rupture with a previous state of existence, represents a continuous state of change. When depicting his passage in Constantinople, the final chapter of Orlando's life, Preciado has cast Amir Bailly in the role. Drawing on a documentary style of filmmaking, Preciado interweaves Bailly's real-life testimony into Orlando's narrative trajectory. In this sequence, Preciado films the protagonist seated in an armchair and smoking a hand-rolled joint. The abnormally large oriental-style head dress perched on Bailly's head, as well as the consumption of marijuana on screen, disrupts the typical 'serious' tone of the film. As Amir as Orlando speaks, he reflects on his own experience of transition: 'pour moi ce n'était pas vraiment une rupture non plus avec qui j'étais avant mais plutôt une continuité de qui je suis et de qui j'allais devenir'.⁴⁴³

Amir-Orlando's assertion that he perceives gender transition not as a moment of fracture but as continuation establishes a continuity between masculinity and femininity. This continuity is conveyed through choices of costume and direction in the scene. The frame shows a sleeping Orlando, still played by Bailly. His head, shoulders and chest are visible in the shot, and he is wearing a white robe that partially reveals his chest. His head is resting against a red velvet pillow, and the red walls of his bedroom can be seen in the background. This frame then cuts to a pair of different hands resting on a body also partially covered with a white robe and resting against the same red velvet bed sheets. The following shot reveals the sleeping figure's upper body, head, shoulder-length hair, plump lips and décolleté. Despite the visual continuity, the transition from one body to another is marked by a distinct aural shift. The silent and serene atmosphere of slumber applied to Amir as Orlando is disrupted by the sudden eruption of a

⁴⁴² Preciado, *Orlando*, 00:48:05.

⁴⁴³ Preciado, *Orlando*, 00:56:00.

loud, screechy heavy metal music track. Preciado's choice of an aggressive music track brutally contrasts with the ethereal, enchanted atmosphere in the previous scene, and in Potter's cinematic representation of Orlando's transformation. Preciado's intentional disruption is furthered when three drag queens suddenly appear inside the frame. While in Potter's film, a form of naturalism was present in the unveiling of the nude female body that marks Orlando's metamorphosis, in Preciado's film, femininity is an over-the-top performance as the three drag queens present themselves as 'Tristana [...] la déesse de hormones', 'Le Filip [...] la déesse de gender fucking', and 'Miss Drinks [...] la déesse de l'insurrection'.⁴⁴⁴

The idea of femininity as 'dress-up', in the tradition of drag, is explored in a later scene set in a dressing room. In Woolf's novel, soon after waking up in her new body, Orlando returns to England. In Preciado's film, Orlando is now played by Naëlle Dariya and is shown preparing for a trip. In the first frames, Naëlle-Orlando is filmed looking through, then standing in front of a closet. The closet represents a personal archive: in the top left corner, a mannequin head wearing a chainmail hood is visible on a shelf. This visual callback to the earlier scene in the weapon store establishes a continuity between Orlando's various forms and incarnations. In a direct address to the camera, Naëlle as Orlando showcases her outfit of choice: a leather skirt and jacket, a tank top that reveals her bare midriff, and bold, burlesque-style makeup. She declares: 'c'est ainsi dans ces habits de jeune Anglaise de qualité que je m'apprêtais à revenir au château.'⁴⁴⁵ The use of a direct address to the camera, combined with the emphasis on dressing up, underscores the performative nature of the scene. This performative dimension becomes even more pronounced in this scene with the use of mirrors that reveal its self-reflexivity: Naëlle-Orlando is seated at a vanity table in front of a large mirror. Preciado's camera is positioned behind her so that the camera at once captures Naëlle-Orlando's reflection and that of the camera in the mirror. The on-screen image is therefore constructed through a series of reflections. Adopting the tone of voice and the mannerism of a 'jeune Anglaise de qualité', Naëlle-Orlando gazes at herself in the mirror as she delivers her lines. After a pause, Preciado breaks the fourth wall by appearing in the mirror's reflection, interrupting his actor's performance to direct them to be 'plus trash'.⁴⁴⁶ Later, Preciado inserts new words into a passage from Woolf's text, adding a reference to the 21st-century realities of sex work in Naëlle-Orlando's monologue: 'avec quelques guinées récoltées grâce à la vente d'une perle, et avec l'argent gagné en faisant des stripteases en webcam en Turquie, je m'étais achetée un

⁴⁴⁴ Preciado, *Orlando*, 01:00:08-22.

⁴⁴⁵ Preciado, *Orlando*, 01:02:40.

⁴⁴⁶ Preciado, *Orlando*, 01:04:59.

trousseau des vêtements féminins à la mode du temps.’⁴⁴⁷ Preciado highlights his active role in the production of images as well as text. However, the self-reflexivity he uses here creates a critical distance. In the dressing-room scene, Preciado exposes some of the ways femininity can be constructed and performed. In doing so, he creates a spectacle that lays bare the artifice and performativity of gender, while revealing that it never amounts to an achieved, complete transformation: we are back stage, on a film set, with all of the devices and artifices in play view. This self-conscious artificiality is ultimately what reveals the realness and depth of individual selves and their bodies as captured on screen.

With Naëlle as Orlando, Preciado draws on the grotesque tradition as defined by Bakhtin: ‘images of the body [...] offered in an extremely exaggerated form.’⁴⁴⁸ Preciado does not exaggerate body parts as such, but rather the attributes that distinguish each of the staged performances in his film. This is particularly evident in Naëlle-Orlando’s act as a ‘trashy’ Englishwoman of rank, where the incongruity between her Marie-Antoinette-style aristocratic wig and her contemporary hypersexual attire creates a striking visual dissonance. The grotesque aesthetic reveals Preciado’s refusal to produce a representation of gender as fixed and authentic. Here, the exaggerated visual and discursive elements function as performative layers. While a caricatural depiction of Orlando is unfolded, Preciado also includes a further destabilisation. Through voice-over, he shares a biographical detail about his own gender transition. As his voice is heard in the audio track, Naëlle-Orlando can be seen having her wig fitted. This image of concealment, paired with Preciado’s own confession, moves away from a caricature of gender and the rejection of authenticity to an intimate revelation, which Preciado defines as monstrous in *Je suis un monstre qui vous parle* as ‘celui qui vit en transition. Celui dont le visage, le corps et les pratiques ne peuvent encore être considérés comme vrais dans un régime de savoir et de pouvoir déterminés.’⁴⁴⁹

During this scene, as Naëlle-Orlando is seen having her oversized wig fitted by a stylist, viewers witness the way in which an actor prepares for a role, how a drag performer gets ready for the stage, and how external markers of femininity are added onto bodies, which they both conceal and transform. As mentioned, Preciado’s voice is heard at the same time, reflecting on his past life:

Parfois en parcourant les rues de New York, je découvrais mon reflet dans une vitrine et je voyais comment le visage féminin se décomposait sans que le visage masculin soit

⁴⁴⁷ Preciado, *Orlando*, 01:02:22-36.

⁴⁴⁸ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 18.

⁴⁴⁹ Preciado, *Je suis un monstre*, 49.

encore apparu. Les hormones avaient commencé à défaire un masque de moi mais ils ne l'avaient pas encore été remplacé par un autre. J'ai appelé cette période le temps sans genre.⁴⁵⁰

The poignancy of Preciado's revelation contrasts sharply with the brash, theatrical images it accompanies. By bringing viewers into the intimate space of the dressing room, Preciado seems to indicate that underneath the pomp and spectacle of gender as performance, lies the hidden reality of more uncomfortable and confronting aspects of transitioning. Preciado uses the lexicon of decay, describing seeing his feminine face in decomposition, 'se décomposait'. The image that Preciado conjures up of a face in the process of decomposition is both grotesque and horrifying, as he casts himself as the figure of the monster.

The monster as 'celui qui vit en transition' is a living being occupying the space in-between gendered identities. The transitional process that Preciado describes in the decomposition of his face as mask allows him to fully inhabit this state. This transitional existence is also a 'temps sans genre', an ideal time situated before or beyond the imposition of 'le régime de la différence sexuelle'.⁴⁵¹ Preciado understands this non-gendered time and its transitional state as ideals, fundamental to understanding what it means to be human. At the start of his film, a series of scenes replicates the 'Oak Tree' passage in Woolf's novel and its subsequent adaptation by Potter. Preciado uses two actors, Janis Sahraoui and Oscar Rosza Miller, as Orlandos in the scene. Janis-Orlando and Oscar-Orlando are depicted exploring the natural world around them. Initially shown on separate frames, both Orlandos engage in similar activities: walking among the undergrowth, resting by the water, embracing a tree: they act as distorted mirrors, doing the same action yet performing it differently. In one variation, Janis-Orlando sits on a fallen log in a small creek, bathing their feet in the water. In the other, Oscar-Orlando is crouching on a log beside the same body of water, shoes remaining on their feet. Oscar-Orlando is wearing a pair of large white underpants and a Jacobean-style ruff around their neck and their upper body is bare, distinctly revealing two female breasts. Oscar-Orlando's attitudes and gestures are typically masculine: their crouched position and bare chest conform to normalised views on how male bodies appear in public. In contrast, Janis-Orlando is fully clothed with long trousers and a white t-shirt on which a realistic image of a bra is printed across the front. While the print of the t-shirt marks out the contours of breasts, Janis-Orlando's chest is visibly flat. Janis-Orlando's 'chested' upper and seated, passive posture,

⁴⁵⁰ Preciado, *Orlando*, 01:03:16-39.

⁴⁵¹ Preciado, *Je suis un monstre*, 33.

indicated by the soft rounding forward of shoulders, is in direct opposition to the assertive stance adopted by Oscar-Orlando. Preciado pairs Janis-Orlando and Oscar-Orlando together to construct a monstrous vision of Woolf's protagonist. The formal strategy of creating mirrored scenes allows Preciado to present his two opposite sex Orlandos that simultaneously perform gendered attitudes in opposition to their perceived sexes. Preciado moves Woolf's Orlando one step further, from transformation or passage from one state to another, to a multifaceted, multigendered, multisexed figure. Here, Preciado intersects the novel with psychoanalytic literature, particularly with Sigmund Freud's theories on bisexuality. In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), Freud observes that on an anatomical level 'in every [...] male or female individual, traces are found of the apparatus of the opposite sex.'⁴⁵² Freud applies this duality to the psychological sphere too. He writes that his study of male 'inverts', i.e., male homosexuals, led him to observe that 'a large proportion of male inverts retain the mental quality of masculinity [...] and what they look for in their sexual object are in fact feminine qualities.'⁴⁵³ He continues, 'in this instance, as in many others, the sexual object is not someone of the same sex but someone who combines the characters of both sexes.[...] Thus the sexual object is a kind of reflection of the subject's own bisexual nature.'⁴⁵⁴ Just as Preciado adopts Sade's figure of the male sodomite to rethink gendered bodies, he applies Freud's thinking of the 'bisexuality' of male 'inverts' to all individuals.

Preciado first presents Janis-Orlando and Oscar-Orlando as distinct yet multiple subjects who make up the two parts of a whole. Both parts are unified in a scene that shows Janis-Orlando and Oscar-Orlando lying together on top of a statue that has been placed on its side. The Orlandos are asleep and positioned top to tail as if sharing a bed. Janis-Orlando's head is resting on the statue's shoulder, and their hand gently drapes over its stone breast. Oscar-Orlando lies in the inverse position, their head resting on the statue's stone feet. During this scene, Preciado's voice-over recounts how a discovery of Woolf's protagonist influenced his childhood perceptions of gender transformations. Just as Orlando underwent a metamorphosis during his sleep, a young Preciado also imagined that sleeping gave him the power to transform his body: 'alors le sommeil est devenu pour moi le royaume magique dans lequel la transition de genre avait lieu'.⁴⁵⁵ It is in this imaginary realm that Preciado envisioned the possible meeting of dualities and wholeness that a complete transformation would allow.

⁴⁵² Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey (Penguin Books, 1977), 52.

⁴⁵³ Freud, *Three Essays*, 55.

⁴⁵⁴ Freud, *Three Essays*, 56.

⁴⁵⁵ Preciado, *Orlando*, 00:11:47.

Preciado's emphasis on the dream state as a site of change points to further engagement with psychoanalysis. In *Testo-Junkie*, when discussing why the idea of a natural link between biological sex and gender is limited, Preciado writes:

Nous sommes face à une ontologie optique : le réel, c'est le visible. A l'opposé, l'idée selon laquelle il existe un véritable « sexe psychologique » distinct de celui qui a été assigné à la naissance, la conviction intime d'être un « homme » ou une « femme », relève d'un modèle de l'invisibilité radicale, du non représentable, paradigme proche de celui de l'inconscient freudien, c'est-à-dire d'une ontologie immatérielle.⁴⁵⁶

Preciado opposes what he refers to as the 'ontologie optique' used to determine identity based on biological realities. According to Preciado, this is in direct opposition to another view, which locates sexual identity in a non-palpable but determining part of us, akin to Freud's unconscious. In his 1915 paper 'The Unconscious', Freud writes: 'everything that is repressed must remain unconscious'⁴⁵⁷, and an interpretation of dreams is a practice used to assist in bringing these hidden aspects of the human psyche into conscious awareness. As he explains in 'The Interpretation of Dreams'(1900), 'dreams themselves are among the manifestations of this suppressed material[...]The interpretation of dreams is the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind.'⁴⁵⁸ Preciado's film depicts this representation of a 'magical kingdom', in which he believed as a child, and that Woolf's novel puts at the centre of its narrative, to display its beauty but also to reveal it as a construction and a fiction, a way of seeing amongst others.

Preciado's body of work can be seen and read as an attempt to define the self. However, this self is continually displaced through his 'autocobaye' practice, and *Orlando* stands as a prime example of a process of self-dislocation rather than self-definition taking place in his ongoing oeuvre. While Preciado first claims the story of Woolf's protagonist as his own, each time his physical presence manifests on the screen, it is never to embody the role of Orlando. Instead, he appears as producer and director, a surgeon in the operating theatre, and as a writer behind a desk. The telling of 'his' story and of the fictional journey in Woolf's text, is in fact entrusted to other bodies and voices: the twenty-six actors playing Orlando in the film. This displacement is reinforced through Preciado's use of voice-over throughout the film, using this cinematic device to construct himself as a disembodied figure within the film. On the surface, *Orlando* is a film about the physical transformation of its protagonist: Preciado's choice to use

⁴⁵⁶ Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 103.

⁴⁵⁷ Freud Sigmund, *General Psychological Theory: Papers on Metapsychology* (Collier Books, 1963), 116.

⁴⁵⁸ Freud Sigmund, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey (Penguin Books, 1976), 768-769.

his voice rather than his body to reconstitute an ‘image’ of his life is therefore noteworthy. This creative choice is especially striking in the moment where, as analysed earlier, Preciado narrates a memory from his past in which he catches a glimpse of his changing physical appearance in a window reflection. This hints at Preciado’s interest in engaging not only with bodies but with an immaterial realm, made up of voices and of spirits. While speaking, Preciado enters in a dialogue with the dead, and primarily with Virginia Woolf herself. At the start of the film, he directly addresses Woolf on familiar terms, framing his entire project as a letter to her: ‘j’ai décidé de t’écrire une lettre à toi qui avait écrit des milliers de lettres et qui en avait reçu des milliers d’autres’.⁴⁵⁹ Their dialogue crosses the frontier between the living and the dead as emphasised by Preciado in a later scene: ‘écrire ma biographie, Virginia, c’est aussi descendre avec Orlando dans l’obscurité, là où il n’y a ni portraits ni témoins, entrer dans le royaume des morts’.⁴⁶⁰ Preciado’s journey into the ‘royaume des morts’ recalls the figure of Orpheus from Greek Mythology. Orpheus descends into the kingdom of the dead and uses his talents for music and poetry to persuade the gods to allow his beloved Eurydice to return to the world of the living. In his reference to this myth, Preciado assumes his role as poet who walks between two worlds. Like in the Orpheus myth, Preciado’s kingdom of the dead is a space marked by unrepresentability: ‘là où il n’y a ni portraits ni témoins’.

The use of art to transcend the strictly biological and enter a realm of immateriality lies at the heart of Preciado’s artistic philosophy. In the first chapter, entitled ‘Ta mort’, of *Testo-Junkie*, he lays bare for readers all the dimensions that underpin his work. In this opening chapter, Preciado describes a video recording made on the day his friend, the French writer Guillaume Dustan, died. In this recording, Preciado does not enter into a dialogue with Dustan but rather lends his voice and body to his departed friend. Across several pages, the text provides a detailed, first-person narrative of the procedures Preciado performs on his own body to alter both its external appearance and its internal composition. As in his film *Orlando* and its scene depicting a book surgery, Preciado adopts a clinical approach to these operations and uses a video camera to document the transformation of his physical appearance. He begins by shaving his head and using the shavings to glue on a makeshift moustache. Preciado then removes his pubic hair and enhances his body with two dildos, one around his waist and the other held in his hand. Finally, Preciado applies testosterone gel to his body. In the video,

⁴⁵⁹ Preciado, *Orlando*, 00:02:08.

⁴⁶⁰ Preciado, *Orlando*, 00:40:09.

Preciado captures himself engaging in an act of auto-penetration. As Preciado writes, using text to construct a visual image of his bodily performance:

J'enfile les godes dans les ouvertures de la partie inférieure de mon corps. Premièrement, le noir réaliste, puis l'ergonomique, dans l'anus. C'est toujours plus facile pour moi de me mettre quelque chose dans l'anus, espace multidimensionnel, sans limites osseuses [...] Je tourne le dos à la caméra, genoux, pointe des pieds et tête appuyés au sol, et mes bras tendus derrière moi maintiennent les deux godes dans mes orifices.⁴⁶¹

The two appendices alter Preciado's body and transform it into a body that is at once penetrating and penetrated: a performance of his theory of bodies as 'pénétrables-pénétrants'.⁴⁶² In this moment of auto-penetration, Preciado's body becomes a site of multiple possibilities. He has created a monstrous body with an equal capacity to penetrate and be penetrated. In these movements, or exercises of 'gender reprogramming',⁴⁶³ as Preciado calls them, the body is masculinised through supplements (testosterone, facial hair, dildos); however the presence of female body parts is never denied: it remains integral to Preciado's project of conceiving a hybrid body that is both masculine and feminine, and neither one nor the other, all at once.

As Preciado describes his act of auto-penetration, he emphasises the evolving nature of his body's interior parts, explicitly focusing on the expansive capacity of his anus as an 'espace multidimensionnel, sans limites osseuses.' The focus on the anus as a multidimensional space underscores its expansive, limitless quality, which Preciado uses as a metaphor for the body's limitless ability for being in a state of change. Preciado's focus on this specific part of the body also recalls the surrealist poem 'Anus Solaire' by Georges Bataille. As in the work of the French writer and philosopher, writing explicitly about sex produces a philosophical reflection. Preciado knowingly references Bataille, notably in his 'drag' performance of Dustan, which reflects the opening lines of Bataille's poem: 'il est clair que le monde est purement parodique, c'est-à-dire que chaque chose qu'on regarde est la parodie d'une autre'.⁴⁶⁴ In addition, the description of his anus as 'sans limites osseuses' is similar to Bataille's image of the earth as a boundless surface covered by innumerable holes: 'le globe terrestre est couvert de volcans

⁴⁶¹ Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 19.

⁴⁶² Preciado, *Testo-Junkie*, 265.

⁴⁶³ 'Exercices de reprogrammation de genre', Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, 348.

⁴⁶⁴ Georges Bataille, *Premiers écrits 1922-1940: Histoire de l'oeil; L'anus solaire; Sacrifices; Articles* (Gallimard, 1992), 81

qui lui servent d'anus'.⁴⁶⁵ Borrowing from Bataille's imagery allows Preciado to give his own body its own planetary proportions, transforming his own orifice into a part of the earth's landscape: as Preciado's body changes shape, the world and everything on it transform with it.

As this chapter has shown, the contours and dimensions of Preciado's monstrous self are mapped out across his body of work through textual, visual and discursive fragments borrowed from others. These fragments are pieced together through an 'autocobaye' methodology, which collapses the boundary between creator and creation, subject and object, material and immaterial realms, self and other, and between the living and the dead. Preciado, by transcending the limits of his own body, does not simply perform a series of self-mythologising narratives. Rather, he produces across a heterogeneous body of work a collective, universalising story of becoming, one that imagines all bodies as part of an interconnected, cosmic whole.

⁴⁶⁵ Bataille, *Premiers écrits*, 85.

CONCLUSION

In Gustave Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary* (1856), the young doctor Charles Bovary, spurred on by his wife's desire to transcend the banality of their married life, and with the encouragement of the town's pharmacist, undertakes a surgical procedure. The patient is Hippolyte Tautain, a disabled stable boy affected by a club foot. Charles' clinical inexperience is no match for the complex operation needed, and his hubristic intervention proves detrimental to Tautain. Shortly after being operated on, the stable boy complains of severe pain as his foot quickly becomes gangrenous. A celebrated surgeon from Neufchâtel, Monsieur Canivet, is eventually summoned to rectify Bovary's botched surgery. Upon seeing Tautain's putrefying limb, the surgeon reacts with disdainful laughter, declaring that the leg must now be amputated as the only recourse for saving the boy's life. Canivet does not hesitate to mock Bovary's foolishness and vanity, proclaiming:

ce sont là des inventions de Paris ! Voilà les idées de ces messieurs de la Capitale ! c'est comme le strabisme, le chloroforme et la lithotritie, un tas de monstruosités que le gouvernement devrait défendre ! Mais on veut faire le malin, et l'on vous fourre des remèdes sans s'inquiéter des conséquences. Nous ne sommes pas si forts que cela nous autres : nous ne sommes pas des savants, des mirliflores, des jolis cœurs : nous sommes des praticiens, des guérisseurs, et nous n'imaginerions pas d'opérer quelqu'un qui se porte à merveille ! Redresser des pieds bots ! est-ce qu'on peut redresser les pieds bots ? c'est comme si l'on voulait par exemple rendre droit un bossu !⁴⁶⁶

In response to the medical atrocities committed by Bovary, Canivet condemns a larger community of self-proclaimed experts who ignore the limits of their knowledge in pursuit of renown and glory. He also voices a scathing indictment of modern medical practices and their compulsion to correct what they see as a 'tas de monstruosités', which need to be corrected and erased in the name of progress. Their treatment, Canivet argues, is not in the interest of patients' well-being but motivated by ideas that regulate what bodies should be. Canivet posits that one can have crossed eyes ('strabisme'), a hunched back ('bossu') and a club foot and 'se porte[r] à merveille', using an expression that means having perfect health while also borrowing from the language of fairy tales, the realm of the wondrous ('merveilleux').

The first two entries of Preciado's most recent work, *Dysphoria Mundi*, take up sentiments expressed by Flaubert's straight-talking Canivet. Together these passages provide

⁴⁶⁶ Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (Éditions Gallimard, 1972), 242.

a premise for Preciado's prosaic and poetic reflections on a world he defines as being in the grasp of an epistemological and ontological transmutation. Under the heading *Antécédents*, his first entry offers the short medical history of an unnamed individual diagnosed with gender dysphoria since adolescence.⁴⁶⁷ Preciado provides all the specifics of his treatment plan while giving out clues that establish a resemblance between the anonymous 'patient' and the writer himself: 'le patient est écrivain et philosophe, enseignant' with a 'intervention sur la mâchoire pour luxation génétique à 18 ans'.⁴⁶⁸ In the following passage, Preciado closes the gap between anonymity and self-writing by stating: 'il fallait que je me declare fou'.⁴⁶⁹ In order to be eligible for sex-change surgery, Preciado explains that he had to agree to a diagnosis of mental illness, the 'dysphoria' of the title. He interrogates the necessary pathologisation of his need for physical change, 'je voulais changer c'est tout'⁴⁷⁰; questioning a medical institution that fails to acknowledge the fiction that is 'l'antinomie entre [...] féminin et masculin'.⁴⁷¹ By engendering this psychiatric and pharmaceutical rectification of the 'mad' or 'dysphoric' body, the system effectively transforms ontological ambiguity into a state of madness. Yet, for Preciado, this so-called dysphoria is, like Canivet's 'tas de monstruosités', not a pathology but a natural state that has been with him always and which cannot be eradicated through medical intervention. Preciado speaks out against a medical institution that pathologises the physiological and psychological traits it endeavours to correct and cure.

The alternative vision of humanity that all three artists studied in this thesis is one in which humans are imperfect, unruly 'heaps of monstrosity'. Ducournau, Despentès and Preciado generate texts and films that function as hosting places for monsters that will not be rectified or controlled. Instead, their monsters are 'merveilles', wondrous creatures that show humanity in the best of light and transcend usual oppositions between the beautiful and the abject, the good and the bad, the non-human and the human, presented not as antinomies but as inseparable and intertwined.

Chapter 1 argued that Julia Ducournau's cinema cannot fit neatly into Creed's category of 'feminist New Wave cinema'⁴⁷². Ducournau does not entirely abandon the objectifying representation of female bodies that has become synonymous with Mulvey's canonical concept of the 'male gaze' in cinema. However, this objectification in Ducournau's cinema is not used

⁴⁶⁷ Preciado, *Dysphoria Mundi*, 13-14.

⁴⁶⁸ Preciado, *Dysphoria Mundi*, 13.

⁴⁶⁹ Preciado, *Dysphoria Mundi*, 15.

⁴⁷⁰ Preciado, *Dysphoria Mundi*, 15.

⁴⁷¹ Preciado, *Dysphoria Mundi*, 15.

⁴⁷² Creed, *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine*, 2.

to establish women as objects of viewing pleasure, but rather as a means to trivialize female bodies, transforming them into universal figures that stand for all human, and carnal, beings. This innovative approach allows Ducournau to explore monstrosity not as a state of human otherness but as a universal multiplicity of being. The innate hybridity of her monstrous figures, their embodiment of the human and animal, masculine and feminine, organic and mechanical, allows Ducournau to radically reinvent the family structure as an entity that holds an integral place in her filmography. The monster as a figure of multiplicity adopts several roles within the family at once, disrupting normative patterns of relationality. Ducournau's monstrous family supports an ultimately optimistic reimagining of humanity as united through its fundamental and inescapable need for relating to the other in the various forms that care and love can take.

Chapter 2 of the thesis explored sex and violence in Virginie Despentes' work through the aesthetic lens of the alternative punk movement and libertine philosophy, moving beyond a gendered reading of her body of work. This chapter also discussed how Despentes' destructive aesthetic eventually reaches a representational limit. In its aftermath, Despentes took on a new direction, making the text a space to host alternative communities in her *Vernon Subutex* trilogy. In Despentes' work, the heteronormative couple appears as a utilitarian entity where sexual labour is exchanged for shelter, and where its bond is contingent upon the rigid performance of gendered expectations: it is ultimately a model lacking in authenticity and genuine emotional connection. Instead, Despentes' monstrous couple is used as a philosophical tool for rethinking the relationality between human beings. The alternative relationality that Despentes envisions challenges the transactional model, revealing itself to be grounded in altruistic care for the other. The relational ethics of the monstrous couple serve as a foundation for the alternative social space that Despentes creates within her trilogy, a community in which shared pleasure and joy bring people together.

Chapter 3 of this thesis focused on Preciado's self-referential monster, a concept and figure deployed across a body of work weaved together from discursive fragments, media interventions and voices of others. Preciado approaches creation from simultaneously held positions, that of the scientist and lab rat, the 'autocobaye' methodology laid out in *Je suis un monstre qui vous parle* and *Testo-Junkie*. Preciado creates autonomous bodies of text and narratives that produce alternative fictions of the body to challenge fictions of sexual difference and visions of the body as an individualised and fixable entity. Preciado's monster is both self and other and his work functions as a philosophical terrain, a site where the discursive and the material are no longer held in opposition but woven into a single, hybrid mode of existence.

Across the texts, films, performances and discourses studied in this thesis, the monstrous is best revealed in moments of self-reflection. Just before Alexia gives birth in *Titane*, she catches her reflection in a full-length mirror. In her mirror-image, she sees herself naked, the broken skin of her pregnant stomach revealing her body's mechanical parts. Similarly, at the end of Desportes' *Vernon Subutex*, following a massacre reminiscent of the Bataclan attacks in Paris, Vernon becomes the sole survivor of this event and returns to the world of the living. Glancing at his reflection in a mirror, he finds himself peering at the scarred face of a man he no longer recognises. These same instances of self-reflection permeate Preciado's work, becoming most pronounced when he tells us about a memory of seeing his own 'decomposing' face in the reflection of a shop window. By offering up such moments of monstrous self-reflection, the artists in this study encourage us to hold up our own mirrors and to gaze at our own image, encouraging us to come face-to-face with our own monstrosity. They present the monster as a shared human face, arguing that the monstrous should be free to roam, to traverse our lives as a vital reminder of our shared humanity. When we embrace the 'monstrous thinking' of Ducournau, Desportes, and Preciado, we are able to see the world differently: we no longer see the monster as other but as ourselves. These moments of monstrous self-reflection hark back to the creature's monologue in Shelley's novel. When finally faced with his creator, the creature reflects on his own condition, declaring:

As I read, however, I applied much personally to my own feelings and condition. I found myself similar, yet at the same time strangely unlike the beings concerning whom I read, and to whose conversation I was a listener. [...] What did this mean? Who was I? What was I? When did I come? What was my destination? These questions continually recurred, but I was unable to solve them.⁴⁷³

⁴⁷³ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 125.

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APPENDIX 1

Beau Smith-Davies : Comment vous percevez votre travail de monteur et de quel côté de votre travail est-ce que vous préférez, le côté technique ou le côté créatif ?

Jean-Christophe Bouzy :

Alors pour moi, le monteur du film, c'est le premier spectateur du film. Enfin, étant donné que, je crois qu'il y a des monteurs qui vont sur les tournages, mais c'est rare. Moi, je n'y vais jamais parce que ça ne m'intéresse pas. Et c'est vrai qu'on est les premiers à voir le film en tant que, comment dire, sur un plan de dimensions. C'est-à-dire qu'on est vraiment les premiers spectateurs. Pour moi, le monteur, c'est d'avoir ça. Et ensuite, moi je dis souvent qu'on est là pour fabriquer du temps et du sens. C'est-à-dire qu'on va donner un carcan et des limites à la narration du film et du sens. Et c'est ça qu'on fait puisqu'on ne produit rien d'autre ; vu que les images sont déjà là, on a les images, on a le son. Donc voilà, nous, on crée le sens du film, et des fois le sens qui était prévu par le réalisateur ou la réalisatrice, ou des fois aussi, alors rarement, quelque chose de complètement différent, mais en tout cas, il y a d'autres choses qui émergent pendant le montage.

BSD : avec Julia Ducournau, est-ce que vous vous êtes rencontrés à l'école ? Parce que je sais qu'elle était à la Fémis. Est-ce que vous êtes rentrés à l'école, chez Canal ? Vous vous êtes rencontrés comment ?

JCB :

Oui, on voyait qui on était à l'école. Enfin, moi je l'avais remarquée parce qu'on la remarque, donc je voyais qui c'était, mais on n'était pas dans la même promotion. Donc on ne s'est jamais parlé, je crois, à l'école. Et c'est ensuite en sortant, quand elle a réalisé son premier court-métrage, *Junior*, là, c'est le producteur, qui est d'ailleurs le producteur aussi de *Titane*, qui s'appelle Jean-Christophe Raymond, qui lui a parlé de moi parce qu'à la Fémis, moi j'avais un peu une réputation de quelqu'un qui aimait bien les films de genre. Oui, les films d'horreur, en fait, on m'appelait, bon, de manière un peu péjorative, on m'appelait l'Américain, mais c'était parce que j'étais un peu le seul qui s'intéressait aux films [de ce genre]. Et du coup, je l'ai rencontrée comme ça, et on s'est rendu compte qu'on avait un peu les mêmes goûts, alors pas sur tout, mais quand même, on avait un peu la même approche du cinéma. Et puis on s'entend bien, on est très amis. Et on aimait bien le même magazine. Il y a un magazine en France qui s'appelle *Mad Movies*. C'est un magazine français, un peu comme *Rockyrama* ou des choses comme ça. Et c'est un peu là-dessus qu'on s'est entendu au début.

BSD :

D'accord, peut-être qu'à la Fémis, c'est plutôt tourné vers le cinéma d'auteur et non pas que le cinéma de genre, alors que, j'ai l'impression en tout cas, qu'il y a de plus en plus de cinéastes français qui jouent un peu avec les codes du cinéma de genre et qui les amènent et les font marier un peu avec le cinéma d'auteur aussi. Mais à l'époque, peut-être, quand vous étiez tous les deux à la Fémis, ce n'était pas encore à la mode ?

JCB :

Non. Après, l'école nous permet de faire ce qu'on veut. Mais c'est vrai qu'historiquement, la Fémis, c'est plutôt une école d'art, donc, plutôt une école tournée, en effet, vers le cinéma d'auteur plus que vers le cinéma de genre. Mais c'est vrai que vous avez raison. Maintenant, il y a de plus en plus de, en effet, de cinéastes qui essayent soit de faire du genre tout court soit, en effet, de marier un peu les deux ; film d'auteur et film de genre.

BSD :

Justement, j'ai regardé un entretien avec vous et la première assistante de caméra Charlotte Vitroly. Dans cet entretien, vous dites que :« Quand on met les titres des films de Ducournau ensemble, "*Junior, Mange, Grave, Titane*", cela fait une phrase ». Est-ce que vous pouvez en dire un peu plus ?

JCB :

En fait, c'est une blague ! C'est une blague qu'on a avec Julia parce qu'on a dit : c'est Junior mange grave titane. Oui, Junior *eats, heavily*, Titane. Et on voulait dire, le prochain film doit s'appeler avec des frites ou avec du ketchup, ou voilà. Et finalement, non.

BSD :

Donc, non, parce qu'il va y avoir un nouveau film ?

JCB :

On vient de le terminer la semaine dernière. Ils sont en train de monter le son, là.

BSD :

Wow, c'est génial ! J'imagine que vous voulez dire avec cette phrase, même si c'est une blague aussi, qu'on voit une sorte de continuité dans son cinéma. C'est vraiment une histoire qui commence au début et qui ne s'arrête pas, même s'il y a une transformation des personnages. C'est un peu cette idée que les personnages se cannibalisent et qu'ils deviennent autre chose. De ce fait, est-ce que vous pensez que son cinéma ou comment, en fait, a-t-il évolué, son cinéma, d'après vous, dès le début, jusqu'à maintenant ?

JCB :

Je pense que, dès le début, elle aborde un peu toujours les mêmes thématiques. Ensuite, je pense qu'elle s'affirme de plus en plus, c'est-à-dire qu'au début, bon après, le court-métrage

c'est un court-métrage, donc c'est vraiment un coup d'essai, un peu de stylistique. Mais ensuite, parce que *Mange, Mange*, c'est un téléfilm, donc c'est un peu une commande, mais bon, ça traite quand même un peu les sujets qui la concernent, mais c'est vrai que *Grave* était vraiment adossé au cinéma de genre. C'est-à-dire, c'est un film que je sais que les Américains ont beaucoup aimé, mais parce qu'il y a une ironie dramatique, c'est une végétarienne qui devient cannibale, donc il y a une arche. Voilà, enfin, tout est très finalement calibré. Enfin, c'est son film où on voit le plus qu'elle sait fabriquer le moteur d'un film. Enfin, c'est-à-dire que, l'exposition, l'élément déclencheur, l'histoire, l'histoire B, le machin, enfin tout est en place, le *midpoint*, enfin tous les actes, enfin tout, tout, vraiment tombe, après plus ou moins, mais c'est quand même très, très *by the rules*. Et ensuite, elle s'est affranchie de ça. Et en fait, moi j'ai un peu travaillé avec elle sur le scénario de *Titane*, parce qu'elle avait besoin de structurer un rêve, en fait, qu'elle avait fait sur quelqu'un qui accouchait de pièces de moteur. Et tout partait de là. Enfin, elle avait un peu des images comme ça dans la tête, et, elle a vraiment essayé, elle a fait le pari, elle voulait écrire très vite, et finalement, ça lui a quand même pris trois ans à écrire, et elle a fait le pari un peu de laisser libre cours. En fait, elle a voulu faire un film, à mon avis, plus musical d'un point de vue narratif, où, on est plus, d'ailleurs, [dans] un truc un peu sensoriel, c'est à dire s'appuyer sur des évocations, des images, pour construire un récit. C'est vraiment un récit plus du rêve, en fait, qu'elle a fait, avec ce film-là, mais elle garde quand même... Je trouve qu'elle essaye toujours... Elle fait très attention au fil narratif de ses films. La narration est très importante pour elle, le personnage, les conséquences de leurs actes. Elle dit souvent, quand on essaie de bouger les scènes un peu, elle dit : « non, ça, c'est trop *random* ». Elle fait très attention [au fil narratif], vraiment à l'enchaînement des actions par rapport aux personnages. Donc, même si elle évolue dans quelque chose de plus, on va dire... C'est comme la musique abstraite, concrète, enfin dans quelque chose de plus abstrait, elle garde quand même, parce que c'est sa formation aussi peut-être de scénariste, qui fait qu'elle... Je ne pense pas qu'elle ira dans le pur expérimental, peut-être un jour, mais elle fait toujours attention à garder une structure, même si la structure peut être un peu, comment dire, chancelante ou surprenante. Mais, par exemple dans *Titane*, parce que dans *Titane*, il y a un vraiment une césure dans le film au moment où on quitte (Agathe), Alexia, qui, elle, vient de se fracasser le nez contre le lavabo et qui se regarde dans le miroir. Et hop, on passe tout de suite à Vincent qui marche dans un couloir. Et ça, au début, ça, c'est vraiment quelque chose qu'on a fait à la fin à force de chercher vraiment le choc ; entre choquer [avec] les images, les personnages. Parce que normalement, on avait tout un moment où Alexia téléphonait, faisait semblant d'être quelqu'un, il disait « Ah, j'ai trouvé quelqu'un dans les toilettes. Je pense que c'est un garçon,

il a le nez cassé. Venez vite », après, elle [Alexia] était dans un bureau... Enfin tout le moment où le store se lève, avant ça, il y a toute une scène dans le bureau avec une femme qui essaie de lui faire parler, et il écrit son nom sur un bout de papier. Enfin, on amenait les choses de manière plus narrative, plus parce qu'on disait, bon, il faut qu'on explique comment son stratagème est dans la tête. Et après, on a dit mais non, en fait, on débranche la box internet et on la rebranche, il y a vraiment un *reboot* à ce moment-là dans le film, qui fait qu'on a ces deux visages qui se superposent et qui racontent en fait beaucoup plus ce que le film est, c'est-à-dire vraiment, tout d'un coup, on dit voilà, maintenant ça va être lui [Vincent] le personnage que vous allez suivre et vous devez l'accepter. Et on vous l'envoie dans la figure. On dit voilà, c'est comme ça.

BSD :

Oui, tout à fait !

JCB :

Mais ça a trait à la narration malgré tout, vu qu'on doit faire croire, on doit, en tout cas, faire en sorte que le spectateur accepte de *switcher* sur le personnage de Vincent, puisque c'est lui, en plus, qui transporte la charge émotionnelle du film aussi. Enfin, le spectateur s'identifie peut-être plus facilement à lui, quoique, je ne sais pas, parce qu'il a des problèmes un peu plus... ce n'est pas un tueur en série, donc on se dit bon...

BSD :

Puisque vous avez parlé de l'aspect un peu littéraire du parcours de Ducournau, de sa formation en tant que scénariste, et j'ai aussi lu, quelque part, qu'elle avait fait une école de préparation en lettres modernes...

JCB :

Kâgne, hypokhâne ou je ne sais plus ce qu'elle a fait, mais oui.

BSD :

De ce fait, je voulais vous demander ; quand vous faites les montages, est-ce qu'il y a des références à des textes littéraires sur lesquels vous tirez de l'inspiration? Ou est-ce que cela reste dans le monde du cinéma ?

JCB :

Non, c'est surtout cinématographique, et encore... Après, il y a des influences qui sont plus ou moins digérées par elle, notamment Cronenberg. Voilà, enfin, c'est clairement son idole. Mais après, sur des choses plus précises, là, la seule scène où on s'est inspiré, en tout cas, elle, et puis nous après, dans le montage d'un film, c'est le moment dans *Grave* où les étudiants prennent du sang sur la tête, et c'était *Carrie*.

BSD :

OK.

JCB :

Clairement, on a dit, parce qu'en fait c'était un plan, on n'avait que deux plans, deux plans larges, et on a zoomé dans l'image pour isoler un peu des étudiants et répéter le sang enfin. Et c'est un peu comme dans *Carrie*, au moment où le seau tombe. Voilà, et c'est un peu ça. On a réfléchi un peu, on s'est dit bon, parce que ce n'était pas suffisant sinon. Mais sinon, on parle de films ensemble, beaucoup de films qu'on regarde, mais on est rarement dans la littérature, non, dans leur référence. Alors, la littérature, pourtant, on lit tous les deux pas mal, mais ce n'est jamais vraiment une référence, en tout cas, peut-être une influence, mais je ne sais pas.

BSD :

Dans *Grave*, je vois des références au film de Pasolini *Salò*, et cela m'a fait penser tout de suite à Sade et Justine, et les deux sœurs libertines, Justine et Juliette...

JCB :

Oui, bien sûr. Justine revient en plus dans *Titane*, et là, quand on montait *Alpha*, on avait une assistante monteuse qui s'appelait Justine, et du coup on faisait des blagues avec ça. Oui, il y a Sade évidemment, et c'est vrai, et j'avais oublié parce que ça fait presque dix ans maintenant, mais c'est vrai que la séquence des gens qui marchent à quatre pattes. En effet, c'est *Salò*, il y a forcément la référence à ça.

BSD :

Il y a une scène dans *Grave* dont je voulais vous parler. C'est la scène où Justine regarde Adrien jouer au foot. Et ce qui m'intéresse surtout, c'est le montage qui découpe les plans. On va voir la tête de Justine qui regarde Adrien. Et j'ai eu l'impression que cette façon que vous l'avez montée, ça a pour but d'entrecroiser le regard du cinéaste et le regard du personnage principal, Justine, et ce regard hybride qui focalise sur les liquides corporels, le sang, la salive, la sueur. Est-ce que c'est une scène sur laquelle vous avez dû beaucoup travailler ? Est-ce que c'est une scène dont vous en souvenez beaucoup ?

JCB :

Si, mais je pense que vous avez, comment dire, soulevé quelque chose de pertinent parce que c'est une scène sur laquelle on a en effet pas mal travaillé. Mais je ne pense pas qu'on avait théorisé vraiment la chose. Comme vous dites, parce que souvent avec Julia, on dit, le montage c'est aussi de l'oreille, il faut que ça fonctionne. Et souvent le montage... monter de manière à, enfin, comment dire, monter pour servir un discours... souvent, c'est, voilà. Enfin, je pense que c'est après qu'on explique ce qu'on a fait. En gros, et ce que vous dites, la séparation entre les

personnages, le regard du personnage, le regard du metteur en scène. Moi, tout ce dont je me souviens, c'est qu'en effet, on a passé beaucoup de temps et qu'on était vraiment, je m'en souviens parce qu'on s'était un peu engueulés, enfin pendant la scène, parce qu'elle me disait: « mais non, il ne faut pas le monter comme une vraie partie de foot, moi, je m'en fous du foot ce que je veux c'est voir ça, voir ça », et, j'ai dit: « oui, d'accord... Mais bon, il faut quand même que ça fonctionne ». Puis, on avait mis Vivaldi, je crois, dessus, alors je ne sais plus si c'est ça encore, mais je crois. On avait mis *L'été [de Vivaldi]*, je crois. Enfin bref, on était revenu dessus, on avait vraiment passé du temps et c'était un peu conflictuel. Et je pense que c'était parce qu'elle voulait réussir sans doute. Alors après, c'est elle qui pourra le dire clairement, et je pense qu'elle sera d'accord avec vous, mais elle voulait en tout cas arriver à quelque chose qui dépasse le simple, en effet, champ-contrechamp, entre le personnage et l'objet regardé, et tout ce truc autour du sang, des corps en sueur. Après, il y a ce truc de désir, et, en même temps, évidemment de faim. Enfin bon, tout ça, c'est là. Mais je pense qu'en effet, si c'est juste faire ça, ce n'est pas si compliqué à faire en montage de juste faire ressentir le désir. Donc je pense que, si ça a pris autant de temps, c'est qu'il y avait autre chose à l'œuvre derrière. Et c'est tout à fait possible que ce soit ce que vous dites. Mais je ne peux pas le confirmer absolument...

BSD :

Non, bien sûr.

JCB :

Mais, oui, en tout cas, c'est une scène qui a pris du temps, oui.

BSD :

Parce qu'on pourrait, par exemple, une lecture typique pourrait être, par exemple, dans cette scène, Ducournau veut montrer que, par exemple, le désir ou le regard féminin communique un désir un peu monstrueux de la sexualité féminine, qui est quelque chose qu'on ne montre pas souvent, mais, en même temps, elle n'est pas tout à fait humaine, elle n'est pas tout à fait femme dans cette scène-là, elle est aussi un peu cannibale, donc elle est un peu entre bête et humaine à ce moment-là. Donc, c'était un peu cette idée à laquelle je voulais revenir. Donc merci d'avoir parlé de cet aspect-là. Et juste pour revenir sur le travail dans *Titane*, est-ce que vous avez des exemples de *Titane*, du travail sensoriel que vous avez fait, des scènes en particulier ?

JCB :

Ce n'est pas tant une histoire de scène, mais une histoire de globalité du film. C'est-à-dire que vu que c'est... Il y a beaucoup de choses insensées qui arrivent dans ce film. Enfin, moi, je sais que j'avais montré ce film-là à ma copine en cours de montage et elle avait dit « Oh là là, c'est

lourd, enfin c'est long, c'est, on n'accroche pas... ». Et c'est vrai que plus encore que sur d'autres films, où on va se baser sur des notions vraiment de pure narration, de dire on n'a pas besoin de cette scène parce que on n'en a pas besoin narrativement, là c'était vraiment trouver presque des moyens de garder l'attention du spectateur et de le lâcher en cours de route, et de le reprendre, mais vraiment comme si c'était un orchestre, pas un orchestre, comme si c'était vraiment un morceau de musique. Parce qu'après, des scènes vraiment en tant que tel... si, il y a la fin parce qu'on avait mélangé, il y a *La Passion Selon Saint-Mathieu* à la fin qui arrive quand elle accouche de Bach. Et voilà, c'est une scène parce qu'on l'avait collée dessus, parce que, je crois que c'était moi qui l'avais mise pendant le travail de l'ours, enfin du premier montage, où je monte tout seul, moi, au début, pendant 6 semaines. Et je fais un premier montage toujours et je mets de la musique, parce que je sais ce qu'elle aime bien comme musique et puis on aime un peu les mêmes choses. Bref, et donc à la fin, cette scène-là était tellement *what the fuck* comme on dit, que je me suis dit, mais qu'est-ce que ? J'adore Bach et du coup, je me dis, tiens, on va mettre le début de *La Passion Selon Saint-Mathieu*, qui est un morceau qui a rarement été utilisé au cinéma, à part Pasolini, je crois. Mais bon, voilà, et ça a marché. Je disais, avec Bach au moins, on va quelque part. Et c'est vrai que là, c'est typiquement une scène où on a toujours eu ce morceau-là, on a essayé de demander au compositeur de faire autre chose, mais bon, on s'est dit ça va être compliqué de faire mieux que Bach. Et quand on s'est retrouvés à la détection, c'est une étape de fabrication du film où on écoute le film pour entendre les dialogues, et [pour] dire ah ça, il faut le refaire en post synchro, et du coup, on enlève la musique. Et on a vu cette scène-là pour la première fois, depuis des mois, sans musique, et on était, enfin, il manquait vraiment quelque chose, c'est-à-dire que le tout avait été monté, toute cette acmé, cette espèce de, voilà, d'apothéose avait été montée sur la musique complètement. Enfin, si on enlevait la musique... c'est peut-être le truc, le côté le plus sensoriel, un peu du film, parce que tout d'un coup, on est à la fin, on doit accepter, on doit faire accepter le spectateur, et ça passe aussi par la chorégraphie, la musique. Donc c'est un peu... C'était peut-être au niveau des scènes, peut-être celle qui s'approche le plus de ça, mais encore une fois... Bon, après c'est du cinéma, donc c'est de la musique, en tout cas, voilà, enfin c'était ça, c'était assez marquant.

BSD :

Oui, je vois ce que vous voulez dire dans le sens, où, par exemple, cette scène, à la fin, est un peu triste, mais, en même temps, on ne ressent pas forcément la tristesse à la fin grâce à la musique, et qu'on ressent peut-être une forme de joie, ce qui est peut-être mal placé dans ce moment-là, et je pense que ça arrive aussi à un autre moment, lorsque Vincent prend Alexia

sur son épaule, et, on lit sur son visage qu'elle a super mal parce qu'elle est enceinte et qu'elle a le ventre écrasé contre l'épaule de Vincent, alors que, derrière, on a cette musique hyper festive et on ressent une espèce de joie, mais en même temps, on ressent sa douleur. Et je pense que c'est ce que ça apporte la musique dans ces moments-là. Mais bon, c'est subjectif...

JCB :

Oui, bien sûr, mais bon, ça en fait partie. Mais après, sur la fin, il y a aussi une notion de sacré. Parce que Julia est quelqu'un qui est très attaché à ça aussi, la mythologie et le sacré, et tout ça. Et donc, c'est vrai que, bon, il y a évidemment, enfin, c'est la naissance, le Messie, enfin, cet espèce d'homme nouveau ou de femme. Enfin, voilà. Donc il y a tout ça un peu là-dedans, donc il faut sacraliser aussi le moment, et la musique sert aussi à ça.

BSD :

J'imagine que vous avez aussi travaillé avec des réalisateurs ainsi que des réalisatrices. Donc, quand vous faites le montage d'un film, est-ce que vous faites une distinction entre un regard féminin et un regard masculin au moment du montage ?

JCB :

C'est une bonne question. Je ne sais pas. En fait, c'est vraiment avant tout, toujours une question de personnalité, en fait, parce que c'est un film, c'est vraiment une personnalité. Après, Julia, elle est très consciente, c'est quelqu'un qui est très instinctif et en même temps qui est très analytique, donc, qui est capable d'analyser le discours beaucoup. Donc, elle a un discours féministe, très clairement, mais en même temps, elle se refuse à être perçue comme une réalisatrice. Enfin, c'est quelque chose avec lequel elle est très à l'aise parce qu'elle va vraiment avoir une voix féminine et féministe dans son discours, et parce que c'est une femme, et c'est quelque chose sur lequel, je pense, elle réfléchit beaucoup et elle travaille beaucoup. Mais, par contre, paradoxalement, je sais qu'elle refuse d'être cataloguée en tant que réalisatrice femme. Pour elle, être réalisatrice, réalisateur, elle s'en fout. Donc voilà, et, après, moi, personnellement, est-ce que je vois une différence ? Sans doute, mais je ne pourrais pas vous dire vraiment en quoi, mis à part une relation... Parce qu'en montage, on a une relation très privilégiée avec le réalisateur. Oui, je viens encore de passer deux mois vraiment entiers, trois même, avec elle. Et je l'aime beaucoup, mais c'est quelqu'un de... Elle prend beaucoup de place et elle est très, voilà, très intense. Enfin, je sais que je ne me comporterais peut-être pas avec elle comme avec un homme ou avec, voilà, mais au niveau du travail, à proprement parler, non, je ne crois pas. Je pense, qu'encore une fois, c'est vraiment une question de personnalité et ça dépend vraiment du réalisateur, mais c'est tout, je crois.

BSD :

Et, juste pour revenir un peu sur ce sujet-là, je ne sais pas si ça a peut-être un lien, mais est-ce que vous avez une idée de quel type de spectateur ou quel public vous attendez à venir voir le film ? Ou, enfin, est-ce que c'est quelque chose sur lequel vous réfléchissez, qui va venir voir, qui va peut-être apprécier ce film ?

JCB :

Non. Après, je sais qu'elle a une *fanbase* vraiment de gens très fans, des gens qui ne l'aiment pas du tout aussi. Donc, elle est très clivante. Mais après, un public cible, non, je ne crois pas. Par contre, je ne sais pas si je suis censé le dire d'ailleurs, mais, je sais que, par exemple, *Titane*, c'est un film pour son père. Et je sais que *Alpha*, le dernier, c'est un film pour sa mère. Enfin, je sais qu'en tout cas, quand elle fait un film, je pense qu'elle le fait pour une personne, pas pour un public, mais pour une personne, pour dire quelque chose à quelqu'un. Et je pense qu'avec *Titane*, elle a voulu dire quelque chose à son père, et je sais que le dernier *Alpha*, elle dit quelque chose à sa mère, donc c'est peut-être le seul cœur de cible qu'elle a, personnellement...

BSD :

Oui, ok, merci. Que pensez-vous de ce que l'esthétique *gore* ou *body horror* apporte aux films de Ducournau ?

JCB :

Ça, elle pourrait mieux vous répondre que moi, mais moi, personnellement, c'est vraiment un sous-genre du genre horreur quoi qu'elle a abordé à cause de Cronenberg. Et dans le dernier, d'ailleurs, c'est encore un peu présent, mais moins. Mais c'est toujours là, donc c'est quelque chose. Mais je pense, c'est, après, c'est dû aussi à ses deux parents qui sont médecins. Je crois que son père est dermato, enfin dermatologue, donc elle a vraiment quelque chose, un lien à ça qui est presque quelque chose qui est de l'ordre de la fascination. Après, est ce qu'il y a un discours relatif à ça ? C'est ce qu'elle avait dit peut-être quand elle avait reçu sa *Palme d'or* à Cannes, elle avait dit : « laissez entrer les monstres ». Voilà. Donc, c'est presque une vision de l'altérité. Voilà, c'est un point de vue là-dessus, et l'altérité monstrueuse, forcément, vu qu'on est dans le genre, donc on pousse la chose toujours plus loin. Donc c'est du *body*, mais horreur, donc voilà, elle se sert un peu de ça pour parler de l'altérité, je pense...

BSD :

Ou ça a un rapport peut-être avec la chair et pas le corps, forcément, peut-être un peu le corps fragmenté aussi avec cette fascination, avec la chair, comme ça, pourrait être des associés avec le sujet ou le oui, c'est juste une réflexion que je fais là-dessus.

JCB :

C'est possible. Non, parce qu'elle aime bien faire des gros plans aussi. Enfin, là, dans le dernier, il y a, on ouvre sur un gros plan, enfin, c'est vraiment de la peau. Enfin, voilà. Donc elle a ce rapport alors, peut-être, en effet, désolidariser le corps du personnel, ça, mais ça, je sais que même elle l'explique, bon après elle aime bien expliquer ces choses-là. Je crois qu'il y a des entretiens où elle en parle, mais je sais qu'en montage, en tout cas, nous, on est encore une fois, on est toujours sur le... encore une fois, on fabrique du temps et on fabrique du sens. Mais après, on est vraiment sur le côté cinétique : il faut que ça fonctionne, il faut que ça marche. Enfin, c'est ce qu'on appelle le rythme, mais bon, ça englobe énormément de choses, donc ça va être la progression des personnages, ça va être donc de la musique, c'est toujours un va-et-vient entre le scénario et la musique en fait. Mais la musique, pas la musique, musique, mais la musique du film.

BSD :

C'est-à-dire de la poésie, enfin, en quelque sorte.

JCB:

Voilà, c'est ça. Il faut que ça ait du sens, mais lequel ? Il est là. Donc on dit, on ne fait pas n'importe quoi, c'est la forme d'abord et le discours en sous. Mais c'est un peu ça. Enfin, elle-même le dit, en tout cas, en montage.

BSD:

Et, je pense que ça, on le ressent aussi en tant que spectateur devant les films de Ducournau, c'est qu'il y a aussi cet aspect de vouloir aussi un peu plaire aux spectateurs, dans le sens où, si on pouvait comparer, par exemple, un film comme *The Substance* de Coralie Fargeat, où on est tellement saturé par l'aspect *body horror*, qu'on ne veut plus être là, dans ce sens-là. Alors, qu'avec les films de Ducournau, on est un peu séduit par le film et on est un peu séduit par l'aspect qui est vraiment la matérialité du corps, le fait que c'est encore vivant. On voit le sang, on voit la sueur, on voit la transpiration et on a ce rapport un peu corporel avec le film, avec l'image, alors que dans d'autres films de *body horror*, on pourrait même ressentir un rejet de l'image plutôt que de vouloir faire partie de ce monde-là.

C'est un peu la fin de ce que je voulais vous demander...

Je voulais peut-être revenir juste de façon plus générale sur les tendances en ce moment dans le cinéma français. On en a parlé un peu déjà d'autres cinéastes de votre génération qui mélangent cinéma d'auteur et cinéma de genre. Et peut-on parler d'une nouvelle *nouvelle vague* dans le cinéma français ?

JCB :

Je ne pense pas, parce que la Nouvelle Vague, c'était vraiment un groupe de personnes qui venaient tous du même endroit, à peu près, qui étaient *les Cahiers du cinéma*, et il y avait une volonté, vraiment, de casser un peu les codes du cinéma classique français. Enfin, c'était vraiment une révolution presque consciente à plein de niveaux, et, que moi, d'ailleurs, je ne suis pas un fan de la *Nouvelle Vague*, je ne suis pas spécialement attaché à la *Nouvelle Vague*, mais en tout cas, il y avait une vraie volonté politique, presque. Là, maintenant, oui, en fait, c'est peut-être, la digestion du cinéma, je pense, américain, mais comme la *Nouvelle Vague*, c'était [le mouvement] très influencé par le cinéma américain de l'époque, et je pense que, s'il y a une similitude, c'est plus celle-là. C'est-à-dire, comment est-ce qu'on intègre le cinéma de l'empire américain, qui est le cinéma dominant, et que, du coup, en tout cas occidental, et comment est-ce qu'on arrive à régurgiter ce cinéma... je pense qu'il y a une relation. Il y a toujours une relation à l'Amérique dans le cinéma français... Enfin, j'ai l'impression qu'il y a toujours eu un va-et-vient. Et j'ai l'impression que c'est *La Nouvelle Vague*, même après des réalisateurs comme Jean-Jacques Beineix ou Luc Besson, en fait, des films typiquement français, il y en a, pour moi Bertrand Blier, Maurice Pialat, voilà enfin qui sont des gens vraiment qui sont dans une démarche d'auteur, mais qui n'est pas une démarche d'auteur politique. Enfin, il y a vraiment quelque chose, pour moi, de typiquement français là-dedans. Mais après, dans cette nouvelle *Nouvelle Vague*, là, il n'y a pas tant d'exemples. Enfin, c'est vrai qu'au CNC, qui est le Centre National de la Cinématographie, ils ont créé... En France, on aime bien créer des groupes de discussion pour financer des projets.... Enfin, et, c'est vrai qu'ils ont créé ces dernières années, d'ailleurs avec Julia, des sections dévolues au genre par exemple. J'ai l'impression que c'est plus des cas isolés plutôt qu'un vrai mouvement.

BSD :

OK, parce que moi j'avais pensé un peu à la science-fiction et le fantastique. Par exemple, j'ai pensé à ce film de Thomas Cailly, *Le règne animal*, qui est aussi issu de la Fémis... En fait, j'essaie aussi de démontrer en quelque sorte que Julia Ducournau fait du cinéma français. Et j'essaie quand même de la placer en quelque sorte dans une tradition française. Et du coup, je voulais faire le lien avec la *Nouvelle Vague* comme une sorte de rupture, peut-être avec un cinéma du passé ou d'avant, et cette idée d'une nouvelle forme de cinéma. Parce que je trouve que c'est quand même assez innovateur sa façon de faire du cinéma... C'est peut-être novateur parce qu'elle s'est inspirée des auteurs comme Cronenberg ou de l'Amérique du Nord...

JCB :

Non, mais en tout cas, il y a toujours, je pense, ce rapport à l'Empire, qui sont les États-Unis. Parce qu'encore une fois, vu que même la *Nouvelle Vague* vénérât des réalisateurs comme

Howard Hawks, comme John Ford, comme leurs plus grandes idoles, étaient des cinéastes américains. Et il y a peut-être cette manière d'avoir... et en même temps, quand on voit les films de la *Nouvelle Vague*, on ne se dit jamais qu'on est devant un film américain. Donc c'est juste une manière de voir récupérer le rôle, et d'avoir réinterprété le rôle du réalisateur comme auteur d'un film. C'était ça, vraiment, l'idée de *la Nouvelle Vague*, c'était de dire le vrai auteur d'un film, c'est le réalisateur, alors qu'aux États-Unis, eux, ils s'en foutent complètement. Et peut-être que le fait d'injecter, parce que Julia, je pense que c'est une des seules vraiment qui fait des films, et notamment le dernier là, des films d'auteurs qui sont très personnels et, en même temps, qui utilisent le genre de cette manière. C'est pour ça que je ne sais pas si ça peut être généralisé parce que c'est tellement... On est dans une approche tellement personnelle. Mais ça rend sans doute compte... Vous avez raison avec Thomas Caillet, il y a des cinéastes qui essaient de s'approcher de ça. Mais elle, a vraiment quelque chose de très particulier avec ça, enfin de très personnel et très audacieux. Enfin, elle fait des films qui ressemblent à...

BSD:

À personne d'autre en fait...

JCB:

Non.

BSD:

Merci beaucoup pour tout le temps que vous avez pris à répondre à mes questions.

Fin