

AFFECT AND NEW FRENCH EXTREMITY: AESTHETICS
OF TRAUMATIC MEMORY

by

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This thesis hopes to highlight how a particular film phenomenon in early twenty-first century France demonstrates the concepts of traumatic affect eloquently through its aesthetic and formal tendencies. Commonly known as New French Extremity, this phenomenon touched on transgressive subjects in extreme and often viscerally challenging ways. This work into New French Extremity hopes to bring about a broader understanding of how art communicates traumatic memory through formal elements of storytelling. Ultimately this research seeks to better understand how bodily experience is affectively contagious and how cinema facilitates this communication through formal and aesthetic means.

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Introduction

Staring at my computer screen, my legs shaking and my fingers hovering restlessly over the letters that fail to convey my direct experience, I attempt to describe my findings on the brain's ability to encode traumatic memory within the body. All academic and socio-cultural disciplines engage with these concepts of memory and somatic experience but I will limit my studies to the familiar realm of art and filmmaking.

Precisely at the conjunction of experience and storytelling, filmmaking is an immersive means that can relay and exhibit infinitely complex layers of affective information. Using elements of sound, image composition, performance, language, editing, affective tone, etc, filmmaking expands upon human experience and transcends its spectator's mundanity.

Perhaps most difficult to discuss and dissect in a critical context yet most direct to spectators' experiences is affective, embodied memory. Affect is understood as something that presupposes and composes emotion. It is often conceptualized as a quantity or an intensity that which emotion and experience are built upon. Fundamental obstacles like subjectivity, humanist understandings of cultural specificity, and the limitations of language render any endeavor into this subject nearly impossible to properly iterate through the accepted language of academia. Yet it is at once a highly complex philosophical concept while simultaneously a study of the incredibly banal body.

Thus, my attempt to study such an expansive concept has brought me to a particularly familiar place. Growing up in a French American family I was exposed to

French filmmakers early on in my life. My critical knowledge of these works expanded only slightly until my enrollment in college, where the study of film became a possibility. The culmination of my studies has brought me back to my first experiences with film.

The subject of my thesis thus became a collection of subversive art films in the early twenty-first century in France referred to as New French Extremity. This phenomenon loosely connects the works of twenty or so filmmakers that rose to prominence in the international art and commercial film world through their transgressive and often viscerally repulsive storytelling means.

Literature on traumatic memory and its association to somatic experience has grown in prominent scientific and literary circles since the beginning of the twenty-first century. The aesthetics of New French Extremity films merit being known as eloquent representations of embodied memory, and therefore I will unpack them through embodied cognition as well as phenomenological theory.

With the collective help of far greater minds before me, I hope to reconcile how filmmakers communicate and engage with the mechanisms of traumatic affective memory through phenomenology. Using literature that ranges from a variety of academic and scientific spheres including but not limited to neuroscience, critical theory, and social psychology, I attempt to elaborate on how New French Extremity engages with memory and somatic experience.

“Cinema has a body and cinematic experience is embodied”¹

The application of affect to literature and other media has grown increasingly relevant amidst the rise of immersive technologies. Psychology and neuroscience have grown alongside such inquiries into subjective bodily experiences. The correlation between bodily experience and memory has thus become a significant source of studies within a wide array of disciplines and its applications can be felt throughout a multitude of academic fields including liberal arts. The conjunction of affect theory and film is no novelty to the critical field, yet its applications remain broadly underdeveloped in relation to somatic memory and trauma.

The work done on affect within the critical sphere has opened up a variety of avenues and applications to our engagement with art. Establishing what exactly affect is and how it is fundamental to our experience of form is a critical first step in this research. Brian Massumi, a key theorist in affect describes this term as a nonconscious experience of intensity (Shouse 1). What differentiates affect from feeling and emotions is its abstract nature as something that presupposes and is “always prior to and/or outside our consciousness” (Shouse 2). Affect is thus not definable by language as emotions and feelings often are because it is the foundation of such manifestations. It is thus best seen as an “intensity”, something that determines the “(quantity) of a feeling (quality) as well as the background intensity of our everyday lives” (Shouse). Often escaping our conscious experience, affect consists of the very material from which our experience is shaped.

1 Atkinson, Meera, et al. “Film, Trauma, and the Enunciative Present.” *Traumatic Affect*, Cambridge Scholars Publ., Newcastle upon Tyne, 2013, pp. 80–102. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.libproxy.uoregon.edu/lib/uoregon/detail.action?docID=1477506>.

Cinema as a medium possesses the formal and aesthetic means to communicate complex affective relationships between characters, situations, and themes. It, therefore, becomes the ideal medium for the study of affective trauma and how it is transmitted through those means. Patterns in the way that New French Extremity films communicate these subtleties have led this research to focus predominantly on traumatic affective memory. Embodied or affective memory is defined as “an embodied model of the original event through which people relive the same visual, kinesthetic, spatial, and affect information of a given past experience” (Iani, F). A traumatic event is understood to be “A traumatic event is a shocking, scary, or dangerous experience that can affect someone emotionally and physically” (National Institute of Mental Health). New French Extremity films touch upon a multitude of shocking and transgressive subjects that confront trauma in notoriously visceral and affectively provocative ways.

Ultimately the way the body remembers trauma and the way it communicates those memories are tied to film as a medium because it showcases how this encoding and dissemination occurs.

Affect and Form

The wellness of a community relies heavily on the affective state of its members and how they relate to one another. Although dominant Western paradigms understand human individuals as self-contained entities, this model of human biopsychology neglects the subtle affective cohesion that develops within social groups.

To expand this concept the social action of engaging with film considers and complicates this diffusion of affect by incorporating form alongside social behavior. As explained by Teresa Brennan, author of *The Transmission of Affect*, images elicit

affective diffusion amongst social groups and can move said social groups in particular ways. Brennan explains “transmission through physical vibration of the image is simultaneously the transmission of a social thing; the social and physical transmission of the image are one and the same process” (71). The process of biosocpsychoial communication is directly translated into the medium of film through images and their transformation as affective information. Brennan explains this phenomenon further claiming “sights and sounds are physical matters in themselves, carriers of social matters, social in origin but physical in their effects” (71). Thus the transmission of social information amongst groups is understood to function through images just as within social contexts. Brennan cites early human psychological experiments where elevations in testosterone are seen when images of tense and aggressive faces are shown. The display of an affectively aggressive and angered individual through the image triggered a similar social phenomenon among the participants.

The study of affect as translated through formal and aesthetics means specifically within film has also been conducive to a broader understanding of filmic experience. The attention to affective communication through formal film elements is crucial to the broader understanding of film as a biosocial concept. Particularly relevant for this research is the study of disgust and its formal manifestation within film. Critic Eugenie Brinkema elaborates on the nature of disgust within film explaining the coupling of fear and disgust claiming “the intention of fear is toward ‘the existential situation [*Daseinslage*] which confronts us,’ while the intention of disgust is toward ‘the features of the object, towards a *type of so-being* [*Soseinsart*]” (Brinkema 161). While Brennan displays the physical as communicative of the social through the image,

Brinkema focuses on the features as an elicitor of emotion through the physical. Brinkema discusses how inseparable the physical and the manifestation of aversive emotion are by claiming that while disgust is “the most immediate and visceral of the affects”(163), it ultimately “requires an act of reading” (163). Therefore, Brinkema argues against separating form from affect because emotion is rooted within the scrutiny of the physical.

Most of Brinkema’s work argues for the inextricable nature of form and affect where one can read form while still doing justice to affect. The formal study of film in conjunction with critical affect theory best operates through the reconciliation of form and affect as Brinkema sees it. Brennan’s understanding of the social and psychological impact of collective affective experiences incorporates the possibility of affective transmission amongst groups and through formal elements like images. These two critical and psychological texts serve as the foundation for studying affect in film through formal elements. Yet affect remains a broad term applicable and malleable for a variety of disciplines and purposes. The focus of this research is centered around affective memory and its formal manifestations in film thus expounding upon trauma studies and embodied memory alongside the broader concepts of affect.

Storytelling and Trauma

The world of storytelling has always had a particular fascination with the retelling of traumatic stories. Contemporary talk therapy often approaches the treatment of clients with the ultimate goal of healing through the recounting of traumatic life events. Many critics of this modality highlight the limitations of language when attempting to relay and reconnect with traumatic encoded memory. Critic Anne

Rutherford elaborates upon the nuances of retelling and re-experiencing traumatic incidents in her essay *Film, Trauma, and The Enunciative Present*.

One way to understand the limitation of language in the communication of trauma is the lack of conceptual and somatic vocabulary to recount the depth of experience. Rutherford claims:

“To try to describe this encounter with one’s own annihilation is to come up against the limitations of our conceptual vocabulary in thinking about who and what we are to start with. We could try to describe this as facing an existential abyss, but the existential is a philosophical concept that in most articulations does not encompass the fully somatic depth of experience”(Atkinson 81).

The recollection and retelling of somatic experiences are adjacent to but not quite the dilemmas of existentialism. When the body has felt vulnerable at the behest of a daunting experience, language nearly always fails to reconcile the depth of that circumstance.

Rutherford conceptualizes the relationship between language and experience as an asymptote. The two concepts are perhaps proximate enough to recount an outline of an occurrence and its impact but never quite capable of reaching the actual sensorial depth of the experience itself. Rutherford also warns of mistaking the recital of atrocious acts as the recounting of trauma and speaks upon their fundamental difference. She claims that while “atrociousness is an act; trauma is an experience” (Atkinson 85), whereas “acts may be described, the experience of trauma may be unshareable even when communicated” (Atkinson 85).

So then does trauma become inaccessible and does the transmission of the traumatic story become futile and incongruent to human perceptions of reality? This poses a great challenge to psychologists and trauma experts who argue that the retelling of traumatic tales can offer unmatched sources of solace and empowerment for the traumatized. Rutherford would argue that the recounting of traumatic stories is not made intransmissible but that language on its own fails to encompass the aforementioned “depth somatic of experience”. Instead, Rutherford calls for critical engagement with art to be done through bodily experience. When describing the experience of an audience exposed to the retelling of traumatic events in a documentary she notes:

“The gulf between the spoken word and the embodied memory has a palpable presence here. The affective contagion that passes across that gap and across the screen to the viewer happens not through the words but through the silences that inhabit them and through the nonverbal registers of voice, eye, and gesture” (Atkinson 88).

Ultimately the unspeakability of trauma and the schism it creates between storyteller and audience is transcended by the omission of language in favor of attention to bodily sensorial experience.

This transmissibility of trauma is not exclusive to documentary filmmaking and instead exists within both narrative and nonfiction storytelling through the very means Brinkema deemed essential in affective communication: form. Here Rutherford refers to Bennet who derives her critical approach from Deleuze who empowers form over narrative for the transmission of affect. Bennet explains her interpretation of Deleuze;

“affect is produced as intensity by formal means rather than by narrative...it allows us to understand affect as something other than an emotional response to character...thus to address the limitations of a narrative organization that contains affect within certain corporeal and moral boundaries” (Atkinson, 91).

Critical engagement with formal elements is thus more conducive to accessing somatic depth than emotional engagement through classic narrative structure or characterization.

Form and memory intertwine as form develops the means for this affective transaction. As briefly explained earlier the retelling of traumatic stories is a foundational source of healing and reconstruction after traumatic experiences. Yet nuances of memory and perception often inhibit open and comprehensive lines of communication between traumatized persons and audiences. In her essay titled *Embodied Memory, Transcendence, and Telling: Recounting Trauma, Re-Establishing the Self*, Roberta Culbertson discusses her analysis of the retelling of a gruesome rape scene in *The Kommandant's Mistress* by Sherri Szeman. She notices the protagonist's language and choice of self-expression and finds that she does this through the compartmentalization of her own body and suffering. Culbertson explains “Rachel survives by reducing that flow to a series of sharp, concrete difficulties and discomforts, by finding life in the body, but in a severely truncated way” (171). The depth of the experience is essentially unattainable to those not present, and yet the survivor's memory finds a way to operate by the remedial and immediate sensorial experience of the event.

Some perceptions of trauma involve a form of transcendence where memories “are remembered at the level of the body and the uncalculating mind, not at the level of the everyday, functioning, speaking self” (Culbertson 176). Most often found in stories of child abuse, this notion of transcendence is no novelty to trauma narratives where pain and extremity lead to experiences that go beyond the body where the victim is “removed at some point in the experience from direct knowledge of the acts perpetrated on the body” (Culbertson 176). These memories are even more complex to decode as they not only transcend language but often transcend mundane perceptions of sensorial organization like the five bodily senses. Culbertson describes these experiences as resembling spiritual transcendence, where “the experience of wounding at the hands of another raises fundamental questions about boundaries of the self” (176). Ultimately, Culberston astutely summarizes the tenuousness of memory and narrative relations by offering that memories fail to follow the rules of narrative because they are at their fundamental “the self’s discourse with itself” (178). Traumatic memories are fragmented pieces of sensorial and experiential information that fail to confine themselves into a comprehensible narrative.

The nuances of memory grow infinitely more complex the longer they are maintained as “memories take on various lives of their own, perhaps altering behavior, working out as templates for response to current life circumstances” (Culbertson, 175). Some memory functions as a means for survival, not to be analyzed or shared, but to be stored for the purpose of self-protection. Film can be understood to challenge that function through materiality. As Marks claims “Materiality is mortality. Symbolization, or the abstraction of communication into information, is an attempt to hold mortality at

bay” (xi). Overreliance on language and inattention to the body denies mortality and furthers the communicative divide between storyteller and spectator.

Marks goes on to define such materials as something beyond the formal, something not defined through analysis but by experience. In the introduction of her critical work called *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*, Marks explains this process of experience and critical engagement as drawing “attention to its aspects that escape our symbolic recognition”(xii). She further provides examples of film’s ability to communicate such nuances through its form at times through elements beyond a director’s control. She cites such instances; “we may become entranced by a gesture, a lock of hair falling across an actor’s face, the palpability of sunlight spilling through a break in the wall” (xii). Film as a medium allows for form to transcend conventional confines of critical engagement and instead provides a spectator’s experience with the space to exist as affective and somatic.

Cumulatively these arguments demand to shift the focus away from conventional literary narrative in trauma stories and instead beg for attention to form and representation of embodied experience through form. The manipulation of affect through image and form is a prolific strategy in filmmaking used to communicate the depths of experience to spectators. Language is limited in its functions to fully convey experience and thus attention to the body should be stressed within both spectator and form. The relation of traumatic experiences can be deeply healing for victims and survivors yet frustration around the limitations of narrative structure and language leaves those seeking solace, speechless and disempowered. This study hopes to represent the affective permeability of the screen through a focus on how formal

elements can communicate a sensorial experience. Reconciling this gap between spectator and storyteller is possible through formal focuses on somatic experience, where phenomenology meets storytelling and the body is felt.

New French Extremity; “Cinema of the Body”²

At the turn of the twenty-first century, a pattern within fringe French filmmaking arose that pushed the boundaries of horror and taboo in cinema. Although its contributors rarely if ever identified as a cohesive operation their films approached similar levels of taboo and repugnance and engaged with these subjects in particular ways. Film Historian Tim Palmer has characterized New French Extremity as a “cinema of the body”(23), and one that uses the depiction of the human body subjected to extreme circumstances. These films are divisive in their reception, with James Quandt the ArtForum critic who coined the term, “New French Extremity” referring to them pejoratively (Quandt 18). Yet Palmer defends their innovation and their bold invocation of “a sensory experience at times threateningly, violently attuned to corporeal processes, the visceral interactions of bodies on-screen” (23). Palmer recognizes the affective power of the “bodies on-screen” where the representation of violence upon the body is translated directly through a medium that spectators’ bodies recognize and cognate.

The academic and cultural focus of these films is primarily oriented around their prominence as a socio-cultural phenomenon in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century France. Academics argue about the cohesiveness of the ‘movement’ and how it pertains to the cultural environment of France at that moment. In his thesis titled *The New French Extremity: Bruno Dumont and Gaspar Noé, France’s Contemporary Cultural Zeitgeist*, Timothy J. Nicodemo, posits what cultural catalysts pre-determined

² Palmer, Tim. “Style and Sensation in the Contemporary French Cinema of the Body” *Journal of Film and Video*, 58.3, University of Illinois, Fall 2006, pp. 22-32.

the rise of New French Extremity films. He follows the logic that these films are a cohesive movement that follows its national predecessor; The French New Wave from the late 1950s to the late 60s. In both instances, Nicodemo argues that these movements exist within “contexts in which a group of filmmakers utilized radical techniques in form and content” (8). Their similarities as distinct film movements are emphasized in their prominence and divergence from other contemporaneous popularized films with both seeking to differentiate themselves from national mainstream cinema whether through technical and aesthetic experimentation in the New Wave or transgression in New Extremity.

The Affective Climate

Nicodemo likewise discusses the contemporaneous social, cultural, and political environment of early twenty-first century France and its general affective environment. As with the New Wave’s intrinsic tie to Marxist riots in Paris and general political disillusion amongst the younger generation in France, New Extremity came to reflect the increasing violence, discontentment, and political polarization within French society. Issues around race, immigration, sexism, sexuality, and poverty have only increased and led to the ever-polarized political French system. Looking at today, France’s 2022 presidential electoral polls find that the once unpopular and fringe right-wing Le Pen party has garnered over 40 percent of votes in the preliminaries (Clark, Alex). Running off a campaign of xenophobia with promises to eradicate Islamic presence within France, Le Pen represents the height of this socio-political divide that reached a boiling point at the turn of the century.

The political sentiments of early two thousand France remarked how “xenophobic sentiments have returned to haunt almost all sections of French society” ever since the National Front, Le Pen’s party, “emerged as a durable presence on the political landscape in the early 1980s” (21, Nicodemo). The contemporary social climate of France reflects its increasingly precarious social fabric with the ethnic and immigration issues it faced at the turn of the century remaining deeply ingrained and stronger than ever within France’s divided culture. In November of 2005 after the death of two black youths fleeing police triggered three weeks of nightly riots in the *banlieue*, the ghettoized and predominantly immigrant suburbs of Paris, the then President Jacques Chirac declared a state of emergency (Granville, Brigitte). France has since then seen the escalation of a culture war as perpetual dissatisfaction and fear amongst its citizens has stirred disharmony and left the country uncertain of its future. The affective social and political climate of France, a divided and discontent country predicated upon cultural malaises such as xenophobia and income inequality is inextricably tied to the manifestation of New French Extremity.

While its cultural context and legitimacy as a film movement are critical to a concrete and holistic understanding of these films, the focus of this study remains on the representation of affect and embodiment within these films. The experience of these films is what renders them highly comprehensible to human bodies and artistic uses of sensory experience. While the films vary greatly in their aesthetics manifested through different directorial styles such as Gaspar Noé’s anxiety-inducing and hyperactive filmmaking, against Bruno Dumont’s hyperrealistic yet leisurely painful style, they retain a commonality through their concomitant yet distinctly thematic, aesthetic, and

affective transgressiveness. These films are so particular to France in the early aughts yet they become a perfect scope for the universal study of affect.

This film movement inhabits the concepts of embodied trauma, memory, and all of its nuances. Not only do they touch on subjects that often place their characters within highly traumatic situations they portray those themes and stories in embodied ways by communicating in a language that the body understands. Perhaps this is precisely what makes these films so divisive amongst audiences and critics alike. Most of the research around these films concentrates on the broader cultural and socio-political environment of contemporaneous France, yet this research hopes to address those same humanistic concerns through the lens of human affective expression and reception.

Two films that engage with these ideas of encoded bodily memory and traumatic transcendence are Claire Denis' *Trouble Every Day* (2001) and Pascal Laugier's *Martyrs* (2009). Each film addresses its subjects and stories in uniquely embodied ways, with Denis' film focusing on how to communicate affect through the portrayal of predation and Laugier's film relating stories of traumatic transcendence through affective transmission. Each film addresses the shortcomings of language when expressing traumatic memory and each finds new ways to communicate through embodied means to its audiences, ultimately making for eloquent case studies in this research.

Trouble Every Day (Denis, 2001); Body Fragmentation and Predation Dynamics

The confluence of power and affective dynamics can easily be understood through the relationship between a predator and its prey. Claire Denis's *Trouble Every Day* elaborates upon this dynamic through the film's allusions to embodied trauma and affective relational dynamics in predation. The film follows two couples in Paris, a French dishonored scientist and doctor doomed to take care of his chronically ill wife and an American couple honeymooning in the city. The husband of the American couple played by Vincent Gallo has other motives for visiting France's capital as he searched for a cure for the same disease that seems to ail the French doctor's wife. The disease sends its victims into insatiable bouts of sexual desire and hunger for human flesh. Embodying this context through unconscious intensity allows for nuance within the predation dynamic and elucidates the experience of both predator and prey. This creates a unique angle for understanding that dynamic and generates an affectively driven experience as opposed to a strictly cognitive and moral one. This brings spectators directly to the affective experience of that predation environment through its intentional framing of the human body.

Neck

From the film's opening scene to its final, the camera conveys the necks of its most vulnerable characters through the perceptions of its predators. The opening scene features young people kissing in the back of a vehicle, where until the scene cuts, the woman's face is entirely covered by the man's yet her neck is left open, vulnerable, and

in focus (00:01:20). Thus the film abruptly and overtly opens with one of its most prominent visual motifs. Perhaps its most impressionable use of this motif involves a scene with Vincent Gallo's character Shane, and a hotel maid. As Shane and his newly wedded wife follow the French maid to their hotel room, a shot-reverse-shot sequence displays Gallo's intense focus on the maid's vulnerable neck with her hair pinned up to reveal it (00:20:30- 00:20:43).



Fig 1. Shane and his wife are walked to their room by the maid.

This tensely drawn-out sequence of shots narrows in on not only the vulnerability of the maid as prey but also ascribes meaning to Shane's stare as spectators experience this scene through the eyes of one of the primary predators in the film. It implicates the spectator within this dynamic and blurs the boundaries between the spectator's experience and the experience of the bodies on screen.

Like the Frenchman's wife, Coré, Shane is affected by this mysterious flesh-eating illness and craves the flesh of those who are socially, emotionally, and sexually vulnerable to him. In fact, in almost all the scenes where the maid is featured her neck is exposed to the camera with that same vulnerability as presented by tracking close-up

shot that implicates the spectator as the predator. The symbolic relationship between the victims' necks and Shane's predatory urges culminates several scenes before when he rapes the maid and consumes her flesh. On the subway, the camera embodies Shane's perception as he stares at a woman's neck (01:21:58).



Fig. 2 Shane's POV shot of the woman's neck on the subway.

Finally, before he attacks the maid in the locker room of the hotel, the camera slowly glances over her body as she undresses, with its primary focus on her neck (01:29:35). By framing its character's necks alongside their role in the prey and predator dynamic, the audience experiences the vulnerability of its preyed upon characters through the vulnerability of the neck.

Hands

Another compelling use of bodily fragmentation is the framing of hands in conjunction with this ongoing prey and predator dynamism. The particular portrayal of hands in this film is associated with both predators and those who are preyed upon.

Hands come to signify both a means for defense and a state of helplessness depending on how they are composed within the image.

The first appearance of this motif comes when the narrative introduces Shane's fantasies on the plane to Paris, where a sequence of shots featuring his wife covered in blood in a bed, opens with shots of a bloodied hand gliding sensually over the sheets (00:09:43). As Shane stumbles back to his seat on the plane he glances at the other passengers' hands as they hang innocently over the aisle (00:10:49).



Fig 3. Hands hanging limply in the airplane aisle.

Shane's fantasies as a predator elicit images of hands reaching, grasping, and or lying listlessly because they elicit experiences of helplessness and physical struggles.

These images of hands often pervade the sexual and cannibalistic fantasies of both Shane and Coré. When two teenagers invade Coré's home and one of them ends up her victim, the gruesome scene begins with Coré gently grasping her victim's hands through the wood bars her husband has built to keep her in (00:58:29). While there is a tenderness to this scene there remains the looming sense that Coré has ensnared yet

another victim as a wolf in sheep's clothing. She grips the teen's neck (01:02:06), forces him down (01:02:09), and even bites his hands (01:02:13).



Fig 4. Coré's active use of her hands during sex with the youth.

Coré uses her hands to attract and attack her victims. This ultimately plays with feminine sexuality tropes where the predominant association between hands and victimhood is subverted when hands are utilized for predation. Thus the film's predation dynamics are not confined to gender norms but rather classify characters according to their role in the broader dynamics of the film's predation-based climate.

Shane's character likewise experiences this connection between hands, sexuality, and cannibalism when a love scene with his wife demonstrates his troubled relationship with these urges. The entire scene spends its cinematographic focus on close-ups of their hands, the way their hands move, and their wedding rings (1:15:19). Dizzying and messy, the scene evokes the disconnect between these characters and their emotional distance at the behest of Shane's illness and the sexual confines of a conflicting marriage.



Fig 5. Successive shots of hands and wedding rings between Shane and his wife.

Likening sexuality to Shane's cannibalism, the scene culminates in his immediate retreat to the bathroom after his wife more assertively grabs his hair with her hands (1:17:04). He evades their intimacy by locking himself in the bathroom while masturbating and ignoring the cries of his wife on the other side of the door (1:17:31). Shane's wife's subversion of the predator-prey pattern troubles their intimacy as his cannibalistic urges grow in intensity and he loses control. Through this scene, spectators experience the affective intensity of Shane's condition and how it comes to consume his existence and ability to foster a meaningful relationship.

Mouth

The depiction of mouths in *Trouble Every Day*, and its relationship to consumption, both within sexual and cannibalistic contexts, further develop this portrait of predation. Although ostensibly unsubtle this motif manifests itself in unique ways throughout the narrative. This depiction of mouths works as a dichotomy when a brutal scene at the end of the film depicts the maid's assault and eventual death. In this scene,

the maid's anguish is most vividly depicted by her clenched eyes and wide-open mouth (01:33:22). Here Shane's association with the mouth is his literal consumption of the maid, from her genitals, his bloodied mouth kissing her face after he has consumed her (01:33:40). The mouth becomes a locus of meaning and somatic signification for both. It is a means for the sexual and cannibalistic consumption of others while also an indication of suffering at the behest of a predator.

Coré's story as well emphasizes her mouth to depict and reinforce these deeply engrained dynamics between a predator and her prey. Coré's character is notoriously and off-puttingly quiet, with her predatorial presence best depicted by the framing of her mouth during scenes of carnivorousness. When Coré consumes the teenage boy that breaks into her home, the camera focuses on its depiction of her mouth as the means through which she enacts her carnivorous aggression.



Fig. 6 Coré's bloodied mouth framed over her victim.

The entire scene focuses on the mouths and faces of the characters with the final shot of the scene framing Coré above her victim, her bloodied mouth and teeth taking up a majority of the frame, projecting forward in aggression and assertion (01:04:19).

When we return to Coré and her victim, she is playing with him, intermittently biting and kissing him oscillating between the world of sexuality and the consumption of human flesh (01:05:37). Coré embodies the unspeakability of affect while depicting a unique affective relationship between sexual intensity and cannibalism. By pointing to the mouth's necessity for both sexuality and consumption, Coré blurs those cognitive boundaries and connects their affective intensity.

Mimicking the dynamics of predation this film utilizes the fragmentation of bodies on the screen to elicit biopsychosocial affective relationships between predators and their prey. The camera frames such parts in obtrusive ways, demanding attention and positioning the audience in relation to these parts and their performance. The body is used as a means of communication with all three parts used by both predator and prey characters in different ways. This formal technique utilizes aesthetics of embodied trauma that focus on the body and renders its characters and their affective states more proximate to spectators. This centers the experience as affective, ultimately side-stepping cognition and morality. This aesthetic cultivates knowledge around bodily experience to portray the trauma of its characters with visceral proximity to its audiences and the human body.

Martyrs (2009); Trauma and Transcendence

The conjunction of traumatic experience and transcendence in Pascal Laugier's *Martyrs* (2009) is explored both within the narrative and the aesthetic representation of the film's philosophical underpinning. The film follows Lucie, the survivor of a kidnapping who exacts revenge on the seemingly normal family that hurt her. Her friend Anna comes to help her deal with the bodies but ends up captured by the underground society that tortured Lucie and other young women into spiritual transcendence. Throughout the film, motifs of embodiment through sense memory, light, and the embodied displacement of trauma through the creature that haunts Lucie explore the concept of physical and spiritual transcendence through a traumatic experience. As aforementioned Culbertson relates traumatic experiences to concepts of bodily and spiritual transcendence where the body experiences an affective response that transcends ordinary organizations of bodily senses. This allusion to transcendence through trauma is both enmeshed within the film's narrative structure and the formal elements that exist within it. *Martyrs* (2009), uses aesthetic representations of sense memory, light, sight, and a haunting embodied creature to develop its philosophy of transcendence through trauma.

The Creature, Embodied Trauma, and Survivor's Guilt

The first half of the film focuses predominantly on Lucie's past trauma and her reconciliation with a horrific and imaginary creature that stalks her and tortures her after her escape. The presence of this creature in the film orients the narrative toward a monster horror. The creature is first introduced during an incident at the foster home where an obvious instance of Lucie self-harming is understood by Lucie as not of her

own doing (00:05:52). This creature follows Lucie into adulthood and as she exacts her revenge against the family that abducted her. After she has committed these murders and the creature arises to harm her again, she smothers her hands in the blood of her captives and exclaims she “did it”, in a desperate attempt to appease the ever-present creature (00:18:12). The creature’s origin within Lucie’s subconscious comes about when her memories reveal a horribly disfigured woman who was also held captive when Lucie was abducted and whom she was incapable of saving (00:35:43). This woman and Lucie’s embodied guilt create what she perceives as a fully formed and physical entity that physically harms her beyond her escape.

The creature and its actions seem to enunciate the physical traumas that Lucie fails to communicate to herself and others. When the creature and Lucie experience a moment of reconciliation and the creature cradles Lucie’s face in her hands, it is revealed that the creature’s mouth is sewn shut (00:41:20).



Fig 7. The creature is revealed to have its mouth sewn shut.

While the woman whom the creature Lucie’s subconscious modeled her after did not have these stitches, the creature is brought to represent the silence of Lucie’s trauma and the unspeakability of its presence within her body. The creature thus

expresses the limitations of language and the bodily means for which Lucie retains her trauma nearly a decade after its occurrence. It ultimately allows her to transcend her bodily experience through the physical manifestation of another.

Representations of Sense Memory

The film also alludes to sense memory and how past experiences are remembered through the senses. When Lucie is chased into a room by the creature, as it makes loud banging noises on the other side, the rhythm of the creature's destructive din brings Lucie back to the banging of a chair onto a floor where she was held captive (00:20:21-00:20:39). She can touch on her trauma not only through the creature but by attention to her senses and a connection between her present experience and her traumatic past. When Anna is taken captive and forced to experience the same tortures that Lucie endured in childhood, she too encounters the auditory embedding of sense memory. The scenes that document Anna's torture at the behest of the captors reinforce the auditory memory of the clanging of the metallic ladder that indicates Anna's torturer has arrived. Each successive scene opens with either the clanging of the ladder or the clanging of the food cart (01:15:52). These sounds and their repetition create a rhythm to Anna's traumatic experience that embeds itself into her sense memory. As spectators, we are exposed to this traumatization and how Anna experiences it, this ceaseless repetition of a foreboding sound and this ingraining of sense memory is something audiences hear alongside the film's protagonist. Embodied memories like these allow the characters to transcend their physical state and to exist within a more permeable timeline of experience, where sensations make experiences attainable through memory beyond the limitations of time.

Transcending Perception

Allusions to sight specifically surrounding Anna's enlightenment narrative bring together this theme of traumatic transcendence. When the organization that held Lucie captive now captures and tortures Anna, the leader explains their worship of the eyes as a means for viewing the transcendence of their captives. The leader explains the importance of specifically women's eyes for spiritual transcendence and the disproportionate success they have witnessed in their women captives. During this sinister scene, as Anna is shown images of the martyred women who were mutilated into spiritual enlightenment, her eyes are the focus of the frame (01:04:06- 01:04:21). This sequence is shot in shot-reverse-shot, alluding to the conversation between Anna's eyes and the eyes of those martyred before her, ultimately likening their bodily experiences and allowing for transcendence beyond individual experience.

The film's conceptualization of sight is not restricted to its physical definition and connotes the concept of sight beyond physical perception when Anna achieves enlightenment. Anna's disfigured face, her eyes swollen shut from the brutality of her experience as a captive contrasts with the comforting voice-over that whispers "You're not scared now" (1:22:00). The further she is prevented from seeing her reality and her suffering the closer she becomes to seeing beyond her experience. Sight beyond physical sight initiates Anna's transcendence out of her body and allows her to reach the enlightenment her captives have forced upon her.

This transcendental relationship to sight is reflected through the film's use of light as a motif and its connotations in conjunction with spiritual transcendence. When Anna finds another victim in the house before her own body is taken hostage by the

organization, she attempts to save this person and heal them as best she can. When Anna removes a blinding metal piece that is stapled to their head, the victim is deeply distraught at the sight of light until Anna throws a towel over their eyes (00:55:18). For someone who was not able to transcend the pain of the experience, light itself is traumatic.

Perhaps Anna's most horrific experience occurs when her captor places her mutilated body, with her flesh inverted and exposed, under a searing light where she hangs listlessly (01:25:52). Light is both the perpetrator of Anna's torture and the source of her transcendence. This occurs mere moments before she is declared to have transcended. Finally, as spectators, we are shown what Anna's experience looks like to her as the frame slowly enters through her eyes and her experience is revealed (01:28:13).



Fig 8. The camera enters Anna's perspective revealing her enlightenment.

This experience is portrayed as a bright white light with muffled and distorted embryonic sounds (01:28:40- 01:29:33). Light and perception are what best facilitate the portrayal of Anna's enlightenment as she transcends beyond her own experience. This

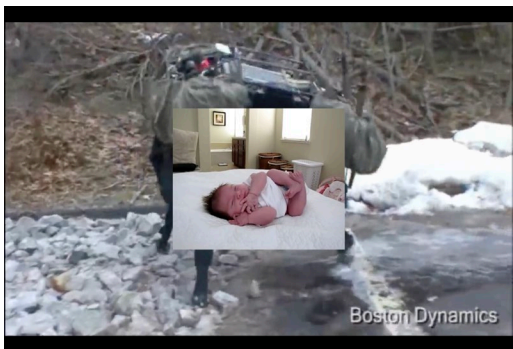
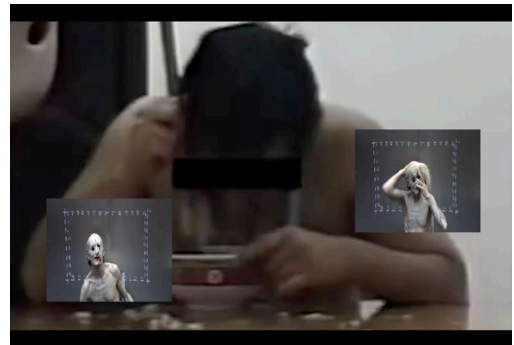
allows for spectators to transcend individuality alongside Anna albeit through different means. Spectators are pushed to participate in affective transmission and self-transcendence through the portrayal of transcendence on screen.

Perhaps one of the most representative of New French Extremity as a whole, and one of the most transgressive films, *Martyrs* utilizes concepts of sense memory, light, sight, and a haunting imaginary to create an aesthetic of transcendental traumatic memory. The shock of trauma on the body can yield peculiar perceptions of self and body as discussed by Culbertson. Laugier's film takes this concept and uses the motifs of sense memory and the creature to represent the embedding of traumatic memory through transcendental means. The motifs of light and sight are also used as a means for transcendence both within the narrative and formally to communicate this complex neurological phenomenon. By utilizing the aesthetics of traumatic memory, this film addresses transcendence within traumatic contexts, how these experiences are remembered with the body, and ultimately how they are shared through embodiment.

Artist's Statement

Alongside this research, I decided to create a digital art piece inspired by the work of New French Extremity and its contributions to traumatic affect studies. I used a collection of videos and images from the internet and global video streaming sites like Youtube to amalgamate them into a video project. I created the audio by manipulating scratchy guitar strums and audio from some of the videos I pulled footage from. I tried to emulate the aesthetics I extrapolate upon in this thesis and created an uncomfortable albeit representative portrait of the permeability of affect through bodies. Below are stills from the film and a link to the project online.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TzK5tKt4cV8>



The Ramifications of Embodied Cinema

Burdened by language and its limitations, storytelling often fails to reconcile ontological experience and narrative. Through a better understanding of how experience is encoded, remembered, and translated through the body a more thorough understanding of ontology and art is possible. Its applications span a variety of disciplines that have already identified the inextricable nature of trauma and storytelling. Judith Herman, trauma theorist emphasizes how storytelling initiates healing by performing the essential role of establishing safety and restoring the “traumatized person’s sense of meaning and connection to society” (Iykou and Chesner 13). Yet such a task becomes insurmountable through an overreliance on language to relate experience. Ultimately this research shows how effective affective communication is when relating traumatic experiences and how New French Extremity filmmaking eloquently articulates the formal and stylistic means for embodied trauma narratives.

France’s storytellers were capable of integrating and encoding the fear, uncertainty, and vulnerability of a divided body politic into an art movement that formally and aesthetically communicated what language would fail to bear. Denis’s *Trouble Every Day* (2001), embodied the fear and vulnerability of an autophagous society, one that was ailed by a cultural cannibalism where social solidarity gave way to the festering wounds of inequality and perpetual dissatisfaction. As a film, it allows for the unfolding of an experience that is primarily affective, side-stepping broader concepts of cognition in favor of affect. Laugier’s *Martyrs* (2009), attempts to perceive what one would experience beyond the normalized cacophony of calamity, and how one

would confront and transcend their annihilation at the behest of a torturous and perpetually precarious world. These films are uniquely capable of addressing the complexity of social systems through their depictions of a holistic human language that acknowledges the subtlety of affect and embodied experience.

Perhaps this explains the persistence of New French Extremity and its aesthetic and thematic influence on contemporary French cinema. In recent years several emerging directors have released films ostensibly influenced by New French Extremity. Julia Ducournau shocked spectators at Cannes with the release of her first feature *Raw* (2016), the story of a first-year veterinary student and lifelong vegetarian who develops an appetite for human flesh. Her second feature, *Titane* (2021), recently received even more international acclaim with equally shocking and transgressive depictions of the human body. Yet equally as influential in the international and domestic sphere is the longstanding Gaspar Noé, who has seldom strayed from New French Extremity and continues to create works like *Enter The Void* (2009) and *Climax* (2018). These films discuss drug use and sexuality in explicit ways that reverberate the aesthetics of New French Extremity into contemporaneity.

The contribution of this research hopes to intervene with the current research around New French Extremity that mostly focuses on a cultural or sociopolitical analysis of these films. Not only does this research hope to address how these films communicate intense affective states across the screen through form, but it also seeks to ultimately reconcile this storyteller and spectator gap by doing so. This is established through a formal analysis that attempts to move away from conventional analyses of form and seeks to do justice to the subtlety of affect and affective expression. For

instance, instead of focusing on formal elements like image and its intention, this research looked at the overall affective environment created on screen and what that meant for the bodies in the film and the bodies of the spectators.

Hopefully, this inquiry unfolds certain aspects of how human experience is a nuanced and embodied one that merits attention to the body and its affects when depicted. Marks quotes Merleau-Ponty's eloquent phrase "perception is a fold in the flesh of the world". She also claims with likened eloquence "Each time we express something we have perceived of the world, we make a fold in its thickness, the way folds in the brain permit chemical communication among its surfaces" (x, Marks). As storytellers, we hold the power to enfold our own perception of reality into the lived experience of another. We do this through the physical, the neurochemical, and the affect. Its effects, ultimately, transcend our consciousness, the consciousness of our audiences, and go beyond our limiting conceptions of the physical self.

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