Limit Cinema:
Bataille and the Nonhuman in Contemporary Global Film

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Abstract

This thesis explores how contemporary global cinema represents the relationship between humans and nature. Drawing from the philosophy of Georges Bataille, especially his notion of transgression, I argue that certain contemporary films attempt to transgress the limit between human and nonhuman realities. I call these films *limit cinema* because they operate at the boundary between thought and world: they interrogate the lines between nature and culture and reframe our relationship to aspects of existence in excess of human thought. In taking a film-philosophical approach, I explore not only what philosophy might be able to say about ecological aspects of contemporary film, but also what films can contribute to philosophical discussions of humanity's relationship with the natural world. To that end, I bring Bataille into conversation with more recent discussions in the humanities that seek less anthropocentric modes of thought, especially film ecocriticism, speculative realism, and other theories associated with the nonhuman turn. I approach the limit between human and nonhuman realities in a number of ways. The films of Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Ben Wheatley are interpreted in relation to a Bataillean understanding of the sacred, in which nonhuman reality is posited as immanent to this world but beyond human understanding. Two films, *Jauja* (Lisandro Alonso 2014) and *Tectonics* (Peter Bo Rappmund 2012), are analysed through the unlikely pairing of speculative realism and apparatus theory; these films demonstrate that the same representational structure can simultaneously implicate us more and less in anthropocentrism. Human subjectivity therefore cannot be cast aside so easily, and I argue that film ecocriticism cannot do without a theory of cinematic subjectivity. I begin to lay out such a theory in relation to Lars von Trier's *Nymphomaniac* (2013) and Jonathan Glazer's *Under the Skin* (2013), arguing that these films evoke subjectivity as an unstable process of turning inside out. I conclude by considering love as a way of relating to the nonhuman, using *Grizzly Man* (Werner Herzog 2005) and *Konelīne: Our Land Beautiful* (Nettie Wild 2016) as examples of cinematic expressions of love for nature. Though I argue that it is finally impossible to see beyond our finite human perspectives, limit cinema pushes against the boundaries of thought and encourages an ethical engagement with perspectives beyond the human.

Table of Contents

Abstract **2**
List of Figures **5**
Acknowledgements **6**
Author's Declaration **7**
Chapter 1: Approaching the Limit **8**
Introduction 8
Film Ecocriticism and the Nonhuman Turn 17
Bataille, Transgression, Ecology 27
The Impossible Imperative 40

PART ONE: OBJECTIVITY

Chapter 2: Eroticism, Sacrifice, and the Sacred **45**
Introduction 45
Wheatley, Death, Sacrifice 47
Apichatpong, Animals, Eroticism 65
Conclusion 78
Chapter 3: Objectivity, Speculative Realism, and the Cinematic Apparatus **80**
Introduction 80
Objectivity and Nature 91
Subjectivity and Apparatus 100
Conclusion 108

PART TWO: SUBJECTIVITY

Chapter 4: Eco-consciousness **111**
Introduction 111
Interiority and Inner Experience 121
Sex and Transgression 128
Death and Discontinuity 138
Conclusion 146
Chapter 5: Love at the Limit **148**
Introduction 148
Eros and *Agape* in *Grizzly Man* 158

Our Mind/Our Land Beautiful 174
Conclusion 183

Chapter 6: Conclusion 185
Bibliography 192

List of Figures

Figure 1 Invagination 120

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Author's Declaration

This thesis represents the original work of Chelsea Birks, unless otherwise stated in the text. The research upon which it is based was carried out in the Theatre, Film and Television Studies Department at the University of Glasgow under the supervision of Prof. David Martin-Jones and Dr. Timothy Barker during the period of October 2014 to September 2017.

Chapter 1: Approaching the Limit

Introduction

This thesis explores how contemporary global cinema pushes against the limits of the human in our age of ecological crisis. The threat of impending catastrophe demands that we reconsider what it means to be human, and that we attempt to position ourselves in relation to a reality that exceeds the anthropocentric frameworks of thought and language. I argue that cinema can help us do this, and I identify a group of contemporary films that I call *limit cinema* because they interrogate the boundaries between human and nonhuman realities. I approach these films through a philosophical lens, and connect them to current movements such as speculative realism and posthumanism that seek less anthropocentric modes of thought. My method can therefore be described as film-philosophical: more than simply engaging with films through ethical and philosophical concepts, film philosophy engages with philosophical thought through film and attempts to uncover what might be gained by bringing the two disciplines into conversation with each other[1]. This thesis therefore explores not only what philosophy might be able to tell us about the representation of nature in contemporary film, but also what films might contribute to philosophical discussions of humanity's relationship with the natural world. I argue that contemporary cinema can not only reflect on societal concerns regarding issues such as global warming, but can also find new ways of representing nonhuman perspectives and their relationships to humans. As such, I argue that film is essential to the ethical reconsiderations made necessary by the ecological crisis.

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1 While classic film theorists often engaged with films in philosophical terms (Rudolf Arnheim's aesthetics and the realist theories of André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer being significant examples), film philosophy has taken prominence in recent years and a distinct methodology within film studies, alongside more traditional historical and political approaches (such as Marxist and feminist film theories, archival research, or genre studies). This chapter will contextualise my methodology within recent ecological debates in both philosophy and film studies, but it is worth noting that film philosophy is incredibly diverse in terms of its approaches and assumptions, as it ranges from the analytic cognitivism of Noël Carroll and David Bordwell to works engaging with continental theorists like Gilles Deleuze or Maurice Merleau-Ponty. There are a range of texts that survey major paradigms or put forward new developments in film philosophy: see especially Jarvie 1987; Freeland and Wartenberg 1995; Allen and Smith 1999; Carroll and Choi 2005; Frampton 2006; Wartenberg 2007; Phillips 2008; Colman 2009; Livingston and Plantinga 2009; Mullarkey 2009; Carel and Tuck 2011; Sinnerbrink 2011; Rodowick 2014, 2015; Sorfa 2016; Herzogenrath 2017.

Chapter One will introduce the concept of limit cinema and contextualise it within current conversations in film ecocriticism, film philosophy, and the humanities more generally. I will start by broadly outlining the philosophical stakes of my argument and introducing my object of inquiry: the limit between human and nonhuman realities. I will then apply these more general concerns to an introductory example of limit cinema, Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* (2011). This will lead into a general overview of film ecocriticism, focusing in particular on film-philosophical approaches. I argue that these approaches are informed by the nonhuman turn in the humanities, and so this chapter will also briefly connect my argument to philosophies such as posthumanism and speculative realism that call attention to the agency of nonhuman things; these intersections will be further developed in later chapters. While there is presently a group of philosophers that are commonly brought to bear on film ecocriticism, including Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Lacan, Alfred North Whitehead, and Simone Weil (in addition to some more contemporary thinkers associated with the nonhuman turn), I propose that a new philosopher be added to the canon: Georges Bataille, the consummate philosopher of limits. I argue that Bataille's notions of transgression, excess, and inner experience can provide new ways of understanding how the beyond-human can be evoked through cinema. This chapter will therefore broadly sketch out my reasons for turning to Bataille, and will distinguish his thought from other, more conventional eco-philosophical approaches.

The method introduced in this chapter will be used to theorise the particular limit films that are the focus of Chapters Two through Five. These films exhibit a wide variety of styles and emerge from diverse national and cultural contexts, ranging from acclaimed auteur cinema like Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010) to obscure experimental documentaries like Peter Bo Rappmund's *Tectonics* (2012). My Bataillean methodology attempts to avoid homogenising the diverse ecological perspectives of these contemporary films while simultaneously linking them together through their shared attention to the limits of the human.

The End of the World

In *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (2013), Timothy Morton argues that the end of the world has already been brought about by global warming. He means this not in an apocalyptic sense – though his work is raptly attuned to the very real dangers engendered by human activities since the industrial revolution – but

rather in the sense that our very idea of "world" is ending, faced with the humiliating impact of objects that, while created by us, operate on scales far larger than our own. Morton often makes reference to the fact that the impact of global warming will still be felt in 500 years, and that the half-life of plutonium will extend almost as far into the future as the entire history of the human species extends into the past. He suggests that the task of art at the end of the world is to engage with what he calls the "very large finitude" of hyperobjects, a scale that he argues is more terrifying than infinity: "[f]orever makes you feel important. One hundred thousand years makes you wonder whether you can imagine one hundred thousand anything" (60). Morton continues that contemporary art, along with philosophy, is tasked with marking the difference between hyperobjects as they appear to us, subject to our scale and modes of perception, and as they exist in themselves: finite and thinkable but far exceeding our ability to measure, predict, or explain. For Morton, all objects resist our comprehension in some way, but the massive scale of hyperobjects makes the gap between appearance and thing more apparent.

Morton's diagnosis of the end of the world emphasises the relative insignificance of the human perspective in comparison to a reality that exceeds us. This works against the general thrust of Western philosophy, which since the Enlightenment has tended to position humans at the top of a natural hierarchy because of our supposedly superior ability to reason. Western philosophy from Plato to Kant largely viewed reason as the highest human faculty, and while it was acknowledged that we might be led astray through the senses or faulty logic, it has generally been agreed that reason allows us to gain knowledge of the world and direct ourselves in relation to it. Morton's discussion of hyperobjects works against this tradition by decentring the human in relation to the world and attempting to theorise things that exceed anthropocentric frames of reference.

Hyperobjects draws inspiration from speculative realism, a movement inaugurated by Quentin Meillassoux's *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (2006). There, Meillassoux argues against the tendency he sees in twentieth century thought to restrict knowledge to the frameworks of human thought and perception. He calls this way of thinking "correlationism" because it asserts that objects can only be considered as correlates to human thought. He explains that correlationism relies on the claim that "thought cannot get outside itself in order to compare the world as it is 'in itself' to the world as it is 'for us', and thereby distinguish what is a function of our relation to the world from what belongs to the world alone" (4-5). Meillassoux argues that both analytic

and continental philosophies tend to adhere to the assumption that the correlation between thought and world (rather than the world itself) is the object of knowledge: he writes that "[d]uring the twentieth century, the two principle 'media' of the correlation were consciousness and language, the former bearing phenomenology, the latter the various currents of analytic philosophy" (6). In both cases, what is examined is the world in relation to us, as constructed through consciousness and/or language.

Meillassoux traces correlationism back to Kant's metaphysics in *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781).[2] The impact of Kant on speculative realism is such that Meillassoux describes his thought as a reaction against the "Kantian catastrophe" (2008, 124); Steven Shaviro writes that speculative realism enacts a return to correlationism's "primal scene" in the *Critique* in order to renegotiate its terms (2014, 68-9). In the *Critique*, Kant enacts what he calls a "Copernican revolution" in philosophy by calling into question the assumption that thought conforms to objects. He argues that this premise results in disagreement rather than secure knowledge, and suggests that these differences might be resolved if we looked at things from the other way around. The metaphysics established in the *Critique* are founded on the assertion that apparently necessary features of the external world – cause and effect, for example, as well as space and time – are qualities of our perception rather than of the world in itself. Kant distinguishes between the phenomenal realm of knowable, sensible experience and the noumenal realm of objects as they exist in themselves, and argues that the latter is foreclosed from philosophical discussion; in fact, though there are a range of interpretations of the *Critique*, some strongly idealist readings have argued that according to Kantian metaphysics there is no mind-independent reality at all.[3] Regardless of the ontological status of things as they exist in themselves, twentieth century philosophies – especially those affiliated with the linguistic turn[4] – tended to agree that the

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2 Meillassoux clarifies that this argument predates Kant, as it can be found at least since Berkeley's idealism (2008, 3), but he also points to the *Critique of Pure Reason* as the most influential text on twentieth century versions of the idea.

3 See Stang 2016 for a helpful overview of the debates and issues raised by Kant's transcendental idealism. He points out that idealist readings of Kant (which doubt or deny the existence of mind-independent reality according to his metaphysics) were dominant immediately after the publication of the *Critique* and were influential among the German Idealists; however, idealist/phenomenalist readings of Kant were "challenged in twentieth century Anglophone scholarship by, among others, Graham Bird, Gerold Prauss and Henry Allison" (7).

4 The phrase "linguistic turn" has been used to describe a wide range of twentieth century philosophies, both analytic and continental, which put language at the forefront of philosophical inquiry. In the analytic

only valid object of knowledge is things as they exist for us, subject to human language, observation, and understanding.

Shaviro writes in *The Universe of Things: On Speculative Realism* that the speculative realists, troubled by the anthropocentrism of post-Kantian philosophies, "each propose a different way of stepping outside the correlationist circle" (2014, 68). This thesis situates itself amongst these discussions, and attempts to discern what it might mean to try and think outside of ourselves and represent this outside through cinema. Like the speculative realists, I therefore frame my argument in relation to the Kantian primal scene, but rather than trying to step outside of the circle I argue that we perhaps ought to first interrogate its limits. These limits, which form my object of inquiry throughout this thesis, are the same ones that Kant imposes on reason in the *Critique*: those between the world as it exists for us and the world as it exists in itself. The ecological crisis emphasises that these two worlds cannot be conflated, since it forces us to consider how the world might exist in our absence. Meillassoux argues that correlationism cannot properly account for the existence of a word outside of human thought, and therefore renders any statement about the existence of matter before human life (the Big Bang, the formation of the earth, evolutionary history) meaningless (2006, 9-27). Ray Brassier (2007), another founding member of speculative realism,[5] reverses the formula and argues that correlationism cannot properly address the inevitability of human extinction. Both ways of looking at the question suggest that Kantian epistemic limits, which enclose our knowledge of existence within the confines of human thought and language, are becoming increasingly problematic in the face of cosmic questions of origin and the threat of global catastrophe. Speculative realism is therefore part of a larger response to anxieties about human finitude

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tradition, its forerunners were Gottlob Frege (*The Foundations of Arithmetic* 1884), Bertrand Russell ("On Denoting" 1905), and Ludwig Wittgenstein (*Tractacus Logico-Philosophicus* 1922); these figures influenced ordinary language philosophy and important analytic works like Saul Kripke's *Naming and Necessity* (1980). The continental tradition, on the other hand, was largely influenced by Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotics, which inspired both structuralism and the ensuing poststructuralist movement. Thinkers associated with the linguistic turn in continental philosophy include, among others, Jacques Derrida (see especially *Of Grammatology* 1967), Jacques Lacan, Luce Irigaray, and Michel Foucault. See also Richard Rorty (*The Linguistic Turn* 1967; "Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and the Reification of Language" 1991).

5 Brassier has since distanced himself from the movement.

and the end of the world, and can be situated among broader discussions about the how to address the Anthropocene.

Atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen popularised the term "Anthropocene" in 2002 when he argued that human behaviour has impacted the planet to the degree that its effects can be seen in the geological record.[6] We are, he suggested, no longer in the Holocene, but have now entered the Age of the Humans. The Anthropocene therefore indicates a frightening paradox: while humans caused the Anthropocene, the term refers to changes that may (and likely will) outlast human life. We have made our mark on the world, but perhaps at the expense of our own extinction. This Anthropocene paradox – of human progress and aggrandisement to the point of self-erasure – suggests a link between the limitations of our human perspective and the potentially impending finitude of our species. The Anthropocene has gained currency across the sciences and the humanities as a means of calling attention to threats posed by our tendency to myopically restrict our focus to human interests and concerns.[7] Timothy Clark writes in *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* (2015) that the Anthropocene requires a reconsideration of scale:

> Phenomena such as ocean acidification, climate change, the general effects of incremental forms of environmental degradation across the planet, global overpopulation and resource depletion do not present any obvious or perceptible target for concern or protest at any one place, or often any immediate antagonist perceptible at the normal human scale. (x)

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[6] There is much debate about how to date the beginning of the Anthropocene. Crutzen (2002) points to industrialisation; Maslin and Lewis (2010) suggest 1610 and link it to the effects of colonialism (see also Martin-Jones forthcoming); the Anthropocene Working Group (Jalasiewicz et al. 2015) posit 1945 with the testing of the atomic bomb.

[7] Though the Anthropocene remains unofficial – according to the International Union of Geological Sciences we are still in the Holocene – the term is widely used as "a loose, shorthand term for all the new contexts and demands – cultural, ethical, aesthetic, philosophical, and political – of environmental issues that are truly planetary in scale" (Clark 2015, 2). There are at least two peer-reviewed journals devoted to the Anthropocene – *Anthropocene* and *The Anthropocene Review* – as well as a wide range of books and articles across the sciences and humanities. For works in the humanities dealing with the implications of the Anthropocene see Morton 2013; Parikka 2014; Clark 2015; Wark 2015, as well as an excellent special of *Angelaki* on the "limits of the human" (Ganguly and Jenkins 2011).

The Anthropocene therefore raises a number of difficult questions about how to address things that are beyond the scope of our usual modes of engagement. Clark continues:

> One major new effort at work in contemporary literary and artistic practice and criticism is to find some way of usefully or authentically engaging such crucial but elusive concerns, precisely when it is acknowledged that they resist representation at the kinds of scale on which most thinking, culture, art and politics operate. (x)

Criticism in light of the Anthropocene must therefore engage with questions of scale and representation, since part of the problem involves being able to describe and respond to problems and anxieties that exceed familiar frameworks.

I am not suggesting that the limit films discussed in this thesis answer these problems, but rather that they engage with them by pointing towards a reality in excess of representation. In different ways, they all destabilise the totalising gaze of the camera and disrupt humanist modes of perception in ways that are useful for the critical reconsiderations made necessary by the Anthropocene. Lars von Trier's *Melancholia*, which focuses on the breakdown of a family in the days preceding planetary destruction, addresses the limits of the human through an aesthetics of the end of the world; it therefore presents a clear introductory example of what I mean by "limit cinema."

When *Melancholia*'s narrative begins, the world has already ended – or at least we know that it will. The prelude depicts the slow-motion collision between Earth and the large blue planet Melancholia; the event is represented through spectacular digital effects and emphasised by a loud crescendo of the score, from Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*. The narrative of *Melancholia* then retroactively dramatises the end of the world through the disintegration of the relationship between two sisters: Justine (Kirsten Dunst), a melancholic with psychic powers who is unfazed by the impending catastrophe, and Claire (Charlotte Gainsbourg), who is frightened but attempts to keep it together for the sake of her young son. Despite its focus on planetary destruction, *Melancholia* limits itself to a small cast of characters – Justine's wedding guests – and a single location, the grounds of the mansion where Justine's wedding takes place. These limits are seemingly reinforced by strange forces: characters seem unable to leave the grounds on several occasions, as horses balk at its perimeters and cars stop running altogether. But despite its restricted drama, the

film envisions its catastrophe globally, seen from the outside in spectacular CGI shots that show the world colliding with Melancholia from space.

This interplay between the subjective and the objective – between planetary and personal disasters – resonates with some of the central questions of this thesis. How do films represent the ways that we see the universal from the inside? If human thought and knowledge are finite, then how might our limited human perspectives grapple with mind-independent reality? *Melancholia* has received a great deal of academic attention, which is one of the reasons I have selected it as an introductory example: its impact on a range of scholars from a variety of perspectives suggests the wider importance of films that engage audiences with questions of finitude and extinction (Figlerowicz 2012; Doyle 2013; Kollig 2013; Peterson 2013; French and Shacklock 2014; Sinnerbrink 2014, 2016b; Dienstag 2015; Elsaesser 2015; Gauvin 2015; Honig 2015; Del Rio 2016; Larkin 2016). Christopher Peterson (2015) argues that *Melancholia* raises questions about decentring the human, and writes that *Melancholia* foregrounds tensions between external reality and phenomenal experience. He writes that the film's impending apocalypse event forces Claire to think about her relationship to the world:

> Presumably the cosmos will continue to exist in the wake of earth's destruction, a universe entirely independent and 'indifferent' to her, but for the moment she is still obliged to carry the world as a horizon of perception in anticipation of its utter absence. She has only one world, yet it is not hers. The world has always existed *for* her; it has never existed (solely) for her.

Peterson calls this a "performative contradiction," since Claire's inability to see beyond her "horizon of perception" does not stop her from anticipating a universe that continues to exist in her absence.

Through the lens of my Bataillean methodology, we might call the ending of *Melancholia* a *limit experience*, since it evokes a subject's confrontation with the possibility of not-being in the face of forces that exceed her. Limit experiences are characterised by paradox and impossibility, since they challenge the very frameworks of thought and reason that structure human existence. They put us in contact with the unthinkable, and are therefore resistant to description and explanation. For Bataille, sexuality and death best exemplify this confrontation with the limit, since they call the integrity of the subject into question: in *Erotism* (1957b), he writes that "[e]roticism always entails a breaking down of established patterns, the patterns … of the regulated social order basic to our discontinuous mode of

existence as defined and separate individuals" (18). This means that for Bataille, eroticism points to the limit between life and death. One of Bataille's favourite examples is a photograph he had in his possession of a torture victim, sentenced to death by *lingchi* (translated variously as death by a thousand cuts, or slow slicing) in 1905.[8] In the photograph, published in *The Tears of Eros* (1961, 204), the victim is strapped to a pole. Large swaths of skin have been removed from his chest, exposing his ribs, and a man is cutting into the flesh above his left knee. But Bataille was most interested in the expression on the man's face, which is directed upwards in what could be interpreted as transcendent bliss; he writes, "I have never stopped being obsessed by this image of pain, at once ecstatic(?) and intolerable" (206). The question mark here evinces a hesitancy, an acknowledgment that the man's experience has already passed a barrier beyond which we cannot know. This image of the moments before death, an experience to which we can bear witness but from which there is no return, suggests eternity in a frozen fragment of time. It captures the crossing of a limit, when the victim must be aware that it is too late but has not yet reached the other side.

Like Bataille's photograph, *Melancholia* occurs entirely within the span of time in which death is inevitable but not yet actual. We see the Earth collide with Melancholia at both the beginning and the end of the film, which situates the narrative in a liminal space between two ends – a death that is not quite dead. This impossible location is symbolised by an extra hole on the golf course surrounding the house where the film takes place. While Claire's husband John (Kiefer Sutherland) repeats several times throughout the film that there are 18 holes on the course, we see the number 19 on a flagpole in shots both at the beginning and the end of the film. The presence of the extra hole in the moments before the world is about to end is an extraneous detail, a lingering remainder that cannot be explained or contained by the narrative. Hole 19 indicates the presence of an extra absence – one hole too many – an irrecuperable excess in that it is at once too much and nothing at

8 Susan Sontag draws from Bataille's analysis of the lingchi photograph in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003); see also Kaplan 2009. Bataille dates the photograph from 1905, and names the victim as Fou-Tchou-Li; Jérôme Bourgon (2002) clarifies, however, that the photograph was of an unidentified victim executed in 1904. See also Brook, Bourgon, and Blue 2008 for a detailed analysis of the meanings of death by a thousand cuts, as well as the ways that Western misunderstandings and misappropriations of the practice (including Bataille's misidentification) are problematically orientalist.

all. The impossible excess of this extra hole is a microcosm of the larger catastrophe. It is the end of the world peeking through a small tear in the fabric.

In the final moments of *Melancholia*, as the blue planet looms ever closer in the distance, Justine reassures Claire's son Leo (Cameron Spurr) by telling him that she will build him a magic cave to protect him from the end of the world. They erect a triangular structure out of sticks, and the three hold hands as they sit cross-legged underneath it. As Wagner once again starts to rise on the soundtrack, the three of them brace for the end: Leo's face is trusting and hopeful, Claire's tearful and terrified, Justine's sad and resigned. The image washes over with blue before an extreme long shot reveals Melancholia expanding on the horizon. Its impact is seen before it is heard; debris and waves of water and fire rush towards the three figures, finally swallowing them as the score and sound of the collision coalesce in a thundering roar. These rumblings reverberate for a moment after the screen fades to black. The ending of *Melancholia* depicts the fragile moment right before the end, an excess of experience at the very limit of being before all sense is enveloped in blackness. This moment at the edge of sense suggests that our human modes of thought are small shelter in the wake of finitude; as Marta Figlerowicz suggests, the ending of *Melancholia* is a "radical questioning of how we make ourselves believe our feelings matter" (2012, 21). Words and images are fragile constructions built upwards from nothing, though we stubbornly cling to them as though they have power over what we do not and can never understand.

The representation of the end of the world in *Melancholia* and its symbolisation through the impossible presence/absence of Hole 19 are exemplary limit images in that they foreground the difficulties of attempting to grapple with forces beyond human comprehension. While not all the limit films are as apocalyptic as *Melancholia*, they similarly negotiate the personal and the universal by testing the limits of subjectivity. Morton writes that the Anthropocene necessitates a new kind of thinking "in which the normal certainties are inverted, or even dissolved" (5). Limit films trace these inversions by embracing paradox, impossibility, and contradiction, and in so doing they encourage ways of thinking about the end of the world.

Film Ecocriticism and the Nonhuman Turn

Film studies has recently begun to answer the call for less anthropocentric modes of thought. Questions of human subjectivity have often been at the forefront of film theory:

from psychoanalysis to apparatus theory to cognitivism, a great deal of attention has been paid to the ways that cinema constructs or impacts processes of identification and subjectivisation. Film ecocriticism breaks with the anthropocentrism of these approaches by considering how film represents and relates to the nonhuman. There is a wide variety of approaches to film ecocriticism, and this section will briefly survey some major trends before focusing on those film-philosophical approaches that are most relevant to my argument.

Adrian Ivakhiv argues in his 2008 article "Green Film Criticism and Its Futures" that the beginnings of the twenty-first century saw ecocriticism moving away from its origins in literary studies and into the terrain of film and media analysis. He surveys major trends in film ecocriticism to that point, which he divides into a number of categories: ecocriticism of films with explicitly environmentalist messages; analyses of wildlife films and nature documentaries[9]; environmentalist critiques of experimental cinema; works on the representation of animals on film;[10] and more general green perspectives on cinema and other media[11] (1). Ivakhiv explains that these approaches exhibit a range of epistemological strategies, from the realist analyses of books on wildlife films (Derek Bousé's *Wildlife Films* [2000] and Gregg Mittman's *Reel Nature* [1999]), to the ideological critique of popular cinema (Pat Brereton's *Hollywood Utopia* [2003] and David Ingram's *Green Screen* [2000]), to possible alternatives to both suggested by experimental and avant-garde cinemas (Scott MacDonald's *The Garden in the Machine* [2001][12]). Ivakhiv notes a tendency in film ecocriticism to remain on the level of the text by considering issues of representation and aesthetics, rather than exploring cinema's implication in a broader ecology of production, distribution, and reception: he writes, "[m]uch ecological writing has pursued an idealist focus on philosophies and ideologies rather than a materialist concern with the things, processes, and systems that support and enable the making and

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[9] In addition to the sources surveyed below, see Armbruster 1998; Chris 2002; Palmer 2010, 2015.

[10] Ivakhiv's example is Jonathan Burt's *Animals in Film* (2002); see also Lippit 2000; Baker 2001; Burt 2006; McFarland and Hediger 2009; Pick 2011, 2013, 2017; Pick and Narraway 2013; McMahon 2012, 2014a, 2014b, 2015a, 2015b, McMahon and Lawrence 2015; Leane and Nicol 2013; Molloy 2011, 2013; Jeong 2013.

[11] In addition to the sources surveyed below, see Hochman 1998; Meister and Japp 2002; Thacker 2004; Lindahl-Elliot 2006; Maxwell and Miller 2012; McKim 2012; Rust, Monani and Cubitt 2013, 2016; Weik von Mossner 2014; Maxwell, Raundalen, and Vestberg 2015; Brereton 2016.

[12] See also MacDonald 2009.

disseminating of cultural texts" (19). Ivakhiv points out that although idealist approaches to film ecocriticism might seek to untangle the ideological terrain of popular films, little has been done to explore the actual effects of these films on audiences. He also notes a lack of research on the material consequences of film production and the effects of changing attitudes within the industry (23). In order to address these gaps, Ivakhiv calls for a more materialist approach to film ecocriticism that explores the implication of individual film texts in broader ecologies of production, distribution, and reception.

Ivakhiv applauds Sean Cubitt's *EcoMedia* (2005) for paving the way for such an approach. *EcoMedia* examines a range of media, from popular films such as *Lord of the Rings* (Peter Jackson 2001-3) to anime (*Princess Mononoke* [Hayao Miyazaki 1997]) to BBC documentaries like *The Blue Planet* (2001). Cubitt's analysis does not reject ideological critique – he asserts that popular film "can voice its contradictions in ways few more self-conscious activities do" (2) – but rather mobilises it through a more holistic mode of analysis. Cubitt analyses media itself as an ecology, and asserts the political importance of understanding not only how people communicate with each other (cinema being one example) but also how these mediations fit within a complex network that includes the agency of humans, technologies, and the natural world. *EcoMedia* emphasises that the ecological crisis demands that we negotiate issues of responsibility within these complex networks.

Cubitt finishes his book by arguing that since we are failing to ascribe responsibility either to individuals or to the system – blaming Exxon overlooks that they are meeting consumer demand for fossil fuels, and blaming the individual overlooks the influence of ideology on their everyday choices – we should instead ascribe it to our modes of communication. He writes that "[a]gency lies in the field of distribution, the communicative structures operating in the subject-object relation" (143): power for Cubitt rests in mediated interactions between entities rather than in the entities themselves, and this is also where he suggests we might find possibilities for change. Cubitt therefore positions film (and other media) at the intersection between the subjective and objective, an assessment that points to the important role that film analysis might play in addressing the ecological crisis. My own analyses in later chapters also build from this assumption, in order to argue that film's ability to mediate between subjects and objects allows it to provide new ways of understanding and orienting relations between human and nonhuman aspects of reality.

There have been a number of important developments in film ecocriticism since Ivakhiv's call for more materialist analyses in the wake of Cubitt's *Ecomedia.* While audience research and analysis of production practices are still underdeveloped areas in the field – with important exceptions such Nadia Bozak's *The Cinematic Footprint: Lights, Camera, Natural Resources* (2011), which explores the ecological consequences of the film industry and its reliance on fossil fuels[13] – there has been a trend towards more materialist approaches to film ecocriticism, especially within the growing field of film philosophy.

Ivakhiv's 2013 monograph *Ecologies of the Moving Image: Cinema, Affect, Nature* is an important contribution to this trend.[14] Ivakhiv describes his approach as an "ecophilosophy of cinema (viii), and he uses the process-relational approaches of philosophers Alfred North Whitehead, Charles Sanders Pierce, and Gilles Deleuze to explore the ways that films can articulate ecological processes of becoming. Films are important for Ivakhiv because they uniquely express these processes: he writes that "[o]f the modern art forms, I suggest that it is cinema – the art of the moving image – that comes closest to depicting reality itself, because reality is always in motion, always in a process of becoming" (viii). Film for Ivakhiv does more than merely reflect public opinions and anxieties: it is also part of the process of relating to reality, and as such helps to produce the world and human relations to it. Ivakhiv identifies three "dimensions" that negotiate ecological relationships in cinema – the geomorphic, biomorphic, and anthropomorphic – and argues that together these dimensions produce dynamic film worlds that are at once subjective and objective, made up of both "subjectivating" and "objectified" entities (11). *Ecologies of the Moving Image* is an important precursor for this thesis because it provides a model for how film ecocriticism might be approached philosophically. The stakes of Ivakhiv's project are ontological, since his analysis explores how films not only represent but constitute part of reality through affective and material processes; though my philosophical underpinning are somewhat different than Ivakhiv's (as shall be explained in the following section), I similarly explore the ways that cinema negotiates between subjective and objective poles and can help subvert or re-orient relations between them.

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[13] For less film-specific explorations of the environmental impacts of media, see also Maxwell and Miller 2012; Maxwell, Raundalen, and Vestberg 2015; and Parikka 2011.

[14] See also Ivakhiv 2011 for a precursor to his argument in the monograph, as well as Ivakhiv 2013b, which provides a condensed summary of his major theoretical motivations.

Other eco-philosophical approaches to cinema have emerged alongside Ivakhiv. In a range of texts, Anat Pick (2011, 2013, 2015) draws from philosophers such as Martin Heidegger and Simone Weil in order to discuss the shared worldhood of animals and humans. Seung-hoon Jeong employs philosophical ideas in order to discuss the intersections between humanity, animals, and technology in popular media. In "A Global Cinematic Zone of Animal and Technology" (2013), he draws from a range of thinkers including Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Lacan, Slavoj Žižek, and Giorgio Agamben, as well as a number of films in order to suggest that "[a]nimality and technology no longer form a naïve dichotomy of nature vs. civilisation but connect with each other" through a "cinematic 'zone' that now goes global" (154). Recent work from Laura McMahon (2012, 2014a, 2014b, 2015a, 2015b) uses ideas from the philosophies of Deleuze, Derrida, and Jean-Luc Nancy in order to explore ecological relations in films such as *Beau travail* (Claire Denis 1999), *Bestiare* (Denis Côté 2012), *Le Quattro Volte* (Michelangelo Frammartino 2010), and *Bovines* (Emmanuel Gras 2011). While attention towards the nonhuman is nothing new in film studies – Pick and Guinevere Narraway point out in the introduction to their edited volume *Screening Nature: Cinema Beyond the Human* (2014) that classical film theorists such as Siegfried Kracauer and Andre Bazin[15] were very much concerned with cinema's ability to represent objects, animals, and natural phenomena (2) – these recent philosophical engagements suggest that questions about nature, animals, and technology have become especially pressing in the early decades of the twenty-first century.

This hypothesis is supported by Richard Grusin's *The Nonhuman Turn* (2015), which identifies a broader shift in the humanities away from humanist modes of analysis during the early decades of the new millennium. Grusin points to a number of theoretical influences on this nonhuman turn, including: actor-network theory, affect theory, animal studies (in the wake of Donna Haraway [1989, 1991, 2003, 2008]), assemblage theory (especially those of Gilles Deleuze and Bruno Latour), brain sciences (neuroscience, cognitive science, and artificial intelligence), new materialism (in feminism and Marxism), new media theory, speculative realism, and systems theory (viii-ix). Grusin argues that the nonhuman turn "insists (to paraphrase Latour) that 'we have never been human' but that humans have always coevolved, coexisted, or collaborated with the nonhuman" (ix). Like

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[15] There has been a recent resurgence of scholarship on Bazin, particularly in an ecocritical context: see Fay 2008; Jeong and Andrew 2008; McMahon 2012; Jeong 2014; Pick 2015.

Pick and Narraway, Grusin makes clear that these questions have a long genealogy (viii), but their renewed emphasis in the nonhuman turn indicates that they have become more pressing in light of advancing technologies and intensifying environmental problems

The increased attention towards the nonhuman in film studies can therefore be seen as part of this broader shift, and a number of the philosophers cited by the above film ecocritics – Deleuze, Whitehead, Agamben – are common points of reference for the nonhuman turn. Even Žižek, whose seemingly rather humanist basis in Hegel, Marx, and Lacan renders him an unlikely candidate for the nonhuman turn, has recently begun to address ecological questions (2007, 2010, 2011). These shifts have directly impacted film studies, to the degree that a survey of relevant sources would be far beyond the scope of this thesis: affect theory has become a prominent mode of analysis, seen in the works of scholars such as Laura U. Marks (2000), Brian Massumi (2002), Eugenie Brinkema (2014), and Steven Shaviro (1993, 2010, 2014); there have been a number of books and articles in the wake of Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" (1991) about machines and artificial intelligence in cinema (Kirkup 2000; Short 2005; Nishime 2005; Pheasant-Kelly 2011); and Deleuzian analysis, including assemblage theory, is commonly employed to theorise nonhuman aspects of film and media (Ivakhiv 2013; Jeong 2013; McMahon 2014a, 2015b). More specifically related to the direct concerns of this thesis, speculative realism has recently begun to make an impact on film studies. Selmin Kara (2014) argues that twenty-first century digital films like *Tree of Life* (Terrence Malick 2011) and *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (Benh Zeitlin 2012) exemplify what she calls a speculative realist aesthetic, since they similarly engage with questions of ancestrality and extinction. This claim has been taken up and critiqued by Christopher Peterson (2015) and David Martin-Jones (2016a, 2016b), who each offer alternative ways of looking at how cinema relates to the nonhuman: Martin-Jones suggests a non-Eurocentric film-philosophical approach through the work of Enrique Dussel; Peterson advocates a phenomenological approach that nevertheless recognises the agency of objects. So while speculative realism remains marginal to film studies, it has nevertheless been both suggested and critiqued as a means of calling attention to the nonhuman in cinema. My argument in Chapter 3 will directly contribute to this discussion.

To sum up, I would like to suggest that Ivakhiv's call in 2008 for more materialist approaches in film ecocriticism has since come to fruition, keeping pace with wider trends in the humanities. This does not mean that materialism has entirely superseded previous approaches, of course, as modes of analysis that might be described as more humanist or

idealist (poststructuralism, cognitivism, phenomenology, psychoanalysis, linguistic philosophy and semiotics) remain popular in both the humanities and film studies more specifically. Further, while I have identified a noticeable trend towards philosophical approaches to film ecocriticism (Ivakhiv, Pick, Jeong, McMahon, Kara, Martin-Jones) – an area that seems to largely have sprung up since Ivakhiv's summation of the field in 2008 – I do not mean to suggest that film-philosophy has become the dominant mode of analysis or has replaced other forms of ecocriticism. Ivakhiv's article argued that ecocriticism to that point tended to focus on popular cinema or films with explicitly environmentalist messages (1), and there have been a number of new publications in this regard (Murray and Heumann 2009; Willoquet-Maricondi 2010; Narine 2014; O'Brien 2016). There have also been recent publications on wildlife films (Beinart and McKeown 2009; Monani 2012; Rust 2013) and activist/environmentalist documentaries (Willoquet-Maricondi 2011; Freeman and Tulloch 2013; Ingram 2013). Film historians have also begun engaging in questions related to ecology and the Anthropocene: James Cahill and Jennifer Fay, for example, both look to early filmmakers like Jean Painlevé (Cahill 2012, 2013) and Buster Keaton (Fay 2014) in order to address contemporary environmental concerns. Resisting the trend in early ecocriticism of focusing on Hollywood film (Ingram 2000, Brereton 2005), several books and articles have recently been published on transnational and non-Western ecocinemas (Lu and Mi 2010; Gustafsson and Kääpä 2013; Chu 2016). This brief survey already suggests that film ecocriticism is an increasingly vibrant and diverse discourse, and that my own argument occupies a particular corner of a broader conversation by advancing a film-philosophical approach. My hope is that my Bataillean methodology will provide new ways of making connections rather than opposing previous ideas, since his thought allows for a certain degree of flexibility between some of the "turns" informing this thesis – linguistic, speculative, and nonhuman.

Another reason for pointing to the divide between pre-and post-2008 film ecocriticism marked by Ivakhiv's article, beside the above point that it suggests a recent turn towards eco-philosophy, is that it aligns itself rather conveniently with the advent of speculative realism. Meillassoux *After Finitude* (*Après la finitude*) was published in French in 2006, and inspired the first conference on Speculative Realism at Goldsmiths College the following year; Brassier's English translation of *After Finitude* was then published in 2008. These contemporaneous shifts in philosophy and film studies form the immediate context of ideas in this thesis. Speculative realism will be my major point of engagement with the nonhuman turn, and Meillassoux, Harman, Morton, and Shaviro will be frequent

interlocutors throughout this thesis. This is because, as mentioned above, I share with the speculative realists my way of understanding the limit between human and non-human realities according to the Kantian distinction of things-for-us and things-in-themselves. However, my argument should not be seen as a continuation or application of speculative realist ideas, as I disagree with a number of the movement's central motivations. Through Bataille, I will ask many of the same questions as the speculative realists about the possibility of thinking or representing mind-independent reality, but by focusing on how the limit is evoked by cinema I will answer them in a different way.

My major point of disagreement is with the speculative realists' outright dismissal of the linguistic turn. The edited volume *The Speculative Turn* (Bryant, Harman, and Srnicek 2011) brings together some of the major thinkers associated with speculative realism, including Meillassoux, Harman, Brassier, Shaviro, Latour, and – though he is somewhat more critical – Žižek. (In order to avoid confusion, we might follow Grusin in thinking of this "speculative turn" as a subset of the larger nonhuman turn, which, as Grusin points out, can be traced back several decades earlier [xii]). In their introduction, the volume's editors propose the movement as "a deliberate counterpoint to the now tiresome 'Linguistic Turn'" (1). Grusin makes a similar claim about the nonhuman turn more generally:

> Perhaps most powerfully, the nonhuman turn challenges some of the key assumptions of social constructivism, particularly insofar as it insists that the agency, meaning, and value of nature all derive from cultural, social, or ideological inscription or construction. (xi)

I do not share this sense of fatigue. While I agree with Grusin's point that theory and philosophy need to account for nonhuman agency in their ethics and ontologies, a project rendered difficult by the social constructivism that underlined much of twentieth century thought, I also think that ignoring the lessons of the linguistic turn can risk arrogance and ideological blind spots.

This is in part because the seductive promise of the new can allow us to forget or cover over aspects of thought that are potentially problematic or reactionary. Shaviro makes a similar point in *The Universe of Things* (2014) by claiming that "[s]peculative realism is not without its dangers" since at its worst it is "a lot like speculative finance, leveraging vast amounts of credit (both fiscal and metaphysical) on the basis of shaky, dubious

foundations (or no foundations at all)" (10). He asserts that, rather than embracing bold new ideas over what the editors of *The Speculative Turn* dismiss as "stuffy … common sense" (Bryant, Harman, and Srnicek 2011, 7), a better way to "outfox correlationism" would be to "proceed obliquely through the history of philosophy, finding its points of divergence and its strange detours, when it moves beyond its own anthropocentric assumptions" (9). My Bataillean methodology, though different than Shaviro's Whiteheadian approach, seeks just such a detour. I therefore follow Shaviro in thinking that a certain degree of caution towards the new – which might initially appear overly conservative in its return to old ideas – can actually help inoculate against some of the more reactionary aspects of the nonhuman turn. So while I would agree that not all aspects of reality are socially constructed, it is also relatively uncontroversial to point out that, from a human point of view (which is the only one immediately available to us), a great deal of them are. I therefore think it is misguided to sweep aside concerns about thought, mediation, representation, ideology, and language in the bold attempt to speculate about objective, mind-independent reality.

I am overgeneralising here, because speculative realism at its best is extremely careful and rigorous in its attempts to exceed human thought (Meillassoux's work is exemplary in this regard). However, I *do* think that positioning the nonhuman and speculative turns as reactionary towards or in opposition to the linguistic turn leaves us open to certain problems. The linguistic turn taught us that the same reality can be explained in a multitude of ways: a single phenomenon can be described in terms of ideology, science, and subjective experience (and many other ways besides), narratives that are all negotiated in relation to complex systems of power, both human and nonhuman. I do not see a reason to close off avenues of thought, and so my methodology seeks some flexibility between constructivism and realism. This is especially important in dealing with cinema as an object, I think, because as a popular art form it raises questions of ontology and indexicality at the same time as it articulates ideological concepts and power structures. I try to engage in analysis on both levels, especially in Chapter 3, which brings together the unlikely combination of speculative realism and Jean-Louis Baudry's apparatus theory. In line with the title of this work, the reader might therefore find it helpful to think of my approach to film analysis as somewhere "at the limit" between the linguistic and nonhuman turns.

For now, I will leave this outline of my suspicions and motivations somewhat general; they will be given more sustained engagement in subsequent chapters. But it is worth pointing out that the lines between the linguistic and nonhuman turns are not as stark as some of the theorists of the nonhuman turn would have us think (Graham Harman is most strident in this regard, as he frequently expresses open distaste for constructivist philosophies[16]). For example, though Derrida is often associated with the constructivism the nonhuman turn is supposedly reacting against ("il n'y a pas de hors-texte"/ "there is no outside-text" [1967, 158]), he argues in *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2008) that the animal has scarcely been considered in contemporary thought. This claim, and especially Derrida's now-famous example of his naked encounter with his cat, is frequently brought up in the nonhuman turn along with other thinkers of the animal like Haraway and Agamben (Burt 2006; Fay 2008; McMahon 2012; Jeong 2013). Cary Wolfe (2009), to whom I shall return in the following section, argues that Derridean deconstruction can be put to use for non-anthropocentric ends, since it productively exposes the limits of thought and discourse. Other seemingly anthropocentric theories like psychoanalysis have also been used in non-anthropocentric ways, Žižek's turn towards ecology being only one example: in the context of film studies, scholars aligning themselves with posthumanism and/or the nonhuman turn have used Freudian/Lacanian ideas such as desire and the uncanny to explore nonhuman elements of films (Badmington 2004; Cahill 2013; Jeong 2013). These examples, though far from comprehensive, suggest that the boundaries between the linguistic and nonhuman turns are already blurry; my contribution merely seeks to keep these points of connection open. If the nonhuman turn is driven in part by a motivation to avoid binaries between nature and culture, subject and object, self and other, then I see no reason to close ourselves off through theoretical boundaries between these different modes of thought.

This section has situated my argument within the immediate context of film ecocriticism and its broader position in the nonhuman turn. I have suggested that Ivakhiv's demand for

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[16] Harman tends to write about his experience as a realist continental philosopher as though he belongs to a persecuted minority that has only recently begun to triumph over those dogmatic idealists who refuse to take reality "seriously" (2017, 2). In his book with Manuel DeLanda, *The Rise of Realism* (2017), he complains: "Until quite recently, almost no philosopher who was continentally trained saw anything of value in a realist position. Indeed, in our first correspondence some years ago, you stated accurately that 'for decades admitting that one was a realist was equivalent to acknowledging one was a child molester' (DeLanda 2007)" (1-2).

more materialist approaches to film ecocriticism has been taken up in a number of ways, developing alongside the nonhuman turn in the humanities. But I have also advocated a certain degree of caution or hesitancy in embracing new ideas, since they sometimes come at the expense of forgetting previous lessons or covering over our own ideological blind spots. There is therefore a hesitancy in my thinking between idealism and materialism – but through Bataille I will turn this hesitancy into a productive critical framework rather than a theoretical flaw. Being critical of post-Enlightenment humanism means, in part, recognising the problems posed by human arrogance: ecologically minded ontologies resist the idea that humans belong at the top of a natural hierarchy according to our abilities to reason about and control our environments. This calls for a way of recognising our limits, and an openness to being confronted with things that we cannot fully explain or understand. This thesis therefore rests on the assumption that human knowledge is inevitably partial and situated, and the following section will introduce some of the ways that Bataille's philosophy can provide a way of coming down from the summit of human exceptionalism without failing to recognise the epistemological limitations posed by subjective experience. Bataille's ideas about the relationship between art and reason can also provide insight into how cinema might help us conceptualise new relations between human and nonhuman realities.

Bataille, Transgression, Ecology

This section, on method, will argue that, when read from an ecological perspective, Bataille's notions of transgression and inner experience offer a particular critique of anthropocentrism that is useful for interpreting human/nonhuman relations in films. I will connect Bataille's thinking to more contemporary ideas belonging to the nonhuman turn, in particular Cary Wolfe's use of the term *autopoiesis*. The choice of Bataille might seem anachronistic, especially given his somewhat uneasy position within contemporary discourse. While he remains a key reference for many important twentieth and twenty-first century philosophers – Michel Foucault's endorsement on the back cover of *Erotism* (Bataille 1957b) claims that "Bataille is one of the most important writers of the century" – Bataille himself has a reputation for being somewhat outdated, even immature or unsophisticated in comparison to those who source him.[17] There are a number of reasons

[17] Bataille was an influence on Derrida, Foucault, and Nancy, among others: see especially Foucault 1963; Derrida 1998; Nancy 1986.

for this, not least of which Bataille's obsessive focus on the subjects of transgression, human sacrifice, sexuality, and death.

Bataille (1891-1962) was a medievalist who worked for much of his life at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris; he worked on medallion collections and published on numismatics. However, as Allan Stoekl points out in his introduction to Bataille's *Visions of Excess*, "[a]t the same time … Bataille was living a kind of second life" and "was far from being a calm and orderly librarian" (1985, x). Bataille wrote extensively on subjects that range from anthropology to economics to art history to philosophy; he was also a founding member of the Collège de Sociologie (1937-1939), a lecture series that brought together leading French intellectuals during the interwar period, as well as a more shadowy organisation called Acéphale that focused Bataille's central values of "expenditure, risk, loss, sexuality, death" and even discussed the possibility of conducting a human sacrifice (though they never carried it out) (Stoekl 1985, xix-xx). Fred Botting and Scott Wilson suggest that these excessive elements are part of the reason for Bataille's marginal status as a philosopher: his thought is focused on "taking experience beyond every boundary, transgressing every law. Philosophically untenable, it is this aspect of Bataille's work that is most exciting, paradoxical, and difficult, attracting and repelling readers in equal measure" (1988, 2). Bataille's work is difficult to pin down because it seeks something beyond the grasp of language, and therefore constantly struggles with its own conceptual limitations through repeated emphases on paradox and contradiction.

Though Bataille is not a mainstream figure in film studies, his thought has had some impact on the field, especially in relation to filmmakers or movements characterised by provocation. His ideas have been applied to a range of topics, including: larger groupings of films like the Japanese new wave (Gordienko 2012), French new extremism (Best and Crowley 2007; Beugnet 2007; Vincendeau 2007; Kendall 2011b; Birks 2015), and African cinema (Harrow 2009); auteurs like Nagisa Oshima (Knauss 2009), Catherine Breillat (Angelo 2010), Lars von Trier (Keefer and Linafelt 1998; McNair 2002; Bush 2015), and Buster Keaton (Trahair 2007); and individual films such as *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959) (Reynolds 2010) and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) (Merritt 2010). Because Bataille is focused on experiences that exceed or resist rational frameworks, his thought is also sometimes brought to bear on the study of affect, especially in relation to horror cinema. He was a major influence on Julia Kristeva, who builds her notion of abjection in *Powers of Horror* (1982, 56-65) from Bataille, especially an essay called "L'abjection et

les formes misérables" (1970). A recent special issue of *Film-Philosophy* refers repeatedly to both Bataille and Kristeva and "takes its cue from Bataille's entreaty that we are 'bound and sworn to what provokes our most intense disgust'" (Kendall 2011a). While Bataille's relationship to horror is clear due to their shared emphasis on violence and perverse sexuality, his applicability to ecocriticism is less obvious. This is, to my knowledge, the first extended use of Bataille in a film-ecocritical context.

I turn to Bataille because his philosophy rests on a critique of anthropocentrism despite recognising that knowledge inevitably remains within the realm of the human. In *Inner Experience* (1954), he sums up this position in an assertion that speaks both to the decentring of the human and the paradoxical nature of language, writing that "[w]e cannot endlessly be what we are: words cancelling each other out, at the same time unwavering joists, believing ourselves the foundation of the world" (39). Despite the stubborn belief that words can express knowledge about the external world, Bataille argues that this merely gives the impression of objective mastery: reality always remains in excess of language, and language's attempts to appropriate it always end in inconsistencies and contradictions. His call to action that we "cannot endlessly be what we are" supports the idea that we cannot remain stuck within the circular logic of reason that, in trying to escape itself, only ever results in reinforcing its own limits. Denis Hollier explicitly links Bataille's undermining of language with a critique of anthropocentrism: he writes that

> [a]nthropocentrism, indeed, represses dehumanizing and decentering excesses; it is committed to saving 'the world we live in', a world organized around the human subject, against the world of expenditure, which Bataille also calls 'the world we die in', 'a world for nobody, a world from which subjects have been evacuated, the world of the non-I'. (1988, 69).

Though language inevitability belongs to the world we live in – the one ordered around the human subject – Bataille's philosophy attempts to trace the limits of thought in order to evoke, without appropriating, what is in excess of human attempts to signify.

While a number of Bataille's ideas will be explored in later chapters, two concepts in particular are integral to my methodology and will be explained in some detail here: I will outline transgression first, and then turn to inner experience. Transgression is the name that Bataille gives to the moment when a limit is crossed, not only in an ethical sense (which is the more usual way of thinking about transgression, as when we transgress a law or taboo)

but also ontologically. The many transgressive acts discussed in Bataille's writing are not merely superficial attempts to shock or disrupt moral sensibilities – though they are intended to do this as well – but also a way of enacting this movement, of articulating it through language while also giving the reader a way of experiencing it. Bataille's major philosophical texts (including *Inner Experience* [1943], *The Accursed Share* [1967a] and *Erotism* [1957b], among others) all include chapters on topics such as human sacrifice, sexual taboos, and torture, and his erotic fiction (*The Story of the Eye* [1928], *Madame Edwarda* [1941], *The Blue of Noon* [1957a], *My Mother* [1966], *The Dead Man* [1967][18]) describe a number of depraved acts in detail: children copulate next to corpses, a girl masturbates with eggs and human eyeballs, a man has sex with a prostitute who claims to be God, a boy is sexually initiated by his mother. Bataille's intention is not to argue for the permissibility of these acts, as this would render these act commonplace and therefore strip them of their transgressive power.[19] Rather, Bataille writes about transgressive acts in order to comment on their very impermissibility. As Foucault argues, the role of transgression in Bataille "is to measure the excessive distance that it opens at the heart of the limit and to trace the flashing line that caused the limit to arise" (1988, 25): Bataille works to interrogate rather than eradicate taboo, exposing the ways that interdiction covers over excesses while also giving rise to their very possibility.

What exactly occurs in this crossing of limits for Bataille, then? What is essential to note is that there is nothing for us to cross over into; or, seen from the other direction, transgression is the act of crossing over into nothing. It occurs entirely in the space of its

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[18] Bataille distanced himself from his more literary works, as he published *The Story of the Eye* and *Madame Edwarda* under pseudonyms (Lord Auch and Pierre Angélique respectively, though a later edition of the latter was published with a preface in Bataille's name); *My Mother* and *The Dead Man* were published posthumously.

[19] Some have argued that this has already come to pass. In an article on French new extremism (on which Bataille was a major influence), Tina Kendall (2011b) points out that the relevance of Bataille's ideas has waned due to the rise of market capitalism, which easily appropriates the transgressive appeal of sex and violence to make a profit. She draws from Linda Williams (1989) and Steven Shaviro (2005; 2006), who both argue that Bataille's arguments are outdated and that "transgression has lost its sting" (Shaviro 2005). Kendall reclaims Bataille's ideas through the notion of "tacky spectatorship," drawing from Martin Crowley's (2004) claim "that the appeal of Bataille today springs from his 'tackiness', understood at once as the risible, cringingly formulaic, or even embarrassing aspects of his writing *and* the kind of sticky, contagious contact that is effected by his work as a result" (Kendall 2011b, 46). For Kendall, it is this tackiness (rather than the representation of sex and violence) that constitutes the transgressive excess of new extremist cinema.

crossing, in an untenable moment that results from "an *unbearable* surpassing of being" (1941, 141). Sex and death are transgressive acts in a moral sense, because they inhibit our ability to work and therefore go against the foundations of society (a population that is constantly fornicating and murdering each other does not make for a productive workforce[20]). However, sex and death are also transgressive because the acts transgress the very structure of society as such by aiming for something that exceeds the bounds of human reason. This ontological dimension to transgression is apparent in the way that sex and death are experienced: both occur as the subjective anticipation of an event that exhausts itself in the very moment of its occurrence. The moment of death is both the extreme limit and the relief of suffering, in the same way that orgasm is both the extreme limit and the relief of building sexual pleasure.

These moments are unbearable in the sense that they cannot be prolonged, since while they occur over a period of time, they must always culminate in the instant when being is extinguished, or when mounting sexual pleasure exhausts itself in its release.[21] Neither death nor orgasm crosses over to "another side," at least not one with any positive content. Beyond death there is nothing; Bataille follows Nietzsche in affirming the death of God, which implies no external support for human existence (I will cover this point in more detail in Chapter 2). After orgasm there is merely continued everyday life. Neither state achieves a sustained "higher plane"; rather, they eclipse themselves at the apogee of the experience. This temporal understanding of transgression is crucial, as it implies that the experience of it, either in orgasm or death, can never be pinned down. As Foucault remarks, the relation between limits and transgression is "situated in an uncertain context, in certainties which are immediately upset so that thought is ineffectual as soon as it attempts to seize them" (1988, 27), which means that Bataille's attempts to trace these limits are doomed to failure. Transgression itself is not a static entity, but rather refers to that which slips through at the very moment of seizure; it must be experienced rather than known, and as such necessarily remains elusive to thought. Because there is no fixed

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[20] For more on taboos, transgressions, and the establishment of society based on work, see especially Part I of *Erotism* (1957b) and Part I of *The Tears of Eros* (1961).

[21] This simplifies matters slightly, as it rather misogynistically ignores the possibility of multiple orgasms. But while multiple orgasms complicate the picture by indicating a sexual pleasure that does not immediately exhaust itself upon orgasm, I do not think that they entirely contradict it: in order for them to be experienced as multiple they must be experienced as distinct, which means that a certain point they must reach a limit.

concept to grasp, the work of theorising transgression is never over. There can only be anxious repetition, failed attempts to signify the unsignifiable. Bataille's words enact their transgressions over and over again, each time only giving a brief, chaotic glimpse of the limit in a surge of linguistic excess. It is these glimpses (but seen through images rather than words) that I argue also characterise limit cinema.

While sex and death provide an effective model for understanding transgression, I am less interested in transgressions themselves than in what they can reveal about what is in excess of human experience. Bataille's model of subjectivity involves a desire to overcome the distinction between subject and object at the limit of experience while still asserting that interiority can never be transcended. Bataille characterises the impossible outside that is in excess of experience in different ways. Often he describes it as a kind of pure negativity, as in death or the void at the edge of existence. But he also sometimes describes it as something living, an abject, squirming multitude that writhes underneath the sanitised language of reason. He sometimes frames it in terms of the radical alterity of other people, from which the subject is able to conceive of itself as a singular being in relation to a community of others. But the outside is always in excess of meaning, an "unknowable immensity" that goes beyond the boundaries of every articulation (Bataille 1954, 88). Bataille makes excess the fundamental principle of existence, a theory that has profound consequences for not only his metaphysics, but also his ethics. It implies that we can never make the system the end of the story; we cannot content ourselves with what lies within the limits of the anthropocentric bubble despite our inability to see beyond it.

This paradox between a desire to see beyond subjective boundaries and a complete inability to do so informs Bataille's concept of inner experience. Subjectivity for Bataille is structured through radical alterity, through an "outside" that can never be accessed except by means of internal experiences, despite the fact that it is irreducible to them. Bataille also conceives of the subject as a complex system that changes through the imposition of differences over time: he writes in *Inner Experience* (1954) that it becomes impossible to locate the "being" of the subject in the midst of the web of relations that constitute a person's body and experience. He compares this to a knife that gets a new handle, and then a new blade, and then to a machine that gets a series of new parts, but argues that these examples still do not capture the complexity of "a man whose constituent parts die incessantly (such that nothing of these elements that we *were* subsists after a certain

number of years)" (86).[22] But despite the fact that it is impossible to locate a self-contained identity in this web of differences, for Bataille these differences somehow come together to form a singular self: he writes that the human subject has the ability to "enclose being in a simple, indivisible element" (86). He calls this constitutive contradiction of identity-through-difference "ipseity" (self-identity, selfsameness). Ipseity is what allows us to draw a distinction between what is inside and what is outside of ourselves despite the fact that "self" is a non-locatable concept, lost in "a labyrinth in which it wanders endlessly" (86). The enclosure of being required for ipseity means that the subject in Bataille is founded not on its own internal structure, but rather on its relationship to its outside. This paradoxical relationship to the outside from within and the ontological priority of the environment over the subject acknowledge that our limits cannot be transcended while simultaneously refusing to restrict existence to the boundaries of human thought.

Bataille's notion of ipseity resonates with more recent ways of conceptualising the relationship between human subjectivity and the environment, especially Cary Wolfe's explanation of autopoiesis in *What Is Posthumanism?* (2009), which similarly places the subject in relation to an outside that can only ever be grasped internally. These resonances usefully illustrate why Bataille's ontology might be useful for posthumanist theory (I will return to the relationship between autopoiesis and ipseity in Chapter Four). Drawing primarily from Derridean deconstruction as well as Niklas Luhmann's variation of systems theory, Wolfe argues that the posthumanist project properly conceived is not an attempt to reach beyond the human, but rather to articulate what it is to be human with greater rigour and specificity. This, it should be noted, is a point of departure from Grusin and some of the other thinkers of the nonhuman turn, who view posthumanism as overly teleological (Grusin 2015, ix). However, since there are many common references between posthumanism and the nonhuman turn (such as Haraway, Latour, and Deleuze), and both movements are concerned with overcoming anthropocentrism, I think there are more points of agreement than departure. Further, Wolfe's version of posthumanism calls for a self-awareness and acknowledgement of inevitable blind spots that is lacking in some of the speculative realist theories, and is helpful for tracing the ways that limit films destabilise form and meaning.

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[22] I will return to this analogy in more detail in Chapter 4.

Posthumanism as Wolfe conceives it calls for a radically destabilized ontology of both the human and the irreducibly complex environment against which it positions itself. In contrast to the traditional humanist model that sees subjectivity as autonomous and self-contained, the posthumanist subject is a constantly shifting system without an underlying essence or substrate that adapts in relation to an irreducibly complex and continually changing environment. Drawing from Luhmann's system theory as well as Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela's concept of *autopoiesis*[23], Wolfe argues that posthumanism, like deconstruction, deontologises concepts such as "human" and "nature" by taking into account how differences serve to both construct and destabilise systems over time. Wolfe's work is therefore an attempt to "take seriously the concept of autopoiesis — that systems, including bodies, are both open *and* closed as the very possibility of their existence (open on the level of structure to energy flows, environmental perturbations, and the like, but closed on the level of self-referential organization)" (xxiv-xxv).

This fundamental paradox of what Wolfe calls "openness from closure" allows him to take the environment into account while still maintaining that we can only ever conceive of and interact with the environment from *within a system*, whether that system be a body, language, consciousness, law, or work of art. He argues that self-referentiality — the inability for a system to see outside of itself due to the fact that the very distinction between inside and outside is always constructed from within — does not imply that we are solipsistically circumscribed within the limits of a particular system, nor does it imply that we exist within a multiplicity of systems that are relativistically foreclosed from each other due to their inability to see outside of themselves. To see it this way would ignore the implications of temporality and thereby fall back into ontologising models of systems as stable and immune to outside influence.

In order to explain this principle of "openness from closure", Wolfe uses the example of the legal system, observing that

> the first-order distinction between legal and illegal in the legal system is itself a product of the code's own self-reference — that is to say, the problem is that

[23] Autopoiesis (meaning "self-creating") was originally used by Maturana and Varela to describe biological systems, especially cells, which are able to produce the components that organise their own internal structure. For a history of the concept's development within scientific research and its relevance to posthumanism in the humanities, see Hayles *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), especially chapter 6.

> both sides of the distinction are instantiated by one side of the distinction (namely, the legal: hence the tautology "legal is legal").

Each system is constrained by its own code, which it uses first to distinguish itself from its environment (legal vs. illegal), and then to develop in complexity based on environmental pressure; legal systems, for example, change over time and become increasingly complex in response to application and policy. In order for any system to function, Wolfe argues that it must remain blind to the fact that its foundational distinction from its environment can only be made internally, from the tautological assumption of identity ("legal is legal"). This blind spot can be observed by another system, but only if that system remains blind to its own fundamental paradox; there is no "outside" position from which any system might view itself or another, because the very distinction between inside and outside is *always made from the inside.* Thus, the fact that each system is constrained by its own code — its own method of distinguishing the differences between itself and its environment — does not imply that systems cannot speak to or about each other or their environments. It merely means that in order to do so they must remain blind to the fundamental paradox that allowed them to distinguish themselves in the first place. Wolfe's posthumanism recognises that systems like human subjectivity cannot overcome their own blind spots; however, he calls for a self-awareness, an acknowledgement of our own limitations and the particular ways that we process information from an irreducibly complex environment.

The paradox that Wolfe argues is essential for the construction of any system can be evoked by the formal characteristics of art. Drawing again on Luhmann, Wolfe claims that this is because "art as a social system has a unique relation to the *difference* between perception and communication" (xxxii), a relation which is built in to the very formal characteristics of art since art involves the communication of perceptions (which are themselves incommunicable). The "meaning" of a work of art is located somewhere in between these two incommensurable realms, and in certain cases can be their very incommensurability: this, Wolfe asserts, "is what allows art to have a privileged relationship to what has traditionally been called the 'ineffable' and the 'sublime'" (xxxiii). Wolfe uses examples from visual art and cinema (especially *Dancer in the Dark* [Lars von Trier 2000], an argument to which I will return in Chapter 4) in order to argue that certain works of art reveal how representation is always *representation for us*, and in so doing they call attention to the ways that representation inevitably covers over other positions from which meaning might be asserted.

This exposure of something that is also simultaneously covered over – the presentation of an absence, to recall my Hole 19 example from earlier in the chapter – also connects to Bataille's way of understanding the relationship between philosophy and art. Like Wolfe, Bataille suggests that any philosophy that attempts to interrogate the limits of reason ought to consider art and aesthetics, since the formal properties of art accommodate excesses and contradictions more easily than reason. This is not to say that art has a unique ability to access the outside of thought; for Bataille, both art and philosophy are *projects*, meaning that they construct something in order to achieve an end or an aim. This contradicts the non-teleological nature of existence, which is predicated on disorder and chance (see also Meillassoux 2008). The difference between art and reason for Bataille is in the way that the project is constructed: he writes that both attain a kind of harmony, but while reason works from disorder to order and in doing so eliminates the former from its worldview, art works the other way to create a kind of harmonious view of disorder.

Reason for Bataille suppresses "desire" from its construction (it effaces affect), while art on the other hand reintroduces it; this makes art "less harmony than the passage (or the return) of harmony to dissonance" (1954, 61). The composition of art, while necessarily achieving harmony in virtue of being contained within form, uses that form to express or evoke something beyond the grasp of reason. This oversimplifies things slightly, as it is possible for philosophy to similarly disrupt its own harmony – Wolfe argues that this is the aim of deconstruction – or even move its readers to tears, but the point is that in order to do so philosophy *must embrace art*. The distinction Bataille draws between art and reason points out that art uses form in order to release the same excesses that reason works to erase. In Wolfe's terms, while both art and reason are internally closed, the differences between their respective internal blind spots can be compared in order to better understand human relationships to the external world.

I have thus far asserted that Bataille's notions of transgression and inner experience are useful for theorising the limit between human and nonhuman realities in cinema, a claim that will be supported in the remaining chapters through analyses of particular limit films. But why Bataille, when other philosophers within the film-philosophy and ecocriticism canons seem to have much in common with his approach? Before I turn more specifically to how I plan to apply Bataille's ideas to cinema, I want to distinguish my Bataillean methodology with two more conventional approaches to film philosophy: Deleuzian and Lacanian. I do not offer Bataille as a radical alternative to previous methods, since his

thought has much in common with other thinkers more commonly employed in film ecocriticism and I will draw on these connections throughout this thesis. Bataille is different in several important respects, however, and these differences offer new critical possibilities for analysing the relations between subjectivity and objectivity in cinema.

At first glance, Bataille's view of subjectivity has a lot in common with Deleuze. They similarly view the subject as composite and unstable, and argue that the apparent unification of the subject is not a condition but the result of experience (Bataille 1954, 86; Deleuze 1987, 77-123; 1988, 78-101; 1991, 85-104). There are also commonalities in the ways that Deleuze and Bataille conceive of the unthought or outside, as they similarly make the non-correlationist argument that exteriority conditions existence and that (as Jonathan Roffe summarises Deleuze's thought) the "interior is only a selected interior" (Roffe 2010). These connections are not accidental, since there is a common genealogy of ideas: Deleuze engages extensively with Foucault (Deleuze 1988; Marks 2010, 112-13), on whom Bataille was a major influence (Foucault 1988), and Deleuze's conception of the outside is drawn from Maurice Blanchot (Deleuze 1985, 168), whose literary theory is so closely linked to Bataille that the two thinkers are often considered together (Shaviro 1990; Stamp 1999; Hill 2001; Holland 2004; ffrench 2007).

In light of these similarities, what distinguishes the images of limit cinema from Deleuze's time-image, which also emerges from an outside of thought? In other words, what value is there in proposing this new category of image, when Deleuzian analysis and the time-image specifically have received considerable attention as useful categories for the interpretation of cinema?[24] The primary difference is that Bataille is less willing to attribute positive content to the outside of thought than Deleuze. Though the time-image, like the limit-image, destabilises thought by creating "a fissure, a crack" (1985, 168) in the totalisable whole of assembled images, Deleuze is a philosopher of time (Rodowick 1997, xvii) and the stakes of his argument are tied to his Bergsonian understanding of temporal structure. While the outside of thought in *Cinema II* is associated with Bergson's notion of the virtual, the outside in Bataille is less easily pinned down, defined largely negatively or else through conflict and contradiction. The limit between thought and the outside in Bataille is more rigid, so that even when the boundaries between self and world are

[24] For a start, see Shaviro 1993; Marks 2000; Flaxman 2000; Pisters 2003, 2012; Martin-Jones 2006, 2011, forthcoming; Rodowick 1997, 2010; Martin-Jones and Brown 2012.

destabilised they cannot finally be transgressed; in the time-image, on the other hand, subject and object "mark poles between which there is continual passage" so that the distinction between them "tends to lose its importance" (Deleuze 1985, 7). So while the time-image operates through "a principle of indeterminability, of indiscernibility" (7) – thereby stepping over the limit at issue in this thesis – the limit-image functions through a logic of transgression, simultaneously undermining and reinforcing the self-contained nature of subjectivity. Deleuze's philosophy is motivated by a desire to discern "how the human observer can think beyond its own constituted, habituated and all too human world" (Colebrook 2010, 1), but Bataille is less convinced of our ability to escape our habits; he would insist that the more we think we have exceeded our limits, the more we find we have paradoxically reinforced them. This is exactly what occurs in the process of transgression. I share Bataille's feeling that those forces shaping human subjectivity – ideology, language, consciousness – are difficult or even impossible to shake off; this is especially true when cinema is the object of inquiry, since cinema's objective impressions are always articulated in relation to an implied human subject (I shall explore this in more detail in Chapters 3 and 4).

If we accept that Bataille's emphasis on the inescapable forces structuring subjectivity differentiates him from Deleuze, however, this seemingly puts him closer to Lacan. For Lacan (and for Žižek, even in his recent ecocritical turn), the Symbolic structures human experience while the Real remains inaccessible; both Bataille and Lacan characterise the real in terms of elusiveness and paradox. As Fred Botting summarises in an article comparing the two thinkers:

> the real remains what *is*, an unspeakable *is*, an impossible, inexpressible, ineffable, and undifferentiated space outside language. The real, then, lies beyond systems of signification; it ex-ists outside Lacan's symbolic order. It is defined as what cannot be defined, that which is alien to or resists signification, that which exceeds symbolization. Utterly Other, the real is Other to subjects of language but has immense effects in its unpresentable in/difference. (1994, 24)

But while Bataille and Lacan talk about the real in similar ways – another connection that is far from accidental since, as Botting also points out, Bataille's thought had "significant bearing" on Lacan (26) – there is an important difference in the ways that they characterise the relation between subjectivity and the real. Lacan's assertion that the world of things is "only a humanized, symbolized world" (1988, 87) aptly exemplifies the kind of

correlationist thinking that speculative realism reacts against. The Real in Lacan is structured by the Symbolic in that it is what is cast outside of signification rather than what precedes or determines it; the Real and the Symbolic are (with the Imaginary) "fundamental dimensions which, according to Lacan, structure the *human* universe" (Žižek 1997, 222; my emphasis). Joan Copjec describes the Lacanian real as "a by-product or residue of thought [that] detaches itself from thought to form its internal limit" (2002, 3), suggesting that while the real is separate from and disruptive to thought, it is nevertheless conditioned by it. Bataille's insistence on excess as an originary principle reverses the formula, since he argues (in a way similar to Wolfe, as argued above) that a system is determined by expenditure – by what it cannot contain (Bataille 1967a). Though we are foreclosed from this excess, it determines us, and not the other way around.

Bataille's thought is therefore less correlationist than Lacan's. Although they agree that there is no way to see outside of the structuring forces of human subjectivity, Bataille's premise that the outside takes ontological priority is in part a critique against anthropocentric modes of thought that assume the primacy of the human subject. Bataille's ontology is therefore more amenable to ecological questions, while still recognising the impact of subjectivising forces (language, law, reason) on human ways of understanding the world. In this way, it might again be helpful to think of my methodology in terms of its in-betweenness: through Bataille, I want to mediate between the solipsistic anthropocentrism that sometimes pervades psychoanalytic discourse and the rhizomatic/relational approach with which Deleuze attempts to exceed human subjectivity.

It is far beyond the scope of this work to defend Bataille's ontology against either Lacan's or Deleuze's, or to imply that he is somehow more "right" in any absolute sense. Nor would I want to do so, as this would elide productive points of connection between these three thinkers, and others besides. Instead, what I am arguing is that Bataille's ideas are *useful* for film ecocriticism, in a way that has been largely overlooked. The cinematic examples in later chapters were chosen because they illustrate this utility of Bataille's ideas. In different ways, these limit films all evoke the boundaries between human and nonhuman realities in ways that resonate with Bataille's notions of transgression and inner experience.

The Impossible Imperative

This chapter has seemingly set up an impossible task. Through Bataille, I have characterised the outside of thought as unrepresentable and unthinkable. Attempts at exceeding our limits paradoxically result in our reinforcing them; pinning down the outside inevitably results in failure, paradox, and contradiction. I have also claimed, however, that the excesses of art, and cinema in particular, can help us trace the limits of the human, even if we cannot finally transcend them. Doing so requires that we attempt the impossible and try to think the outside of thought. But what grapple with impossibility at all? Though I have framed the limit between human and nonhuman realities in ontological terms, my answer to this question is primarily ethical.[25] The ecological crisis demands that we think of reality in a more holistic way, and that we attempt to overcome challenges such as climate change that have become irreducibly complex and global in scale. The Anthropocene forces us to consider timescales far exceeding those that determine our everyday lives. Humans in the twenty-first century are, as Morton suggests, confronted with the end of the world, not only in the sense of impending apocalypse or extinction, but also in terms of our finite abilities to understand and respond to global crises. The end of the world requires a number of ethical reconsiderations in order to recognise the role of humans in a wider ecology, reconsiderations made even more difficult by our finite means of understanding and responding to problems.

I agree with Jonathan Roffe's summation of the Deleuzian ethical project, which aims to "reconnect with the external world again, and be caught up in its life" (2010, 98). Bataille would add, however, that this reconnection is impossible:

> We are discontinuous beings, individuals who perish in isolation in the midst of an incomprehensible adventure, but we yearn for our lost continuity. We find the state of affairs that binds us to our random and ephemeral individuality hard to bear. (1957b, 15)

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[25] Though this introductory chapter has framed my methodology primarily in relation to more metaphysical film-philosophies, the ethical motivation for my argument also connects to the growing body of work on film and ethics: see Cooper 2006, 2007; Stadler 2008; Downing and Saxton 2010; Nagib 2011; Boljkovac 2013; Choi and Frey 2014; Hole 2016; Sinnerbrink 2016a. I will expand on the ethical implications of my argument in Chapters Five and Six.

Reconnection with the continuous world only happens at the moment of death, a horizon beyond which we cannot see. Transgression is a way of flirting with this horizon, of attempting to overcome ourselves while recognising that doing so risks our own annihilation. The above passage suggests that transgression is a compulsion, an impulse to exceed ourselves often against our own better judgment; by theorising the limit between human and nonhuman realities in terms of transgression, my Bataillean methodology must therefore recognise its own inevitable failure. The Bataillean ethics at stake in this thesis can therefore, in a reversal of Kant, be called *the impossible imperative*. While Kant's categorical imperative was asserted as a method for ascertaining objective moral truths, the impossible imperative is a recognition of objective moral non-truth; it assumes that objective reality is irreducible to all frameworks – including ethical frameworks – that we attempt to impose upon it. Despite the impossibility of drawing an objective moral framework, however, the ecological crisis insists that we must try, as flawed and partial as those attempts will inevitably be.

The limit films chosen in this thesis disclose or respond to the impossible imperative in a variety of ways. Because the ecological crisis is global, I posit limit cinema as a transnational category, and the examples introduced in this thesis therefore come from a range of national and cultural contexts. Most of them can be loosely categorised as "global art cinema," as per the definition offered by Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover. They characterise global art cinema as "feature-length narrative films at the margins of mainstream cinema, located somewhere between fully experimental and overtly commercial products" (2010, 6); these films offer "overt engagement with aesthetic [and] unrestrained formalism" and "by classical standards, might be seen as too slow or excessive in visual style, use of color, or characterization" (6). I have not limited myself to narrative films, however, and also include documentaries with similarly excessive styles.

I have endeavoured to include a relatively broad selection of films, but I have also set a few limits. Because limit cinema represents the relationship between humans and the environment in terms of narrative and formal excess, the category is less easily applied to Hollywood and genre cinemas. This is not to make a taste judgment or dismiss popular cinemas as irrelevant; I would like to expand my Bataillean methodology to address more mainstream films in future research. But while popular cinemas can also be excessive – horror, action, and melodrama especially – these excesses relate to more rigid generic and formal structures, a relationship that I think could serve as the foundation for a whole other

project. The films I have chosen here, on the other hand, foreground their excesses more readily; they depart from or destabilise familiar generic patterns in order to suggest the existence of something beyond the scope of reason. It is this destabilisation that I trace through close textual analysis of particular limit films.

Because my argument is situated in a twenty-first century context, amongst conversations about the Anthropocene and the nonhuman turn, I have also restricted my analysis to films that have been released since the beginning of the millennium. This is not to say that only contemporary art is relevant to contemporary problems, as the aforementioned historical approaches of thinkers like Cahill and Fay make clear. But contemporary art can tell us something about what it means to be in the present. As Groys argues in "Comrades of Time" (2009), contemporary art can impel us to hesitate and reconsider our position in relation to the past and future. Groys characterises the present itself as a kind of limit, since it "interrupts the smooth transition between past and future"; it inconveniently interrupts the progression between the trappings of history and the promise of future progress with an interminable period of hesitation and delay. Understood in Bataillean terms, traversing this limit is a perpetual act of transgression, consisting not of a crossing over – the future inevitably slips into the present – but only ever in the difficult and frustrating act of the crossing itself. By restricting my focus to contemporary film, I am therefore tarrying with the present; I want to explore how cinema relates to reality as it is currently conditioned and made manifest.

The examples I have chosen are by no means intended to be comprehensive, but they do cover a range of concerns to do with conceptualising mind-independent reality. Because my argument explores relations between subjects and objects, I have divided my thesis into two parts. Part One, "Objectivity," considers the possibility of representing the nonhuman, and therefore focuses primarily on questions about the objective. Chapter Two considers cinematic objectivity in relation to Bataillean notions of the sacred through the films of Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Ben Wheatley. Bataille's sacred is immanent to this world rather than belonging to a transcendent state like God or heaven; I similarly characterise the sacred in Wheatley and Apichatpong, and argue that their films envision human relationships with the sacred in terms of sacrifice (Wheatley) and eroticism (Apichatpong). Chapter 3 engages with objectivity in relation to speculative realism, and argues that while speculative realism can provide important insights about the ways that films represent the nonhuman, it has much to learn from film theory. I explore speculative realism in relation

to Jean-Louis Baudry's apparatus theory in order to argue that the same aesthetic strategy can simultaneously evade and reinforce anthropocentric modes of perception. I apply this claim to two films, *Tectonics* (Peter Bo Rappmund) and *Jauja* (Lisandro Alonso 2014), which both posit spectatorial knowledge as limited in relation to the diegesis, but simultaneously emphasise the ways that they implicate the spectator through strategies such as single point perspective. From this, I argue that film ecocriticism cannot do without a theory of cinematic subjectivity, since avoiding the subjective can lead us to overlook some of the ways that anthropocentrism in cinema might either be implicitly reinforced or undermined.

This leads into Part Two, "Subjectivity," which explores how a Bataillean understanding of cinematic subjectivity might contribute to film ecocriticism. Chapter 4 outlines a non-anthropocentric Bataillean theory of cinematic subjectivity, and applies it to the subjectivisation of the female protagonists in *Under the Skin* (Jonathan Glazer 2013) and *Nymphomaniac* (Lars von Trier 2013). Both films represent subjectivity as an unstable process of turning inside out, which I theorise through Bataille's ipseity and Nancy's related concept of invagination. Chapter 5 then considers the relationship between the human subject and the unknowable outside of thought in terms of love, and looks at *Grizzly Man* (Werner Herzog 2005) and *Konelīne: Our Land Beautiful* (Nettie Wild 2016) as examples of loving nature. Love is an imperfect way of relating to nature, since it always involves problems of projection and subjective bias; through *Grizzly Man* and *Konelīne*, however, I argue that these imperfections can be productively brought to bear on the impossible imperative. This argument builds from the understanding of post-theology explored in Chapter 2, and draws from theological understandings of love to suggest that loving nature is an ever-unfinished process of relating to a world outside of thought. While this process is ambivalent in that it holds potential for both harm and good, *Konelīne* and *Grizzly Man* suggest that love cannot be left out of ecological ethics.

Part One

Objectivity

Chapter 2: Eroticism, Sacrifice, and the Sacred

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I argued that certain contemporary films confront us with the limits of the human, and I contextualised this claim within recent discussions in the humanities and film studies more specifically about how to break with anthropocentric modes of thought. This chapter, the first half of Part One on Objectivity, will consider the possibility of representing nonhuman reality through cinema in relation to Bataillean notions of the sacred. Bataille distinguishes the sacred from the profane world of work and reason, which he argues betrays the nature of existence by imposing truth and meaning. The sacred, on the other hand, is what is excluded or in excess of the human: "There is in nature and there subsists in man a movement which always exceeds the bounds, that can never be anything but partially reduced to order" (1957b, 40). Though the sacred is external to human modes of thought, it nevertheless "subsists" in our behaviour and manifests itself through irrational drives such as sexual desire and self-destruction. Because the sacred resists reason, Bataille characterises it as irrational, contradictory, and ambivalent; the sacred is also associated with nature, since despite its exteriority to human thought it is immanent to this world rather than belonging to a transcendent world beyond. This Bataillean understanding of objectivity – of a world outside the particularities of the human perspective – will be explored in relation to the works of two filmmakers: Ben Wheatley and Apichatpong Weerasethakul. I will argue that the films of Wheatley and Apichatpong evoke two kinds of relationship with the sacred. Wheatley's films emphasise death and sacrifice, while Apichatpong's films envision an erotic communion with nature.

The films of Apichatpong and Wheatley differ greatly in terms of cultural context and aesthetic approach, but this chapter will draw connections in the ways that both filmmakers explore tensions between contemporary society, related to suburban and urban spaces, and a pagan or animist history that inheres in the natural landscape. Some background on the two filmmakers will be helpful before I turn to my Bataillean interpretation of their works. Apichatpong is a prolific artist and prominent favourite in the international film festival circuit, especially after his 2010 film *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* won the Palm d'Or at Cannes. Trained first in architecture in his native Khon Kaen and subsequently receiving a Master of Fine Arts in Filmmaking from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Apichatpong positions his films somewhere between art and

entertainment, narrative and documentary, reality and dreams. While Apichatpong's films are slowly paced and narratively obscure — he has been linked to other contemporary "slow cinema" auteurs such as Béla Tarr, Abbas Kiarostami, and Lisandro Alonso — his arthouse aesthetics are infused with a love of pop culture, even kitsch: Thai pop songs feature prominently on his soundtracks, and the supernatural elements of his films are often references to sci-fi and horror as much as Buddhist and animist folklore.

Wheatley, a UK filmmaker who has been extremely prolific since the release of his first feature (*Down Terrace*) in 2009, is similarly interested in supposedly low-brow genres such as horror and science fiction. His films straddle the line between genre and arthouse cinema, as they experiment with generic structures through narrative ambiguity and formal excess. His feature films draw from genre conventions only to undermine them and subvert audience expectations: *Down Terrace* and *Kill List* (2011), for example, are unusual takes on the crime genre, with the latter also borrowing heavily from horror conventions, while *Sightseers* (2012) is a black romantic comedy/road movie that combines brutal violence with sublime natural beauty. Wheatley's films often stage human relationships in the midst of natural landscapes characterised by irrationality and violence, representations that serve as counterpoints to the comparatively gentler but no less incomprehensible junglescapes in Apichatpong.

While Wheatley insists on violence and death by focusing on male brutality and pagan sacrifice, in Apichatpong the dissolution of the rational is staged as erotic, evidenced in the frequent sexual encounters of humans in nature or even of humans with nature (inter-species sex is a common trope in his cinema). Reading Apichatpong and Wheatley through Bataille will allow me see them as two sides of the same coin, since for Bataille eroticism and death are the two ways by which we can confront the limits of the human. As I outlined in the previous chapter, both sex and death culminate in a transgression of/at the limits of thought: both acts risk the dissolution of the self into an ecstatic communion with alterity, negativity, or non-being. Complementary representations of eroticism and death in the films of Apichatpong and Wheatley will help to elucidate – as much as possible, given its resistance to thought and language – the Bataillean sacred.

I will start by exploring the negative post-theology of Wheatley's *Kill List* and *A Field in England* (2013), which I argue are structured by a sacrifice-for-nothing that emphasises the radical aporia of death. Building from this, I will move towards the erotic encounters with

nature in Apichatpong's *Tropical Malady* (2003), *Syndromes and a Century* (2006), and *Uncle Boonmee.* Wheatley's evocations of the sacred are violent and nihilistic, while Apichatpong's are more optimistic and life-affirming. Rather than insisting on one of these versions of the sacred over the other, I will argue that holding positive and negative notions of the sacred in suspension is essential for the ethical project made necessary by the Anthropocene.

Wheatley, Death, Sacrifice

Post-theology and the Sacrifice of Sacrifice

Like Bataille, Ben Wheatley's films are obsessed with death and sacrifice. *Down Terrace* ends with the protagonist murdering his parents with the help of his girlfriend; *Kill List* culminates in the ritual sacrifice of the protagonist's family, unknowingly committed by the protagonist himself; *A Field in England* contains the repeated death and resurrection of a central character; the romantic holiday in *Sightseers* ends with a woman allowing her boyfriend to fall to his death in a thwarted double suicide. Rather than answering questions or resolving narrative tensions, these deaths raise more questions than they answer as they coincide with the gradual disintegration of generic structure towards an increasingly obscure and excessive aesthetic. This gradual collapse into irrationality and excess correlates with the central tension between Christian rationalism and a repressed pagan violence that Wheatley views as central to the British cultural imaginary. This concern with pagan history is nothing new to British cinema, and Wheatley borrows extensively from horror films such as The *Wicker Man* (Robin Hardy 1973) and *Witchfinder General* (Michael Reeves 1968) that focus on themes of witchcraft and human sacrifice. This section will introduce Bataille's ideas about sacrifice in relation to more recent discussions about post-theology; the subsequent sections on Wheatley will contextualise his films in relation to British cinema, especially folk horror, and then analyse the function of sacrifice in *Kill List* and *A Field in England.* I argue that what differs Wheatley from other British folk horror is that the sacrifices in his films no longer serve an authority, but rather inhere in the structure of his films as a sacrifice of form itself. Sacrifice in Wheatley serves nothing: there is something in it that cannot be recuperated to serve the structuring forces of law, god, or truth. The sacred evoked by sacrifice in Wheatley inheres in the landscape itself, a landscape that is bereft of higher meaning but that structures human existence as its very limit.

Bataille provides an effective framework for considering Wheatley's treatment of sacrifice, as he also envisions a sacrifice-for-nothing that has radical potential to disrupt authoritarian forces. This notion of sacrifice attests to the pervasiveness of sacrificial logic despite the impossibility of sacrifice serving a higher truth after the death of God. Christopher Watkin argues in his book *Difficult Atheism* (2011) that "to think in the West today is to think after God, with concepts and a tradition bequeathed by theology and theologically informed thinking, and even if the aim of such thinking is to be atheological it cannot avoid the task of disengaging itself from the theological legacy" (12-13). Watkin continues that post-theology recognises that the death of God does not rid us of his impact on metaphysics; thinking beyond God requires that we recognise the influence of theology on the construction of thought and language.[26] Sacrifice in Wheatley serves a similar function by undermining generic conventions and frustrating attempts at interpretation or meaning.

Sacrifice holds a central place in the foundations of Western thought, culminating in Christianity's notion that only by sacrificing God could humankind achieve salvation. Post-theological readings of sacrifice argue that this way of thinking persists though the floor has been pulled out from underneath it, as sacrifice remains implicated in the ways that we understand and work towards truth. As Dennis King Keenan explains in *The Question of Sacrifice* (2005), the notion of truth has explicit ties to sacrifice in the Western philosophical tradition, as "[s]acrifice has come to be understood as a necessary passage through suffering and/or death (of either oneself or someone else) on the way to a supreme moment of transcendent truth. Sacrifice effects the revelation of truth" (10). This process is thwarted by the lack of possibility for transcendence, since there is no higher truth to attain; while sacrificial logics persist, their grounding has become obsolete, resulting in what King calls the need for sacrifice to sacrifice itself.

Keenan locates this movement towards the sacrifice of sacrifice in thinkers like Julia Kristeva, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Bataille (among others); Bataille, he argues, effects this by emphasising "the irreducible undecideability of the double meaning of death articulated by that moment when death as possibility turns into death as impossibility" (2005, 45). Death

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[26] Post-theology and post-secularism have recently received some attention as frameworks for interpreting film; see Cauchi and Caruana (forthcoming). I also owe the connection between Apichatpong and immanent ideas of the sacred to a conference paper by Cauchi (2014); although his framework and conclusions were different from my own, his interpretation of the cave sequence in *Uncle Boonmee* sparked some of the ideas and research that eventually became this chapter.

is aporetic in that, at the very moment that it can be apprehended, the possibility for apprehension ceases to exist; it remains a "not yet" until the moment when speaking the not-yet becomes impossible (50-51). Sacrifice for Bataille is a means of relating to this impossibility at a distance: through the communal witnessing of the death of another, we can share an experience of death without dying. The impossible subjective experience of death is turned into an objective event, which in turn can only be experienced in fragments of individual subjective experiences. Sacrifice is therefore the name Bataille gives to the compulsion to go beyond the self, to break the boundaries of ego and to experience alterity. As he writes in "Sacrificial Mutilation and the Severed Ear of Vincent Van Gogh" (1985), sacrifice is a way of explaining the "necessity of throwing oneself or something of oneself out of oneself" (67), a necessity that exceeds the rational and requires the ecstatic communion of a group. He continues that this compulsion to exceed oneself "in certain cases can have no other end than death" (67); the urge to break the boundaries of the self is an inherently self-destructive one, though that destruction can be mitigated through the deferred, mediated experience of witnessing.

Sacrifice in Bataille is also a means of breaking with anthropocentric rationality. Human sacrifices and other offerings to gods are useless expenditures that exceed the profane logic of work and reason: as waste, sacrificed objects are no longer subordinated to use and cannot be contained by the restricted systems of human labour and productivity (1967a). By exceeding profane human logic, Bataille argues that sacrifice can form a paradoxical relation to the sacred outside of thought. This duality between the sacred and the profane is another way of naming the divide between the human and that which exceeds it: since the profane for Bataille is structured by labour and encompasses everything related to human activity and production – from philosophy to language to economy – the sacred is everything in excess of this sphere. It is the "beyond" of experience, implied by the structure of the profane and conditioned by its limits. This "beyond" encompasses alterity in all forms, including the mind of the other and the impossible experience of death; but most importantly for my purposes the sacred is also associated with nature, the unknowable outside of human consciousness. While we cannot move beyond our limits, Bataille argues that through sacrifice we can exceed the narrow logic of the profane and form a paradoxical relation to what is outside of human thought. Sacrifice is one of the ways that we can break from the logic that allows us to conceive of nature as subordinate to human reason.

Bataille's assertion of sacrifice as an ethical act is not meant to be taken literally; in fact, one of his philosophical motivations is to avoid catastrophic expenditures such as war in favour of more ethical forms of sacrifice. One of the ways of doing this is by performing sacrifice through dramatization and art. Aesthetics also requires distance and mediation, so art, like sacrifice, allows us to witness the horror of death at a distance. He describes this connection between art and sacrifice in "The Cruel Practice of Art" (1949):

> It is true that sacrifice is no longer a living institution, though it remains rather like a trace on a streaky window. But it is possible for us to experience the emotion it aroused, for the myths of sacrifice are like the themes of tragedy, and the Crucifixion keeps the image of sacrifice before us like a symbol offered to the most elevated reflections, and also as the most divine expression of the cruelty of art. However, sacrifice is not only this repeated image to which European civilization has given a sovereign value; it is the response to a secular obsession among all the peoples of the globe. Indeed, if there is any truth to the idea that human life is a trap, can we think — it's strange, but so what? — that, since torture is 'universally offered to us as the bait,' reflecting on its fascination may enable us to discover what we are and to discover a higher world whose perspectives exceed the trap? (para. 6)

This question remains, though the possibility of answering it is foreclosed to us after the death of God; instead of finding our way out of the trap, the practice of sacrifice can only trace the trap's edges. The obsessive return to sacrificial violence through art indicates an ache for transcendence, a longing for the sacred despite the impossibility of achieving or even conceptualising it. Bataille's atheistic appropriation of sacrificial logic enacts what King calls the sacrifice of sacrifice, since Bataille colonises sacrificial thought in order to break it apart. This fracturing of sacrificial logic leaves room for a new, non-transcendent kind of sacred, an excess of the rational that undermines its very structure and also exists not in some conceptualisable space beyond reason (like God or heaven) but only at the very limits of thought.

The sacrifices in Wheatley's cinema also serve to sacrifice sacrifice, as they are enacted not in the name of a higher authority but rather as a disruptive force that breaks apart narrative formal logic in order to open onto something else. This deconstruction of narrative logic is effected through the central conflict between Christian rationalism and Pagan violence, a central theme that Wheatley borrows not only from history but also from traditions in British cinema. Wheatley's films effect a sacrifice-of-sacrifice that is

cinematic rather than philosophical, appropriating the narrative logics of previous films in order to undermine their patriarchal and theological assumptions.

Paganism and British Folk Horror

Despite being hailed in the popular press as "one of British cinema's most singular voices" (Kermode 2016), Wheatley has received little attention by academics at the time of writing. An exception is a special issue of *Critical Quarterly* dedicated to Wheatley's work, which was published in 2016 to coincide with the release of *High-Rise.*[27] In different ways, a number of the issue's contributors analyse the ways that Wheatley's disorienting construction of space is related to the ways that his films subvert audience expectations. Adam Lowenstein (2016) and Rosalind Galt (2016) focus on geography and the ways that Wheatley's films both relate to and undermine cultural constructions of English identity, while Kevin M. Flanagan (2016) interprets Wheatley's films according to John Orr's (2010) taxonomy of British directors as broadly either modernist or romantic, and argues that Wheatley's films interrogate the tensions between these two aesthetic modes. Sonia Lupher (2016) and J. M. Tyree (2016) explore the subversive effects of Wheatley's films in terms of genre. Lupher analyses *Kill List* as a horror film, and argues that its most horrific aspect is not the shockingly violent ending, but rather its commentary on quotidian existence; in this, *Kill List* is closer to the tradition of British realism and its focus on the "melodrama of everyday life" (Higson 1995)[28] than the fantastical terrors of the horror film (Lupher 2016, 31). Similarly, Tyree interprets *Sightseers* (2012) as a feminist remixing of comedy and horror that undercuts "English Romantic ideals regarding nature, travel, and love" (39). The two articles on *A Field in England* interpret it according to its layering of past and present: Henry K. Miller (2016) builds from novelist Robert Macfarlane's categorisation of the film as "new English eerie" (to which I will return below) in order to discuss the film's reinterpretation of Civil war themes, while Joel McKim (2016) argues

[27] I have largely left *High-Rise* out of this chapter since, because it is an adaptation (of J.G Ballard's 1975 novel of the same name), it has a somewhat more complicated relationship to Wheatley/Jump's preoccupations with paganism and folk horror than the films I discuss in detail below. I do, however, provide an ecocritical reading of the film in a short article for *The Drouth* (Birks 2016). See also Lockhurst 2016; Hatherley 2016; Butt 2016; Fisher 2016; Blacklock 2016.

[28] See also Hill 1986; Lay 2002.

that the film's affective power emerges from the conflict between its historical content and digital aesthetic.

All of the above commentators interpret Wheatley in relation to familiar codes of genre and national identity, as Wheatley's films are characterised as distinctly British and familiar in their appropriations of generic conventions. However, these familiar patterns are destabilised in a number of ways, and Wheatley's films subvert audience expectations by undermining established interpretive frameworks; Lowenstein goes as far as to suggest that "we often wish we could find our way back to familiar cinematic spaces and genre codes to which we are accustomed, but Wheatley has gleefully erased the map and set the house on fire" (2016, 5). Wheatley's cinema, then, interrogates a number of tensions that the above scholars link to British cinema and culture: genre convention and formal innovation, realism and excess, and romanticism and modernism. Rather than resolving these conflicts, however, Wheatley's cinema radically destabilises them by undermining their associated expectations. If, as Andrew Higson argues, "to identify a national cinema is first of all to specify a coherence and a unity" (1989, 37) – a process that Higson points out is necessarily fraught since this unity is continually contested by internal conflicts and contradictions – then Wheatley's cinema exploits the sense of unity suggested by familiar generic and aesthetic codes in order to obliterate any stable sense of meaning.

Contextualising Wheatley in relation to British cinema as a whole is beyond the scope of this thesis; however, reading his films in terms of their reinterpretation of folk horror will help to contextualise the theme of sacrifice in *Kill List* and *A Field in England*. Robert Macfarlane (2015) associates Wheatley, especially *A Field in England*, with a trend in contemporary British media towards a new "English eerie" that works against the British pastoral tradition by provoking "ideas of unsettlement and displacement." Macfarlane writes that the representation of the English countryside in *A Field in England* (and a number of other contemporary art works) reflect an unsettled relationship with history as well as anxieties about climate change and ecological catastrophe. The eeriness associated with the landscape in *A Field in England* is way of reminding us that past violence cannot be buried under the earth, and that "the skull beneath the skin of the English countryside" will always re-emerge. While eeriness associated with the landscape in British media is nothing new — Macfarlane traces its historical lineage to writers MR James, Alan Garner, and Susan Cooper, and to films such as *The Wicker Man* — he argues that there is something significant about its contemporary manifestations, which take on anxieties

associated with the increasing threat of climate change in the twenty-first century. As such, Macfarlane's new English eerie gives an ecological slant to the broader trend of "uncanny landscapes" in British film and media identified by Peter Hutchings (2004); Hutchings writes that these landscapes unsettle pastoral codings of the countryside and express an uneasy relation between the past and present. In Wheatley's cinema, this takes the form of a conflict between modern masculine rationality and a repressed, violent paganism.

The link between Wheatley and films like *The Wicker Man* is worth exploring in more detail, as the differences between their representations of pagan themes resonate with the sacrifice of sacrifice that I outlined in the previous section. *Kill List* obviously borrows directly from *The Wicker Man*, and Wheatley has stated that *A Field in England* was influenced by 1960s civil war films such as *Witchfinder General* and *Culloden* (Peter Watkin 1964); the general obsession with paganism in Wheatley's cinema is in part a nostalgic throwback to the folk revival of the 1960s and 70s (Bonner 2013). As Marcus K. Harmes (2013) points out in his extensive survey of British horror from that period, films like *Witchfinder General* and *The Wicker Man* along with *Cry of the Banshee* (Gordon Hessler 1970) and *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (Piers Haggard 1971) are generally described as "folk horror" because of their associations with the folk revival. With the exception of *The Wicker Man*, all of these folk horrors are set in the English civil war, a period of turmoil when authority was radically called into question: the instability of the seventeenth century resonated with the anti-authoritarian ideals of hippie culture and the folk revival, and the folk horror films were seen as countercultural alternatives to the more mainstream Hammer horrors of the day (65).

Harmes complicates this picture somewhat, arguing that while the folk horrors of the period envision states of unrest and instability, they generally only do so in order to re-assert patriarchal authority in the end. *The Wicker Man* is particularly instructive in this regard, as while it might seem as though "the authority represented by Sergeant Howie (Edward Woodward) of the Highland Police is defeated by the sexualised paganism of the islanders of Summerisle" (2013, 68), in fact Howie's authority is only undermined in order for a new patriarchal authority to be instated. The Christian rationalism represented by Howie is merely replaced by a more potent pagan authority in Lord Summerisle (Christopher Lee), and Howie's sacrifice at the end of the film is performed not as an act of anti-authoritarian rebellion but rather in the service of a more primordial and sinister patriarch.

As Harmes argues, "[t]he conclusion of *The Wicker Man* shows the preservation of the patriarchal status quo because the practice of pagan religion and the power structures on the island are so closely imbricated" (2013, 76). Patriarchal authority in the other folk horrors is similarly undermined only to be reaffirmed in new and more terrible ways, as the collapse of law leads not to revolution but rather further abuses of power. Harmes ties this in particular to gender, observing that, in these films, "male headship over women, represented in men's use of women for physical and sexual pleasure, remains unimpaired by the general chaos of the Civil Wars" (75). As a result, folk horror films do not affirm the liberating possibilities offered by the collapse of law and return to paganism as the countercultural reading suggests, but rather long for a return to the stabilising forces of Christian paternal authority (75). *Kill List* and *A Field in England* pick up on the anxieties central to folk horror, but rather than re-affirming the patriarchal authorities these earlier films call into question, Wheatley's films conclude with a radical sense of indeterminacy.

Irrational Violence in *Kill List*

Given the resonances between folk horror and Wheatley's cinema, the obsession with paganism in Wheatley's films must be seen not only as a reference to Britain's pre-Christian history but also to the 1960s/70s folk revival. Wheatley, who grew up during this era and who explicitly states it as an influence, takes up the problematisation of authority from the earlier cycle but revises it by radically undermining its re-repression of destabilising forces. Thus, Wheatley's films can also be read as post-theological in that they hold no nostalgia for the lawfulness of the past, nor do they look forward to the establishment of new forms of order. Existence in Wheatley is godless and groundless, subject not to higher powers but to the irrational contingency of the natural landscape. The sacrifices in Wheatley's films therefore *serve nothing*, as there is nothing for them to serve: rather than resolving narrative tensions or exposing truth, their sacrificial logics collapse the structures of narrative and meaning. Comparing *Kill List* with *The Wicker Man* clearly demonstrates this, as although the sacrifice that concludes the former was obviously inspired by the latter, it radically revises the formula by refusing the re-assertion of patriarchal authority.

In *Kill List,* retired hitman Jay (Neil Maskell) is hired to do one last job. Jay and his partner Gal (Michael Smiley) follow the orders of a group of violent men with mysterious motivations, and are given a "kill list" that includes The Priest, The Librarian, and The

Member of Parliament. *Kill List* initially appears to follow the conventions of other British hit man/mob films such as *Sexy Beast* (Jonathan Glazer 2000), *Gangster No. 1* (Paul McGuigan 2000), and *In Bruges* (Martin McDonagh 2008), but it gradually begins to deviate from the genre and dissolve into chaos. This descent towards disorder and violence is hinted at in the beginning of the film when during a dinner party Gal's girlfriend Fiona (Emma Fryer) carves a cultish symbol — a cross with a triangle meeting at the top point, surrounded by a circle — in the back of the bathroom mirror. There are other ominous indications that the job is part of something more sinister than Jay and Gal first expect: Jay is coerced into signing his contract in blood, a deep wound that festers throughout the film; their victims appear to know Jay and thank him before they are killed; Jay's doctor is replaced by a strange man who also appears to know him, and gives him cryptic advice rather than fixing his hand; Jay's cat is killed and hung from his doorway after Gal and Jay try to back out of the mission. Unnerved by these unexplained events, Jay becomes increasingly agitated as he and Gal work through the list; he strays from the cool professionalism of a hired gunman towards paranoia and psychosis.

The meaning of the symbol carved in the back of the mirror at the beginning of the film is revealed in the end, when Jay and Gal approach the home of the M.P., their final target. The final act of the film abandons the urban and suburban spaces of previous scenes as Jay and Gal head out into the countryside where the politician's mansion is located. The association between nature and unbridled violence, common to all of Wheatley's films, culminates in *Kill List* with the enactment of a brutal and enigmatic pagan ritual. Gal and Jay emerge from the woods surrounding the M. P's mansion to find a group of masked cultists. Naked or dressed in cloaks and carrying torches, the cultists file in procession through the woods towards a triangular structure that resembles the cult symbol from the mirror. Their masks, made of broken twigs, are an obvious reference to the titular structure in *The Wicker Man* (the reference is picked up on by most reviews of *Kill List*, and expressed explicitly by Wheatley [Carnevale 2012]). The allusion to *The Wicker Man* foreshadows the human sacrifice revealed to be the meaning of the cult symbol: a noose hangs from the triangular structure, and the cultists look on as a robed young woman is hung from it.

Disturbed by the ritual, Jay opens fire on the cultists, who run towards him in a cacophony of inhuman screams. Gal and Jay are chased into sewer tunnels, where Gal is disembowelled by one of the cultists; Jay shoots him out of mercy, then escapes the tunnels

and heads back to the country house where his wife and son are in hiding. Jay is knocked unconscious when the house is attacked, and wakes to find himself back in the woods by the mansion surrounded by the cultists. He is given a knife and urged to combat a cloaked figure indicated by a title to be named the Hunchback. After he stabs the figure repeatedly in the hump and chest, the cultists remove their masks, revealing Jay's employers, the doctor, and Fiona. The cloak and mask are removed from the Hunchback, revealing Jay's son riding piggyback on his wife; this revelation was foreshadowed in the beginning of the film with an image of Jay's son riding piggyback on Shel as he pretended to battle Jay with a plastic sword. Shel, now bloodied, looks up at Jay and laughs as the cultists applaud and crown him with a circle of branches. The cult symbol flashes onscreen again before the title of the film appears and the credits roll.

The violence that concludes the film does not serve a clear purpose but rather plunges the film into narrative obscurity. This becomes even clearer if we compare it to the ending of *The Wicker Man*, which restores order and affirms the patriarchal authority embodied in the pagan leader of the village. The sacrifice of Sergeant Howie in *The Wicker Man* solves the mystery that structures the film: the girl whose disappearance Howie was investigating turns out to be alive, and Howie learns that she was not the victim of human sacrifice as he had begun to suspect but rather bait to lure him — their real target — to the island. The sacrifice of Howie also restores the status quo of the village rather than destabilising it, as it is intended to bring back a bountiful harvest and reinforce the leadership of Lord Summerisle. In *Kill* List, on the other hand, the sacrifice only further obfuscates the mystery as well as stripping the central father figure of his power. Jay's unknowing sacrifice of his wife and son nihilistically undermines the family structure that serves as the impetus for the entire narrative — Jay's motivation to take up the job was to provide for his wife and son — and Shel's laughter at the end contradicts earlier images of her readying to do battle with the cultists. Was she in league with them all along? Was she convinced, or coerced? Why did the cultists select Jay, and what did their choice have to do with his previous failed mission? Did Gal know, since he thanks Jay before he dies just like the other victims? What does the cult want to gain through Jay's sacrifice of his family? While answers to these questions are possible (a Google search of "*Kill List* explained" reveals a number of plausible theories — it was all a dream, Jay is the Antichrist, etc.), the film itself refuses to settle on a meaning. There are too many gaps and too many conflicting pieces of information for an easy interpretation, and the ending

frustrated a number of viewers and critics who saw its violence and refusal of resolution as a pointless shock tactic.

Rather than adhering to the linear progression of genre cinema, *Kill List*'s structure is doubled and symmetrical (a format that I will examine again in relation to Apichatpong, whose films also tend to be laid out in a two-act structure). Wheatley reveals in interviews that the hammer torture scene, which occurs midway through the film's runtime, forms a break in the narrative, after which events in the film begin to echo the first half: "You've got a fold in the middle, the hammer attack at the 45 minute mark, and you've got the two hunchbacks at the beginning and end" (Lincoln 2012). Gal and Jay roughhousing during the dinner party is mirrored in a scene towards the end where they fight after discussing plans to kill the M.P; Gal's protruding intestines after he is gutted in the sewers recalls an eviscerated rabbit that Jay finds on his lawn earlier in the film; the group of cultists they run into in the woods echoes an earlier scene where Jay and Gal encounter a group of Christians at dinner. But *Kill List*'s symmetry is disrupted by small narrative and visual gaps as well as stylistic excesses that do not fit neatly into the film's balanced structure. Black frames are used as ellipses throughout the film, giving rise to the sense that something is missing. Brutal violence is sometimes elided and sometimes shown in graphic detail, and the shock of the latter is intensified because the viewer is left uncertain about what is going to be shown and what is going to be concealed.

The hammer scene is an effective example of this strategy. Jay and Gal discover videotapes containing unseen horrors (the television screen they view them on faces away from the camera) in the possession of the Librarian; visibly disgusted, Jay tortures and then messily bludgeons the man to death rather than shooting him. While the contents of the videotape are concealed, the torture is shown in graphic detail, and the scene is shot and edited so as to build and then subvert expectations about what will be seen. After burning the Librarian with a cigarette, Jay takes a hammer out of the toolbox on the table, and the camera cuts to his face as he begins hammering the Librarian in the knee; the camera then tilts down to reveal the impact before tilting back up again to show the Librarian's reaction. This rhythm of graphic onscreen violence followed by a reaction shot continues for several moments, but when Jay eventually hammers the Librarian's head in, there is no interluding cutaway or tilt; this break in the rhythm intensifies the shocking effect of bone and brain matter spraying up from the librarian's skull. Describing the scene, Wheatley says that this editing pattern was intended to betray the spectator's expectations and trust:

> The main idea from all that was from seeing *The Orphanage* [Juan Antonio Bayona 2007], when they run over the old lady in the beginning and they do the cut away from it, you don't see it and you go: 'Oh, that's okay, we're not going to see it.' And then they cut back a little bit and you go: 'Okay, I've seen this now, they won't go back for another go on this.' And then they cut back and when her jaw falls off, it's just like: 'Oh f**king hell, no! Why did you do that? You already told the story of the woman being dead, you didn't have to do that!' But it's so clever, because it basically says: 'Alright, we've shown you this, we can basically show you anything now…' (Carnevale 2012)

By creating tension between revealing and obscuring the shock of unrestrained violence, *Kill List* gives rise to a frightening sense of possibility. The escalation of violence following the Librarian scene exploits this tension and gives the impression that the film has spiralled out of control; the film's violence is excessive not only in terms of its graphic representation, but also in its disruption of the film's narrative structure. By refusing to re-repress these excesses in the form of a satisfying narrative resolution, *Kill List* insists on the shocking irrationality of violence rather than providing it with a framework that would grant it validation or meaning.

Because *Kill List*'s doubled events and images refuse in the end to be reconciled into a singular meaning, the film concludes with a frustrating and uncanny sense of circularity. Uncanniness is the Freudian term for the familiar-turned-unfamiliar, and potentially accounts for many of the frustrated reactions to the film's ending: while the first act leads the viewer to expect the logic and linearity of genre, what we end up with is the irrational circularity of dream logic (Wheatley compares his non-linear approach to David Lynch, whose films operate similarly in this respect [Lincoln 2012]). The rationality implied by the generic framework that guides the first half of the narrative as well as by the titular idea of the "list" is subverted in the last half, replaced by the uncanniness of empty repetition. As in a dream, repeated events do not gesture towards an over-arching explanation but rather to a disturbing feeling of something being amiss in a way we do not understand; Freud (1919) links the uncanny to repeated events and the recurrence of random numbers, which give the sense of a foreclosed meaning though none can rationally be discerned. This narratively unsatisfied insistence on doubled events and images finds resonance in Bataillean dualist materialism, which also insists on holding two sides in suspension. As Dennis Hollier remarks,

> [d]ualism itself, as a doctrine, never relinquishes the untenable position it imposes upon the one enticed by it, keeping him in a never resolved dissatisfaction. According to Bataille, this simply results from the fact that one must choose between a perfection which, satisfying the mind, definitely puts it to sleep, and the awakening which requires an ever unresolved dissatisfaction. (1998, 61)

Wheatley makes a similar point when he expresses his distaste for exposition, asserting that "[i]f you give additional context where it isn't needed people just shut off" (Lincoln 2012). While a satisfying reading of *Kill List* is not impossible, doing so domesticates the excesses that make the ending so impactful, and the fact that multiple interpretations are possible undermines any efforts to find a singular underlying truth. What we are left with, then, is an irrational and violent excess associated with a mysterious pagan ritual.

In contrast to Christian eschatology, paganism finds the sacred in the material. The pantheistic theology characteristic of many types of European paganism identifies the divine with nature, foreclosing a realm beyond this one and instead locating the sacred in the natural environment. This folding inward of the sacred and its association with nature rather than a singular god provides a form of resistance to the rationalist view that subjugates nature to human will and understanding. If we locate a force in this world beyond human comprehension, then there will always be something about reality that evades us — pagan pantheism resonates strongly with the Bataillean conception of the sacred as found not in a realm beyond this one but rather at the limits of human thought. This is not to conflate Bataille or Wheatley with pagan mysticism, however, since such a reading reduces its aporetic dualism into a singular positive theology; the point is not to replace Christian salvation with the divine presence of nature, but rather to hold these two contradictory positions in suspension. In directing itself towards the pagan landscape, Jay's sacrifice of his family subverts the Western/Christian conception of sacrifice as exposing a transcendent truth. But the sacrifice has no clear link to a non-transcendent positive outcome either — unlike the sacrifice in *The Wicker Man*, which is performed in order to ensure a successful autumn harvest and thereby re-subsume nature under human control. By refuting clear links to truth, salvation, or resolution, Jay's sacrifice directs itself instead towards a terrifying and groundless excess that cannot be contained or domesticated.

Circularity in *A Field in England*

The circular logic of *Kill List* and the trope of sacrifice-for-nothing carry over into *A Field in England,* which does not slip gradually into irrationality and violence but rather begins in a state where law and order have already collapsed. The film is set in the mid-seventeenth century, and Wheatley has stated that he is interested in the period because it was a time of turmoil with global consequences. He says: "I think at that moment in England, anything could have happened. Everyone was starving, and they were basically killing God, because they were killing the king, God's representative; they were writing their own rules" (Godfrey 2013). This fascination with the seventeenth century is also influenced by the British folk revival and the aforementioned folk horrors from the late '60s and early '70s: if *Kill List* takes its cue from *The Wicker Man*, then *A Field in England* follows from *Witchfinder General*, a film that similarly explores the lawlessness of the English civil war. But while *Witchfinder General* remains resolutely (albeit nihilistically) humanist in its insistence on evil as an explainable human phenomenon — the witch hunt in the film is an assertion of misogynist masculinity rather than a response to natural forces spun out of control — *A Field in England* expands its scope beyond the violence underlying human interactions. Rather than staging its conflicts between two sides of a war or between the oppressed and their oppressors, the central opposition in *A Field in England* is between humans and their landscape. Comments from the characters such as "there are no sides here" and "forward is back, tis all the same" emphasise that once the group have crossed over the hedge into the field, they have entered a realm beyond human power structures where the rules of logic can be turned upside down; these statements also hint towards the film's circular conclusion, which characterises the space as circumscribed and inescapable. The collapse of civilisation in the film is not a precursor to revolution where tensions might be resolved and new rulers (no matter how cruel) instated, but is rather an event that leaves room for forces in excess of human reason to surge up through the cracks.

A Field in England follows a group of army deserters as they traverse a field in search of an alehouse. Cowardly alchemist's assistant Whitehead (Reece Shearsmith) escapes from his commander and cowers in the bushes, where he encounters Jacob (Peter Ferdinando), Cutler (Ryan Pope), and the corpse of Friend (Richard Glover). Cutler convinces the men to desert and follow him to an alehouse over the hill, and at the mention of ale Friend regains consciousness and they set off over the field. Cutler feeds Friend and Jacob a stew

laced with psilocybin mushrooms — pious Whitehead refuses — and convinces them to pull on a long rope attached to a rowan pole carved with pagan symbols. From the other end of the rope emerges sinister Irishman O'Neil (Michael Smiley), who captures the men and coerces them into digging for a treasure he believes is located in the field. Whitehead, who had been looking for O'Neil at the command of his master, is subjected to unseen torture and forced to divine for the treasure. The film's narrative logic becomes increasingly obscure as characters consume hallucinogens, converse about God, descend into violence, and come back from the dead. Eventually, the treasure is revealed to be nothing but a skull, all but Whitehead are brutally killed, and Whitehead is revealed to be trapped in the limits of the field.

Perhaps because of its more anarchic setting, *A Field in England* is Wheatley's most artistic film in that it strays the furthest from generic conventions and engages the most in visual and formal experimentation. The black and white cinematography frequently pauses on natural details: there are close ups of insects crawling up dewy leaves, slow motion shots of long grass blowing in the wind, and extreme long shots dwarfing human characters in a wide landscape of field and sky. The aesthetic appeal of these shots is undercut by a sense of menace and brutality; low thrums on the soundtrack and frequent eruptions of graphic violence evoke a landscape that is anything but pastoral. The field in *A Field in England* where the entirety of the action takes place is a liminal space where the rules of time and causality do not apply, a location that at once strictly limits the actions of the characters but also opens limitless possibilities in virtue of the fact that it is a place outside of the rules. The hedgerow that Whitehead crawls over at the beginning of the film while attempting to escape his commander contains the space of the narrative and eventually proves be inescapable: in the film's final moments, Whitehead attempts to cross back over the hedgerow after the rest of the characters have been killed, only to re-emerge in the field with his deceased comrades standing before him. The same shot from Whitehead's point of view as he crawls through the hedgerow and over a circle of mushrooms is repeated again, and the image of Cutler and Friend standing before him recalls a strange apparition from the beginning of the film, of two figures standing in a cloud of dust who disappeared as soon as they were seen. Whitehead had dismissed that vision as "only shadows," and its echo in the end implies that the field is delimited and circular both in terms of time and space, as the past appears inexplicably haunted by future events. This unsurpassable limit conditioned by irrational nonhuman forces is an effective

image of the sacred, as the field characterises nature as in excess of reason but only conceivable within certain inescapable boundaries.

Relations between human figures and the field that surrounds them are constantly shifting through the framing of characters in relation to the field as well as the ways that space is constructed through editing. Scale moves between close-ups on small details in the landscape and extreme long shots that diminish the human figure in relation to a wide horizon and open sky; these shifts do not clarify space but rather emphasise the relations between scales and call attention to the not-human. In his essay "Uncanny Landscapes" (2005), Jean-Luc Nancy associates the framing of figures lost in landscapes with post-theology and the disappearance of the gods. He writes that "landscape begins when it absorbs or dissolves all presences into itself: those of gods or of princes, and also the presence of the peasant" (58). Landscape painting for Nancy is inherently post-theological in that it is "an affirmation that the divine, if it presents itself in some way, certainly does not present itself as a presence or as a representation, nor as an absence hidden behind or within the depths of nature (another form of presence), but as the withdrawal of the divine itself" (60). There is no hidden meaning in the landscape; for Nancy it is written entirely on its surface, and consists of our lostness in relation to a ground that swallows us up. The extreme long shots in *A Field in England* similarly figure the relation between humans and their landscape. While the use of such shots is conventionally used to clarify space or to anticipate action, in Wheatley's film they are used to de-emphasise the figure and break with filmic logics that construct natural spaces according to human scale.

Positioned in relation to an environment that exceeds them, the characters fall prey to forces beyond comprehension — within the boundaries of the field, strange occult forces begin to manifest and drive the characters towards confusion and violence. O'Neil is characterised as the darker pagan counterpart to Whitehead's pious Christianity: he is referred to by Friend as the devil, he threatens to use spells on the men to turn them into frogs, and he uses a scrying mirror and divination spells to control the men and find the treasure. His hat, billowing cloak, and buttoned waistcoat are a subtle reference to Michael Hopkins (Vincent Price) from *Witchfinder General*, an association that aligns him with masculine evil: *A Field in England* subverts traditional links between nature, paganism, and femininity, association that *Witchfinder General* exposes as being easily exploited in order to subjugate women. Women are entirely absent from *A Field in England* —though the fact that it (like all of Wheatley's films except *Down Terrace*) is written by a woman,

Amy Jump, is significant — and the film troubles masculine power to the point of absurdity rather than exposing or re-writing its systems of domination. Unlike its predecessor, *A Field in England* does not allow for the troubling re-assertion of a violent patriarchal system, but rather undermines masculinity by framing its struggles in a landscape that is indifferent to them. Whitehead captures O'Neil only to have O'Neil turn it around and capture Whitehead instead; Friend aligns himself with Whitehead and Jacob, but after being killed and resurrected again he betrays their location to O'Neil; Cutler turns against O'Neil after the treasure is revealed to be nothing but "dirt and old bones" and O'Neil shoots him in the face in retribution. The state of nature where the men find themselves is Hobbesian in its brutality and senselessness, and their petty battles mean nothing when framed in the absurd circular logic of the field.

The irrational logic of the field draws on the influence of the mushroom circle, a reference drawn from British folklore. According to Wheatley, "within [a mushroom circle] time moves at a different speed. The lore is that if you go into a circle it takes four men and a rope to pull you out and although you feel that weeks may have passed — it could be minutes in real time" (Wheatley 2014). After they pull O'Neil out from a mushroom circle using just such a method, he remarks "The world is turned upside down," a comment that applies equally to the political state of England as well as the natural state of the field. This sense of topsy-turviness where anything is possible inheres in the style as well as the narrative logic of the film: shots are turned upside down, the 180-degree rule is broken, and at one point there is a long psychedelic sequence where previous and subsequent shots from the film are looped together in kaleidoscopic patterns. This suspension of cinematic and narrative laws leads not to a utopic sense of infinite possibility, but rather, as with *Kill List*, a menacing sense of circularity. The disorientation created by non-continuity editing and the layering of past and future events enhances the sense of being delimited by forces beyond comprehension, a feeling emphasised by the film's circular conclusion. *A Field in England* creates the sense of being trapped within an inescapable space and beholden to forces beyond what we can understand — an apt metaphor for the problem of anthropocentrism.

The irrational, circular logic of *A Field in England* intensifies the senselessness of the sacrifice that structures it. The death and repeated resurrection of the character Friend establishes him as a kind of Christ figure, an association strengthened further by the metaphoric weight of his name and the repeated references to God and the Bible

throughout the film. But this association with Christ, the ultimate Western sacrificial figure, is also turned upside down and rendered radically senseless. Friend is a thoroughly ambiguous figure, at once endearing for his stupidity and detestable for his cruelty. When he is accidentally shot to death by Cutler, he asks Jacob to deliver a message to his wife, but instead of passing on his love, he asks Jacob to tell her that he hates her, and that he loved her sister — whom he had, "many times, from behind like a beautiful prize sow." Further, Friend is resolutely an earthly figure with no link to a transcendent beyond; when asked by Whitehead if he knows about celestial bodies, "those things that hang above us," Friend replies that he has never looked up because it sounds badly paid. If the seventeenth century was a time when God was dead, then the potential for salvation was rendered impossible; the death and resurrection of Friend, like the sacrifice of Jay's family in *Kill List*, is therefore an empty, repetitive gesture.

The only revelation effected by sacrifice in *A Field in England* is death. After Friend is killed for the second time, Whitehead drags his corpse through the field and sees an ominous black orb growing in the sky. Cutler digs frantically in the hole for the treasure, and a loud clang is heard as he hits a skull with his shovel. This "skull beneath the skin of the English countryside" (to recall Macfarlane's description of the English eerie) refers back to another folk horror, *The Blood on Satan's Claw*, which begins with a skull being unearthed in a village that incites demonic possession among the villagers. While that film rids the village of the curse by destroying the bones of the satanic beast, however, in *A Field in England* there is no escaping death. The empty repetition of sacrifice only defers it; the "not yet" is approached at a distance but never quite appropriated, never granted meaning because death is the moment when meaning is lost. It is this endless deferral of meaning through sacrifice that I argue is the image of the sacred found in Wheatley. Without external grounding or justification, sacrifice loses its meaning — or, rather, it *is* the very loss of meaning. *Kill List* and *A Field in England* embrace the terrors of this collapse into senselessness, but their beautiful aesthetics also point to the creative possibilities of a post-theological approach to the sacred. The loss of an external truth imposed on reality leaves open the opportunity to create our own ways forward, ways that must be conceived through a relation to history while simultaneously recognising history's contingency. It is these possibilities that I will explore through the cinema of Apichatpong, which I argue open an alternative to Wheatley's nihilistic view of the natural through an excessive aesthetic of eroticism.

Apichatpong, Animals, Eroticism

Ambivalent Apichatpong

As with Wheatley, Apichatpong's cinema is often seen to have a quality of "in-betweenness" tied to destabilising stylistic and narrative excesses. Though their cinemas express this liminality in different — even opposing — ways, I argue that the two filmmakers can be productively read against each other in order to explicate the Bataillean sacred, which emerges in the ways that each filmmaker articulates the limit between humans and nature. While the English landscape in Wheatley's films differs radically from Apichatpong's untamed jungle, both filmmakers oppose traditional pastoral/romantic notions of their respective nations' countryside and instead evoke the natural as an irrational force beyond human control.

While the ambiguity of Wheatley's cinema is generally tied to genre, Apichatpong's work stresses ambiguity and liminality both in terms of style and socio-political commentary. A number of scholars have commented on this quality of in-betweenness in Apichatpong's cinema, as they take note of the ways that his films move between the margins of city/country, animal/human, Buddhism/animism, and East/West. As David Teh (2011) argues, these wanderings construct an "itinerant cinema" that reflects on the cultural and political history of Thailand, particularly the north-eastern Isaan region where Apichatpong lives and grew up. Teh argues that Apichatpong's ambiguities, more than merely constituting an aesthetic refusal of meaning, reflect a deep political ambivalence while also evoking the marginal identity of Isaan. What Teh calls Isaan's "incoherent political geography" is the result of power struggles and redrawn borders as the region was

> buffeted between three spheres of influence: Khmer to the east; Lao kingdoms to the north (with whom it has close ethno-linguistic ties); and the central Siamese lowland powers, shifting south from Sukhothai (thirteenth to fifteenth centuries), through Ayutthaya (fifteenth to eighteenth centuries), to Thonburi and Bangkok (1768 to the present). (600)

While Apichatpong avoids explicit political commentary, Teh argues that the narrative ambiguities of his films are tied to this cultural history of marginalisation; further, he argues that some of Apichatpong's aesthetic strategies, which may appear obscure, exotic, or mystifying to non-Thai audiences, actually draw from a long cultural tradition of storytelling tied to the region, as well as from Western influences such as Surrealism. Teh

argues that Apichatpong combines Surrealist strategies with Thai storytelling conventions in order to obfuscate straightforward readings and make an ambivalent political statement; he writes that "his [Apichatpong's] subjects tend not to represent one or the other position, but usually both, an imbrication of identities that short-circuits attribution to a singular ethnicity or political stance" (602).

Rosalind Galt (2013) also explores the political dimensions of Apichatpong's films, but expands the scope by placing them in an international context and linking them to the category of queer world cinema. Queer cinema is about more than merely representing queer identities, since the construction of these identities is a product of the very structure that queer theorists seeks to resist and oppose; instead, the filmmakers Galt identifies insist on "jamming up the gears of productivity" by refusing to settle into the narratives constructed for them by hegemonic ideology (66).

While Teh and Galt focus primarily on human interactions by exposing the political dimensions of Apichatpong's work, other scholars have focused on the complex relationships forged by his films between humans and their environment. Like Teh, Natalie Boehler (2011) describes Apichatpong's cinema as evoking liminal spaces and links this to the marginalisation and otherness of Isaan in relation to central Thailand, but she argues that this perspective is negotiated through a non-anthropocentric aesthetic of the jungle. She writes that "[w]hile classical cinema style basically centres on the human figure, these non-anthropocentric images seem to suggest a decentring of the human world on a figurative level: entering the jungle, the protagonists face a sort of higher being which they are subjected to" (300). Boehler argues that this representation of the jungle as wild and in excess of human control goes against more conventional Thai depictions of the agricultural countryside as an "idealised and domesticated" space linked to nostalgic notions of Thai national identity (293). The stakes for Boehler always come back to the human rather than the natural, however, as she views the jungle as a psychogeographical fantasy space that can erode self-other distinctions constructed along ethnic and national lines.

Seung-hoon Jeong (2013), on the other hand, takes a more holistic ecological position by arguing that the shifting perspectives in Apichatpong can evoke the other-than-human, in particular the animal, which he says exists on the border between the Symbolic and the Real. He claims that cinema like Apichatpong's reveal nature as "not simply organic in its

totality or antagonistic to humans, but deeply antagonistic and even indifferent to itself" (140). Una Chung (2012) similarly argues that Apichatpong opens onto other modes of subjectivity, including the animal and the ecological, but while Jeong sees Apichatpong's work as largely functioning through negativity — a trope exemplified by the ambiguous ending of *Tropical Malady* in which the protagonist remains suspended between the possibility of killing or being devoured by a tiger — Chung sees more optimistic possibilities in Apichatpong's stylistic treatment of reincarnation and transformation. She argues that rather than traumatically opening onto an animal Real that cannot be harnessed to serve human purposes, Apichatpong's work "moves beyond horror" through aesthetic strategies that "can lighten the impulse toward horror accompanying our glimpse of life beyond rational sight" (217-18). This movement beyond rationality for Chung is rhythmic rather than interruptive, dreamlike rather than traumatic, cruel, or violent. The fact that Apichatpong's work can be read as constructing either a negative project (Jeong) or a positive one (Chung) is testament to a profound ambivalence inherent in his aesthetics.

All of the scholars above see Apichatpong's films as evoking a boundary or border zone, and whether this border is between normalised self and ethnic/sexual/economical other or between the human and animal/natural, it is clear that liminality is at stake. Apichatpong's films are therefore an effective example of limit cinema, since they operate at the margins and refuse to settle questions of meaning or identity. While the above scholars adeptly bring out the political stakes of Apichatpong's ambiguity by tying it to self/other relations in a number of ways (human/animal, Isaan/Bangkok, queer/heteronormative), I wish to expand the discussion by discussing *how* this relation operates. Relations between self and other in Apichatpong's films are staged in erotic terms, and this eroticism has only been tangentially considered in the scholarship on Apichatpong thus far.

While Wheatley stages the relations between humans and their landscapes in terms of violence, Apichatpong envisions these interactions as sensuous and intensely erotic. Sex in Apichatpong is always outdoors and often interspecies, and the erotic encounter is the space where the human and the natural become indistinct. As with Wheatley, the interactions between humans and their environment is also related to religion: for Apichatpong, modern Buddhism is interlaid with earlier folk traditions that inform the representation of the natural landscape. Apichatpong uses Buddhist themes and imagery but places them in a resolutely earthly, quotidian context, a feature of his films that has led to controversy and censorship in Thailand: *Syndromes and a Century* was banned after

Apichatpong refused to cut out scenes which included depictions of monks performing everyday tasks like playing guitars or playing with toys (according to Apichatpong, the fact that one of the monks is gay did not factor in [Andrews 2010]). Reading the religious themes of Apichatpong's films alongside their erotic content, I will argue that the sacred in Apichatpong is linked to an erotic encounter with nature. Focusing in particular on *Syndromes and a Century*, *Tropical Malady,* and *Uncle Boonmee*, I will explore the ways that nature is represented as sacred but non-transcendent, linked to human experience and memory of the natural landscape.

Animal Eroticism in *Tropical Malady*

Most of Apichatpong's films take on a bisected structure that operates along a nature/culture divide. His first film to take this approach, *Blissfully Yours* (2002), begins with an extended city sequence, and only after the two central characters enter the countryside 45 minutes into the film do the opening credits appear. While the city sequence is shot in comparatively drab tones, the jungle sequences are sensuous and lush: the sun creates deep shadows in the green foliage where characters sleep, eat, swim, and have sex. This erotic sensuality tied to the jungle carries forward into *Tropical Malady*, but the jungle becomes more than a stage for human sexual relationships: the second half of the film envisions an erotic encounter not between humans but rather between a human and the jungle itself.

Apichatpong has linked the two-act structures of his films to Buddhist reincarnation, and the doubled storylines of his films reflect on themes of memory and embodiment. These themes explore what Apichatpong refers to as the transmigration of souls: "I like the idea of the transmigration of souls," he explains, "But I can't say I believe in something until it's proven" (Andrews 2010). As Chung suggests, instead of shocking us into recognising irrecuperable alterity, Apichatpong's alternative aesthetic of transformation and reincarnation moves between "the viral passage among human, animal, machine, god, and ghost, who appear through the action of birth, death, and rebirth" (2012, 221). The two-act structures of Apichatpong's films represent impossible encounters through an erotic aesthetic that emphasises affect and sensuality. In *Tropical Malady*, the bisected structure can be read as depicting two versions of the same love story: in the first, soldier Keng (Banlop Lomnoi) meets Tong (Sakda Kaewbuadee), a quiet boy from the village where Keng is stationed; in the second, a soldier also played by Banlop Lomnoi chases a

tiger spirit – who sometimes appears as Sakda Kaewbuadee in striped makeup, and sometimes as a real tiger – deeper and deeper into the jungle.

The two sets of relationships reflect in different ways on the difficulties of love, as the fascination with the other in Apichatpong is always predicated on difference and unknowability, and is always transient or impermanent. At the end of *Blissfully Yours,* a title card reveals that the film's central couple — Roong (Kanokporn Tongaram), a young factory worker, and Min (Min Oo), an illegal Burmese immigrant — have split up and Roong has gone back to her previous boyfriend. The end of the first section of *Tropical Malady* ends with Tong's disappearance and Keng's attempts to locate him, while the second section ends with Keng staring down the tiger-ghost, caught in suspension between killing him or being eaten; a monkey speaking from a tree in an earlier scene had instructed Keng to either "kill him to free him from the ghost world, or let him devour you to enter his world." The Hegelian struggle-to-the-death that marks the end of *Tropical Malady* is left in a state of indeterminacy. Neither the man nor the ghost is dominated, and in the end both are left exposed to the other, trembling in the dark and caught in each other's gaze.

If for Hegel self-consciousness depends on the outcome of the struggle — on the recognition of the other — then *Tropical Malady* concludes right at the limit of this self-consciousness, the instant before the subject is complete and aware. This zone of indeterminacy is the Bataillean erotic moment: for Bataille, "desire is to bring into a world founded on discontinuity all the continuity such a world can contain" (1957b, 19). The erotic for Bataille is always impermanent and dangerous, as because it longs to join the discontinuous subject with a continuous world it cannot be sustained without risking the death of the subject. But while the erotic is dangerous, for Bataille it is also necessary, to the point where Bataille argues that a theory of humankind cannot be constructed without it. Eroticism is one of the names Bataille gives to the problem of inner experience: he writes that "[w]e fail to realise this because man is everlastingly in search of an object *outside* himself but this object answers the *innerness* of the desire" (1957b, 29). The longing to overcome oneself and become continuous with the world – the Bataillean version of the death drive in that its complete accomplishment is the annihilation of the subject — is the basis for the desire to connect with another, either physically through sex or more abstractly through communication.

The impossibility of this desire is the result of the paradox of inner experience: the desire to be outside the self can only come from within it, since the self is the very thing that constructs the limit between inside and outside. Once the desire is fulfilled, there is no longer a subject to desire it. We can only grasp shadows of this exteriority in the moments when the integrity of our self-hood is risked, either at the moment of death or the moment when we encounter the other. While this process is dangerous, it is also intensely life affirming, and Bataille argues that the broadest definition of eroticism "is assenting to life up to the point of death" (1957b, 11). The erotic encounter with alterity paradoxically affirms the subject as self-enclosed: as discussed in the last chapter, ipseity or self-identity can only occur through a relation with an outside (non-identity). During the erotic encounter, the subject confronts the limit between inside and outside, and is therefore suspended between the affirmation of its self-enclosure and its negation in the presence of the other. This limit can only be held temporarily before it falls back on one side or the other: either the paroxysm subsides and the subject retreats back into its self-enclosure, or the limit is transgressed and the subject is annihilated.

These paradoxes of inner experience and its encounter with alterity are reflected in the ambiguous ending of *Tropical Malady,* which refuses to settle the question of kill-or-be-killed. Jeong writes that this ambiguity articulates a non-anthropomorphic ethics of the animal, arguing that the tiger's "animal gaze destabilizes the frame of nature vs. culture and seemingly addresses the man in an unheard inhuman voice" (2013, 146). The ethics of this encounter, which the film suggests can only be resolved when the man kills or is eaten, are cyclical: as Jeong points out, the tiger-ghost that Tong has become is presumably the same tiger that was implied to have eaten him in the city sequence (148). By conflating romantic love with the relationship between humans and nature, *Tropical Malady* suggests that the stakes of eroticism are ecological as well as intersubjective: the loss of the self in the other is analogous to humankind's relationship with the natural world. Bataille, too, draws this comparison, as he begins his theory of human sexuality with the reproduction of single-celled organisms, and continues to draw parallels between erotic desire and the birth, death, and decay of animal populations (1957b, 11-25). As a name for a non-rational encounter with alterity, eroticism can provide an alternate mode of thinking to the rationalist-humanist perspective at issue in ecological ethics: conceptualising human interactions with the natural world in erotic terms can provide a way of understanding the nature/culture divide while acknowledging that the limits demarcating us from them are always constructed from within.

The shadowy ambiguities of the erotic encounter are reflected in *Tropical Malady*'s jungle aesthetics. The boundaries between Keng's body and the surrounding jungle begin to blur as he tracks the tiger-ghost through the forest: the camouflage of his fatigues blends in with the sun-dappled foliage, and as he stalks deeper into the jungle he becomes more exposed and permeable to his environment. As Keng's body responds to the jungle humidity, the artificial pairing between his army fatigues and the forest generally fades into a moister, more organic indistinction – he sweats, defecates, becomes muddy. But while this porous exchange between Keng's flesh and his environment is sensuous, even erotic, it is also dangerous: his body is penetrated by the bites of insects, sharp branches, and rocks, and red trickles of blood mingle with beads of sweat and caked-on mud.

This intense affectivity contrasts with the more reserved city sequences, as the restrained static long shots in the first half are replaced in the second by a wandering camera that spreads into the space of the jungle and pauses often in close-up on various sensual details. This affective closeness is also reflected in the relationship between Keng and Tong, as while their romance in the first half is shy and tentative, in the second half they are drawn together more viscerally: "He can smell you from mountains away," the monkey tells Keng, highlighting a collapse of distance between Keng and the tiger. Keng's confrontations with the tiger spirit are marked equally by fascination and violence. At one point, Keng runs into the spirit in his anthropomorphic state and chases him into clearing; the two figures are shot from a distance, the outlines of their bodies blurred and ghostly as they grapple with each other in the long grass. Keng is eventually thrown down a cliff, rocks and earth tumbling around him; the spirit then looks down at him from above as he examines his bloodied palms. If we read the second half as an echo of the first – a transmigration of the men's souls — then these interactions can be seen as a way of making explicit their desire, drawing links between the tentative back and forth of sexual attraction and the mutual fascination between predator and prey. Consummation becomes consumption; the more metaphorical expenditure of being that constitutes the sexual act is paralleled by the literal expenditure of killing and eating that characterises animal existence in the jungle.

This emphasis on the permeability of the body that simultaneously enhances awareness of the body's boundaries is evoked not only visually, but also through sound. Philippa Lovatt (2013) calls attention to the ways that *Tropical Malady* de-emphasises the voice and

heightens ambient sounds in order to increase their affective impact. She writes that in Apichatpong

> the sound of the environment is often so dominant that it dismantles our reliance on the verbal or linguistic to ground our understanding of what is happening in the narrative, and instead encourages (or rather insists upon) an embodied, phenomenological engagement with the scene. (62)

For Lovatt, sound in Apichatpong helps bring us outside of ourselves; in Bataillean terms, this process is erotic in that the hapticity of heightened ambient sound is linked to the desire for continuity between body and world. This haptic reading suggests that sound can bring the spectator in more immediate contact with the outside world represented on film.

As with everything that brings us outside, however, sound also brings us right back in, reverberating off the limits of our experience. Timothy Morton draws on this paradox in his analyses of ambient noise and music in *Ecology Without Nature* (2007), writing that the intimate qualities of sound waves (which "vibrate air, which vibrates the body" [95]) promise a more immediate interaction with the environment (see also Chapter Four). However, because sound is necessarily experienced sensually, "ambient art misses the genuine unknown, which would consist of radical non-identity" (96). The outside brought to sensory experience inevitably turns inward, losing what characterised it as external in the first place. The ambient noises in *Tropical Malady* reflect this aporia, as by destabilising the rationalising framework of the voice they call attention to a sensuous reality in excess of the human — but the very sensuousness that evokes this reality emphasises that we can only experience the outside world in human terms. The recognition of this aporia is the basis for Morton's ecological ethics, and *Tropical Malady* hangs on the limit between these perspectives by stopping its narrative right at the point before the inside turns outside — at the moment before death.

The ambiguities of embodiment and desire in *Tropical Malady* are mapped onto the divide between the human and the animal; these lines become fluid as the two halves of the film divide from each other and re-converge through repeated themes and images. Apichatpong's non-linear storytelling and disorienting use of image and sound frustrate attempts to constrain his films to rational frameworks. The interpenetration between self and other in *Tropical Malady* is erotic in that it expresses the desire of the subject to exceed itself, as Keng and Tong's romantic desire is echoed in the more primal desire of

the hunter and hunted. These roles hover in a state of indeterminacy: is Keng chasing the tiger, or is the tiger stalking him? The indeterminacy of desire, linked to an immanent spirituality and the animal world, evokes an eroticised image of the sacred, a position that I will develop in the following section by expanding on the use of religious themes in Apichatpong's next two films, *Syndromes and a Century* and *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives.*

Desublimating the Sacred

The ambivalence in Apichatpong's films is staged as being not only between the human and the natural, but also between the real world and spirit world. The spirit world in Apichatpong's cinema is always folded into this reality rather than being pushed beyond its boundaries, and ghosts are often a metaphor for how the past is embedded in the present. This folding inward of the sacred is reflected in the ways that Apichatpong desublimates religious imagery by bringing the spiritual into the everyday.

Apichatpong's ghosts inhabit the same world as his people and animals and are generally shot in the same way. The sacred is the *material*, folded into this world rather than being deferred to one beyond. This conception of the sacred as immanent to this world rather than transcending it reflects the animist traditions that Apichatpong draws from: for animist cosmology, there is no separation between the real and the spiritual, and non-human entities in the world possess a spiritual nature beyond what we can understand. Animism also implies the possibility of engaging with the sacred on a sensual rather than rational or spiritual level. Reflecting this possibility, the erotic encounters between humans and animals in Apichatpong's films provide an alternative method for engaging with the natural world, one predicated on an ecstatic, irrational, sensuous exchange rather than on use and subordination.

Apichatpong links the animist influences of *Uncle Boonmee* to north-eastern Thailand, and says that its traditions differ from mainstream Thai culture:

> Before Siam became Thailand the country had several communities, tribes, and the north-east has more the influence of Laos and Cambodia. It's a very animistic society, more Hindu. More about magic, sorcery, witchcraft. For this film I use a dialect of the area, very close to Laotian. So if you showed this film in Bangkok, many or most people might not understand. (Andrews 2010)

A number of scholars have expanded on the links between Apichatpong's films and north-eastern animist folklore. Teh writes that while Western commentators are quick to draw out the Buddhist influences on Apichatpong's work, they miss the more complex regional history where Buddhism was imposed "somewhat against the grain of an animist substrate" (2011, 602). Teh writes that the opposition between matriarchal-syncretic animism and patriarchal-monological Buddhism provides a more nuanced framework for considering Apichatpong's films (602). May Adadol Ingawanij (2013) argues that Apichatpong's animism indicates an alternative cinematic ontology — a new realism – which draws on "[t]he property of film image as trace, or a material record of contingent details in excess of the narrative system" in order to construct the world as a constant flux of disparate parts (92). Both scholars tie Apichatpong's animist aesthetics to the conflicted politics of north-eastern Thailand, a legacy that is picked up in Apichatpong's films through frequent references to war and anti-communist violence that have marked the region's recent past. As Ingawanij points out, Apichatpong evokes these political issues obliquely, "training his gaze lower and further to the ground" (101); his emphasis on the materiality of the everyday insists on contingencies that refuse to be subordinated to a totalising grand narrative.

The materiality of the natural world in Apichatpong's cinema is inflected with forces beyond reason, an excess of style and narrative that emits from the landscape and resists straightforward interpretation. *Uncle Boonmee* begins with a picture of murky twilight, the 16mm image blurring together the lush jungle blues and greens. A cow stands tethered to a tree and impatiently resists his rope. It escapes and wanders through the forest until he is found by the farmer; the silhouette of an ape-like creature with glowing red eyes observes as the cow is led back towards the farm. The titles appear, after which we do not see the cow again. The connection between the cow sequence and the central narrative, which focuses on Boonmee's encounters with the ghosts of his family before he dies, is left unclear, as are the relationships between other side stories throughout the film. The cow might be Boonmee in a past life, or it might be another inhabitant of the jungle surrounding his house where the monkey ghosts live. It might simply be a reminder of the animal gaze, that the human perspective is not the only one through which the jungle is seen. In *Uncle Boonmee*'s crepuscular jungle, the animal world interpenetrates the human; it is depicted as utterly alien and yet inexorably connected to human activities and perspectives.

The digression midway through the film of a princess's erotic encounter with a catfish similarly does not relate to Boonmee in any clear sense, but rather serves as a parable about the interconnectivity of animals and humans. While travelling through the jungle, a princess stops at a green pool underneath a waterfall. Despondent over her appearance – she lifts her veil to reveal heavily scarred skin – she weeps, but then hears a voice coming from the pond. The voice belongs to a catfish who tells her not to waste her tears, and assures her that she is beautiful. The princess walks into the water, shedding her outer garments and dropping her gold into the pond as offerings to the catfish, whom she calls the "Lord of the Water." She lays back into the milky-green pool and closes her eyes: the fish swims between her legs, splashing as she tilts her head back in ecstasy.

This eroticisation of the human relationship with nature provides a model based on sensuous exchange rather than subordination. Eroticism is the impossible desire to know the other, but such an exchange is only approachable if we risk being exposed to the other in turn. While it is not possible to know the animal from their eyes, *Uncle Boonmee*'s insistence on the interconnection between us and them requires that we expose ourselves to the natural, and the catfish sequence makes literal the erotics of such an engagement. The final shot of the princess interlude is from the catfish's perspective, beneath the water as the princess's jewellery sinks to the rocky bottom of the pool. As sacrificial objects, these jewels are wasted and thereby rendered sacred — they are divorced from the human logic of production and returned to nature, sinking into the catfish's murky pond.

Another story of the human engaging erotically with the animal world is recounted when Boonmee's long missing son Boonsong returns in the form of a monkey ghost. Boonmee is visited by his sister in law and her son, and they sit down to dinner on Boonmee's porch. They are suddenly joined by the apparition of Huay (Natthakarn Aphaiwonk), Boonmee's dead wife. Only slightly disarmed by the sudden presence of a ghost, Boonmee and Huay's sister, Jen (Jenjira Pongpas) ask Huay about quotidian matters, such as whether she has enough food to eat. Their conversation is interrupted suddenly by one of the monkey creatures from the opening scene, who comes walking up the stairs. He tells the group that he is Boonmee's son, Boonsong, and recounts how he was transformed: he explains that he grew long black hair and his eyes turned red after he mated with a monkey ghost, a creature that he discovered while taking pictures in the jungle. He tells how his experience of the unknown, at first mediated through the lens of the camera, became increasingly immediate as he traversed the jungle in search of the creature he had caught on film,

eventually resulting in his taking a monkey ghost for a wife. The risk of the erotic dissolution of the self in the other is made literal through Boonsong, as in coming to know the monkey ghost he grew to forget his humanity.

The fluid natural world of *Uncle Boonmee* contrasts with the rigid linearity of *Syndromes and a Century*. *Syndromes*, like Apichatpong's other works, takes on a two act structure split between rural and urban spaces. Both sections of the film contain the same actors playing the same sets of characters, which include two doctors (one man, one woman), a dentist, an old monk, and a young monk. The parts each begin the same way, with Dr. Toey (Nantarat Sawaddikul) interviewing Dr. Nohng (Jaruchai Iamaram) for a position in the hospital. Her questions and his answers remain more or less identical — only the settings and perspective are different, as the first takes place in a comfortable-looking country office surrounded by lush gardens, and the second takes place in a sleek white high-rise office with a city view and stainless steel fixtures. The gaze in the first sequence belongs primarily to Dr. Toey, shot from her point of view as Dr. Nohng answers her questions; the second from his point of view, observing her reactions as he responds. The repeated events give the uncanny impression of an echoed memory or a dream — a feeling of déjà vu without a clear narrative purpose. As with *Uncle Boonmee*, it is unclear how the two halves of the story are connected: they seem to be separated by time as well as space, as though the characters have been transposed into the future only to be irrevocably connected to their past. *Syndromes and a Century* is narratively structured not through clear cause and effect but rather through the idea of reincarnation, as traces of the past are left on the present and characters shift perspectives but circle back through their earthly existences.

The sense of circularity suggested by the film's doubleness is reinforced by the repeated visual and verbal references to circles. Circles and straight lines make up the diegetic world of *Syndromes*, in sharp contrast to the unruly wildness of Apichatpong's precious films; this emphasis is reinforced by Dr. Nohng who, when asked about his favourite shape in an interview, replies "a circle," round and smooth like the bottom of a glass. In line with this motif, the two halves of *Syndromes* are not opposites, but the same thing considered from two sides — two halves of the same circle. In both halves, the mise-en-scène is characterised by the stark rigid lines of long hallways. While the country hospital setting is less stark and modern than the Bangkok medical centre, it is no less ordered and clean: the walls are white, the shelves are neat, and the gardens are well manicured. People move

through both spaces upright and in straight lines, or else they sit in rigid chairs; this is unlike Apichatpong's previous films, where characters frequently crouch, kneel, look upwards, and lay down. As though unsettled by these new linear environments, the camera moves more than it usually does in Apichatpong's cinema: it swings back and forth to consider conversations from various sides, or wanders away from the speakers to consider the view through an open window. The circle motif carries through both halves: there is a solar eclipse, an extended shot on the mouth of a pipe, and a remote control flying saucer. These images are poetic and metonymic, linking the two halves of the film by association rather than cause and effect. Like *A Field in England*, *Syndromes and a Century* loops around itself in a circle, but its circularity is inflected by melancholy and joy rather than a fatalistic sense of dread.

While the linearity of *Syndromes* stands out in Apichatpong's work, the presence of a wild orchid stands as a symbolic reminder of the disorder of nature. In the first half of the film, Dr. Toey recounts a story of an orchid seller with whom she had fallen in love; he came to the hospital to look at a wild orchid that he claimed was the rarest in Thailand. He tells the hospital director in a flashback: "Look at the roots, Director. They're not so pretty. Twining all over. People don't like it so much. It seems to lack form and order." This image contrasts starkly with the sterile efficiency of the hospital environment; rather than being a symbol of exemplary formal beauty, the orchid is precious precisely insofar as it is messy and formless. It is also a symbol of love, as Dr. Toey recounts the orchid story in order to illustrate the pain of desire. In *Syndromes*, desire quietly dismantles (rather than violently disrupts) the order of being.

Syndromes is quiet and contemplative, and it is therefore perhaps surprising that it was the most controversial of Apichatpong's films upon its release in Thailand. The film was released as a new censorship law was being drafted with a restrictive ratings structure that allowed the government to maintain the right to censor and ban films, and *Syndromes* drew national media attention as Apichatpong protested the censorship of four scenes, and then refused to screen it in its censored state (it was later screened with the four scenes replaced by black screens and silence of equal duration). While *Syndromes* was met with shock and outrage, the scenes at issue are resolutely mundane, censored not because they represent excessive violence or sexuality but rather because they bring what is supposed to be sacred within everyday contexts. Teh makes a similar claim when he argues that Apichatpong's transgressions work through domestication and desublimation rather than shock value: he

writes that "[w]hile Buddhist symbols appear frequently in his work — as in everyday life — he avoids the sacral zones of religious life, instead framing the clergy (sangha) in profane and quotidian contexts" (2011, 602). In contrast to Wheatley's brutal nihilism, Apichatpong's quiet transgressions are evidence that exposure to the outside of thought need not be marked by brutality or bloodshed. The perceived desecration of Buddhist imagery in a scene where a monk quietly plays guitar at a small gathering, or a group of monks play with a remote control flying saucer, provide an alternative way of opposing a system. Transgression is generally thought of as breaking moral laws in order to reveal a chaotic, violent excess of an established order, but *Syndromes* does the opposite; it brings the sacred back within the confines of the human, exposing the disorder quietly growing within established boundaries.

Both kinds of transgression cross the limit between the sacred and the profane, articulating the distinctions we draw between the everyday human world and the unknowable world beyond. Apichatpong's desacralised religious images, however, expose the ways that inside and outside are always intertwined. By drawing the sacred into the material, *Syndromes* quietly interrogates the distinction between the artificiality of the human and the disorder of the natural. *Uncle Boonmee* and *Syndromes and a Century* approach these distinctions from opposite directions, as the sacred natural space of the former is counterbalanced by the profane linearity of the latter, but Apichatpong's cinema in general serves as a reminder that these worlds inflect each other. Whether by conflating the sacred with the natural or bringing the religious into every day contexts, the sacred in Apichatpong is articulated at the limits of the human and not in some higher world beyond.

Conclusion

The films of Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Ben Wheatley approach the nonhuman from very different perspectives. Apichatpong's cinema is more life-affirming in its emphasis on eroticism and sensuousness, while Wheatley's cinema is more negative in that it foregrounds cruelty, death, and violence. By theorising Wheatley and Apichatpong through Bataille's ontology of the sacred, I have framed their differing approaches not as opposites but as two sides of the same concept; in contrast to the linearity of the profane human world, the sacred is ambivalent and its contradictions must be held in suspension rather than resolved or domesticated. Engaging with the sacred means pushing our limits and putting ourselves at risk, and Apichatpong and Wheatley provide two models for

accomplishing this. The endless deferral of meaning through sacrifice-for-nothing at the heart of Wheatley's project deconstructs the notion of sacrifice itself, which I argued is central to Western conceptions of truth. There is something in the sacrificial violence of Wheatley's films that cannot be recuperated into structuring forces, something in excess of the narrative that cannot be made to mean without losing the force of its impact. Rather than undermining the possibility for positive meaning, Apichatpong's films envision an excess of the human in terms of erotic interpenetration: in the space of the jungle, the boundaries of the human are destabilised as they come into contact with natural forces. In both cases, the sacred natural world is depicted as beyond the bounds of human rationality, and therefore as a risk to the integrity of human self-hood. But while the process of engaging with it is inherently dangerous, it is also necessary in order to disrupt anthropocentrism.

The cinemas of both Wheatley and Apichatpong insist on immanence, of a sacred inhering in this world. Both filmmakers frame this in terms of a pagan return to nature: Christianity and Buddhism are pulled aside to reveal a pagan or animist substrate, one that exists simultaneously to dominant rationalising narratives. For pagan cosmology, there is no moving beyond this world: the sacred is enfolded into it, at the limits of the human but not beyond the bounds of material existence. Apichatpong and Wheatley's cinemas envision existence as circumscribed and finite, and the circularity that characterises their narrative approaches reinforces the idea that there is something in excess of understanding inherent to the physical world. The loss of God eliminates the possibility for transcendent truth as well as for singular structuring narratives, but the limit cinemas of Wheatley and Apichatpong suggest another way forward – one that paradoxically involves circling back around to re-examine our fraught relationship with the natural world.

Chapter 3: Objectivity, Speculative Realism, and the Cinematic Apparatus

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I tackled the question of objectivity – of mind-independent reality – in terms of the Bataillean distinction between the sacred and the profane. Rather than conceiving of the sacred in terms of a transcendent world beyond, I have, following Bataille, characterised it as those things in the world left out of human frameworks of truth and rationality. The sacred in Bataille is always in dynamic relation with human ways of understanding reality, but remains irreducible to them. This chapter, the second half of Part One on "Objectivity," will tackle questions about objectivity and cinema's ability to represent the outside of thought from a slightly different direction; Bataille will move somewhat into the background, though the ontology established in the previous chapters will continue to undergird my philosophical assumptions here (his relevance will re-emerge more explicitly in Chapter Four). Because my understanding of the relation between human and nonhuman reality has much in common with speculative realism (see Chapter One), this chapter will engage with some of speculative realism's assumptions about how to escape anthropocentrism. To do so, I will bring speculative realism into conversation with a very different kind of theory about reality. I argue that although speculative realism contains some useful insights for rethinking the anthropocentrism that has dominated (at least Western) thought since the Enlightenment, it has much to learn from film theory. In particular, I will look at how Jean-Louis Baudry's apparatus theory – explored in various essays from the mid-1970s – contains a number of insights relevant to contemporary debates about how to conceptualise and relate to nonhuman reality. I will focus in particular on the ways in which apparatus theory complicates speculative realism's claims that we can think about reality outside of human thought.

Though I agree with the speculative realists that we must attempt to think beyond the limits of the human perspective, I simultaneously uphold that such a task is impossible. I suggested in Chapter One that the impossible imperative – we cannot, but we must – can form the basis of a new ecological ethics that recognises the limits of human perceptions and concepts but also asserts the existence of a world beyond them. This chapter will look at some of the problems and prospects for such an ethics of impossibility (see also Chapter Five), and the ways that this impossibility is apparent in cinema's negotiation of subjectivity and objectivity. The complex interplay between subjective and objective

forces in cinema can provide a model for understanding the relationship between human subjectivity and nonhuman reality at issue in speculative realism. To support these claims, I examine two films that self-reflexively engage with questions of subjectivity, objectivity, and nature: Peter Bo Rappmund's 2012 experimental documentary *Tectonics*, and Lisandro Alonso's 2014 historical drama *Jauja.* The self-reflexive gestures of these two films expose the limits of the cinematic apparatus and gesture to a world beyond representation, one that can only be related to in fraught, unstable, and contradictory ways.

Following Bataille, my argument relies on impossibility and contradiction: one of the central tenets of this thesis is that reality – that is, the world-in-itself rather than the world as it exists for us – may not align with human ideas of coherence and rationality. The structure of this chapter therefore works through two conflicting positions without resolving the arising tensions, since I argue that the tensions themselves expose something crucial about the limits of the human. I begin by providing an overview of relevant concepts from speculative realism as well as their application to film studies before I critique speculative realism's position through a re-reading film theory, including the classical theories of André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer but especially Baudry's apparatus theory. The following two sections then look at conflicting functions of *Tectonics* and *Jauja*, approaching the question of nonhuman reality from opposing perspectives; the section on "Objectivity and Nature" looks at how *Tectonics* and *Jauja* call attention to a nonhuman reality in excess of human perception; the section on "Subjectivity and Apparatus" then examines how both films simultaneously expose ways that cinema must always stage nonhuman reality in relation to a human spectator. Both films assert the importance of nonhuman reality on the level of content while inevitably bringing this reality back to human perception on the level of form. This tension will allow me to extrapolate a more general claim about the impossibility of breaking with anthropocentrism, since the same idea can undermine it on one level while affirming it on another. This impossibility need not resign us to despair over our imprisonment within the phenomenal bubble, but can rather form the basis of a more nuanced ecological ethics.

Speculative Realism and Film Theory

Speculative realism is a movement in contemporary philosophy that, while diverse in approach and conclusions, is united through a desire to get past the boundaries of the phenomenal bubble in which they claim we have been encased at least since Kant.

Speculative realism has recently begun to influence film studies, alongside broader ecological trends such as posthumanism and animal studies that have become increasingly prevalent in film scholarship over the last few decades. Scholars such as Selmin Kara, David Martin-Jones, and Christopher Peterson have employed, engaged with, and critiqued the ideas of speculative realism in relation to cinema: Kara (2014) argues that films such as *Tree of Life* (Terrance Malick 2011) and *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (Benh Zeitlin 2012) exemplify a new "speculative realist aesthetic" in that they are similarly concerned with questions of ancestrality and extinction (existence before and after human life); Martin-Jones (2016) argues that through film we might come to understand SR's central questions as belonging to a broader critique of modernity and colonialism; and Peterson (2015) argues that contrary to the claims of speculative realism, we cannot do without the human as our epistemological grounding point, using insights from *Melancholia* (Lars von Trier 2011) and *Gravity* (Alfonso Cuarón 2013) to bolster his claims. That these discussions have arisen within film studies makes sense, given that film theory – like speculative realism – is often occupied with questions about the relationship between reality and perception.

While I think there are significant insights to be gained from speculative realism and its application to film studies, we should not be too hasty in our embrace of new ideas at the expense of old ones. Speculative realism often skips over the warnings of anti-realist twentieth century philosophies (especially postmodernism and poststructuralism) about the difficulties in ascertaining objective truth, and at its worst risks arrogance in attempting brandish its flag on some unclaimed territory of the real. Steven Shaviro cautions in *The Universe of Things: On Speculative Realism* (2014) that speculative realism's rejection of both naïve, dogmatic realism and the anti-realism of twentieth century philosophy carries risks: "Even if breaking away from 'stuffy … common sense' is admirable, it can also bespeak a contemptuous arrogance, implicitly suggesting that 'everyone else is deluded, but I know better'" (9-10). He further argues that

> [t]he only way to outfox correlationism and reach the great outdoors, without simply falling back into what Kant rejected as 'dogmatism' is to proceed obliquely through the history of philosophy, finding its points of divergence and its strange detours, when it moves beyond its own anthropocentric assumptions. (9)

The dangers posed by the arrogance of the "new" can be mitigated somewhat by following Shaviro's advice and returning to old ideas that are generally ignored or forgotten by new theoretical approaches; he advocates a return to the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, while I take a somewhat different approach by returning to classical and 1970s film theories. By bringing apparatus theory in conversation with speculative realism, I want to demonstrate that the latter not only has something to learn from the written discourse of film studies, but also from the films themselves – that is to say, their medium-specific mediation of reality.

Before I turn to my critique of speculative realism, a brief overview of the history and motivating concepts of the movement will be helpful.[29] Speculative realism – a term coined by Ray Brassier, who has since distanced himself from the movement[30] – began with a conference held at Goldsmith's College, London in 2007 inspired by the publication of Quentin Meillassoux's *After Finitude* (2006). Speakers at the first event included Meillassoux, Brassier, Graham Harman, and Ian Hamilton Grant, and though

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[29] A detailed overview of all of the thinkers associated with speculative realism is beyond the scope of this chapter, but for a comprehensive and highly readable overview see Gratton 2014. Gratton includes both the "core" original members as well as related "new materialist" thinkers like Elizabeth Grosz, Jane Bennet, and Catherine Malabou who are not usually included in the speculative realist canon. While speculative realism often praises itself for being exciting and radically new, Gratton's analysis is especially helpful in that it contextualises the movement within broader concerns of philosophy, as well as raising problems with and potential solutions to central concepts of speculative realism. His inclusion of Grosz, Bennet, and Malabou also helps to work against the domination of the movement by (mostly white, mostly heterosexual) men, a problem for which speculative realism is often criticised but seldom makes any effort to correct. Levi Bryant, Graham Harman, and Nick Srnicek's edited collection *The Speculative Turn* (2011), for example, includes 25 essays by prominent philosophers; only one of them is a woman, despite the fact that in the introduction the editors congratulate themselves for including a diverse group of scholars that "hail from thirteen countries, speak seven different native languages, and are separated from eldest to youngest by a range of more than forty years" (Bryant, Harman, and Srnicek 2011, 1).

[30] When asked about speculative realism in an interview, Brassier replied: "The 'speculative realist movement' exists only in the imaginations of a group of bloggers promoting an agenda for which I have no sympathy whatsoever: actor-network theory spiced with pan-psychist metaphysics and morsels of process philosophy. I don't believe the internet is an appropriate medium for serious philosophical debate; nor do I believe it is acceptable to try to concoct a philosophical movement online by using blogs to exploit the misguided enthusiasm of impressionable graduate students. I agree with Deleuze's remark that ultimately the most basic task of philosophy is to impede stupidity, so I see little philosophical merit in a 'movement' whose most signal achievement thus far is to have generated an online orgy of stupidity" (Rychter 2011). Brassier is referring to the active online community surrounding speculative realism, which includes blogs by Timothy Morton, Graham Harman, Levi Bryant, and Nick Srnicek.

these thinkers are quite different in their approaches (ranging from object-oriented ontology or OOO to process philosophy to panpsychism to nihilism), they nonetheless share a critique of correlationism, the idea that "thought cannot get *outside itself* in order to compare the world as it is 'in itself' to the world as it is 'for us', and thereby distinguish what is a function of our relation to the world from what belongs to the world alone" (Meillassoux 2006, 3). Speculative realism is motivated by a frustration with the tendency of post-Kantian philosophy (especially continental philosophy) to talk about reality only in relation to human concepts and discourse, as a product of language, power structures, texts, ideological systems, consciousness, and other human-centred forces (Bryant, Harman and Srnicek 2011, 3-4). By correlating existence with human thought, correlationist philosophy draws the emphasis away from reality and towards the question of our access to it; acknowledging that everything we know is conditioned by the way that we know it, correlationism (represented by philosophers as diverse as Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Michel Foucault, and Bruno Latour[31]) turns ontological questions into epistemological ones and maintains the Kantian assertion that things-in-themselves are beyond the bounds of knowledge and reason. Speculative realism calls this premise into question, pointing out that correlating everything we know about the world *to us* inevitably results in a problematic anthropocentrism by placing us in a privileged position at the centre of the universe.

As Bryant, Harman, and Srnicek explain in the introduction to their edited volume *The Speculative Turn* (2011), the motivation to question the anthropocentrism inherent in anti-realist philosophies came about at least in part because of ecological concerns:

> Without deriding the significant contributions of these philosophies, something is clearly amiss in these trends. In the face of the looming ecological catastrophe, and the increasing infiltration of technology into the everyday world (including our own bodies), it is not clear that the anti-realist position is equipped to face up to these developments. (3)

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[31] Latour is somewhat of an exceptional case as he is also a favourite reference of many speculative realist thinkers, including Graham Harman, due to his influential work in the philosophy of science and his assertion that all entities are equally real. As Gratton points out, however, certain ideas of his read as strongly correlational, such as his claim that "Ramses could not have died of tuberculosis, since that was not discovered until 150 years ago" (quoted in Gratton 2014). For Latour's discussion of Ramses's tuberculosis, see Latour 2000.

According to this view, anti-realist thought is now coming under threat by pressure from the real; in the form of present and looming disasters, reality is impinging on our ability to stay comfortably within the anthropocentric circle of human thought and consciousness. In other words, the time has come to give reality its due. This is not the same as saying that we should return to a pre-Kantian realism, or what Quentin Meillassoux calls "the 'naïve' stance of dogmatic metaphysics" (2006, 3).[32] As Steven Shaviro explains it,

> the basic speculative realist thesis is the diametrical opposite of the 'naïve' assertion that things in themselves are directly accessible to us; the key point, rather, is that the world in itself – the world as it exists apart from us – cannot in any way be contained or constrained by the question of our *access* to it. (66)

Acknowledging the difficulties of thinking the unthought (the outside of thought, what Meillassoux calls the absolute), speculative realism asserts the importance of *speculating* about it. Speculative realism tends to argue that a non-anthropocentric, non-correlational picture of reality looks rather stranger than the pre-Kantian versions of reality, since we can no longer assume that the world adapts to our concepts of it. Graham Harman passionately defends speculative realism against charges of being old-fashioned or reactionary,[33] writing that

> [u]sually, the main problem with the term realism is that it suggests a dull, unimaginative appeal to stuffy common sense. But this connotation is exploded

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[32] Meillassoux borrows the term "dogmatic metaphysics" from Kant, who argues in *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) that philosophy cannot merely investigate the truth of concepts; it must also take a step back to assess how reason is able to arrive at those concepts. The *Critique* is an attempt to critique the faculties of reason in order to provide grounds for metaphysics (rather than merely assuming that reason can provide us with knowledge of the world), which Kant argues is only possible by restricting our knowledge to things as they exist for us (mind-dependent, correlational) rather than things as they exist in themselves. Meillassoux concedes to the correlationists that after Kant there is no way of appealing to the common-sense, Cartesian view of a knowable external world except merely by assuming its presence; *After Finitude* is an attempt to find a way back to the mind-independent world "out there" without begging the question of its existence.

[33] I am not convinced that s speculative realism is an entirely new kind of realism. This statement from Bryant, Harman, and Srnicek evidences a contradiction between old and new that remains unresolved in SR: "By contrast with the repetitive continental focus on texts, discourse, social practices, and human finitude, the new breed of thinker is turning once more toward reality itself" (2011, 3). Their claim that they are "turning once more towards reality" indicates a reactionary return to traditional metaphysics that they disavow by claiming to be a "new breed of thinker."

> in advance by the 'speculative' part of the phrase, which hints at starry landscapes haunted by poets and mad scientists. (2011, 21).

All of the speculative realists are committed to *reality itself* rather than representations or mediations of it, and though their answers differ as to how we can know anything positively about it they agree that such positive knowledge is bound to be quite different from traditional realist notions of a knowable external world.

A potential problem with speculative realism is that it cannot sufficiently account for ethics, despite being motivated in part by ethical concerns. Martin-Jones (2016) argues that SR's metaphysical focus risks ignoring historical and political factors, which is a problem given that our current ecological situation is largely the result of the exploitative and exclusionary logics of modernity and colonialism. Peterson (2015) criticises speculative realism in relation to cinema from a different angle by arguing that we cannot do without the human as the basis for our encounters with the world. While Peterson praises speculative realism – specifically Graham Harman's OOO and its "unrelenting displacement of human exceptionalism" (2015, 2) – he contends that pointing out that we are not special does not grant us access to perspectives beyond our own. Peterson argues that OOO's flat ontology that grants equal ontological value to all things[34] amounts to "an impossible view from nowhere" (2015, 4). We are inevitably grounded in our own point of view, which Peterson argues is not an unethical or metaphysically untenable position but rather the very starting point of ethics.

Ecological metaphysics is, in part, the recognition of perspectives other than our own, a way of negotiating with the other. It is unclear that the internal battles of the speculative realists, which often cannot even agree amongst themselves,[35] can provide us with an

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[34] Harman grants all things, human or otherwise, the same ontological status and insists that they are all equal, at least insofar as they relate to each other in the same way; Levi Bryant (2011), another proponent of OOO, calls this the "democracy of objects."

[35] Harman describes a fantasy about a future where different camps of speculative realists fight to the death: "No longer reduced to alliance under a single banner, the speculative realists now have a chance to wage friendly and futuristic warfare against one another. Intellectual fault lines have been present from the start. At the Goldsmiths event two years ago, I played openly with scenarios in which each of us might be isolated against a gang attack by the other three on specific wedge issues. In my new capacity as a blogger, I have turned this into a scenario of outright science fiction, in which the continental landscape of 2050 is made up solely of warring clans descended from the various branches of 2007-era speculative realism" (2011, 22).

adequate methodology for negotiating between human and nonhuman perspectives. If the aim is to provide us with positive knowledge of the absolute, then the radically different ontologies that this aim has inspired only stands testament to the difficulties inherent in doing so. Anti-realism risks the arrogance of anthropocentrism by forgetting about spheres beyond our concepts and understanding, while speculative realism risks the arrogance of mistaking our own particular insights for objective truth. Ideas from film theory about the interconnectivity between subjective and objective forces in the construction of cinematic perspective can provide something of a middle ground.

Realism and the Cinematic Apparatus

Questions central to speculative realism about reality, mediation, and perception have been part of film theory since its inception. The ability or inability of cinema to directly represent reality, or to provide us with pictures of reality previously unimagined or unconsidered, was the focus of early realists like André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer. In their introduction to *Screening Nature* (2013), Anat Pick and Guinevere Narraway discuss these early realists as important precursors to studies of ecology in cinema, noting that the

> link between film and the physical world has been a central theme in the study of film and film theory, most notably the classical theories of cinematic realism of Siegfried Kracauer and André Bazin. Each in his way, Kracauer … and Bazin … argued for the affinity between film's photographic ontology and the reality it captures. (20)

Important insights can therefore be gained by looking to film theory in order to answer some of the questions raised by speculative realism about the relationship (or lack thereof) between reality and perception.

Kracauer's *Theory of Film* (1960) explicitly argues for film as an object-oriented medium, in contrast to the traditional arts (he uses tragic theatre as an example): "Unlike this cosmos [of tragedy], where destiny defeats chance and all the light falls on human interaction, the world of film is a flow of random events involving both humans and inanimate objects" (1). For Kracauer, film is uniquely capable of revealing and recording physical reality, since it can both mimic our modes of perception in order to represent a realistic scene, or else it can penetrate aspects of reality that are normally hidden from us (for example, by slowing down movements too fast for us to see, or enlarging small details

by shooting in close up, or shooting from angles other than eye-level). Kracauer's theory of film is a kind of object-oriented metaphysics *avant la lettre,* as he argues that film as an art is uniquely capable of representing those aspects of reality that escape our notice or are beyond our abilities to perceive.

Bazin similarly argues for the realist capabilities of cinema, asserting that film's capacity to objectively record physical reality is the basis of its artistic merit. Bazin was heavily influenced by phenomenology (especially the work of Merleau-Ponty), and so his thought is perhaps more at odds with speculative realism than Kracauer's despite his commitment to cinematic realism. Though Bazin asserts that film is capable of reproducing "the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it" (1967, 14) – a sentence that could have just as easily been written by Harman describing his object of inquiry – for Bazin this reproduction of reality is only possible through artifice and mediation (1971, 26). Cinema is objective in the sense that it reproduces an image of reality through an automatic photochemical process rather than "the creative intervention of man" (1967, 13) but this does not amount to OOO's "impossible view from nowhere" since it remains anchored to a particular viewpoint – that of the camera.

Bazin is not trying to argue that the "creative intervention of man" is entirely absent from cinema since of course filmmakers choose what objects are to be photographed and how (1967, 13). Rather, he is pointing out that the actual process of reproduction differs from arts like painting and literature in that it is filtered through an object (the camera) rather than a human subject (who sees, then paints or writes as she sees). For Bazin the objectivity of cinema is based on our psychological impressions of reality since the camera sees more or less as we see, but the automatic, mechanised process involved in representation works to conceal cinema's basis in subjective impressions. Bazin's realism therefore rests not on the simplistic idea that cinema is able to give us direct access to objective reality, but rather that it gives us the subjective impression that it is able to do so; cinematic realism depends on the contradictions between (rather than resolution of) nature and artifice, human and machine, subjectivity and objectivity. These oppositions do not cancel out or bracket off the real (as speculative realism would argue about phenomenological versions of realism) but rather are the very condition of cinema's relationship to reality. Cinema might represent a desire to produce a perfect reproduction of reality (Bazin calls this the "myth of total cinema"), but it will always fall short because of the particularities of its perspective; like ours, cinema's view of the world is only partial,

deficient, and incomplete. Its objectivity does not imply totality: to borrow the logic of speculative realism, the reality reproduced by cinema is not exhausted by the camera's access to it. This does not imply that cinema bears no relationship to reality, just as the fact that we perceive the world subjectively does not undermine the existence of a world outside of those perceptions.

From an ecological point of view, what is interesting about realists like Bazin and Kracauer is that they discuss perspective not only in relation to human subjectivity, but also as mediated through a nonhuman entity: cinematic perspective is objective not in the sense of being omniscient or ungrounded, but rather because it is literally the point of view of an object. Our encounter with cinema is a subjective impression of an objective perspective, as we identify with a camera that sees things in a way similar to but not identical with the way we perceive (much as we might identify with another person). Jean-Louis Baudry argues that "the spectator identifies less with what is represented, the spectacle itself, than with what stages the spectacle, makes it seen, obliging him to see what it sees; this is exactly the function taken over by the camera as a sort of relay" (1986a, 295). Seen in this way, cinema becomes relevant for speculative realism because it highlights the ways that our perspectives are shaped by and come into contact with not only other humans but also nonhuman things. Since cinema is a technology invented by humans it is of course bound to be related to us in some way, but this relationship does not only go in one direction: we both affect and are affected by cinema.

Crucially, however, cinema also exposes that these encounters are never neutral or uncontaminated by human perspectives and ideological structures (at least not when humans are part of the relation; encounters between two rocks, or birds, or particles will contaminate each other in different ways). The apparatus of cinema establishes a mode of perception before the spectator encounters the impressions of reality onscreen; it constructs a way of seeing conditioned both by the material objects involved (camera, projector, screen) and the ideological structures that gave rise to those objects. Apparatus theory explains cinematic realism by looking at subjectivity and objectivity in relation to each other; while unlike speculative realism it cannot do without a theory of subjectivity, it also cannot do without the mechanical elements involved in cinematic representation. The ideological effects of cinema have a material basis: they are not imposed on it from the outside but are part of its material functioning as a technical apparatus.

Baudry would probably object to being compared to early realists like Bazin and Kracauer, since he often talks quite dismissively about Bazin's "naïve realism." More recent readings of Bazin assert that his argument was more nuanced than was realized by 1970s film theory, however, and that his definition of realism is more complex than the traditional concept of an objective external world (Andrew 2010; Andrew and Joubert-Laurencin 2011; Rosen 2001). Further, though there are significant differences between Bazin's realism and Baudry's apparatus theory, speculative realism would categorise them both as correlationist since they rely on assumptions drawn from phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty for Bazin, Husserl for Baudry). Baudry argues that cinema is a "phantasmatization of objective reality (images, sounds, colours) – but of an objective reality which, limiting its powers of constraint, seems equally to augment the possibilities or the power of the subject" (1986a, 292). For Baudry, cinema allows the spectator to enjoy an illusion of objectivity, since the apparatus works to conceal its own ideological basis.

Baudry argues that one cannot consider reality in the cinema without considering the subject, since it is the subject that takes ontological priority over the impressions of reality onscreen (reality is always staged for the subject). It is true that film is "objective" in the sense that it mechanically reproduces physical reality, but apparatus theory reminds us that this objectivity is conditioned by ideological and subjective forces. The subject remains "the active centre and origin of meaning" even though the mechanisms of cinema work to repress cinema's subjective origins (1986a, 286). We cannot consider the objective effects of cinema without an account of its subjective workings, though this does not mean (as speculative realism would have it) that we cannot consider reality at all. Although cinema represents a desire to exceed the limits of subjectivity and occupy an objective position, it simultaneously bears witness to the impossibility of doing so. The following sections will bolster these claims by providing examples from particular films that interrogate the tensions between subject and reality, spectator and screen. *Jauja* and *Tectonics* both expose conflicting truths: on one level they draw attention towards an objective world in excess of the human, while on another they self-consciously indicate the ways that this world is necessarily framed in a subjective way.

Objectivity and Nature

Tectonics, Temporality, and Eco-Politics

Peter Bo Rappmund's 2012 experimental documentary *Tectonics* foregrounds the ecological by bringing human figures into conversation with a broader environmental context while simultaneously interrogating the position of the spectator through a pronounced use of perspective. Its 60-minute running time consists of a series of static shots of the landscape surrounding the Mexican-American border; but while it stages these images for a motionless camera – and by extension viewer – it represents the environment as vibrant and uncannily alive through time-lapse techniques and a sense of discord between image and sound. *Tectonics* follows the border from the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific Ocean, shooting the landscape from various angles and at various distances. The film's style is reminiscent of James Benning's experimental documentaries, which also often use static shots of landscape to comment on environmental issues and/or undermine anthropocentric modes of perception (see, for example, *California Trilogy* [2000-2001], *Ten Skies* [2004], *Nightfall* [2013], and *BNSF* [2013], as well as Adelaar 2017). However, unlike Benning's films, in *Tectonics* the image is obviously digitally manipulated in a number of ways, and these manipulations give a sense of vitality and rhythm to the environment rather than viewing it as passive or inert.

Tectonics begins with a black screen and a low electronic hum; the sound of the ocean rises as we begin to see the blue-green outline of waves shuddering against a black shore. The colours are enhanced and artificial, and the movements of the waves are sped up and altered so that they appear jerky and unnatural. The soundtrack, by contrast, is more continuous, and the sound of waves rolls over a fade to black; this is followed by a fade-in to a brighter ocean scene with a distant crimson horizon and shadowy raves rushing in an accelerated pace to and away from the shore. Brief glimpses of seabirds along the water line flash in and out, before the image transitions once again to black and then cuts to a different ocean scene, this time in natural colours. Waves pulse onto a sandy shore as seagulls group and disperse mid-frame, and in the distance a group of three people seem to be conversing next to a parked car; a lighthouse stands immobile on a rocky outcrop.

While a still frame of this shot reveals nothing unusual in the composition, in the moving image the actions of the birds and the figures in the background are sped up and looped:

the birds flock and cluster and fade away before fading in again and repeating the same movements. In contrast to the flurry of movement towards the bottom of the frame, the human figures in the background remain huddled together and only shuffle back and forth slightly. While the movements of the birds and people, as with the waves in the previous shots, are jerky and unnatural, the sounds of the birds and the ocean that accompany the image are natural-sounding and continuous, immersing the spectator in the seascape through its ambient sounds. These opening scenes establish the aesthetic of the film as a whole: there is a range of movements and rhythms within each frame as well as across the entire film. The shots are of varying length and are arranged organically, unpredictably; the soundtrack that runs over each image will sometimes bleed into the next shot, or cut abruptly. Punctuating these shots at various intervals are pauses marked by black frames. Though the overall structure of *Tectonics* is straightforwardly linear – east to west, Atlantic to Pacific – it tangles and snags time along the way, pausing to loop and reconsider details that might otherwise be ignored.

Tectonics makes visual associations between various geographical features, from the ancient to the impermanent, sun-drenched hills and rivers to ramshackle houses clustered around dusty roads. Humans are not entirely absent from the film, as a number of shots feature tiny figures in the distance that appear and disappear like ghosts, but they are never foregrounded in the frame; *Tectonics* takes on an alternative scale, modelled on features of the landscape rather than the human body. There is only one face filmed in close-up in the entire film. On a billboard beside a parked border patrol van are posters with the faces of wanted men; one of these is shot in close up, but the paper is so wrinkled and water-damaged that it becomes its own geography. Enlarged in the frame, it becomes as much a landscape warped by ridges and valleys as the green hill in the shot that follows.

Tectonics examines a politically charged topic, one that has become even more contentious in the wake of the 2016 U.S.A. election and President Trump's promise to build a wall along the Mexican-American border (the film highlights the absurdity of this project, as many scenes demonstrate that the border is already marked by numerous walls, fences, and otherwise prohibitive landscapes such as mountains and cliff faces). However, the film addresses its subject matter with an ecological eye that extends the focus beyond the scope of human interactions that we might ordinarily associate with the border. Issues of surveillance and violence are not elided, as evidenced by shots of surveillance blimps, border crossings, cameras, and police cars. At one point we see a row of small American

flags fixed to a painted blue wooden board; a close-up reveals one bearing the message "You can't have too much border security. Only too little as we have now." From these images, one can easily imagine a different documentary about the same subject, where shots of the landscape are intercut with talking-head interviews of people on either side of the border discussing their experiences. In light of the weight of its subject matter, it is significant that *Tectonics* instead frames its more politically-charged images in relation to a broader ecological context. This choice hints towards an alternative ecological politics, attuned to what Jane Bennett calls the vibrancy of matter. Bennett argues that distinctions between living and non-living things are problematic because we can observe vitality in matter of all kinds; she writes that

> [b]y vitality I mean the capacity of things – edibles, commodities, storms, metals – not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own. (2009, xii).

Viewing the world in terms of the distinction between active living things (with humans at the top given their perceived superior agency and free will) and inert matter means that we overlook the multitude of ways that nonhuman matter motivates human behaviour and impacts the world in which we live, and Bennett argues that opening ourselves up to the vitality of matter will have profound consequences for the ways that we view and interact with our environment.

Tectonics exemplifies this call towards an ecologically-minded politics, one that not only addresses ecological issues within the sphere of human politics but that also takes into account the power of nonhuman things. *Tectonics* suggests that we cannot conduct a politics of the border without considering the actual, physical place: the line between Mexico and the United States is explored not merely as an abstract concept, delineating a political distinction between countries and ethnicities, but as a human-imposed idea that has real material consequences. The ecologically-minded politics of *Tectonics* views humans as another force shaping the landscape, just like rivers and tectonic plates.

Though each shot in the film is static, the overall effect is anything but; *Tectonics* makes geography come alive, as the movements of things both tiny and large are enhanced and multiplied. The movements of plants are manipulated until they are rendered twitchy and unfamiliar, and they seem to be quivering of their own accord rather than swaying

smoothly in the wind. People and birds are rendered transient and ephemeral; time scales are shifted so that they appear and disappear within the frame over the course of a shot. The title places the film in the context of geological time and reminds us that things that might appear static are active, and their movements become visible given a long enough time line. While the parameters we put on geographical space seem finite and definite when drawn on a map, *Tectonics* calls attention to the ways these spaces are shaped not only by human politics but also by geological forces. By providing short glimpses of locations surrounding the border, *Tectonics* provides localised representations of particular spaces, but it does so in a way that calls attention to their distribution over gigantic periods of time. The border might be called a "hyperobject" in Timothy Morton's sense of the word: hyperobjects are "things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" and that "involve profoundly different temporalities than the human-scale ones we are used to" (2013, 1). The steep canyon walls that we glimpse for a few seconds in the film were shaped over thousands of years by the slowly trickling river that runs through the canyon's base. The mountains in the distance were created by the slow movement of tectonic plates. *Tectonics* disrupts human-centred temporality by giving the spectator brief glimpses of a reality that exceeds the access we are granted by the limited perspective of the camera.

Jauja's Irrational Wilderness

Jauja also calls attention to a reality outside of representation, using both narrative and framing to examine and slowly unwork the subjugation of humans over nature. The film's critique of anthropocentrism is done in part by problematising colonialism, especially its attitude towards nature as something to be conquered and exploited. *Jauja* is set in the 1880s in Argentina, and follows Captain Gunnar Dinesen (Viggo Mortenson) as he chases his runaway daughter Ingeborg (Viilbjørk Malling Agger) through the Patagonia desert. While Dinesen's presence in Patagonia is not fully explained and his role in the military operation is never made explicit, the film is set during the Conquest of the Desert (1870-1884), a military campaign that sought to secure Patagonia against invasion from Chile and to exterminate or displace the indigenous peoples that controlled the region at the time. *Jauja* loosely employs iconography and narrative tropes from the Western — a lone wanderer on horseback, hostile natives, desolate desert landscapes — but it displaces them to a new context and renders them unfamiliar and uncanny. While the Western genre's relationship to colonial ideology (whether supportive or critical) is related specifically to

the context of the American frontier, *Jauja* draws from the genre in order to bring its critique of colonialism into a broader global context; the film offers a commentary that extends beyond the scope of human interactions in order to consider the relationship between colonial ideology and the natural world.

While the Conquest – which resulted in the genocide of over a thousand indigenous people and the displacement of thousands more – is only obliquely referred to, its racist project is made evident by various statements by officers in the opening scenes of the film. Pittaluga, a crude, arrogant man whom we first see masturbating in a tidal pool with his military medals gleaming on his bare chest, describes the indigenous people as "coconut heads" during a conversation with Dinesen; when Dinesen protests that this designation does little to help them understand their enemy, Pittaluga replies that they do not need to understand them, only exterminate them. Pittaluga tells Dinesen that their mission in the desert – building a place, a country, a family – is a difficult business, but that "one must embrace an idea and push ahead with it" since "that's what sets us apart from the coconut heads." This linearity is revealed to be at odds with the landscape, which disrupts and disorients any straightforward trajectory, and Dinesen's mission unravels the farther he gets away from camp and its associated colonial logic.

Jauja's critique of colonialism through the construction of space and landscape builds on Alonso's previous films, which represent Argentina's wilderness as enigmatic and in excess of any allegorical reading. Jens Andermann argues that the wilderness in Alonso's cinema is always related to Argentina's complex colonial history as well as its cinematic heritage – especially *Cinema Novo* from the 1960s and 70s, which he writes "staged its dialectical critique of neo-colonial oppression and the complicity of classic narrative cinema" (2014, 53). In Alonso's films, however, these histories are divorced from any clear allegorical meaning. Andermann situates Alonso's work (particularly *Los muertos* [The Dead, 2004]) in the context of other recent Argentinean and Brazilian films (such as Mariano Donoso's *Opus* [2005] and Andrea Tonacci's *Serras da desordem [The Hills of Disorder,* 2006]) and argues that these films refer to histories that they simultaneously work to cloud or forget:

> instead of endowing place with hegemonic and affective density … these recent films from Argentina and Brazil approach the rural interior as what at first appears to be an exercise in oblivion. By stripping it of its previous inscriptions, these films invest landscape with an enigmatic nature, which,

> however, is often the effect of a staged ingenuity on the part of the cinematic narrator, who misreads or pretends to ignore the previous archival codings of the rural interior. These, nonetheless, are constantly put in evidence, but as elliptical traces, the legibility of which has come under challenge. (55)

This elliptical approach to history is related to an alternative construction of space, as these films simultaneously refer to and dismiss the ways that previous films treated cinematic landscapes as a means of critiquing Argentina's oppressive colonial history – for example, by re-writing the conventions of the rural epics that were popular in the 1930s and 1940s and thereby subverting their underlying national mythologies (53). Films like *Los muertos* therefore bear ambiguous traces of these histories that refuse to be settled into an overarching narrative: landscapes are "exhausted" of allegorical meaning despite their excesses of signification.

This expansion towards a wider reality that cannot be appropriated by the camera is supported on a stylistic level by Alonso's framing. His "lonely man" films — *Los muertos*, *La libertad* (2001) and *Liverpool* (2008) — all feature sequences where the camera comes untethered from the central protagonist, who otherwise completely anchors the perspective. In *La libertad*, the camera follows the movements of a woodcutter (Misael Saavedra) until he retreats to his hut for a nap; while the woodcutter sleeps, the camera wanders away from the hut without him and tracks through the forest, swaying from side to side and spinning upwards to glance at the sun glinting between the trees, until it encounters a fence at the edge of a cornfield. Towards the end of *Liverpool*, Farrel (Juan Fernández) leaves the remote village where his mother lives and walks away from the camera, fading into the distance and eventually out of sight; the camera does not continue to follow him but rather stays for a moment on the empty winter scene before cutting back to the lives of the family he has left behind. *Los muertos* opens with an out-of-focus shot that tracks over lush foliage in the jungle until it lands on the bloodied corpses of children; this shot is never contextualised, and might be dream, foreshadowing, or memory. The end of *Los muertos* repeats this puzzling gesture by staying outside the hut where Vargas (Argentino Vargas) reunites with his family, panning down to the dirt to reveal a small toy rather than following Vargas to settle the question of whether he intends to murder his family. Andermann writes that

> [t]his shot, drifting away from and once losing sight of the protagonist, has in *The Dead* not so much a function of delivering a superior, totalizing

> perspective … but rather of forcing out a different level of engagement with 'space freed from eventhood,' to return to Lefebvre's definition of cinematic landscape. (2014, 68)

Framing in Alonso's films therefore renders cinematic space ambiguous, and the landscape is granted a presence apart from merely being a backdrop for human action or a site upon which allegorical meaning might be inscribed.

Jauja makes explicit the political and historical stakes of Alonso's previous films by directly addressing Argentina's complex colonial history while still refusing any straightforward allegorical reading. *Jauja* similarly features a number of shots where the camera lingers on spaces that characters have left; rather than following characters that exit the frame, the camera often pauses on features of the landscape such as horses, grasses, and mountains. As with Alonso's previous films, these wandering shots construct the Argentinian landscape as full of phenomena but voided of determinate meaning. The wandering shots in *Jauja* trouble the relationship between space and the human figure, calling the latter's domination over the image into question. Like *Tectonics*, *Jauja* stages its political critique through a more holistic aesthetic that positions humans in relation to a wider ecological context, which is related to the representation of the landscape as something in excess of human reason or purpose.

The simultaneous plenitude and lack of the Patagonian Desert also makes it a sacred space in Bataille's terms, to recall my argument in Chapter 2. The sacred is whatever lies beyond the limits imposed on existence by work and meaning, and can therefore only be described in contradictory terms: Bataille describes the sacred both as empty and full, "the prodigious effervescence of life that … the order of things holds in check" as well as "the passion of an absence of individuality, the imperceptible sonority of a river, the empty limpidity of the sky (1973, 50-52). The paradoxical nature of the sacred is evidenced by a statement from the beginning of *Jauja*: Ingeborg tells her father that she loves the desert because it fills her, a description that contradicts customary notions of the desert as barren, empty, a wasteland.

The sacred space of the desert puts linear colonial rationality – the idea that "one must embrace an idea and push ahead with it" – at stake, and *Jauja*'s narrative therefore works to undermine any straightforward reading. *Jauja* begins as a more or less uncomplicated period drama with a clear narrative direction – Dinesen must leave his camp at the coast

and go into the desert to retrieve his daughter, who has eloped with a young soldier named Corto (Misael Saavedra) – but the narrative logic strays farther from sense the more Dinesen wanders into the wilderness. The film begins with a title card that explains that Jauja is a "mythological place of abundance and happiness" that has inspired many expeditions and increasingly exaggerated legends; the title card continues that the "only thing that is known for certain is that all who tried to find this earthly paradise got lost along the way." In this respect, Jauja becomes a structuring absence of the film, a non-place that leads the characters to get lost rather than providing an aim for their wanderings.

Dinesen journeys away from the camps at the coastline into the desert, and encounters a number of unexplained acts of violence before his horse gets stolen and he falls asleep on a mountain under the stars. Upon waking, Dinesen finds a wolfhound who leads him to a cave on the mountain, where he encounters an old woman who seems somehow to be his daughter. Though Dinesen ostensibly reaches his goal by finding Ingeborg, the discovery accomplishes little in terms of narrative resolution. The woman undermines Dinesen's entire project by telling him that, "All families disappear eventually, even if it takes a long time. They're wiped off the face of the earth. The desert swallows them up. I think it's for the best." These statements imply that the various questions raised over the course of the narrative — the whereabouts of Ingeborg, the motivations for various acts of violence — are rendered meaningless, ambiguous, or indeterminable by the desert. The desert as sacred space interrupts the smooth rationality of profane human logic; it draws things "out of the world of utility and restores it to that of unintelligible caprice" (Bataille 1973, 43). This unintelligibility accounts for the lack of discernible causes for events and presences encountered in *Jauja*'s desert; they occur precisely in order to disrupt reason, to evoke the existence of a world outside of thought. The human dramas that focused the narrative to this point are spun out of control, overcome by the expansive irrational logic of the desert.

Following his conversation with the old woman, Dinesen wanders back into the desert and disappears into the rocks as the old woman asks in voice-over, "What is it that makes a life function and move forward?" This linearity of human life is then called into question as the film suddenly jumps to a large Danish mansion. A girl played by the same actress as young Ingeborg wakes up and walks through the house, which has modern fixtures revealing the scene to be in the present day, though various bric-a-brac (heirloom furniture, carved tusks, old-fashioned portraits) also indicate a long colonial heritage. She walks into the yard and converses with a man leading a pack of wolfhounds; the man explains that he has been

treating an infection on one of the dogs, who contracted it because he had been scratching nervously due to being anxious about the girl's long absence. The girl takes the dog for a walk in the neighbouring woods where she finds a wooden soldier – a recurring motif in the film, as Ingeborg had seen it in the beginning floating in the ocean and had shown it to her father, who later discovers it along the path to the old woman's cave. She hears the dog howl in the distance and follows the noise to find a small pond, where water ripples away from the dock in a large circle, as though something has just fallen in. She tosses the wooden soldier into the water, and a close-up on the pond where she drops it fades into the final shot of the film: we see the Patagonia seaside populated with seabirds and walruses, and guitar music rises up on the soundtrack before the screen fades to black.

As with the cave sequence, the baffling final sequence bears an excess of meaning that refuses to be answered in any straightforward way. Did the girl dream all the events of the film, inspired by the colonial iconography of her house? Did the dog somehow become her father after falling into the pond and being transported to 19th century Patagonia? Had she fallen into the pond previously, accounting for her long absence and the dog's anxiety? Or is it the wooden soldier that symbolises Dinesen? The spiralling outward of the narrative, first from its coherent historical context and then to the space of the cave and finally, inexplicably to modern Denmark, expands like ripples in the pond rather than plunging towards a progressive future. The woman's question – what is it that makes a life go forward – is contemplated by examining lives that do anything but; the events of the film fold over each other through metonymic rhythms and repeated images rather than a clear narrative trajectory. By calling the linearity of time and progress into question, *Jauja* dismantles the anthropocentric colonial logic that motivates the presence of the army in the desert. The old woman's assertion that the desert swallows up all families and all countries unsettles the boundaries of the narrative and places the film in the context of a broader timescale, one that outlasts the parameters of human lives and generations. The desert renders Dinesen's search for his daughter and the army's claim on Patagonia contingent and fleeting, tiny in comparison to the vast and incomprehensible wilderness.

Subjectivity and Apparatus

Tectonics, Perspective, Ideology

The previous section demonstrated that both *Jauja* and *Tectonics* call attention to a reality beyond the parameters of human representation and reason, a reality that both films align with the natural landscape and geological time. While these ecological concerns are central to *Tectonics* and *Jauja* and should not be ignored, however, they are only part of the story. There are also important considerations to make about the ways that the camera positions the spectator in relation to the landscape depicted in both films, things that might be overlooked if we were only to consider the ecological relationships established within the diegeses. In addition to the conclusions I have drawn above, I want to examine the ways that both films stage their ecological awareness for a human spectator. I will consider not only what is represented onscreen but also some of the processes that allow for these representations – especially the ideological processes involved in the construction of perspective, an aesthetic aspect of cinema that is inherited from Renaissance art and that *Tectonics* and *Jauja* foreground in interesting ways. While the emphasis on perspective complicates claims to objectivity or any kind of holistic ecological awareness, I think it is precisely this disruption of the objective that is most important in the ecological projects of both films.

Baudry writes that within the cinematic apparatus, it is the lens of the camera that occupies the position between the inside and outside (the subjective and objective). He writes:

> The lens, the 'objective,' is of course only a particular location of the 'subjective.' Marked by the idealist opposition interior/exterior, topologically situated at the meeting point between the two, it corresponds, one could say, to the empirical organ of the subjective, to the opening, the fault in the organs of meaning, by which the exterior world may penetrate the interior and assume meaning. (1986a, 297)

Baudry is drawing here on a play on the French word "*objectif*," which can mean both "lens" and "objective": he argues that the lens is the point within the process of making a film where the exterior world comes to meet subjective apprehension. It marks the limit between inside and outside which, as Baudry argues, is an idealist distinction, meaning that it can only be drawn with reference to human consciousness. Within the cinematic apparatus – one might also call it the system of cinema, including everything from

profilmic reality to camera to projector to exhibition space to spectator – it is the lens that Baudry argues forms the first encounter between inside and outside.

It is significant that Baudry does not locate the first instance of subjective differentiation between inside and outside within a human subject. It would be more obvious to suggest that the point of this encounter happens when the image meets the spectator's eye, but instead, Baudry externalises the process by arguing that it takes place through an object – the camera. He argues that this externalisation of subjective processes leads the spectator to assume an objective position in relation to the cinematic image. Crucially, however, this objectivity is an illusion, and one that is only possible because of the ways that the cinematic apparatus relates to subjective experience and produces the subject position occupied by the spectator. Baudry argues that although realist theorists of cinema tend to rely on formalist analyses about particular devices within the frame of certain films in order to explicate the relationship between cinema and the real, doing so overlooks a more crucial question about why cinema is able to have realistic effects at all. He writes that

> the key to the impression of reality has been sought in the structuring of the image and movement, in complete ignorance of the fact that the impression of reality is dependent first of all on a subject effect and that it might be necessary to examine the position of the subject facing the image in order to determine the raison d'être for the cinema effect. (1986b, 312)

Considering the form of individual films is not enough for Baudry: understanding cinema's realistic effects involves broadening the scale to include the workings of all elements of the cinematic apparatus as well as their ideological underpinnings. All of these, Baudry argues, support the subjective illusion of objectivity, an illusion that can only be explicated through a theory of subjectivity.

Cinema for Baudry only looks "real" because it is modelled on our psychic structure; it is therefore necessarily correlational even if it evinces a genuine encounter between internal and external forces. The camera is modelled on the human eye, but externalising its mode of representation allows it to give an impression of objectivity by repressing its subjective origin. He writes that the body (another apparatus) is forgotten while we watch a film (1986a, 291), and that the subjective position established by the cinematic apparatus occupies the whole frame rather than a particular point within it (1986b, 313). Cinema grants the illusion of a masterful gaze by centring the image on the spectator and allowing

her to temporarily forget her particular, limited perspective. Baudry writes that this process is influenced by an entire history of Western art since the invention of perspective during the Renaissance. He argues that perspective in art comes at the same historical moment and through the same technology as Galileo's refutal of geocentrism and decentring of the human in relation to the universe:

> But also, and paradoxically, the optical apparatus camera obscura will serve in the same period to elaborate in pictorial work a new mode of representation, *perspective artificialis.* This system, recentring or at least displacing the centre (which settles itself in the eye), will ensure the setting up of the 'subject' as the active centre and origin of meaning. (1986a, 286)

We can see his point more clearly by imagining alternatives. Baudry points out that previous modes of representation did not stage their images for an imagined observer from a set position; Greek theatre, for example, was "based on a multiplicity of points of view, whereas the paintings of the Renaissance will elaborate a centred space" (1986a, 289). Perspective unifies the image for a singular viewpoint, thereby establishing the spectator as the subject for whom the entirety of the representation is staged. The centring of the subject through perspective carries through Western art to cinema, and though it appears natural to us, the fact that alternative models are possible indicates that it arose from a particular, contingent history of ideas. Perspective is therefore imbued with ideological baggage, and the use of it in cinema cannot be said to be neutral or objective.

I am less concerned here with the particular framework Baudry provides for explaining this ideological baggage (he relies heavily on Marxism and psychoanalysis) than with the more general point that we cannot subtract the subjective effects of cinema in order to access an objective reality existing underneath. Though this is a correlationist claim, I do not think that it necessarily traps us within a problematic anthropocentrism; through *Tectonics* and *Jauja* I even wish to suggest that perspective can give us the tools to undermine the correlation from within. Baudry's observation that the camera obscura emerged at the same time as Galileo's theory of heliocentrism – centring and de-centring the subject at the same time – suggests the difficulties involved in breaking with anthropocentrism, since the same idea can simultaneously implicate us more and less in its logic. The way out of this trap is not to set aside the issue of subjectivity altogether in favour of objects, as speculative realism (especially OOO) wants us to do, but rather to subvert our perspective from within in order to open up the possibility of touching on a reality larger than ourselves. Since

there is no outside position from which to approach objective reality, the only other possibility is to disavow the limit between self and world – an act of repression that Baudry reminds us amounts to narcissism (1986b, 313). Rather than disavowing or attempting to set these limits aside, we are better off calling attention to them in order to find the places where their logic breaks down.

Tectonics enacts such a deconstruction, since its emphasis on perspective calls attention to the apparatus while also evoking a reality irreducible to its representation. The ecological awareness elicited by the film indicates that such a deconstruction need not myopically remain within the realm of human perception; it can evoke a wider reality while still acknowledging that it represents this reality for a human observer. *Tectonics*' repeated visual emphasis on straight lines fading into the distance interrogates this tension by emphasising the ways that that cinema always addresses itself towards a spectator. Lines opening up from a centred point towards the edges of the frame indicate the direction towards which the film orients itself; these lines gesture towards the spectator facing the screen and invite her into the image. This self-conscious form of address towards the spectator points to the ways that the subject facing the screen is always included in the image and necessary for its process of signification.

Tectonics also calls attention to structuring gaps and absences in the image by simultaneously working with and against the unifying effects of cinema. The jerky movements of elements within the frame disrupt the smooth progression of time; tiny fragments of time appear to be missing as parts suddenly appear and disappear, their absences only perceptible for a brief moment that becomes emphasised as the image is looped and the movements repeated. One shot, for example, overlooks a hilly village with small, brightly coloured buildings; we see cars and people moving up and down the streets in the distance, and smoke billows out unevenly from several rooftops. There are small gaps between the movements of the people and cars (like the gaps between moments in time-lapse photography), and they each progress jerkily along a path before vanishing suddenly and beginning the movements again. Other shots make the gaps between movements even more pronounced: in one, trucks and busses drive down a curved stretch of road, but there are large intervals between our glimpses of them; they appear frozen at one side of the frame before disappearing momentarily and re-appearing farther down the road. These kinds of patterns are repeated in different shots throughout the film; sometimes objects appear to be moving briskly with very brief gaps in between, and sometimes they

move more slowly with more pronounced absences before they appear in another part of the frame. This emphasis on absence calls attention to what is not seen at the same time as it makes aspects of the frame perceptible that might otherwise be ignored, as the spectator is drawn to meditate on the patterns of movement and the relations between them rather than viewing time and space in terms of linear progress. These absences are like crevices in the topography of the image; rather than being continuous and whole, *Tectonics* is rippled and cratered with tiny holes. Our view of the border is articulated as partial and incomplete, despite its representation through a medium that usually establishes space as comprehensible and consistent.

The tiny absences within the frame also call attention to off-screen absences – what is unrepresented and unseen. Because the camera remains static, we are never given a contiguous sense of space since we never see what is off-screen; each shot is a discrete tableau, more like a moving painting or photograph than a part of a film. According to Roland Barthes

> [t]he tableau (pictorial, theatrical, literary) is a pure cut out segment with clearly defined edges, irreversible and incorruptible; everything that surrounds it is banished into nothingness, remains unnamed, while everything that it admits within its field is promoted into essence, into light, into view. (1986, 173)

The tableau presents a perspective that renders everything that is excluded irrelevant; this reinforces the mastery of the spectator's gaze, who is able to see presence come "into light".[36] The tableaux of *Tectonics* reinforce that this process of representation is predicated on exclusion and absence; by working these two modes of representation against each other – cinema and still tableau – the film exposes the structuring absences of each. While a still tableau evokes a sense of wholeness by seeming like a partial view of a complete universe, *Tectonics* provides a succession of moving tableaux that refuse to be

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[36] This reading also applies to the three tableaux vivants in *A Field in England* (see Chapter 2), which similarly undermine the anthropocentric gaze of the camera. In the tableaux, the actors stand motionless as the camera cuts between them, their expressions visibly trembling as they try to hold their faces still; these emphatically unnatural pauses in *A Field in England*'s narrative highlight the artificiality of the cinematic image and its reliance on human scale. They are also references to seventeenth century art: "the tableaux came out of looking at woodcuts that reflect that time period, obviously flat and two dimensional. It was a way to reference those but also a way of using a film language that wasn't traditional" (Wheatley 2013).

connected into a coherent, contiguous space; they are partial glimpses that refuse to suggest a totality. The stasis of the camera works against the movement of the image over time in order to destabilise the unifying effects of cinematic representation.

It is crucial to note that this destabilisation of the image does not occur through a radical break with its mode of representation, but rather as a result of engaging with cinema's inherent logic; *Tectonics* uses perspective, movement, and time in order to investigate the limits of cinematic representation. This does *not* result in an erasure of the limit between human and nonhuman realities or a complete break from the ideological trappings of perspective (which would be impossible) but rather in a complex interrogation of the relationships between reality, the image, and the spectator. The undermining of the human within each frame is contradicted by these emphatic assertions of the spectator's position outside of the frame, but *it is through this very contradiction* that the relationship between nonhuman reality and a human observer is articulated. *Tectonics* makes visible the gap between reality and representation by pointing out its own inability to exceed subjective boundaries; the observer cannot be subtracted from the image, but *Tectonics* also reminds us that this relationship between image and observer is insufficient in accounting for the reality we perceive.

Jauja, Limits, Space

As with *Tectonics, Jauja*'s ecological project is related not only to an expansion beyond the human within the diegesis but also to the way that the film self-consciously appeals to an observer. At the same time that the spectator's attention is drawn away from human figures within the frame, the 4:3 aspect ratio and restricted construction of space make her aware of the limits of her perceptions. The restricted framing gestures towards the position of the spectator, emphasising her relationship to the image in a way similar to the use of single-point perspective in *Tectonics.* But since *Jauja* (like all films) is implicated in the logic of cinema, its attempts to break from anthropocentrism are necessarily limited by the subjective workings of the apparatus; rather than ignoring or overcoming these limitations, *Jauja* draws attention to them in order to call the spectator's mastery over the image into question.

If we recall the claim from the previous section that the same idea can simultaneously implicate us more and less in the logic of anthropocentrism, then Alonso's use of the

wandering camera can be understood as performing two conflicting gestures at the same time. While these shots do function to expand awareness of a world beyond the human, as was argued in the previous section on "Objectivity and Nature," they also reinforce that this awareness always belongs to the spectator and is therefore inevitably subjective. Alonso's wandering camera sequences tend to mark a break in stylistic logic, since his films generally limit perspective to a single protagonist; the result is unsettling and alienating, since the spectator's identification with the lone male wanderer is interrupted and her attention is drawn instead to the camera itself. In the scene from *La libertad* when the camera veers away from the woodcutter as he sleeps, for example, the shot is obviously hand-held, implying the somewhat unsettling presence of a definite but unseen observer. Perspective is untethered from the narrative, but crucially is not objective: the effect is voyeuristic in part because it seems limited to a single, unknown observer. This voyeuristic effect calls attention back towards the position of the spectator, emphasising that she was always imbricated in the image; while shots like this might be able to expand perspective beyond the human characters, they cannot expand beyond the camera and therefore inevitably remain "subjective" in that, to recall Baudry, they maintain the spectator as the "active centre and origin of meaning."

But while the subjective position of the camera cannot be overcome, it can be undermined from within. The mastery over the image that Baudry argues is a central aesthetic effect of cinema is exposed as illusory, since in Alonso's films it does little to clarify narrative events. We are often denied essential information as the camera veers away from actions that might provide narrative resolution, as with the ending of *Los muertos* when the camera tracks away from Vargas just when he is reunited with his family, or the final shot of *Liverpool* when the camera tilts away from Farrel's daughter's face as she examines the keychain he had given her, shielding her emotions from view. In *Jauja* the sense of mastery over the image is initially even more pronounced than in Alonso's previous films because of the self-contained framing and 4:3 aspect ratio. Every shot is balanced, like a tableau or a painting, and all elements fit neatly within the nearly-square frame — a marked contrast from the Western films that *Jauja* references, which generally made use of widescreen formats and provide panoramic views of spectacular landscapes. This makes the wilderness in *Jauja* seem at first to be smaller and more controlled, a feeling emphasised by the deep-focus cinematography used throughout: everything remains visible and in focus and attention is rarely drawn towards off-screen space. But this totalising gaze is increasingly problematised as the film progresses, since the excesses of information

contained within each frame cannot easily be integrated into a coherent, linear narrative. Further, though we often see the entirety of the action within a scene, this often does not help us to interpret it. Actions are often seen from too far away to make out clearly, as with a scene where we witness the murder of a man in extreme long shot with Dinesen in the foreground and the figures barely visible amid poles on the hill in the horizon; our more holistic view of the event paradoxically precludes us from understanding it. The spectator's apparent mastery over the image is emphasised in order to draw attention to its limitations: she is not given enough information to construct a contextualising framework for the events that unfold in front of the camera. The universe of *Jauja* appears to extend beyond the confines of the frame and to operate according to a logic to which we are only given partial access.

While cinema conventionally constructs space horizontally across the frame – especially in the widescreen formats generally employed by Westerns – space in *Jauja* is constructed *backwards*, limited laterally by the square sides of the frame and expanding away from the spectator towards the horizon. Actions within the frame tend to occur from back to front rather than side to side: as Pittaluga masturbates in the pool, for example, we see Dinesen approach a log in the background; the shot is later reversed as Dinesen sits on the log in the foreground and Pittaluga emerges from pool behind him. A particularly striking shot observes Dinesen riding up from the distance towards the camera before reversing to watch him ride away and fade into the desert landscape. This emphasises perspective in a manner similar to *Tectonics*: actions occur in straight lines towards and away from the camera, gesturing towards the position occupied by the spectator. But although we view each action in its entirety from multiple angles, these shots do not clarify space but rather enhance the sense of disorientation created by *Jauja*'s puzzling narrative. The space of the desert remains mysterious, as it is never made entirely clear in which direction Dinesen is heading: he may be riding in circles or back and forth, towards and away from the camera. This enhances the sense that actions are divorced from any clear direction or aim, that Dinesen's decision to heed Pittaluga's advice and push forward into the desert is at odds with the irrational, non-linear logic of the wilderness. The spectator is lost along with Dinesen, and as the narrative progresses the framing serves to reinforce that our information is limited to what we are given access to in the narrow confines of the frame; the diegetic universe exceeds the boundaries of the image but remains inaccessible to us due to the limited perspective of the camera. This does not mark a radical departure in

cinematic aesthetics but rather a use of cinema's inherent logic against itself in order to question its construction of a totalising gaze.

As with *Tectonics, Jauja's* attempts to gesture towards a broader ecological reality must be read alongside the way that the film directs itself towards a human spectator. The diegesis is self-consciously staged for us, but our ability to interpret it is radically called into question. Within the diegesis, *Jauja* expands its awareness beyond the human in order to give presence to the landscape, but our access to this reality necessarily remains partial and limited. Although Alonso's films draw attention towards a natural landscape emptied of characters within the frame — therefore breaking the correlation between humans and space within the diegesis — they simultaneously underscore the spectator's relationship with the screen, emphasising that on the level of the apparatus the correlation is impossible to escape. The tension between an expanded ecological awareness and the limits imposed on it by the cinematic apparatus is not settled or overcome, but rather remains central to Alonso's aesthetics; *Jauja* cannot escape the trappings of the cinematic apparatus, but by interrogating its own limits it can disrupt the spectator's mastery over the image. It gestures towards a reality in excess of representation that remains forever clouded from us, pushed outwards and subsumed by the blackness at the edge of the frame.

Conclusion

Although the ecological crisis impels us to recognise a world beyond the human, we are in the end unable to transcend the limits of our finite human perspectives. Using insights from film theory, especially Jean-Louis Baudry's apparatus theory, this chapter critiqued speculative realism's assertion that we can think outside of the correlation between human thought and world. Though I agree with speculative realism that there is a world independent of human thought, I simultaneously uphold that our ability to relate to this world is limited by the boundaries of our perception. This need not enclose us within the anthropocentric bubble, but rather points out where we might find the point of contact between human subjectivity and nonhuman reality.

I further argued that speculative realism has something to learn not only from written discourses within film theory but also from cinema itself. The cinematic apparatus is a complex system comprising both human and nonhuman elements; it negotiates tensions between subjectivity and objectivity in ways that can be productively brought to bear on

issues central to speculative realism. Though cinema can provide an illusion of objectivity, the ideological underpinnings of the apparatus reveal that this sense of objectivity is conditional on cinema's subjective effects: it is only by positioning the subject as the centre and origin of meaning that films are able to appear realistic or objective. Rather than falling on one side of this contradiction or the other – emphasising subjectivity or objectivity, phenomenology or ecology – I argued that it is more productive to maintain these oppositions in order to trace the limits between them. I used the examples of *Jauja* and *Tectonics* in order to explore these tensions, as both films call attention to a wider reality while simultaneously emphasising the ways that they frame this reality for a human spectator. Both films use cinema's logic against itself in order to point out the limits of their own representations, therefore undermining the totalising effects of cinema and gesturing towards a world outside of image and thought. A nuanced ecological ethics can neither shed the subjective trappings of the human perspective, nor can it take that perspective for everything. Despite the impossibility of seeing beyond human concepts and perceptions we must continue to push against our limits, searching them for fractures and inconsistencies that might open onto the unknown wilderness beyond.

If phenomenology and ecology must be considered, then ecological ethics cannot do without a theory of subjectivity. Questions remain about how a theory of cinematic subjectivity might contribute to ecocriticism and an ethics of the Anthropocene, and so the second part of this thesis will flip the terms around and consider how cinema can represent the subject in relation to external reality. The next chapter will introduce a less anthropocentric theory of cinematic subjectivity through Bataille's ontology of the subject in *Inner Experience* (1954). For Bataille, the subject is finite but constantly desires to exceed itself. This tension between finitude and excess can help us find the locus of transgression – the limit between human and nonhuman realities, the unstable boundary between inside and outside.

Part Two

Subjectivity

Chapter 4: Eco-consciousness

Introduction

I suggested at the end of the previous chapter that film ecocriticism cannot do without a theory of subjectivity. Theorising the nonhuman in cinema requires that we recognise the subjective underpinnings of the apparatus which – drawing from Baudry – I argued always directs itself towards a human subject, even if this subjective position can be deconstructed or undermined. While previous chapters have focused on what is in excess of the limit between human and nonhuman realities (what Quentin Meillassoux calls "the great outdoors" [2006, 7], or reality independent of human thought) this chapter will focus on the question of human subjectivity, and attempt to provide a way of reading cinematic subjectivity that responds to the need to consider a world beyond what we can think and know. Any exploration of a limit must consider what it encloses; a study of the periphery must also consider the centre. This chapter will therefore investigate how an understanding of human subjectivity might contribute to film ecocriticism. I will stress that the subject does not take ontological priority: while humans can only have knowledge within a limited sphere, our existence is conditioned by an unknowable wider reality. So while this chapter might sometimes appear to take a step back from the broader ecological concerns of this thesis by focusing at length on the structure of human subjectivity, the argument here is integral to my overall methodology. Since human subjectivity cannot merely be subtracted from our metaphysics or modes of film analysis, as I demonstrated in the last chapter, in what follows I will attempt to work through subjectivity in order to determine how it relates to what exceeds it. In the filmic examples explored in this chapter, this excess is often characterised in terms of nature and ecology, but also sometimes to social relationships. Human subjectivity will therefore be characterised as related dynamically to a multitude of forces outside itself, including both the environment and other people.

In order to theorise human subjectivity as limited and beholden to broader forces, I will draw primarily from Bataille's notion of ipseity (or selfhood, individuality), which he conceives of as a paradox between continuity and discontinuity: human subjects perceive themselves as discrete, self-contained beings – discontinuous from nature – despite the fact that their existence affects and is affected by things of their bodies. Bataille's theory of subjectivity is remarkably non-anthropocentric, as he frames human existence in relation to a wide array of natural forces on a variety of scales (atoms, single-celled organisms, plants,

animals, the biosphere, the universe). Human subjectivity is not exceptional for Bataille, and he cautions in *Erotism* that we should not discount the interiority of even single-celled organisms:

> I do warn you … against the habit of seeing these tiny creatures from the outside only, of seeing them as things which do not exist inside themselves. You and I exist inside ourselves. But so does a dog, and in that case so do insects and creatures smaller still. (1957b, 14-15)

Further, the interiority of all beings, including humans, is fragile and susceptible to outside influence:

> What one calls a 'being' is never perfectly simple, and if it has a single enduring unity, it only possesses it imperfectly: it is undermined by its profound inner division, it remains poorly closed and, at certain points, open to attack from the outside. (96)

I will draw from this non-anthropocentric approach to human subjectivity to argue that cinema, which constantly negotiates between multiple subject positions (characters, camera, spectators) can work to question or even reformulate the complex interplay between human subjects and the world beyond them. I will look at two recent films that self-consciously address issues of interiority and selfhood in relation to nature: Lars von Trier's *Nymphomaniac (Vol I & II)* (2013) and Jonathan Glazer's *Under the Skin* (2013). I will focus in particular on the ways that both films represent the inner experiences of their protagonists in relation to a natural landscape that is characterised as obscure, irrational, or only partially understood. Commentators have written extensively on issues of gender and sexuality in both films, but they have scarcely been considered through an ecocritical lens despite the importance of nature for both narratives. Bringing these two theoretical poles – ecology and subjectivity – into conversation will allow me to explore how *Nymphomaniac* and *Under the Skin* (and maybe cinema more generally) can interrogate the limits between inside and outside, and potentially help us approach the unstable places at the boundaries of the body where we open onto our environments. The two films do this in slightly different ways: *Under the Skin* exemplifies ipseity and invagination primarily on the level of representation, through abstract imagery that destabilises the spectator's grasp on what she sees, while *Under the Skin* works through subjectivisation through form, as it undermines its own internal logic in interpreting the experiences of its protagonist.

Gender, Humanism, and Female Subjectivity

Both *Nymphomaniac* and *Under the Skin* focus on a female character at the margins of society: in the former, a self-professed nymphomaniac named Joe (Charlotte Gainsbourg) relates her life story to bookish virgin Seligman (Stellan Skarsgård) after he finds her beaten and bloodied in an alley; in the latter, an alien takes on the form of a woman (Scarlett Johansson) and drives around Glasgow seducing men so that she can kill them and harvest their bodies. Most scholars writing on *Nymphomaniac* and *Under the Skin* have focused primarily on issues of gender, which makes sense since both films raise questions about sexuality, violence, and difference. *Nymphomaniac* tends to be addressed in relation to von Trier's other works, which are often either criticised for their portrayals of sexual violence and misogynist attitudes, or else reclaimed as feminist texts that trouble conventional notions of gender and female subjectivity.[37] Bonnie Honig and Lori J. Marso argue in their introduction to a special journal issue on von Trier that they "see von Trier's films as intensifying clichés of gender, power, and politics in ways that may usefully press democratic and feminist theory in new directions" (2015, par. 3). Von Trier's use of clichés – especially gendered ones, like seeing women as inherently evil (*Antichrist* 2009), or as good-hearted innocents (*Breaking the Waves* 1996; *Dancer in the Dark* 2001; *Dogville* 2003) or as sluts (*Nymphomaniac*) – is therefore understood as a way of pushing social attitudes "to their (il)logical extremes" so that ideas like "liberalism, feminism, progress, work, community, and family values are intensified to the point of absurdity" (para. 7). They argue that this leaves room for new critical possibilities, a position expanded upon in relation to *Nymphomaniac* by both Lynne Huffer and Rosalind Galt in articles later in the issue.

Huffer argues that *Nymphomaniac* undermines its own construction of narrative, which she compares to the Pygmalion trope of "a feminine canvas painted with a 'promiscuous' masculine brush" (2015, para. 7), by critiquing the figure of the writer/director embodied by Seligman and ultimately granting agency to the female subject. Galt argues that von Trier extends his criticism to the spectator by pointing out the ways that they become complicit in the violence of the cinematic spectacle, which Galt compares to the sadomasochistic relationship between Joe and K (Jamie Bell) in *Nymphomaniac Vol. II*;

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[37] See, for example, Bainbridge 2007; Faber 2003; Hjort 2011; Marso 2015; Loren and Metelmann 2013; Zolkos 2011.

watching a von Trier film means, for Galt, "agreeing, in a sense, to suffer" (2015, para. 4), and confronting our desires and motivations for doing so. Both Huffer and Galt emphasise the importance of perspective: Huffer's analysis critiques the negotiation of power between Joe and Seligman as the narrative drifts between her versions of events and his interpretations of them, while Galt argues that von Trier plays with the presumed liberal attitudes of his spectators only to subvert these expectations and leave "the spectator unexpectedly complicit in the worst kinds of violence against women" (para. 16). Both Huffer and Galt agree that von Trier's play with perspectives leaves the spectator in a state of doubt, ambiguity, and uncertainty – a state of nonknowledge that refuses to be resolved in a comfortable way. They claim that these excesses that refuse to be recuperated into the narrative have radical political potential in that they free up spaces in dominant modes of thought, but von Trier's films fall short of suggesting positive possibilities for a new future; as Huffer points out, "[t]his freedom is not a program for political action: von Trier's films will not tell us what to do" (sec. 4). My own reading of *Nymphomaniac* will expand on the implications of this negativity by linking the uncomfortable excesses of the film to its representation of nature. The role of nature in the film has been insufficiently explored despite *Nymphomaniac*'s repeated emphasis on natural themes[38]: Joe's stories about her father are focused on his love for trees and natural science, Seligman's digressions often compare Joe's sexual activity to some aspect of nature (the behaviour of fish, mountain climbing), and there are numerous images of natural phenomena such as sunsets, mountain ranges, or the movement of leaves in the wind

Scholarship on *Under the Skin* is similarly focused of issues of gender and difference: Ara Osterweil argues that the film's science fiction themes are tied with a critique of "the perils of becoming female" (2014, 44), since the alien's subjectivisation as a human woman leads to sexual violence and murder; Sherryl Vint (2015) links difference in *Under the Skin* to issues of ethnicity, arguing that the film challenges notions that we are all the same "under the skin" by confronting us with an alien perspective that resists identification

[38]An exception is Marcos Norris (2015), who links the depiction of Joe's sexuality with what he claims is a radical feminist idea of embodiment that depends on an essentialist view of nature. Norris forgets, however, that *Nymphomaniac* consists not only of Joe's statements and perceptions of herself but also of Seligman's interpretations and appropriations of her narrative. Acknowledging Seligman's role in the film complicates Norris's more utopian picture, but leaves room for the ambiguity that Galt and Huffer argue has significant critical potential and that I will pick up on in my own reading later on.

and challenges us to confront difference. Laura Tunbridge (2016) touches on posthumanist themes in her analysis of *Under the Skin* in relation to other recent science films starring Johansson (*Her* [Spike Jonze 2013]; *Lucy* [Luc Besson 2014]), arguing that Johansson's performances reveal the constructed nature of materiality, embodiment, and sound in cinema. While the stakes for posthumanism are drawn more explicitly with *Under the Skin* due to its science fiction themes, as with *Nymphomaniac* the critical focus is centred on gender and sexuality; questions remain about the ways that both films construct subjectivity in relation to nature.

I do not wish to ignore or work against previous feminist readings of these films, but rather broaden the focus to a new ecocritical context. Subjectivity should not be considered in isolation from its environment, and Bataille's thought will give me a framework through which to address a number of questions raised by both *Nymphomaniac* and *Under the Skin* about the negotiation between human and nonhuman perspectives. Bataille has been brought up before in relation to von Trier (though not, to my knowledge, *Under the Skin*): Stephen S. Bush (2015) reads Bataillean notions of sacrifice against the self-sacrifice of Bess in *Breaking the Waves* in order to point out the ethical shortcomings of each, while Kyle Keefer and Todd Linafelt (1998) analyse the same film in relation to Bataillean concepts of desire and divinity. The pairing of Bataille and von Trier makes sense given their common focal points of transgression, provocation, religion, and violence, and this chapter will draw from these connections in its analysis. However, as the next section will demonstrate, Bataille's thought also has implications for the ecological questions at stake in *Under the Skin* and *Nymphomaniac*, as well as in this thesis as a whole.

Subjectivity and Excess

In *The Universe of Things* (2014), Steven Shaviro considers that, broadly speaking, we can either conceive of objects in terms of substance or relations. He argues further that, since both conclusions can be drawn from experience, deciding between these theoretical approaches is an aesthetic matter rather than an ontological one: "it is finally a matter of *taste* and is not subject to conceptual adjudication" (41). As mentioned previously, Shaviro's solution to this problem is to turn to Alfred North Whitehead, whom he argues is able to resolve these tensions with his nuanced views of both the relationality and privacy of all objects. My aim here is not to counter Shaviro's approach, but to turn the focus away from what we can know about objects (the primary concern of speculative realists and

associated thinkers such as Shaviro) and towards what not knowing can teach us. Bataille's philosophy, like Whitehead's, attempts to grapple with both sides of experience (isolation and interconnectivity), but he is less inclined to provide answers; instead, his thought is an attempt to theorise what inevitably resists theorisation, the messy excesses of reality that do not fit into our ordered systems of thought and language.

This task, in the end, is self-defeating and impossible, and Bataille's frenzied, anguished style of writing reflects this madness at the heart of his philosophy. He laments in *Inner Experience* (1954) that in order to remain true to the object of his thought, he really ought to remain silent, though his compulsion towards knowledge continuously drives him to theorise the unknowable: "*the word silence is still a sound*, to speak is in itself to imagine knowing, and to no longer know, it would be necessary to no longer speak" (20). Bataille's philosophy is an inevitably messy and imperfect attempt to move beyond reason by using knowledge against itself, which he likens to religious mysticism in that

> [i]t brings to a world dominated by thought connected with our experience of physical objects (and by the knowledge developed from this experience) an element which finds no place in our intellectual architecture except negatively as a limiting factor. (1957b, 23)

I see a similar project at work in *Nymphomaniac* and *Under the Skin*, which, like Bataille, attempt to approach the limits of our intellectual architecture by surrendering to forces in excess of reason.

For readers acquainted only with Bataille's somewhat salacious reputation, his long discussions of natural phenomena are likely to be surprising. He begins *The Accursed Share* (1967a), his two-volume work on political economy, with a description of the movement of energy in the biosphere; he uses this to argue that, when considered on a broad enough scale ("general economy" rather than "restricted economy"), economic systems are always founded on excessive expenditure rather than penury and competition. *Erotism* (1957b), his work on human sexuality, starts with a lengthy analysis of the reproduction of plants, animals, and simple organisms, from which he derives his theory that humans are discontinuous beings that are nevertheless conditioned by a continuous world beyond themselves. Bataille is very much a thinker concerned with scale, and he attempts the uneasy reconciliation between the particular and the universal in a strikingly ecological way. Bataille is intensely attuned to the isolated experience of human existence

– an aspect of his writing very apparent in his graphic accounts of sex and violence – but he simultaneously upholds that we cannot be considered independently from each other or the natural world.

What makes Bataille interesting from an ecological standpoint is that, although he can be described as a correlationist in that he believes we cannot conceive of a reality outside of our subjective impressions, he does not give the human subject ontological priority. He resists the anthropocentrism that speculative realists argue characterises post-Kantian philosophy by insisting on excess as an originary principle. A system, he argues, is always conditioned by what is outside of itself rather than its own self-constitution. This motivates his thinking on a wide variety of topics: *The Accursed Share*, for example, outlines why economies are better understood by what they waste or squander than what they productively consume, while in *Erotism* he argues that social laws are best understood by their exceptions, what they make taboo. Individual human subjects are no different for Bataille. Though we conceive of ourselves as discrete and discontinuous, our existence is nevertheless predicated on a continuous world that remains obscure until we die and our subjective boundaries are erased. To return to the definition of inner experience I introduced in Chapter One, Bataille draws from atomic theory to explain the paradox of individual selfhood, or *ipseity*:

> Man can enclose being in a simple, indivisible element. But there is no being without 'ipseity.' *Without 'ipseity,' a simple element (an electron) encloses nothing.* The atom, despite its name, is a composite, but only possesses an elementary complexity: the atom itself, because of its relative simplicity, can only be determined through 'ipseity.' Thus the number of particles that compose a being intervenes in the constitution of its 'ipseity': if the knife of which one successively replaces the handle then the blade loses the shadow of its ipseity, it is not the same as a machine, in which would have disappeared, replaced piece by piece, each of the *numerous* elements that made it new: still less a man whose constituent parts die incessantly (such that nothing of these elements that we *were* subsists after a certain number of years). I can, if necessary, admit that from an extreme complexity, being imposes upon reflection *more* than an elusive appearance, but complexity, raised degree by degree, is for this *more* a labyrinth in which it wanders endlessly, loses itself once and for all. (1954, 86)

We experience ourselves as unified beings discrete from one another, but when we attempt to trace our limits we discover that this unity is more mysterious than it first appears; we

turn out to be composite beings with unstable boundaries. Despite the instability of these boundaries, however, we find ourselves unable to transcend them, since doing so would erase what differentiates us from the world – what constitutes us as subjects in the first place.

A useful link can be drawn between Bataille's notion of ipseity and Cary Wolfe's use of autopoiesis in *What Is Posthumanism?* (2009), which I introduced briefly in Chapter One. Wolfe borrows the concept from biology, where it refers to the self-organisation of cell structures. He uses the concept in relation to Niklas Luhmann's systems theory in order to explain the irreducibility between thought, language, and world: autopoiesis, or what Wolfe calls "openness from closure," conceives of systems as internally closed and self-constituting – they refer only to themselves – but open to outside influence. Language, for example, can conceive of things only as language even though languages change over time to adapt to external pressures. The same goes for consciousness, systems of law, or biological systems like cells or bodies. While an autopoietic system cannot conceive of anything except in terms of its own frames of reference, it nevertheless remains prone to influence from the outside and adapts itself in order to accommodate new information and flows of energy from its environment. What is crucial for Wolfe is that the system does not reduce everything to itself, but rather constitutes itself in relation to its environment *through difference*:

> Systems theory, in other words, does not occlude, deny, or otherwise devalue difference but rather *begins* with difference — namely, the cornerstone postulate of the difference between system and environment, and the corollary assumption that the environment of any system is always already of overwhelmingly greater complexity than the system itself. (14)

If we think of human subjectivity in terms of autopoiesis, then correlationism becomes less anthropocentric: human thought can only conceive of things from within (as thought), but it does so in response to a world that is ontologically prior and significantly more complex than itself.

I do not wish to suggest that Bataillean ipseity and Wolfe's autopoiesis are the same, since they arise from a different set of concerns and theoretical predecessors; however, there are useful connections in the ways that they theorise the connection between thought and world. Ipseity and autopoiesis are relevant for posthumanism and the nonhuman

turn because while they both recognise that we cannot escape our systems of thought, they also avoid the anthropocentric conclusion that these systems are everything. Rather, they posit existence in relation to an outside that cannot be appropriated without *turning it inside*, since any means of conceptualising it (such as art, language, or thought) reduces its complexity by bringing it in line with the terms of a system. Asserting that we only process information as ourselves does not amount to taking ourselves for everything – quite the opposite, as it can provide a way of theorising our existence as partial and subject to influence from an irreducibly complex reality outside of ourselves.

One more concept drawn from biology will be useful in the discussion that follows, since it will help explain cinematic representation of interiority later in the chapter: the embryological term *invagination*, which Maurice Merleau-Ponty imported into the humanities through his theory of flesh, and was later adopted by other French thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, and Jean-Luc Nancy.[39] In biology, invagination refers to the process through which an embryo forms: it occurs when a spherical collection of cells (called a blastomere) indents to form a cavity that will eventually become the gut. Invagination marks the moment when an organism differentiates between its inside and outside, and when it develops distinct germ layers. Crucially, the "inside" of the organism does not develop because its surface is punctured or penetrated from the outside, but rather because it folds in on itself. Nancy uses the term often in describing embodied experience as a constant enfolding in an effort to find an ever-elusive self:

> The body is nothing but the outside: skin exposed, a network of sentient receivers and transmitters. All outside and nothing like 'me' that would be held inside that wrapping. There is no ghost in the machine, no dimensionless point where 'I' feel or feel myself feeling. The inside of the envelope is yet another outside, developed (or de-enveloped) otherwise, full of folds, turns, convolutions, and adhesions. Full of invaginations, small heaps, and conglomerations. (2015, para. 1)

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[39] There are also similarities with Deleuze's concept of the fold, developed in *Foucault* (1986) and *The Fold* (1993); Simon O'Sullivan explains that the fold allows Deleuze to rethink subjectivity in that "it announces that the inside is nothing more than a fold of the outside" (107). As I mentioned in Chapter One, however, there are differences in the ways that Deleuze and Bataille conceive of the relation between inside and outside; further, Deleuze's fold, influenced by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Alfred North Whitehead, emerges from a somewhat different genealogy of ideas than Nancy's invagination, and so I would be hesitant to conflate the two notions here.

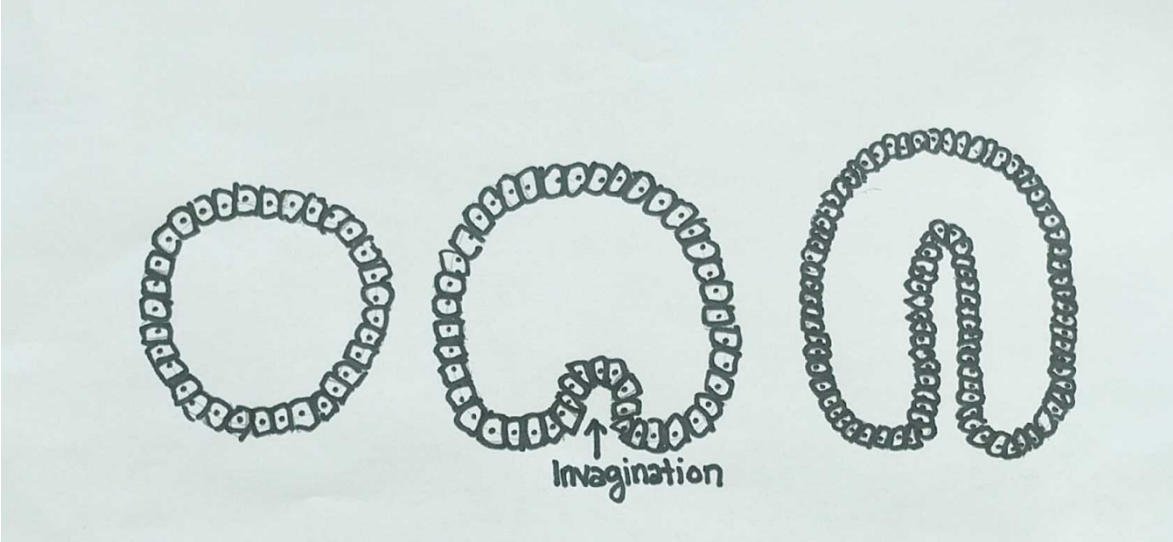

Figure 1 Invagination

This way of thinking adds another layer of complexity to the concept of interiority. For Nancy, it is not only that the outside of existence (the real) remains inaccessible to us, but also that our own interiority remains similarly precluded since it can only be read externally, on the surface. We are folded inside out, not merely in an abstract philosophical sense but also in a physical one: when a zygote invaginates, it folds inwards to form a channel so that the "outside" passes through without penetrating the cell layers on either side. Nancy uses this as a way of explaining our interiority as a play of surfaces that never accesses an internal essence or truth, since our efforts to penetrate the inner core of our being can only result in creating more folds. "Inside" and "outside" should therefore not be understood in simple spatial terms, as a sphere within which I exist, and beyond which we can locate the real. Rather, subjectivity is a complex process that constantly enfolds inside and outside, and that shifts in relation to a complex environment containing myriad other constantly-enfolding beings. Understood in this way, subjectivity and self-knowledge become a play of surfaces that never penetrate into an inner truth or an outer reality. Cinema is a useful example for considering the convolutions of inner experience as it can represent subjectivity (through techniques such as narration, point-of-view shots, or the visualisation of internal states), and it constantly negotiates between multiple subject positions. The next three sections will work through *Nymphomaniac* and *Under the Skin* thematically, in order to explore a few different ways that the films negotiate perspective. I will begin by discussing the ways that both films evoke the interiority of their protagonists, then I will turn to the function of sexuality in this subjectivisation, and finally I will look at how death is represented as the limit of these processes.

Interiority and Inner Experience

Under the Skin begins with a black frame and a frantic score of scurrying strings rising on the soundtrack. A blue light glows in the distance, and a jump cut brings us closer to the source before cutting again to reveal a series of circular shapes floating in a line away from the light. The shapes are vague and nearly abstract, but they call to mind the opening images of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick 1968) of the Earth lit from behind by the sun; the reference suggests that the shapes we first see in *Under the Skin* might be a spaceship, or some other kind of celestial object. The shapes "eventually resolve themselves to be the focusing shutter of a camera" (Vint 2015, 4), before the image is suddenly illuminated and the artificial, circular lines become a bright hazel human eye. This sudden reversal across a huge spatial range – from cosmic to personal, mediated through a camera – provides an initial visual example of the way that *Under the Skin* deals with questions of human subjectivity. The film's title already evokes its concern with interiority, which it investigates through a series of ambiguous spaces and images that subvert our expectations – or turn them inside out, to borrow Nancy's way of thinking. Though *Under the Skin* is a film about interiority, we are precluded from the thoughts of characters, as there is no voice-over and very little dialogue; the spectator is therefore encouraged to read things "on the surface." This surface, however, is constantly slipping and reversing.

After the title flashes on a white screen, the film cuts to a rural highway at night. A motorcyclist rides through a tunnel before stopping and climbing over an embankment. He returns with the lifeless body of a woman thrown over his shoulder, and takes her to the back of a van. The van seems to contain a featureless white void, where a naked woman (Scarlett Johansson) removes the dead woman's clothes and puts them on herself. It is unclear whether the space inside the van is real or metaphorical, and the scene can be read in a number of ways. Osterweil, for example, reads the scene as depicting the alien donning the dead woman's skin (2014, 45); this takes an interpretive leap, however, since the dead woman is clearly not Scarlett Johansson and we only see the alien removing her clothes. The scene might take place in a real, physical place – another dimension, maybe, or a gate to the alien's home world – or it might depict a psychic process, of the alien acquiring a human persona. The indeterminacy of inner and outer spaces is central to the aesthetics of *Under the Skin*, which poses questions about what it means to be human that in the end remain unresolved; the mystery of what lies "under the skin" literally goes up in

smoke in the final sequence when the alien is set on fire. A metaphorical reading of *Under the Skin* suggests a continual flipping inside out that never achieves an inner truth, since we are only ever allowed to read surfaces. Transgressing the boundaries between inside and outside does not allow us to transcend our existence, but only flips things inside out so that what was previously perceived as hidden is turned to the outside; consequently, all we can ever read is a (constantly shifting) surface, while what is hidden always remains underneath.

As well as evoking a number of metaphysical connotations about interiority and embodiment, *Under the Skin* is quite literally about turning people inside out. Throughout, the alien seduces men and bring them to an inky black pool where their skins are removed. Her expression as she drives around Glasgow is generally blank and impenetrable, but it changes suddenly when she stops and asks men for directions: she smiles warmly and asks them where they are going and whether anyone is waiting for them there. If they refuse a ride her face immediately falls back to neutral. The impression that she is a persona, a mask, is emphasised by her exaggerated makeup – bright pink lips, eyes heavily lined. She initially appears to be a subject without interiority, or at least any interiority that is easily interpreted. As the narrative progresses, however, she seems to develop an emotive inner life, a process tied to her gradual awareness of her human body as more than an external skin. This first occurs when she is stuck in traffic and a man hands her a rose purchased by another driver: she puts the rose on the seat next to her and recoils at the sight of blood on the packaging and her fingers. As she drives away she looks back to see the seller bandaging his bleeding hand, but this event marks an initial moment of uncertainty about her body. Her surprise is also the first evidence of affect, which foreshadows her eventual development of empathy. She previously had shown no concern for human lives – in an earlier scene she watched a mother and father drown, leaving their baby crying on the beach – but gradually seems to develop the ability to emphathise with her victims, and eventually releases one of her conquests, a lonely man with a disfigured face. Presumably fearing discipline from her superior – the man on the motorcycle in the beginning of the film – she escapes to the Highlands.

She stops at a café and attempts to eat a slice of cake, putting it in her mouth gingerly before abruptly coughing it back up. Her failed attempt at eating suggests a curiosity about her inner self, a faith in her own interiority that turns out to be a dead end; her attempt at ingestion results in revulsion, a blockage. We might read this as a metaphor for the

problem of embodiment: we search for our inner selves, a place to locate the "I," only to find that "I remain a null point of spirit nowhere to be found in this entanglement smeared with pulp, tissues, and fluids" (Nancy 2015, para. 5). Our inability to penetrate our own exteriority is reflected in the alien's preoccupation with the holes (or lack thereof) in her skin. In a later scene, the alien goes home with a man she meets on a bus. After he goes to bed, she examines her body in a full-length mirror: dimly lit by the red glow of an electric heater, she bends her knees and twists her body to examine the effects on her reflection. Later, the man and the alien attempt to have sex. She stops him suddenly, shocked, and leaps into the corner to shine a lamp on the place where her genitals should be. It is unclear whether she is disturbed by the presence of an opening or the absence of one (though the final sequence, which reveals her skin to be covering her alien form, implies the latter), but the man's attempt to penetrate her apparently calls the integrity of her body into question.

The alien's investigations into the holes in herself – her invaginations, the places where the body's boundaries break down or fold in on themselves – amount to little positive knowledge, at least not from the position of the spectator. These holes do not open onto a legible inner self (they are a dead end), but nor do they block out harm or outside influence. Her human skin, which is meant to be a protective shield over the alien truth of her identity, proves to be simultaneously fragile and impenetrable. Reading her "on the surface," the spectator cannot breach her boundaries in order to find answers about her subjective position, and even once her skin is peeled off and her inner being is exposed, this too becomes just another surface – one even more inscrutable and opaque than her outer human skin. Reading these scenes through Nancy and Bataille suggests that the alien's development of interiority makes evident that being human means having a self contained in a human skin. This self cannot exceed the limits of its existence (its body), but nevertheless opens onto a wider world through convolutions and invaginations that render its boundaries unstable.

If *Under the Skin* is about someone trying to determine the limits of their own existence – their ipseity, as determined by their physical body – then *Nymphomaniac* is about the negotiation of subjectivity through a multitude of perspectives. As with *Under the Skin*, this leads to no definite interpretation. *Nymphomaniac* is composed of a series of chapters, through which self-proclaimed nymphomaniac Joe recounts her life story to Seligman. The story is intended to prove that she is a "bad human being," deserving of the beating that left her bloodied in the alley where Seligman found her. Though the narrative is more or less

linear – or rather, circular, beginning with Joe bloodied in the alley and ending by explaining how she arrived there – it is diverted through a number of interruptions and explanations from Seligman.

Joe calls the first chapter of her story "The Compleat Angler," inspired by a fishing hook (of, fittingly, a nymph) hanging on the wall. She recounts her first sexual experiences: masturbating as a child, losing her virginity, competing with a friend to see how many men they could seduce on a train trip. Seligman, who later identifies himself as asexual and who professes to spend most of his time reading, relates her experiences to his own frames of knowledge. Often, his analogies are about natural phenomena, and in the first chapter Seligman relates Joe's behaviours to those of a fish, inspired by his passion for fly fishing. The image supports Seligman's interpretations of Joe's history and lends them visual credence. He interrupts Joe's story about trawling for men on a train – she narrates as the events are shown onscreen – to compare their actions to "reading a river" for fish. The image literally rewinds to account for Seligman's analysis, and the footage of the two young girls looking into the compartments repeats, this time superimposed with images of reeds floating in a river current as Seligman explains how the behaviour of fish is determined by river topography.

Joe, too, uses nature analogies to explain her own experiences. She tells Seligman that her only sin is "demanding more of the sunset," and a sunset appears as she describes her longing for more spectacular colours. She describes a childhood masturbatory activity called "playing frogs," which involved sliding on her belly on a flooded floor; the froglike movements of the two young girls shown in flashback are preceded by a close-up of a green frog jumping into water. In a later chapter, Joe describes feeling like a "potted plant" during her sado-masochistic relationship with K: she describes him constantly checking her "cunt juice" the way old ladies check if their plants need watering, and the descriptions of both actions are paired with corresponding images. While *Under the Skin* has formal restraint in that it shows far more than it tells, and does not even show enough to ensure a straightforward reading, *Nymphomaniac* is characterised by narrative excess: it both tells and shows far more than it needs to, with images corroborating seemingly insignificant details and analogies that do not in the end amount to a definite reading. The indexical relationship between words and images does not give the sense of a single underlying reality, but rather enhances the feeling of slippage between perspectives as Joe's story proliferates into a multitude of metonymic images.

Because the narrative takes place as a dialogue, the spectator is called upon to navigate these excesses of information in order to determine their own interpretation of Joe's life story. The conversations between Joe and Seligman touch on a number of controversial issues – religion, race, abortion – certain to provoke strong reactions. Seligman is initially characterised as a "proper" liberal humanist: he is a well-read atheist that believes in women's rights and often chides Joe for making politically insensitive statements. Joe, on the other hand, reveals a number of problematic opinions: she rejects the label of sex addict by identifying as a nymphomaniac, and asserts that her nymphomania makes her immoral in some absolute sense; she insists on calling the black men with whom she engages in a threesome "negroes," and tells Seligman that "any woman who tells you negroes don't turn her on is lying"; during a lengthy sequence in the director's cut when she recounts her (incredibly graphic and brutal) experience of performing an abortion on herself, she insists on describing the process in detail and rebukes Seligman for suggesting that a woman's right to choose overrides the infliction of trauma on the foetus. The presumably liberal, culturally-literate spectator, uncomfortable with Joe's position, is likely to align herself with Seligman, at least until the final sequence.

After Joe has told her story, and insisted that she behaved immorally by wilfully disregarding the feelings of others in order to achieve her own sexual satisfaction, Seligman replies that she was "simply a woman demanding her right," and that her story would not seem as subversive – would even be banal – had she been a man. His passionate feminist sermon is enhanced by flashbacks of all of the film's relevant events, granting his reading of them a sense of finality and certainty. After he finishes, Joe tells him she is too tired to argue and declares him to be her first true friend. This seemingly happy ending to Joe's tale provides a satisfying final reading that neatly ties up loose ends, and so a spectator unfamiliar with von Trier's cinema might find what happens next surprising. After Joe has fallen asleep, Seligman creeps back into her room in only a pyjama top; he climbs into bed with her, stroking his flaccid penis and grabbing her buttocks. She wakes up in surprise and the screen goes black before we hear him protest, "But you've fucked thousands of men." A gunshot is heard, followed by fleeing footsteps, and the credits roll.

Seligman's act of sexual assault contradicts his previous characterisation as a kind-hearted feminist asexual, and impels a reconsideration of his readings of Joe's narrative. It also implicates the spectator by demanding that she re-evaluate the degree to which she has been complicit in Seligman's position, which in the end is revealed to be based in violence

and misogyny. The ending emphasises that the narrative has not merely been a negotiation between two perspectives (Seligman's and Joe's) but rather a dialogue between two people self-consciously staged for a third – the spectator. Read in light of Seligman's final act, his determination to read Joe's life against her own interpretation is recast not as generous and encouraging (as his "feminist" diatribes would seem to suggest) but violent and appropriative. The point is not that Joe is "right": *Nymphomaniac* does not result in a positive affirmation of her un-PC excesses. Nor does the emphasis on a third term in the equation – the position of the spectator – result in a dialectical solution or higher-order truth. Rather, as Huffer argues, *Nymphomaniac* ends with a more troubling negativity that unsettles the entire narrative structure. This ending, as well as being narratively excessive (it adds on to a story that had already reached a satisfying conclusion) is also excessive in the sense that it goes beyond the hermeneutic logic it itself had established, which the ending reveals to have been founded in masculine aggression and power. The film's critique is levied not merely at Seligman but also at his frames of knowledge, drawn from a broad tradition of Western thought referenced throughout the narrative.

Nymphomaniac's critique of liberal humanism is characteristic of von Trier's cinema, which often provokes the spectator by pushing against her values and making her unexpectedly complicit in acts of violence or degradation. *Nymphomaniac* is most explicit about this critical project, however, as evidenced by the sheer range of topics discussed (race, religion, abortion, women's sexual autonomy). This exaggerated emphasis on von Trier's preoccupation with the flaws in Western thought might provide a new way of looking at the film's abundant natural images and references to natural phenomena. Just as new readers of Bataille might be surprised by his frequent allusions to the natural sciences and use of biological examples, viewers drawn in by *Nymphomaniac*'s titillating title – and provocative advertising campaign, which included a series of 14 posters, each featuring one of the actors in the apparent throes of an orgasm – would probably be frustrated by film's frequent detours and analogies. The association between sex and nature, if read in Bataillean terms, provides a form of resistance to the film's structuring narrative logic: to recall Bataille's argument, sex is a means for communing with the sacred natural world, which Bataille sees not as a transcendent "other realm" but rather a reality in excess of structuring forces like language, law, consciousness, or reason. Sex is heavily regulated in human societies through taboos and institutions such as marriage because of its transgressive power: there is something excessive in the sexual experience that cannot be harnessed for useful purposes, and that often works against our better

judgments or makes us behave irrationally. Because sex has the potential to work against the profane world of work and reason, it is associated with the sacred natural world in excess of human thought. The importance of nature in *Nymphomaniac* can therefore be read as part of its critique of Western thought: like the missing "inner truth" of Joe's personal narrative (to which I will return shortly), the natural images cannot entirely be put to work in the service of narrative.

There is something in *Nymphomaniac*'s natural images that remains extraneous or excessive, and that resists Seligman's attempts to appropriate them into a signifying discourse. What does an image of frogs leaping add to the phrase "playing frogs"? How is an image of a sunset enhanced by the simultaneous description of its spectacular colours? The doubling of these representations – through both words and images – emphasises the gulf between language and matter, further destabilising the truth claims offered by the narrative. There are even further levels of mediation, of course, since the images are cinematic representations of natural phenomena rather than the phenomena themselves, and the cinematic image (as we saw in the last chapter) is already implicated in human ways of seeing; the images are also mediated through the perceptual and cognitive systems of particular spectators. These refractions do not expose an "inner truth" of representation, but nor do they suggest that truth is merely interpretation, since the film's final moments calls the entire practice of hermeneutics into question. Rather, *Nymphomaniac* ends with an implosive negativity that exposes the limits of its own mediated representations. If we follow Wolfe's definition of posthumanism as a critique of post-Enlightenment humanism, then *Nymphomaniac* is a thoroughly posthumanist film: it uses humanist logic against itself, leaving behind excesses that are difficult to reconcile with its own structure of representation. The formal excesses of *Nymphomaniac* are linked to its representations of nature, both of which resist Seligman's rational frameworks by destabilising any straightforward interpretation.

To bring things back to the question of subjectivity, where does all of this uncertainty leave Joe? Can we locate her in the film's excesses of images and interpretations? Like the alien in *Under the Skin*, Joe can only be read on the surface, and as with *Under the Skin* it is a surface that is constantly shifting and evading straightforward signification. My point is not that the truth becomes lost in a postmodern slippage of signs, or that it is revealed to be relational or non-existent, but rather that this slippage opens onto a different order of truth – one that belongs not to reason, but to the sacred world in excess of it. *Nymphomaniac*'s

narrative structure is based in a negotiation of perspectives, but rather than resolving them it ends with their violent negation.

This negation is properly Bataillean in that it does not serve the discursive system by being synthesised into a higher-order truth, but instead points to an excessive remainder that violates the systems of narrative and meaning. In an article about Bataille's reworking of Hegel, Mete Ulaş Aksoy explains that "transgression, if being worthy of its name for Bataille, should put the system in jeopardy, managing to dodge the dialectical movement" (2011, 217). Bataillean negation is not antithetical, as it does not constitute a complete reversal or contradiction of a claim or point of view. Rather, it is a point of access onto something beyond or lacking a point of view, and this access is always bound to be fleeting and incomplete since our tendency towards signification will always rope it back within the confines of reason before long. This incompleteness is frustrating because it doesn't even allow for the satisfaction of complete annihilation: Shaviro writes in *Passion & Excess: Blanchot, Bataille and Literary Theory* that Bataille's "obsessive meditations concern – and participate in – a catastrophe all the more obscure and unsettling in that it refuses apocalyptic closure" (1990, 37). The troubling excesses of Bataille's work are not quite nothing, but not quite something either; they are something *else*, something "out there" and exterior that also turns out to be disturbingly intimate. Rather than choosing between perspectives, *Nymphomaniac* opts for this "something else": it reinforces the gulf between perspectives that is not quite their negation, a gulf also alluded to by the film's excessive natural imagery. Joe's subjectivity is positioned in relation to a reality that exceeds her, a reality that she engages with erotically and with abandon.

Sex and Transgression

Sex in both *Nymphomaniac* and *Under the Skin* is represented as a way of transgressing the limit between inner and outer spaces. Eroticism is linked to death in both films, and provides a way of representing the limits of subjectivity and the boundaries between society and nature. In *Erotism*, Bataille writes that eroticism "is assenting to life up to the point of death" (1957b, 11), meaning that the erotic provides a way of approaching the limits of consciousness, the places where we border onto another world or another person. This is paradoxical, since it both affirms the subject's finitude – its inescapable enclosure inside its own ipseity – but also requires a desire to move beyond these subjective boundaries. It is not quite an impulse for self-destruction, since although it desires the

erasure of differentiation between self and world, it also requires that these boundaries are reinforced, or else there would be no subject to desire its own erasure. The subject that confronts its own limits through an erotic experience flirts with death but in the end resists it, therefore "assenting to life" despite considering the possibility of its own annihilation.

Bataille uses this paradoxical definition of eroticism as a way of accounting for the link between sex and death in culture. While they would seem to be opposing forces, since one begets life and the other ends it, for Bataille they are inexorably connected. He argues in *The Accursed Share* that, counterintuitively, death is a luxury: it is wasteful, since it involves the loss of energy without return – specifically, the loss of all the energy required to grow and maintain the organism over the course of its life. The luxury of death allows for sexual reproduction, which gives rise to discontinuous beings. He contrasts this with asexual reproduction, which involves the continuity between one generation and the next so that we cannot determine where the parent ends and the offspring begins:

> As we know, death is not necessary. The simplest forms of life are immortal: The birth of an organism reproduced through scissiparity is lost in the mists of time. Indeed, it cannot be said to have parents. Take for example the doubles of *A'* and *A"*, resulting from the splitting in two of *A*: *A* has not ceased living with the coming into being of *A"*. (1967a, 32)

More complex – or what he calls "burdensome" (33) – forms of life delay the disappearance of the parent through death until long after the reproductive process, thereby squandering an excess of energy (since neither life nor death are necessary for Bataille) into the production of discontinuous offspring. Death is therefore the condition for subjectivity, which can only be achieved through sexual reproduction: the ipseity of an individual subject results from its discontinuity from its parents and other organisms of its kind.

This squandering of resources fits into his broader ontology of excess, which sees life as a "wild exuberance" that continuously wastes energy without return. Sexual reproduction is one way of squandering energy; Bataille lists meat-eating as another: "If one cultivates potatoes or wheat, the land's yield in consumable calories is much greater than that of livestock in milk and meat for an equivalent acreage of pasture" (33). Meat eating is linked to death and sexuality in that it is an unnecessary luxury, but luxury for Bataille is unavoidable, and can in fact be beautiful. The ethical problem of meat eating for Bataille

consists not in how to turn our unproductive excesses into useful energy, but rather involves the more complicated question of how to make sure the inevitable expenditure is "acceptable" or even beautiful rather than overly destructive. The complex ethics of meat eating are also at stake in *Under the Skin*, though the film addresses the question more obliquely than the source material: while Michael Faber's novel (2000) explicitly links the harvest of humans to ethical problems with capitalism, describing the industrial practices through which the meat is harvested in detail, Glazer's film is less overtly political in its emphasis on affect and abstract imagery. Rather than being tied to broader systemic issues, the alien seems to work alone, except perhaps for the supervision of the motorcycle man (a relationship that is never clearly explained). Though the alien's ability to view her victims as meat seems to come into question towards the end of the film, in the beginning she is an efficient solitary hunter, as her appearance allows her to lure the kind of person that would not normally worry about harm to their person: cocksure single young men.

In the first seduction sequence, she brings a man back to a tenement flat after questioning him about his relationships and putting him at ease by flattering him and laughing at his jokes. She turns the key in the door and he follows her into the darkness, and there is a cut to a black, non-descript space. He follows suit and his clothes leave a trail behind him on the black floor, which can only be differentiated from the rest of the space through the reflections in its glassy surface. Drums plod on the soundtrack as strings rise up in a pace that matches the walking movements of the two figures. Naked, he walks towards her as she walks backwards; he gradually sinks into the glassy surface of the pool, which now appears to be made of a thick black liquid. The camera tracks forward past his sinking body and the alien stops and turns around. The music fades from the soundtrack as the alien silently picks up the discarded articles of clothing, her body reflected in the undisturbed black surface of the pool; the man is nowhere to be seen.

As with the prior sequence in the white van, it is unclear whether the scene is actually occurring or is meant as a metaphorical representation of the process by which she seduces and kills the man. The spatial discontinuity across the cut between the outside of the flat and the inside of the void is reinforced by the movements of the two figures, who cross more ground than could possibly be contained by the building; because there are no distinguishing features of the environment, close-ups on the man make his movements appear unnatural, as though he is walking in place. The man and the alien never touch, but the sequence is explicitly sexual: the man's erection is in full view as he sinks into the

pool, and Scarlett Johansson's body is put on display as the driving force leading the victim, seemingly unaware of his strange surroundings, to his demise.

This first void sequence establishes the pattern for the alien's seductions, and each subsequent "sex" scene reveals a little more about the alien's project. She meets the next man in a club, where they dance together; his movements carry across a cut back to the void, as he dances in place to the same percussive rhythm from the last seduction scene. A long shot reveals the alien to be walking backwards on the surface of the pool while the man, now naked, gradually sinks into the inky pool. She walks back over the surface before a cut to the man below, floating in liquid and illuminated by blue light. He encounters what appears to be another man (presumably the first) floating in an unearthly way; he touches the man's wrinkled skin, which appears to grasp him back before it screams and retreats back into the darkness. The whole skin then wrinkles and folds in on itself, and ripples for a few moments like a sail in the void.

The question of what happened to the body inside the skin is answered in the next shot, which seems to be of a trough filled with sanguine liquid flowing towards a red, illuminated opening. The liquid disappears into the hole before the shot transitions to a series of abstract red shapes, then a red line, then a light that could be a star. The implication is perhaps that the man's insides are sent "elsewhere," and that the abstract images somehow represent the process through which this occurs. The shapes also look something like blood under a microscope, suggesting that the abstract images are not on a cosmic scale but rather a molecular one – a closer look at what is "under the skin." This echoes the indeterminacy between inner and outer spaces in the opening sequence, and enhances the sense of disorientation that pervades the void scenes. The question posed by the film's title proves difficult to answer, as the aesthetic slips between spaces at various scales rather than probing under the surface to expose a previously hidden truth

By relating this process of "turning inside out" to sex, *Under the Skin* emphasises what is at stake in the erotic; namely, the exposure of self to the outside. The void sequences pose sex as an ecological question by externalising the process and rendering it spatially ambiguous. The men are not consumed by the alien, but instead by the space around her. Rather than penetrating the flesh of the other, the sexual act in *Under the Skin* involves a penetration of self by the outside; the men sink into this outside, where they are turned inside out. In Bataillean terms, these "sex" scenes visualise what is risked in the erotic

experience, as the self is exposed to what cannot be contained by their consciousness. Bataille writes that there is an inexorable gap between us:

> You and I are *discontinuous* beings. But I cannot refer to this gulf which separates us without feeling that this is not the whole truth of the matter. It is a deep gulf, and I do not see how it can be done away with. None the less, we can experience its dizziness together. It can hypnotise us. The gulf is death in one sense, and death is vertiginous, death is hypnotising. (1957b, 12-13)

Because for Bataille the ipseity of the other is impenetrable – "no communication between us can abolish our fundamental difference" since "[i]f you die, it is not my death" (12) – we can only relate to each other in virtue of the gulf between us, and these relations are limited to experiencing its "dizziness" together. Intersubjectivity for Bataille is therefore fundamentally irrational: it is predicated not on the commonalities in our capacity for reason, but rather *on the limits* of these capacities. Intersubjectivity, like sex and death, exposes the interstices in reason, since it calls our subjective boundaries into question and exposes us to the knowledge that our knowledge is limited, and that we are not all. While a subject might wish to penetrate or be penetrated by another person – the object of desire, whose ipseity is discontinuous and wholly other – the sexual encounter cannot breach the gulf that disconnects us. In opening ourselves to the other we end up mutually exposing ourselves to the dizzying outside of thought in between us. But this relationship is more complex than merely "me" versus "you," an "inside" in here versus an "outside" out there: as with the ambiguous spaces in *Under the Skin*, the distinctions marking these differences are often obscure and unstable.

The void sequences also pose the question of what we are in excess of our meat. The alien's gradual development of empathy works against her ability to hunt her victims, eventually resulting in her inability to follow through with killing the man with the disfigured face. Their encounter begins like the others: she sees him walking alone at night and convinces him to take a ride. The man is obviously unaccustomed to being spoken to the way that the alien does, as she uses the same tactics of conversation as with the others: she flatters him, telling him he has beautiful hands, and probes him about his relationships with other people (he has none, it seems). The scene plays with the idea of seeing beyond appearances – of being interested in someone for more than just their looks – but turns it into something risky and menacing. A close-up shows the man pinching himself, suggesting that he is at least willing to entertain his own good luck in encountering a

beautiful woman who wants to take him home. The spectator, however, is aware that the alien's interest in the man's inner self is more literal than he realises. The cliché that "we're all the same underneath the skin" is true in a brute, material sense, since the man's disfigured face hides the same mass of blood and organs that was seen earlier in the alien's trough.

This third void sequence progresses as before: they unclothe before he sinks into the pool. On her way out of the abandoned house where she had taken him, however, the alien pauses to look at herself in a mirror. She had previously been shot observing herself, fragmented, in various mirrors – her lips in a hand mirror as she put on lipstick, her eyes in the rear view of the van – but the sight of her full face in this mirror seems to make her pause. Osterweil reads this in Lacanian terms, as the initial moment of her subjectivisation: "As in Jacques Lacan's theory of the mirror stage, the birth of the self emerges here from the simultaneous recognition of, and estrangement from, her own reflected image" (2014, 49). This contradiction between recognition and estrangement in *Under the Skin* is evoked by the alien's recognition of self *as other*, seen from the outside as a body wrapped in skin. This process of identification is profoundly alienating because of the gap between experiencing oneself from the inside (ipseity) and observing its exteriority, its extension as matter. There is something irreducible between these experiences, a sense in which I am in excess of my body at the same time as my body is in excess of me, despite the fact that my existence is inexorably material.

In his essay "Fifty-eight Indices on the Body" (2008a), Nancy writes about embodiment as a mutual intrusion: "[t]he body's the intruder that, without breaking in, can't penetrate the self-present point that the spirit is" (154). The body remains foreign to a spirit that Nancy defines as pure negativity, since "[t]he body keeps its secret, this nothing, this spirit that isn't lodged in it but spread out, expanded, extended all across it, so much so that the secret has no hiding place, no intimate fold where it might some day [sic] be discovered" (156). We are *nothing* in excess of our meat, but this nothingness is ontologically significant rather than being merely reducible to our brute materiality. The alien's reflection on herself in the mirror seemingly leads to an awareness that she is nothing more than meat, and that consequently her victim – whom she had previously seen as mere meat – must also be a self. She lets the disfigured man go, and he escapes naked through a grassy field (her act of mercy turns out to be futile, however, as the motorcycle man catches him shortly after). This awareness of self as other, and of others as selves, happens not because of some deep

inner connection but rather on the surface, on the level of skin. It also suggests the possibility of empathetic connection across species lines, as the alien and her human victim share similar experiences of interiority. The alien's empathy with her victim occurs not because they are the same underneath – they are not, as the final sequence reveals – but because they share an alienation from their outer appearances: they both feel differently on the inside from what they are on the outside.

Nancy writes that truth occurs on the level of skin, since it marks the unstable division between inside and outside: "the truth is skin. Truth is in the skin, it makes skin: an authentic extension exposed, entirely turned outside while also enveloping the inside, a sack crammed with rumblings and musty odors" (2008a, 159). The truth revealed is disappointingly material – that we are living meat ("rumblings and musty odors") – but also reveals that we are not all, that we are exposed to an outside in excess of us. This exposure to the outside that constitutes our relationship to ourselves and to others is also what is at stake in the sexual experience, which Nancy describes in an excessive, "supernumerary" fifty-ninth index: "[t]he body is related to the body of the other sex. In this relation, its corporeality is involved insofar as it touches through sex on its limit: it delights, meaning that the body is shaken outside itself" (160). Sex is a way of experiencing the body at its limit, a limit that can only be transcended through death, and *Under the Skin* interrogates these processes by externalising erotic and intersubjective relationships, making them into something that truly risks turning the subject inside out.

Sex in *Nymphomaniac* is similarly transgressive in that it not only pushes the boundaries of morality, but also exposes the limit between society and nature. Bataille, like Nancy, argues that sex is ontologically excessive, more than just being morally so. Sex is one way of disrupting the profane logic of human work and reason, and thereby forming a (tenuous and largely negative) relationship with the world outside of thought. *Nymphomaniac* exemplifies this idea in a number of ways, since its sex scenes are excessive in both an aesthetic sense – they are "too much," unnecessary – and a practical one, since they involved a large amount of labour despite the fact that the most explicit scenes were cut from the theatrical version. The director's cut, on the other hand, contains a number of scenes featuring un-simulated sex of body doubles: a great deal of impressive CGI is employed to make it look as though the actors are really having sex. The director's cut is not widely available, nor was it widely screened, and its extra 84 minutes add little to the narrative except more digressions and explicit sex. An immense of amount of labour was

required to film each sex scene twice: the negotiation of two sets of contracts (Gainsbourg and Martin have both said in interviews that the limits of their roles had to be very clearly defined [Lunn 2014; van Hoeij 2014]), the meticulous blocking of two scenes with two separate sets of actors, the use of prosthetics for the main actors, the post-production CGI to unify the two scenes seamlessly, the editing and re-editing required for the release of two separate versions.

The result is arguably a disappointing and inferior film. Reviews for the director's cut are more tepid than for the theatrical release, and tend to point out that the longer version aggravates the film's already obscure and meandering narrative. *IndieWire* reviewer James Berclaz-Lewis, who defends the theatrical version as superior, summarises the difference between cuts as simple addition:

> That's not to say that the longer version doesn't offer its fair share of surplus sex. But it's a case of slight extensions rather than wholesale scenes … In fact, most of Joe's sexual encounters are afforded a couple of extra frames, along with a few generous close-ups. Sprinkle a few more bodily juices and you've essentially covered the extent of the alleged 'controversial' bonus content offered by the director's cut. (2014, par. 3)

Berclaz-Lewis's criticism suggests that these additional sequences do not "add up" to anything, whether in terms of narrative understanding or aesthetic value; they are superfluous, excessive. The extra minutes of *Nymphomaniac*'s director's cut can be read as sacrificial in the Bataillean sense, since they are literally wasted labour. Though this could be read in terms of artistic failure, the excessiveness of the director's cut can be related in interesting ways to the thematic concerns of the film, especially the interconnection between sex and nature. The description of the extra scenes as mere addition and the puzzlement in accounting for the increased running time by audiences of *Vol. I* (Felperin 2014) – though the extra scenes *Vol. II* are more pronounced – add an extra-textual dimension to the film's concern with mathematics, and especially addition.

Nymphomaniac makes sex mathematisable. When Joe tells Seligman about her loss of virginity to Jerôme, she recounts that he "humped me three times" – numbers appear counting upwards with his thrusts as the event is shown in flashback – and then turned her over and "humped me five times in the ass," at which point a plus-sign appears, followed again by the count upwards to five. Seligman explains that 3 and 5 are Fibonacci numbers,

but Joe brushes off his attempt to rationalise her experience by telling him, "that may be, but in any case it hurt like hell." Seligman's comment that Joe's sexual experience is somehow connected to a mysterious order of the universe – the Fibonacci numbers, connected to the golden ratio and visible in structures in nature – is given credence by the appearance of the numbers on screen. It is also reinforced by Joe's seemingly intuitive mechanical skill: on her way out of Jerôme's apartment, she casually repairs the moped that he had been struggling to start before their sexual encounter. During a later scene, Jerôme fails to parallel park his car, and Joe insists on giving it a try. To his frustration, she parks it perfectly, an action shown in an overhead shot superimposed with diagrams demonstrating the physics of her manoeuvre. Joe's knowledge of how things work is not reasoned, and nor does she seem to direct it towards any employable skill: until the final chapter, she seems to float through dead-end desk jobs. Rather, it seems to connect her with an obscure order of things, a mathematisable structure to existence that she knows not through reason but simply by nature.

Seligman's interpretations constantly try to grant meaning to these events by connecting them to his frames of knowledge, but in the end his interpretations – like the extra scenes in the director's cut – amount to nothing, or even to loss. During the last chapter in *Vol. I*, "The Little Organ School," Joe recounts her experiences with three lovers, inspired by a taped recording of Bach and Seligman's explanation of polyphony ("the idea that every voice has its own melody, but together in harmony"). Seligman explains that Bach's music is based on a "rather incomprehensible mystique concerning numbers," especially the Fibonacci sequence, and numbers once again appear on screen as he adds the numbers in the sequence together. He tells Joe that the Fibonacci numbers have been used throughout history to try and find a divine methodology in art and architecture, a statement supported by images of illustrative diagrams and classical artistic references – the Last Supper, the Parthenon. Seligman relates this to Bach's polyphony, which forms a melody on the organ called "Cantus Firmus" with a base voice, the left hand, and the right hand. Joe uses this to jump into a story about the harmony between her various lovers, whom she explains add up to a complete sexual experience. This harmony is composed of three lovers: a reliable base voice called F, an unpredictable left hand called G, and Jerôme, who completes the harmony because she falls in love with him.

When Joe finishes telling Seligman about her lovers, the screen is divided in three, with each third looping various details of their relationships as the Bach tape plays in the

background. The addition of the three sequences through the split screen evokes a sense of completeness – arithmetic leading to a whole number – that matches Bach's harmony. But while Joe explicitly introduces the story as a way of providing a totalisable account of her sexual history – a universal concept derived from particular experiences – in the end it amounts to a loss. The completed melody results in the loss of Joe's orgasm, and *Vol. I* ends with Joe exclaiming that she cannot feel anything, a statement punctuated by the abrupt stop of Bach's hymn and a corresponding image of Seligman's tape player finishing. Joe's desire for completeness and fulfilment, evidenced by her plea a few moments earlier for Jerôme to "fill all my holes," results in a total loss of the pleasure she sought through sex. The complicated stylistic methods that *Nymphomaniac* uses to make sense of these events (diagrams, metaphorical images, intercutting, repetition) give the impression of coherence, as though the images should amount to a clear revelation, related to Seligman's descriptions of divine methodology. But the mathematisation of sexuality amounts to simple addition that refuses a suggest a totality, and that instead paradoxically leads to a loss.

The loss of Joe's sexual pleasure critiques the mathematisation of reality by undermining the assumption that by adding one plus one we can progress to a higher-order truth, a methodology for the universe. Instead, what results is a pure and simple loss, as the three lovers add up to the negation of Joe's sexual satisfaction. This loss forms an implicit critique of Seligman's references to the history of art and theories that sought a divine methodology to the universe through numbers, a critique that might also be brought to bear on thinkers like Meillassoux (2006) and Ray Brassier (2007); though Brassier and Meillassoux attempt to disengage from any theological foundations for mathematics, they similarly argue that mathematics is the means by which reason can comprehend the world outside of thought. *Nymphomaniac*, like Bataille, provides an alternative view of what allows us access to the absolute, since it critiques Seligman's attempts to mathematise Joe's reality as founded on his appropriative masculine logic. *Nymphomaniac* refuses to allow the numbers to suggest a whole, and the film's self-destructive gestures – in *Vol. I* with the loss of Joe's orgasm and in *Vol. II* with the unseen death of Seligman – suggest that the absolute is not something known. It is something felt rather than reasoned, the way that Joe experiences her orgasms or intuits the workings of mopeds and automobiles.

Death and Discontinuity

Nymphomaniac suggests that by losing her orgasm, Joe also loses her point of access to the sacred. In a scene from the "Eastern and the Western Church" chapter from the beginning of *Vol. II*, Joe describes her first, spontaneous orgasm at the age of twelve. In the director's cut, the scene is preceded by an extended black screen that echoes the beginning and ending of the film. Bird songs rise slowly on the soundtrack for a few moments before the image appears, a flashback of Joe as a child lying in the grass on a hillside. She looks around, and there is a cut to a series of shots of natural scenes – grasses in the wind, a bee in a flower, a waterfall – before Joe begins to shudder and rise up into the air.

A long shot from below her feet shows her suspended above ground, flanked by two ghostly apparitions: one woman dressed in gold riding a bull, and another in Roman clothes holding a baby. Seligman, incredulous, tells Joe that her vision is like a "blasphemous retelling of Jesus's transfiguration on the mount," with the figures of Moses and Elijah replaced by the Whore of Babylon and Veleria Messalina, "the most notorious nymphomaniac in history." Joe seems unfazed by Seligman's incredulity and disinterested in his reading, telling him that she is as innocent to the religious as he is to sex. Seligman had previously linked her to blasphemy in a scene in which she describes the workings of an organisation she had belonged to called the "Little Flock," which encouraged young women to engage freely in sexual behaviour while rejecting society's emphasis on romantic love; at their meetings they had played a theme on the piano, which Seligman explains was called "the Devil's interval" and was banned in the Middle Ages.

By using religious themes in order to evoke their blasphemous undersides, *Nymphomaniac* links obscenity with the sacred. For Bataille, our relationship to the sacred is double-sided and includes both religious mysticism and Dionysian excess. Sexual obscenity is a way of relating to the sacred because it calls our ipseity into question: "[o]bscenity is our name for the uneasiness which upsets the physical state associated with self-possession, with the possession of a recognised and stable individuality" (1957b, 17-18). Seen in this way, the film challenges the spectator to take Joe's transgressive sexuality seriously, rather than condemning it or domesticating it within the PC rhetoric that Seligman uses to such nefarious ends. Joe is both a nymphomaniac and a bad person: she is immoral because she positions herself outside, or at least at the margins of morality, and she is a nymphomaniac because her sexuality has the potential to upset social codes. Joe's sexuality is therefore

blasphemous in that it aligns her with a reality that exceeds the frameworks imposed upon it.

The abundant natural images in *Nymphomaniac* suggest that this reality is related to the environment. Seligman's analogies posit nature as knowable, an assumption that the film works against by creating lacunae in the visual landscape and disrupting the spectator's knowledge at key points in the narrative. The black screen that opens the film evokes an ambient soundscape before revealing the sources of the sounds: rain falls on metal and drips through eaves as something creaks slowly in the wind. These sounds continue for 90 seconds or so before cutting out abruptly as an image of snow falling in a brick alleyway appears. Because the sounds are at first disconnected from their sources, they give a sense of 3-dimensional space outside the image: their sources are multiple, moving across both sides of the screen. As opposed to the cinematic image, which is built on principles of perspective directed towards the position of the spectator, the soundscape is more immersive and ambient.

Timothy Morton argues that ambience has the ability to unsettle distinctions between subjects and objects. In *Ecology Without Nature* (2007) he describes an "ambient poetics," writing that "[a]mbience denotes a sense of a circumambient, or surrounding, *world*. It suggests something both material and physical, though somewhat intangible, as if space itself had a material aspect" (33). The etymology of ambience, he points out, comes from "the Latin *ambo*, 'on both sides,'" (34), an idea that he uses to explore the ways that ambience moves between subject and object, inside and outside. Cinema, as argued in the last chapter, puts the spectator in a position of mastery over the image by giving the impression of objectivity: the image is "out there" and accessible to me, since it directs itself towards my position through the use of representational devices such as single-point perspective. The acousmatic sounds in the opening scene of *Nymphomaniac* work against this sense of mastery by refusing to grant access to the image, instead immersing the spectator in ambient sounds. Morton writes that acousmatic sound "comes 'from nowhere,' or it is inextricably bound up with the space in which it is heard" (41): rather than being related indexically to visual sources, these initial sounds in *Nymphomaniac* become associated with the space where the film is screened, collapsing the distance between the spectator and the diegesis by refusing to initially posit the film world as something "out there," in a world of a different order from the space inhabited by the spectator. These sounds evoke a sense of situatedness, of existing in a particular space, without separating

this space from the real, physical location where the spectator sits. The sounds are not tethered to a specific narrative perspective, since we initially do not know who in the story, if anyone, might be hearing them.

This sense of ambiguity is recuperated into a more conventional representational framework when the image appears, as the sounds are retroactively tied to their sources. The image shows drainage pipes and a shed with a tin roof, accounting for the metallic sounds of falling water, and close-ups of rain trickling down the walls and of a metal fan creaking then firmly anchor all of the opening sounds to their sources. Eventually the camera settles on Joe lying prostrate in the alley, implying a new interpretation for the sounds: they might have been from Joe's perspective as she listened to the sounds of the alley with her eyes closed. But before the image appears, the ambient sounds create a sense of situatedness without identification, and are therefore neither subjective nor objective. They are too particular to provide a sense of context or mastery at the same time as they are too indeterminate to suggest a specific subject position

The spectator's inability to see in the opening scene relates to a broader trope of blindness in von Trier's cinema. In *What Is Posthumanism?* Wolfe argues that von Trier's *Dancer in the Dark* critiques the "humanist schema of visuality" (2009, 169) through its thematic concern with blindness: "the film uses the 'pathological' fact of Selma's blindness and the compensatory strategies it generates to disclose a radically deconstructed notion of the visual" (189). Bataille similarly uses the notion of visuality against itself, an idea succinctly summarised by Benjamin Noys:

> Vision is possible only through the original violence of the aperture that opens the eye, an aperture which is also a blind spot. The blind spot is the part of the eye which makes vision possible and the part which makes that vision incomplete or impossible. It is the aperture which opens the possibility of vision but which vision cannot comprehend visually. (2000, 30)

Bataille relates this to the relationship between knowledge and non-knowledge, in order to argue that the former is made possible by its own lacunae, its own incompleteness. Wolfe points out that the theme of blindness in *Dancer in the Dark* is linked to death, since it results in Selma's (Björk) unjust execution; Bataille also links the blind spot with death, using repeated references to punctured and mutilated eyeballs in order to evoke a sense of horror about the loss of the visual. Eyes see, but they also denote the possibility of not

seeing: they can either provide “windows of the soul” that suggest the vibrant interiority of another, or else they can be the staring eyes of a corpse that evince the total loss of subjectivity.

The opening sequence of *Nymphomaniac* relates this deconstruction of the visual to the cinematic image, suggesting that it is similarly built on a blind spot that precludes complete or totalisable knowledge. By emphasising the space around the screen through sound, the screen itself is exposed as limited, partial. This self-reflexive gesture towards the limitations of the medium can only be temporary, as once the image appears *Nymphomaniac* falls into a more conventional cinematic patterns. But the gap in knowledge suggested by the opening scene is re-opened at crucial moments in the film, and serves as a reminder that there is something in excess of the frameworks imposed on Joe’s experiences.

As with *Dancer in the Dark*, these small moments of blindness are related to death, but crucially for my purposes they are also related to sexuality. The first black screen sequence introduces an element of uncertainty; the second, which occurs in the director’s cut just before Joe recounts her first orgasmic experience, interrupts the film in the middle and links Joe’s sexual awakening to the ending; the third occurs just after the attempted rape, casting ambiguity over the final moments of the film (though it is implied that Joe murders Seligman and escapes). The association between death, sexuality, and blindness suggests there is something about the former two that cannot be seen or understood. Understood through Bataille, this means that sexuality and death are posited as the lacunae in knowledge that constitute the possibility of knowledge and such. The abundance of knowledge expressed throughout the narrative, founded upon Seligman’s evidently thorough knowledge of Western thought and history, is built over a structuring absence, as the holes in the narrative fabric of the film construct knowledge as partial and incomplete.

As Huffer argues, what dies in *Nymphomaniac*’s final moments is not only Seligman but also his worldview and its effects on the film’s narrative structure. The suicidal gesture of the film calls his epistemological strategies into question, strategies based in a tradition of Western thought that separates subjects and objects and mobilises this distinction in order to maintain systems of oppression. Seligman’s act of sexual violence therefore does not work against his prior characterisation as a proper liberal humanist, but is rather symptomatic of it. His death destabilises these structures and does not offer a new

alternative: as Huffer explains it, "*Nymphomaniac*'s final shot refuses resolution. Reinforced by the film's consistent blurring of its own diegetic borders, the final shot risks an opening into an unknown … future" (2015, sec. 3). Seligman's death can be read as sacrificial in Bataillean terms, in that it serves nothing: it breaks down rather than reinforcing systems of meaning.

As sacrifice, Seligman's death opens onto the continuous world of the sacred, where distinctions between subjects and objects begin to blur. This world is inaccessible to us – we cannot "see" it, since our modes of perception and representation are implicated in subject/object distinctions – but the ending of *Nymphomaniac* hangs on the limit. The questions posed by the film's narrative about the "truth" of Joe's subjectivity – nymphomaniac or sex addict, bad person or woman "demanding her right" – are rendered ambiguous, blinded by the black screen. Death according to Bataille opens onto the continuous world that exceeds the limits of our ipseity, and although *Nymphomaniac* offers no alternative to the profane distinction between subject and object that constitutes the discontinuous human world (doing so would only recuperate the radical negativity of the final sequence into the structures of meaning established by the narrative), it works against what Wolfe calls "the humanist desire for holism, unity and coherence" (2009, 173). The blind spots that punctuate the film therefore structure subjectivity in a thoroughly posthuman way, as a system that differentiates itself from a broader reality through a constitutive gap or absence that will always remain unseen and unknown. In contrast to the humanist desire for completeness, *Nymphomaniac* calls attention to the impossibility of totalised knowledge, since knowledge itself is predicated on its own violent and irrecuperable negation.

The ending of *Under the Skin* bears striking similarities to *Nymphomaniac*. Both films end with attempted rape and murder, and link images of falling snow to the suffering of their heroines: in the former, the alien's ashes float upwards to join the blustering snowflakes falling over the Highland forest, while in the latter, Joe concludes her story where it began, with her lying in the snowy alleyway. While Joe positions herself increasingly at the margins of society, however, the alien's subjectivisation is linked to her growing sense of empathy and intersubjectivity. After her encounter with the disfigured man, she grows increasingly anxious in her urban surroundings. Previous driving sequences had established her gaze as predatory, as from the safe vantage point of the driver's seat she was able to observe and isolate her prey; towards the end of the film, her objectifying gaze

gives way to shots of unfriendly faces in crowds that increasingly overwhelm the frame. The alien's subjectivity is therefore linked to the traumatic realisation of intersubjectivity, encounters not only with the Other, but with *others* – a community.

Just before the scene with the disfigured man, the alien walks through the streets of Glasgow and stumbles, falling into the pavement. Strangers help her to her feet before she walks off silently, without thanking them. Following this odd interaction is a series of shots of people along the street: several break the fourth wall, glancing quickly at the camera before moving on their way as they shop, talk to friends, withdraw cash, greet customers, and deliver packages. The sequence is followed by a close-up on a wide, frightened looking eye – presumably the alien's – before more shots of strangers begin to blur together, their ghostly images superimposed with a strange yellow glow. The alien's face eventually emerges in the centre of the image, before the scene transitions to the night sequence where she meets the disfigured man. The strangers intrude on the face-to-face pattern of her previous human interactions: rather than the relationship between predator and prey – a rather literal example of a Hegelian struggle-to-the-death encounter with the other – the alien is thrown into the more tumultuous and indefinite context of a broader community.

Along with sex and death, community is one of the forces that Bataille links to the sacred. In *The Inoperative Community* (1986), Nancy argues that Bataille's concept of community works against the assumption that communities are closed systems: "Bataille is without doubt the one who experienced first, or most acutely, the modern experience of community as neither a work to be produced, nor a lost communion, but rather as space itself, and the spacing of the experience of the outside, of the outsideof-self" (19). Though social life is built on the profane logics of work and reason, community also exceeds these frameworks in that it opens onto the outside; it is conditioned by the intersubjective gulf that subjects experience at the limits of themselves. Community for Bataille (and for Nancy) is therefore radically *impossible*, since it builds itself on something that it cannot appropriate, similar to the way that vision is made possible through its own blind spot. As Noys explains, "Bataille does not reduce community to a work to be produced" (2000, 55). Community exceeds project and labour, and is therefore a radically open terrain that constantly unworks itself, despite human attempts to constrain it within ideological systems.

Community always risks violence because, in Bataillean terms, it is predicated by death; it hangs on the limits of subjective differentiation and exposes individuals to forces that call the integrity of these limits into question. Intersubjectivity is the risk of exposing myself to not-self, to the possibility of not being, and communities are linked only through this shared possibility (thus the importance of human sacrifice for Bataille, since it allows a group to share the experience of death by witnessing it). This way of conceiving of community is broader than a dualistic self-versus-other framework, since each individual provides a new site of negotiation, of exposure to the outside, which has the potential to unwork the system as a whole. *Under the Skin* imagines a community from the outside, but not in terms of a "self" vs. "other" dichotomy that merely reverses the terms. The ambiguous aesthetics of the film, which make it difficult to discern between inner and outer spaces, destabilise this dichotomy, since the limits the film articulates between subject and world are continuously redrawn and flipped inside out. These ambiguities suggest that the trauma of intersubjectivity has less to do with the intrusion of the other into established subjective frameworks, and more to do with the mutual intrusion of individuals by forces entirely beyond subjectivity.

After being overwhelmed by Glaswegian city life, the alien flees to the Highlands, which prove equally inhospitable. She eventually finds her way to a forest, where her solitude is interrupted by a logger who cheerfully instructs her about nearby trails but also menacingly recalls her earlier questions to her victims: he asks if she is new to the area and whether she is alone. She continues on the trail and finds a bothy, where she curls up in the corner and falls asleep. This is followed by a shot of the forest outside, and an image of the sleeping alien slowly appears superimposed on the swaying trees. She is then suddenly awoken by the logger, who attempts to rape her; she flees through the woods, but he eventually catches up and wrestles her to the ground. A slower, more sinister-sounding rendition of the earlier percussive theme rises on the soundtrack as the man tries to subdue the struggling alien. There is a shot of her terrified face looking skyward before a POV shot from her perspective looks up at the tops of the trees and the snow slowly falling. He tries to rip off her clothes as she struggles, but then looks down in horror at his hands, which are now covered by a thick black substance (the same as the pool in the void?). The alien walks away from him, her hands groping at the tears that have been ripped through the skin on her back. She stumbles forward and slowly peels the skin off her shiny, black, humanoid body, then looks down at her human mask. It blinks up at her, with the same terrified expression as her earlier glance upwards before the POV shot. The logger creeps

up behind her and douses her in gasoline before lighting a match. The alien, set ablaze, runs into a clearing where she eventually falls and emits a thick black cloud of rising smoke. We watch the alien's smouldering body for a moment before the camera tilts upwards to track the rising smoke. Eventually the camera settles in an upward-facing position with the snow falling softly on the lens, echoing the earlier POV shot from the alien's perspective. The perspective here is unclaimed, however, an ambiguous image of death that witnesses the alien's dissipation into the atmosphere. The snow on the lens indicates towards the position of the camera, and by extension to the spectator, as witness.

Jean-Luc Nancy writes that photographic images are like death masks: "the photograph *itself* as a death mask, the instantaneous and always rebegun image as the casting of a presence in contact with light, the casting of a presence fleeing into absence" (2005, 99). Death masks provide a surface for something surfaceless and a gaze for something sightless (death); their underside reveals nothing, the same way that turning a photograph around only shows us a blank reverse side rather than a deeper ontological truth. Nancy connects photographs and other images to the sacred, which he describes as "inseparable from a hidden surface, from which it cannot, as it were, be peeled away: the dark side of the picture, its underside or backside" (2). The reverse side of the alien's human skin, when peeled away from her body, is revealed to be black as the void; like Nancy's image, the thin exterior of her blinking human face covers over a depthless darkness. The alien's gaze at her discarded human face is a brutal echo of the earlier scene in the mirror, as they both evince the alien's simultaneous identification with and alienation from her outer appearance. The alien witnesses herself *as other* at the moment of her death, at the same time as the spectator is made aware of her inexorable difference. Her alien body is linked to the radical exteriority of the void – it seems to be made of the same substance – and her gaze at her human face can therefore be read as a representation of the outside looking in. This reversal across the thin, fragile limit of the alien's human skin represents an impossible perspective, since the outside has no look; it is by definition that which has no perspective, since "the *Geist* or face of the dead man forms a face-to-face that is blind" (Nancy 2005, 82). As with *Nymphomaniac*, blindness once again evokes a world without sight, inevitably hidden from our limited structures of representation.

Death according to Bataille is moment when we transgress the limit between inside and outside. It is impossible, because it erases the subjective boundaries that determine the difference in the first place; communion with nature, with radical exteriority, is only

possible at the expense of self. The alien's otherness, and her death, are tied to the natural landscape: the blending of her being with the environment, foreshadowed by the superimposition of her sleeping body over the surrounding trees, is carried out brutally with her burning ashes floating up into the sky. But this evocation of death, of transgression across a limit, is finally counteracted by the snowflakes on the lens. This gesture towards the camera implicates the spectator into image, and once again flips the order of things inside out. The image of exteriority that concludes the film is revealed to be staged subjectively, for the spectator as witness. These continuous reversals suggest that the sacred can never be accessed or appropriated, since the limit does not conceal some inner truth: once we approach the outside, we inevitably discover that we have turned back inwards. These invaginations enfold us with a world in excess of us that we can only approach from a distance, as witnesses to the violence that will inevitably separate each of us from ourselves.

Conclusion

I have argued that Bataillean notions of ipseity and transgression are relevant for film ecocriticism. Although Bataille is a correlationist in that he thinks we cannot have knowledge of reality outside of human thought, his philosophy attempts to discern how a theory of non-knowledge might help us approach what is in excess of our ability to understand. Through a close reading of the shifting perspectives in *Nymphomaniac* and *Under the Skin*, I have sought to provide an example of how a theory of cinematic subjectivity might attune itself to the unknowable outside of thought. Bataille provides a way of avoiding the anthropocentrism inherent to theories such as psychoanalysis or phenomenology that posit everything in relation to a human subject, while also recognising that the boundaries between subjects and objects are not easily breached. Rather than attempting to see beyond the limits between inside and outside, I have attempted to trace the limit itself; cinema provides a useful terrain for doing so, since it constantly negotiates between various subject positions. Tracing the movements of cinematic subjectivity reveals subjective limits to be fragile, unstable, and constantly turning inside out. The cinema screen, like Nancy's photograph, does not conceal a deeper truth; but if, as Nancy argues, truth is at the level of the skin, then the play of surfaces across a film screen can be useful in understanding the relationship human subjectivity and objective reality.

Though this chapter has provided a way of reading cinematic subjectivity in relation to an environment that exceeds it, questions remain about what we could or should do in response. The ecological crisis demands action, after all, and the next chapter will explore what films might be able to teach us about forging a new kind of relationship with the environment. If our relationship with nature has to do with affect and non-knowledge, then what kind of affective response is appropriate? Or, phrased another way: how might cinema teach us to love nature, and what could this love imply for our future?

Chapter 5: Love at the Limit

Introduction

The ecological crisis compels us to form a positive relationship with nonhuman reality. As previous chapters have made clear, however, forming positive knowledge about reality beyond our conceptual frameworks poses great difficulties. Drawing from Bataille, my argument to this point has tended towards a largely negative and potentially pessimistic reading of our relationship with nature. I have thus far questioned our ability to know non-human nature at all, and have used cinema and film theory in order to argue against the position of thinkers like the speculative realists who assert that reasoning about a thought-independent reality is possible (see Chapter 3). Through Bataille's concepts of transgression, sacrifice, and inner experience, I have also argued that reason is not always the best way of thinking about the relationship between humans and nature, and that the aesthetic excesses of cinema can evoke other kinds of relations to nature – in terms of, for example, the sacred versus the profane (see Chapter 2) or erotic experience (see Chapter 4). Because I take a post-theological approach, I have maintained that there is no God or system of meaning that can help us maintain a positive relationship with reality outside of thought. While this might suggest a sense of nihilism about humanity's relationship with nonhuman reality, however, I have simultaneously asserted that the ecological crisis demands that we try to relate to a reality that we can never fully understand. This "impossible imperative," which I have alluded to previously, will be more fully explored in this chapter. I will argue that love can provide a way of meeting the demand to engage with the unknowable.

Cinema often centres on themes of love, and a number of recent films have dealt explicitly with the idea of loving nature. Popular films such as *Bee Movie* (2007), *Avatar* (2009), and *The Mermaid* (2016), for example, all represent the relationship between humans and nonhumans in terms of heterosexual romance. In *Bee Movie*, the improbable romance between a bee and a human woman helps the world narrowly avoid ecological catastrophe. In *Avatar*, the human hero's relationship with the daughter of an alien chief encourages his empathy towards the distant moon Pandora, and eventually drives him to resist the occupying human forces that threaten to devastate Pandora's landscape. In *The Mermaid*, a beautiful mermaid seduces a billionaire in order to exact her revenge for the devastation of her habitat, but eventually their love for each other provokes his change of heart and turn

towards environmental conservation. By addressing the idea of loving nature through genre conventions, these films all imply that romantic love has a role to play in encouraging empathy towards the natural world.

Are these films onto something – can love encourage a more ethical relationship with nature? Is it right to think of this love in terms of romance, or are there other ways of loving nature? This chapter will begin to suggest an answer by looking at different approaches to nature love. Two films will help me explore some of the issues raised by love for nature: Werner Herzog's *Grizzly Man* (2005) and Nettie Wild's *Konelīne*: *Our Land Beautiful* (2016). These films demonstrate that love for nature will always be imperfect, since it inevitably involves subjective desire and projection. Despite these difficulties, however, I argue that love is an integral part of our engagement with the environment, and should therefore not be discounted in any ethics of the nonhuman.

Love for the Real

Love might seem like an unusual place to start in thinking about how to relate to the environment, since it seems incorrigibly subjective and anthropocentric. Love is prone to over-sentimentalising that mischaracterises its object on the one hand, and fits of jealousy, possessiveness, or even violence on the other. Despite these imperfections, however, scholars from a range of disciplines – theology, anthropology, philosophy, and film studies – have recently begun to examine love as a way of engaging with nature. This section will survey some of the ways that love for nature has been theorised, beginning with Marcel O'Gorman's claim that speculative realism as a whole expresses an unacknowledged romanticism for objects. O'Gorman ties this romanticism to the history of Western thought on love, and I will draw on this connection to outline a post-theological take on the distinction between *agape* (Christian divine or neighbour love, modelled on God's non-preferential love for creation) and *eros* (preferential romantic love). While some Christian environmentalist advocate *agape* as a more objective form of love for nature, my post-theological reading will argue that subjectivity, in the form of erotic preferential love, inevitably clouds human relationships with the environment. However, love's imperfection – even impossibility – is precisely what allows it to engage with the unknowable outside of thought. The remainder of the chapter will look at the ways that *Grizzly Man* and *Konelīne* use love to relate to this outside. Like all documentaries, both films explicitly relate to the

real, and by theorising their modes of engagement as love I want to elucidate some of the possibilities, as well as the problems, associated with loving nature.

In his essay "Speculative Realism in Chains: A Love Story" (2014), O'Gorman argues that SR's turn towards objects is less a radically new form of realism than a posthumanist form of romanticism. He writes that posthumanism's turn towards objects, exemplified especially by speculative realism but also by other forms of new materialism, is motivated by

> (a) a desire to connect with the nonhuman world in ways that ignore the lessons of poststructuralism; and (b) a romantic wonder about the infinite world of things acting in the universe. For indeed, romance is what drives this attraction to the cyborg, the animal, and more recently, the inorganic thing. And by 'romance' I mean not only the literary genre – I am unabashedly talking about love. (31-32)

He argues that SR's claim that it seeks knowledge about objects in-themselves rather than as they appear for us is betrayed by rhetorical devices such as the list that make evident their basis in the author's desire. The long lists of objects of various scales – microscopic to cosmic – that frequent the texts of Graham Harman, Ian Bogost, Jane Bennet, and Bruno Latour are evidence of their love, "at once an indicator of finitude (here's what I have) and infinity (here's what I desire). Just as importantly, [the list] is an indicator of possession (this is what I own, this is what I know)" (33). Rather than removing the author's subjectivity from the equation, then, speculative realism unwittingly makes evident a psychological truth rather than an ontological one. O'Gorman writes that the desire for objects expressed by speculative realism is often erotic, even pornographic, such as Bogost's descriptions of objects "rubbing shoulders" in a process that "happens fast and hot, the universes of things bumping against one another in succession" (qtd. in O'Gorman 2014, 33). These erotic attachments to objects are, O'Gorman argues, in some sense "unrigorous" (35), even naïve, since love itself is a difficult and messy concept. He argues that by denying its own desires in claiming to move beyond the structures of human subjectivity, speculative realism ignores poststructuralism's warnings against cohesion and unity in order to echo romantic ideas of nature as harmonious and amenable to our identification. Despite these difficulties, however, O'Gorman wants to claim something positive in what speculative realism denies, and he suggests that posthumanist love for

objects has radical potential for thinking the relationship between humans and nonhumans.

If love for objects cannot be avoided – if philosophies of the nonhuman are in some sense doomed to betray our desire – then perhaps we ought to account for love in our environmental ethics. O'Gorman traces ideas of love backwards from speculative realism to the romantics to the New Testament to Plato; he points out that in addition to the erotic love expressed by SR's lists and pornographic descriptions of horizontal object-relations, we can also find evidence of brotherly love or friendship (*philia*) and divine or Christian love (*agape*). O'Gorman's characterisation of love as an "unrigorous" concept – difficult to pin down or define in a systematic way – is echoed in this history of thinkers on love. Poststructuralists often characterise love in terms of impossibility or paradox, from Lacan's famous maxim that love is giving what one does not have to someone who does not want it, to Nancy's descriptions of love as giving presence to something that is absent.[40] There is a post-theological dimension to these theories of love, since they all refer back to or deconstruct the ways that Christian notions of love have helped to shape Western thought.[41] In this regard, Kierkegaard is an important pre-cursor, since his *Works of Love* (1847) tackles what he sees as a paradox at the heart of Christian love.

Kierkegaard sees a contradiction in the Biblical injunction to love all people equally (*agape*, divine or neighbour love) and the preferential loves we hold for some people above the rest (erotic love for one's spouse, filial love for friends and family). Although Kierkegaard argues that *agape* is the only true form of love, Sharon Krishek (2008) argues that he has difficulty disentangling from particular human expressions of love in order to

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[40] Catherine Kellogg (2016) explains Nancy's reading of the phrase "I love you" in this way: "Signs literally take the place of missing referents, and in this sense signification, while naming a 'presence', is always already pointing beyond itself towards what is not and cannot be present" (152). Lacan refers to love as giving what one does not have in several seminars, starting with *Seminar V* (1957-1958); Slavoj Žižek frequently refers to this definition in exploring the difficulties of neighbour love. He writes in "From *Che Vuoi?* To Fantasy" (2009) that "finding oneself in the position of the beloved is so violent, traumatic event: being loved makes me feel directly the gap between what I am as a determinate being and the unfathomable X in me which causes love. Lacan's definition of love ('Love is giving something one doesn't have…') has to be supplemented with: '… to someone who doesn't want it.' Is this not confirmed by our most elementary experience when somebody unexpectedly declares passionate love to us? The first reaction, preceding the possible positive reply, is that something obscene, intrusive, is being forced upon us" (para. 9).

[41] See especially Nancy 2008b; 2012.

theorise love on a universal scale. Kierkegaard associates neighbour love with self-denial, since it requires unselfishly wishing the best for the other even at the expense of one's own desires; preferential love, on the other hand, is always selfish to some degree since we make the choice of one person at the exclusion of others according to our subjective desires and inclinations. Krishek writes that although Kierkegaard favours non-preferential love, "he definitely does not want to ignore or deny our corporeal, worldly existence" (599), and that *Works of Love* is therefore plagued with a problem of preferential love that Kierkegaard cannot quite square with the injunction to love the neighbour.[42] These ambivalences suggest that the difficulties in pinning down love as a concept might be related to the problem of parsing out distinctions between the subjective and objective – the issue at the heart of this thesis. O'Gorman's point that speculative realism mistakes subjective desires for objective truths is symptomatic of this problem, suggesting that the age-old question of what constitutes love might still be relevant for twenty-first century philosophies of the nonhuman. We might therefore read films like *The Mermaid*, *Avatar*, and *Bee Movie* as posing legitimate questions about how to reconcile love for nature with human desires.

This question of how to love nature has also recently taken root in the burgeoning field of Christian environmentalism. Works such as Kathryn D. Blanchard and Kevin J. O'Brien's *An Introduction to Christian Environmentalism* (2014) and Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether's extensive edited volume *Christianity and Ecology* (2000) argue that Christian ideas of love can be brought to bear on contemporary ecological issues. These texts work against the resistance of some Christians (the mainstream of the American religious right, for example) to global warming and other environmental problems by pointing out places where the Bible encourages stewardship rather than domination over nature. Susan P. Bratton (1992) explicitly links Christian environmentalism to the conflict

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[42] Though Krishek argues that *Works of Love* cannot account for this problem, she locates a solution in another Kierkegaard text, *Fear and Trembling* (1843), through the paradox of faith. There, as Krishek points out, "[t]he paradox of faith refers to the ability to sustain simultaneously the two movements of faith, which seem to contradict each other" (2008, 613); she writes that "Rather than understanding it [love] as structured in the shape of self-denial alone, as Kierkegaard seems to be doing in *Works of Love* ('Christian love is self-denial's love'), I suggest that we understand it in terms of the double movement of faith. In other words, I suggest that we understand *Kjerlighed* (the one true love) as structured in the shape of self-denial (resignation) and unqualified self-affirmation (repetition) tied paradoxically together" (615). This "solution" affirms rather than overcomes the paradox.

between neighbour and preferential love, revising Kierkegaard's problem in order to question whether our love for nature ought to take the form of *eros* or *agape*. Bratton notes that Christian ethics are based in love, and makes the argument that ethical engagement with nature should be founded in *agape*, or self-sacrificing spiritual love, rather than *eros*, which she defines as "love of beauty or natural love with the desire to possess" (4). She argues that while a surprising number of theologians have posited *eros* as the proper form of Christian love for the environment,[43] *agape* allows for a more ethical form of engagement with nature since it does not require reciprocity. Bratton argues that *eros* should not be written off entirely, since our appreciation for nature and desire to possess knowledge about it are integral components of our experience; however, erotic love is always founded on the sensible, and is therefore too subjective and selective in its preferences. She writes:

> Aesthetic eros can also create environmental difficulties (overcollection of rare species, for example), and can easily produce ethical models that incorrectly value nature or are selfishly human-centered. Aesthetic eros can be nonconsumptive and appreciative of nature, for example, when one admires mountain scenery or observes wild birds in flight … however, it is subject to self-concern and acquisitiveness, and therefore … needs to be transformed. (14)

Bratton explains that *agape* is generally conceived as a transformative element that can correct the selfish tendencies of *eros*, and she applies this line of thinking to love for nature in order to argue that *agape* – modelled on God's self-giving and non-preferential love for creation – can help mitigate the dangers posed by over-attachment to earthly human sensory experience.

Bratton's argument that we should love nature non-preferentially (without the need for reciprocity or the expectation it will love us back) initially seems convincing, given that more possessive kinds of love for nature have led to measurable harm. Further, *agape* seems at first to be less anthropocentric, since it seeks to disentangle us from the particularities of human desires and inclinations in favour of a more objective, selfless form of love. The framework of this thesis is post-theological, and therefore cannot follow

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[43] Bratton refers especially to Richard Cartwright Austin's *Beauty of the Lord: Awakening the Senses* (1988) and Jay McDaniel's *Of Gods and Pelicans: A Theology of Reverence for Life* (1989) as theological proponents of eros towards nature (4-5).

Bratton in assuming the existence of a God whose divine love can serve as a model for human interactions with nature. Without God there is no way of firmly adjudicating the difference between subjective impressions and objective influence; the limits between these poles are too unstable. We should therefore be suspicious of Bratton's faith in the transformative powers of divine love, since post-theology implies that we cannot appeal to a higher truth in order to ground our ethical claims.

Further, I argued in the previous chapter that we cannot do away with human sensory experience so easily, since our attempts to transgress the limits of our perceptual frameworks inevitably result in those limits turning back in on themselves – a movement that, following Nancy, I referred to as invagination. In the absence of God or transcendent truth, our love is bound to be too imperfect to be held to Bratton's standards for *agape*. Kierkegaard's paradoxical characterisation of love, which cannot quite eliminate worldly inclinations, and Michael O'Gorman's critique of speculative realism as irrevocably subjective despite its claims of objectivity both emphasise that our desires will inevitably creep back in no matter how hard we try to push them out. (The ways that desire complicates objectivity also resonates with psychoanalysis, a point that O'Gorman only touches on obliquely but to which I will return later in the chapter.) But post-theology also asserts the importance of religious frameworks on our thinking, and it is therefore worth taking seriously how this conflict between *eros* and *agape* might contribute to a post-theological environmental ethics.

As I mentioned in Chapter 2, post-theology does not do away with theological ideas, but rather deconstructs them in order to undermine their reliance on transcendent levels of truth (such as God). Both Bratton and Kierkegaard draw the distinction between *eros* and *agape* in terms of self-affirmation/selfishness, and self-effacement/sacrifice. This suggests that erotic love moves from the subject outwards, towards the sacred, while *agape* moves in the other direction. But because these movements are not easily distinguished, a post-theological understanding of love might instead encompass both *eros* and *agape* as well as the indeterminacy between them. Bataille is useful here, since the conflict between self-affirmation and self-denial that Krishek locates in *Works of Love* is similar to the Bataillean erotic, which is characterised as an undecidable movement of self-containment and self-erasure. Like Bratton and Kierkegaard, Bataille makes use of theological ideas in order to theorise erotic love and sacrifice. However, while the former two suggest that erotic love does nothing to call the integrity of the self into question since it only reinforces

subjective desires and preferences, for Bataille the erotic is exactly what puts the subject at risk: "[e]roticism always entails a breaking down of established patterns, the patterns … of the regulated social order basic to our discontinuous mode of existence as defined and separate individuals" (1957b, 18).

Because Bataille defines the erotic as "assenting to life up to the point of death" (1957b, 11), it can be understood as encompassing both self-affirmation and self-sacrifice in a movement that tests but ultimately reinforces subjective limits.[44] The subject can only experience this movement from the inside outwards, since she is limited by her ipseity; however, Bataille's ontology insists on forces outside of experience that impress themselves on our structures of perception and meaning. This is similar to autopoietic systems that adapt to their environments through self-organisation, in a process that Cary Wolfe calls "openness through closure" (see Chapter 1). The impossible structure of love identified by a number of the thinkers referenced above (Kierkegaard, Bataille, Lacan, Nancy) can therefore be thought of as analogous to the paradox of inner experience, since they both are structured by the contradictory movement across the limit between subjectivity and the sacred.

Love is inherently anthropocentric in that it cannot break from subjective limits; however, it is also by definition a relationship to something outside of ourselves, a desire to shake up our boundaries by making contact with an other. In his commentary about Nancy's essay "Shattered Love," Matthew Abbott writes that "[t]hinking love requires generosity, receptivity, and openness to something in excess of the thinker – which is to say, it requires love" (2011, 143) This relationship between thought and love is a result of love's relationship to the other, to the outside of self; it is a response to the fact that "thought does not master its object" (142). Because thought cannot appropriate what it thinks, its relationship to its object is a dynamic process that can never complete itself. The relationship between the lover and the love object is therefore a work in progress that can never be finished or guaranteed: "this 'being put to the test' is crucial to it [love], and persists with it at all times; there is no way of proving it once and for all, and so the task it

[44] This is similar to Kierkegaard's paradox of faith; see Krishek 2008.

sets is continual" (140). Unlike Christian *agape*, which must relate itself to infinity, for Nancy love is about finitude:

> Love does not transfigure finitude, and it does not carry out its transubstantiation in infinity … Love cuts across finitude, always from the other to the other, which never returns to the same – and all loves, so humbly alike, are superbly singular. Love offers finitude in its truth; it is finitude's dazzling presentation. (1986, 99)

This dynamic process of relating to the not-self is inevitably anthropocentric, since it is bound with human finitude. But Nancy's evocation of love as a relation to the not-self leaves open more optimistic possibilities than the critiques against *eros* outlined above. Love that does not model itself on the divine (love without God) is not necessarily limited to a selfish desire to possess or appropriate the other, though Nancy admits that love is ambivalent and always holds the possibility for violence and harm.[45] If we think love for the nonhuman in these terms, then we can only love nature from the inside, as ourselves, and, as with our love for another person, we can never be sure we are doing it right. This uncertainty requires that we keep working and testing our approach based on feedback from the beloved; love is therefore an autopoietic relation of constant readjustment, a process rather than a stable entity.

What does this process look like in practice, and how useful is it for thinking about environmental concerns in a secular context? Anthropologist Kay Milton tackles these questions in *Loving Nature: Towards an Ecology of Emotion* (2002), where she advocates love as a means of engaging with nature. Milton argues that love not only should be central to environmental ethics, but also already is, since any rational debate about how to fight to preserve nature already presupposes a level of care and emotional investment. While she takes a decidedly more secular position than Bratton, she draws from implicitly theological notions of love in order to argue that humans ought to value nature as sacred. Milton's interrogation of the "ecology of emotion" suggests that affect is an integral part of the way

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[45] Nancy refers to the risks posed by love frequently, but perhaps most succinctly in his lecture for children on love in *God, Justice, Love, Beauty* (2011): "There are risks involved in all this, great risks. We can be mistaken, and we can confuse the image of the other person that we have in us, the other person such as we see him or her, with the real person, who is necessarily different from the image. Every practice of love consists in a back and forth between the real person and the powerful image I have of him or her. None of this is simple, and it can easily backfire" (75-76).

that we process and respond to information from our environment, social as well as natural. By resisting rationalist/humanist frameworks that oppose reason and emotion, Milton also unsettles the distinction between science and religion, and argues that "both scientific and religious ways of relating to nature are present in discourses about nature protection" (9). Milton links religious thinking with the ways that we attribute value, and argues that through emotional engagement with natural things we can come to view them as sacred (92-109). Like the Christian environmentalists, Milton does not want to discount the ways that supposedly non-rational modes of engagement with nature can motivate our behaviour in positive ways. The idea of loving nature as sacred can therefore be useful in a post-theological context, and can provide an alternative to seeing the world through the framework of Western science and rationality, which, as Milton points out, has coincided with the exploitation and destruction of the environment over the modern era.

If affect drives us to form value judgments about things, and can inspire us to hold nature as sacred, then how might film influence our emotional engagement with the environment? Film generally seeks to provoke affect rather than convince through rational argument. Even rhetorical environmentalist documentaries like *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) or *Cowspiracy* (2016) reinforce their claims by appealing emotionally to the spectator. In the former, Al Gore's personal anecdotes relay how he came to care about global warming, and the latter uses images of animal suffering to help convince the viewer to switch to a more environmentally-friendly vegan lifestyle. Films that are less explicitly about environmental issues can also affectively engage viewers in relation to natural spaces or phenomena: as Adrian Ivakhiv argues in *Ecologies of the Moving Image* (2013a), while films are "limited in their capacity to convey knowledge about socio-ecological issues … they can bring attention to those issues, or, more subtly, they can affectively orient viewers to such issues or to the images, representations, and arguments in which those issues are registered and conveyed" (299-300). *Grizzly Man* and *Konelīne* "affectively orient viewers" towards environment through love: they represent human relationships with the environment as fraught and contradictory, and interrogating these contradictions will help us trace some of the movements in the ever-unfinished process of loving nature.

The two films are similar in a number of ways: they are both documentaries set in North America's Pacific Northwest (*Grizzly Man* in Alaska, *Konelīne* in British Columbia), and they both explore a number of conflicting opinions on how best to engage with the region's rugged wilderness. That they are documentaries is significant because of the ways that the

mode works through the relation between subjectivity and objectivity: Stella Bruzzi defines the documentary as "a negotiation between reality on the one hand and image, interpretation and bias on the other" (2006, 6), and argues that documentary's "identity is not fixed but fluid, and stems from a productive, dialectical relationship between the text, the reality it represents, and the spectator" (7). *Grizzly Man* and *Konelīne* mobilise these relationships in terms of love – which, like documentary, also negotiates between subjectivity and reality in complex and dynamic ways.

There are some important differences between the films, however. Love in *Grizzly Man* primarily appears on the level of content: we know that the film's central character, Timothy Treadwell, loves nature because he tells us so repeatedly. This love is contested both within the film text, since Herzog's voice-over and a number of talking head interviews with the film disagree overtly with Treadwell, and in the extensive academic commentary on the film, which often engages with this dialectic in order to favour one side over the other. The bulk of this chapter will be spent engaging in these debates in order to draw out their implications for nature love. Though nature in *Grizzly Man* is largely characterised in pessimistic or negative terms, I will argue that love in the film finally exceeds the dialectic established between Herzog and Treadwell. This excess will be used to transition to *Konelīne*, which I think holds more optimistic possibilities for loving nature. Love in *Konelīne* operates more on the level of form, as an aesthetic mode of being in relation to nature, and its aesthetic *eros* encourages a love that recognises, yet exceeds differences.

Eros and *Agape* in *Grizzly Man*

"Warring Simplifications"

Grizzly Man is a documentary about the life and death of Timothy Treadwell, who lived among wild Alaskan grizzlies for thirteen summers before he was killed and eaten by one, along with his girlfriend Amie Huguenard. Herzog's film draws from the hundred-plus hours of footage that Treadwell shot over the course of his time in Alaska, and intercuts this found footage with talking-head interviews. The film's central conflict is between two opposing views on nature: Herzog's more nihilistic view of nature as predicated on "chaos, hostility, and murder," versus Treadwell's more sentimental view of nature as harmonious and reciprocal. As the extensive critical discourse surrounding the film suggests, however,

these two positions are overdetermined by the film itself, and the excesses and ambiguities in *Grizzly Man*'s representation of nature are used to make a multitude of sometimes complementary, sometimes conflicting arguments about love for nature. This section will work through the various readings of the film in order to examine their various contradictions; in the next two sections I will build from these analyses in order to trace the paradoxical movements of love within the film itself.

Ned Schantz argues that *Grizzly Man*'s apparently "warring simplifications" result in a paradoxical excess of information so that "it takes several analytical passes to render anything like a complete account of their main events" (2013, 597). The film's excesses of signification that burst out from an apparently simple conflict (nature as good versus cruel or violent) might account for not only the differences of opinion expressed in the film, but also in the debates and controversies that surround it. Many academic approaches to the film attempt to land on one side or the other of the Treadwell/Herzog debate; to varying degrees, and against the general thrust of the film, ecocritical approaches tend to side more with Treadwell as at least "an approach rooted in love" and a "small step in the right direction" (Ladino 2008, 82). While they tend to agree that Treadwell made some flawed assumptions in his interactions with the grizzlies, ecocritics often applaud his willingness to blur the boundaries between the human and the animal and his capacity for empathy with nature. These approaches include: Colin Carman (2012), who views Treadwell's relationship with the grizzlies as a queering of the animal/human distinction; Ryan Hediger (2012), whose posthumanist reading analyses the film as disruptive of binaries, especially around normality and difference; Adrian Ivakhiv (2013a), and Seong-Hoon Jeong and Dudley Andrew (2009), who view the film in terms of Deleuze and Guattari's "becoming animal"; and Jennifer K. Ladino (2008), who looks at *Grizzly Man* explicitly in terms of love, and asserts that Treadwell's relationship with the grizzlies demands "a renewed consideration of 'the animal' as the site at which humans' love for nature, anxieties about nature, and contradictory perceptions of what nature means are played out" (57).

On the other side of the Treadwell/Herzog debate are, unsurprisingly, those that approach *Grizzly Man* from an auteurist perspective, and therefore situate the film in Herzog's larger concerns with themes of madness and humanity against nature. These include Laurie Ruth Johnson (2016), who interprets Herzog's oeuvre in relation to German romanticism, especially its "forgotten" ideas about nature being sick, baneful, or cruel; Brad Prager (2007), who views Herzog as an anti-Romantic who rejects the anthropomorphisation of

nature (87); and Benjamin Noys (2007), who interprets Herzog's perspective in the film according to the Lacanian notion of antiphusis, or anti-nature. Still others argue that, rather than being diametrically opposed, Herzog and Treadwell are two sides of the same coin; sometimes they offer a third position as an alternative. These include Oleg Gelikman (2012), who sees both Treadwell and Herzog as evocations of the pastoral mode; Elizabeth Henry (2010), who argues that both are too anthropocentric, but that a third, more ecocentric position is visible in the film's evocation of landscape; David Lulka (2009), who sees the positions expressed in the film as inadequate for considering animal agency; and Julie K. Schutten (2008), who sees both Herzog and Treadwell as narcissists that project their own respective views on nature, but who also sees value in Treadwell's death since his consumption by the grizzlies unsettles the nature/culture binary.

In addition to the range of interpretations and ethical claims about Treadwell and Herzog, there are still more disagreements about the appropriate theoretical conclusions to be drawn from the film. Herzog is discussed variously as a romantic (Gelikman, Hediger, Johnson), an anti-romantic (Prager, Noys), and a modernist (Lulka) – descriptions that all work against Herzog's own description of his work as emulating the "heroic and tragic ideals of classical antiquity" (Johnson 2016, 3), not to mention his general distaste for academic approaches to his work in general.[46] Further, *Grizzly Man* has been seen as exemplifying Deleuze and Guattari's becoming-animal (Ivakhiv, Jeong and Andrew) as well as failing to exemplify it (Lulka). It has been read as negotiating Agamben's notion of the "anthropological machine" in order to maintain the distinction between human and animal (Mattessich 2013; Pettman 2009), or else raising the possibility of blurring these boundaries in a posthuman way (Carman, Hediger, Henry, Ivakhiv, Jeong and Andrew, Schutten). While there are a number of possible interpretations for every film, the wide range of critical responses to *Grizzly Man* suggests that the film is especially overdetermined or excessive. Most of the above scholars write explicitly about *Grizzly Man* in terms of love, and the conversation can be seen as a broad debate about the appropriate way to love nature. Since love is characterised by impossibility and

[46] In an interview with Paul Cronin, Herzog opines that "academia is the death of cinema" (2002, 15). Prager writes that although "[w]riting about Herzog offers a special challenge in that one is writing about a subject who has made clear his overall distaste for scholarly analysis," academic inquiry is still worthwhile since "accepting the position that Herzog's works should be received with reverent silence, as though we ourselves were under hypnosis, or with only those analytic tolls that have been supplied by the director himself fails to do justice to his body of work" (2007, 2).

contradiction, the intense polemics surrounding the film might be attributed to the methodological difficulties in dealing with the idea of love. Rather than attempting to overcome these difficulties, the following sections will trace some of them within the film by taking a closer look at the conflicts between Treadwell and Herzog, and relating these conflicts to the distinctions between *eros* and *agape*. My own reading of the film attempts to keep open the various contradictions raised by *Grizzly Man*'s love for nature by theorising it in terms of Bataillean eroticism.

The Bears Don't Love You, Timothy (Or Do They?)

Grizzly Man begins with a long shot of two grizzlies grazing in a lush green field with snow-topped mountains in the distance. The title appears and Treadwell enters the frame, explaining that the two bears, "Ed" and "Rowdy," are members of a sub-adult gang that are beginning to "challenge everything," including Treadwell himself. The sudden appearance of Treadwell within the space occupied by wild grizzlies is shocking, even transgressive, since it breaks with the conventions of wildlife documentaries. Anat Pick points out that for *Planet Earth* and other BBC wildlife documentaries, "[n]ot only the voice-of-god but also the eye-of-god is typical" (2013, 23): David Attenborough's voice-over narration along with spectacular shots created through long lenses and high-definition cinematography contribute to a sense of an objective gaze. These technological mediations are further emphasised by *Planet Earth*'s making-of featurettes; these expose the long and often tedious processes behind the series' dramatic footage, as camera operators are often revealed to have been at a great distance from the action, and generally had to wait for long stretches of time to capture brief moments of activity. *Grizzly Man*, by contrast, collapses the distance between filmmaker and filmed subject, and Treadwell's appearance amongst the grizzlies in the opening shot of the film blurs the human/animal distinction that is usually held sacred by wildlife documentarians. The dangers posed by this blurring of boundaries are immediately made apparent, as the timeline for Treadwell's life (1957-2003) appears underneath his name. His obvious passion for the bears is driven home by an open declaration of love, as he announces that despite the dangers they pose to him ("these bears can bite, they can kill"), he is willing to give his life for them. He blows a kiss towards the apparently indifferent bear in the background, announcing "I love you, Rowdy," before exiting the frame. The sense of foreboding that hangs over the scene is reinforced by his unsettling announcement, "I can smell death all over my fingers."

This immediate association drawn between death and love readily lends itself to a Bataillean interpretation, since Treadwell's transgressive presence amongst the grizzlies is an attempt to both "leave the confinements of his humanness" (as Herzog describes it a few moments later) and reaffirm these same boundaries through erotically charged encounters. As with the Bataillean erotic, the risk of these encounters is death, and the film follows Treadwell as he flirts with the line between humans and bears before transgressing it entirely, resulting in the total loss of his subjectivity. As Schutten argues (in a passage that resonates with my reading of *Under the Skin* in the previous chapter):

> the dissonance felt by viewers of the film surrounds a disconfirmation of human faith in the nature/culture binary, and that Treadwell's death is troubling because the predator/prey relationship makes humans 'pieces of meat' and, as such, objects rather than subjects. This interruption forcibly moves humans to the nature side of the dualism, thereby questioning the superiority of the culture side of the binary by exposing human vulnerability. (2008, 195)

This blurring of boundaries is not merely abstract or representational, but – most importantly – material, since Treadwell's body quite literally became part of the grizzly and had to be exhumed from within it. Treadwell's love for the grizzlies makes explicit what is always at stake in the Bataillean erotic; namely, the complete dissolution of self in the other.

Treadwell's love for the grizzlies and other elements of wild nature is obvious throughout *Grizzly Man*, as he repeatedly professes his love for various flora and fauna. Early in the film, Treadwell introduces us called a bear named The Grinch, so called because of her aggressive demeanour. The bear ambles across a stream towards Treadwell, who stands in the foreground with his back turned. As she approaches, he attempts to calm her by saying "Hi, Grinch, how are you" in a relaxed, high-pitched voice. She continues towards him and he begins to assume an offensive stance, his voice switching registers as he gestures towards her and intones, "Don't you do that!" As she retreats, he switches again, apologising to the bear and telling her that he loves her.

While it is tempting to read this scene as a naïve projection of sentimental feelings that results in a near miss, Hediger suggests that Treadwell's repeated pronouncements of love gesture towards more complex concerns:

> The phrase signifies in a radically different fashion for human viewers in the cinema than it does for the bears who are its immediate audience, so it functions at once as animal vocalization and as speech. For the bears, its sing-song nature may well have helped Treadwell communicate his ostensibly peaceable intentions, as he believed. But that very same attribute – the sing-song sound – combined with the semantics of the phrase, lead many cinema viewers to think him simply foolish or crazy. (2012, 90)

The reading that Hediger attributes to the cinema audience, of Treadwell as "foolish or crazy," would suggest that *Grizzly Man* is about a unidirectional and ultimately failed relationship: Treadwell's unwise attachments to the bears are met with indifference and finally hostility. However, Hediger's posthumanist reading argues that the film's pathways of communication are more complex and multi-directional – especially due to the multiple layers of mediation through Treadwell's and then Herzog's footage, a point to which I will return – and that consequently *Grizzly Man* "demonstrates compelling cross-species communication" (83). Hediger's reading looks past the conflict between Herzog and Treadwell in order to consider the multiple perspectives and ambiguities negotiated through the cinematic medium; this opens up at least the possibility of reciprocation, even if it cannot be verified or exactly determined.

We see these possibilities for reciprocation especially in scenes in which Treadwell interacts with wild foxes. While the grizzlies generally seem indifferent, are occasionally tolerant, and seldom seem curious or aggressive towards Treadwell, the foxes actively seek him out for play and physical affection. In one scene, Treadwell shoots upwards towards the roof of his tent as a fox walks overhead; Treadwell touches one of the paws and the fox seems to touch him back. Treadwell exits the tent and holds a finger out for the fox to sniff, before the scene cuts to footage of the fox chasing Treadwell across the grass. Their game finishes back at the tent, and Treadwell tells the fox he loves it as guitar strings emphasise the emotion in his voice. It is difficult to read this scene as anything but a genuine, mutual encounter between a human and a wild animal: Treadwell's delight is met with the fox's obvious curiosity, and Herzog's voice-over praises Treadwell "as a filmmaker" for being able to capture such beautiful unscripted moments. While interactions like these may raise ethical concerns (as scientists and ecologists mention throughout the film, Treadwell's presence in the park was generally harmful in that it accustomed the wildlife to his presence and taught them not to fear humans), they also indicate that Treadwell's

engagements with wild nature were not as unidirectional as Herzog's voice-over might suggest.

The risk of Treadwell's encounters, however, is that they are irrevocably tainted by projection and sentimentality. In a sequence about midway through the film, Treadwell explains his motivation for leaving civilisation in a series of monologues. In one, he confesses to Iris the fox that he had problems with drugs and alcohol and that his connection with the bears were key to his recovery. "So I promised the bears" he explains, "that if I would look over them, then would they please help me." Treadwell's imagined contract[47] with the bears exemplifies the kind of preferential love derided by Kierkegaard and Bratton, since it is conditional on reciprocation and the cooperation of the other rather than "a completely self-giving engagement with the world" (Bratton 1992, 16). Treadwell loves the bears because of what they can do for him, and he fantasises about his ability to provide for them in turn (throughout the film, Herzog and others undercut this fantasy, since Treadwell was "protecting" the bears in a national park, where they were already safeguarded by the state). So while Treadwell's love for nature might have resulted in genuine cross-species communication, as the fox sequences demonstrate, these encounters are not neutral or unclouded by sentimentality. Further, his preferential love for bears and foxes occasionally leads him to neglect or misunderstand other aspects of the Alaskan wilderness. In one scene he mourns the death of a baby fox, who has ostensibly been eaten by wolves; he angrily swats away flies that swarm around the carcass, telling them to "have some respect," thereby failing to recognise that the death of the fox supports the lives of the animals who prey on it. He similarly laments the deaths of bear cubs, killed by male grizzlies or eaten by their mothers to stave off hunger. Scenes like these indicate that Treadwell does not love the bears or foxes as they are, but rather as he desires them to be, and this kind of preferential love often inhibits a more holistic understanding of their position in a broader ecology.

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[47] Michel Serres also thinks about love for nature in terms of a contract. In *The Natural Contract* (1990), he asserts the need for a contract with the earth: he models the idea on the Social Contract, but expands it beyond the framework of social relations in order to imagine a more reciprocal relation with the environment (see also Martin-Jones 2016b). In a section on "Love," (49-50), he argues for an *agape*-like, holistic form of love for the entire planet: "we must learn and teach around us the love of the world, or of our Earth, which we can henceforth contemplate as a whole" (49).

As Treadwell's confessions imply that his love for nature originates with his own troubled psyche, it is difficult not to psychoanalyse him. Just after Treadwell's talk with Iris, he delivers an extended soliloquy about his failed relationships with women.[48] He laments that "it would have been a lot easier" if he were gay, seeing as he could solicit sex whenever he wanted rather than dealing with the trials of feminine subjectivity. As Dominic Pettman argues, "the evidence accumulates that the guardian of the grizzlies 'doth protest too much'"; he continues that "[o]ne can't help but wonder if an attraction to men, and a revulsion of this attraction, led Treadwell to flee his family in Long Island, change his name, abuse alcohol and other drugs, and ultimately seek spiritual solace in the wilderness" (2009, 39). Such speculations are irrevocably anthropocentric in that they insist on human subjectivity as their hermeneutic centre, and look to Treadwell's psychological structure rather than his external relationships in order to determine the "truth" of his relationship with the grizzlies.

However, Carman (2012) argues that queer interpretations of Treadwell's relationship with the bears open up radical possibilities for ecological thinking. Though he does not go so far as to agree with Pettman that Treadwell must have been gay, Carman posits that Treadwell's love for the grizzlies is queer in that it disrupts identification according to natural/unnatural binaries. He writes: "The fact that Treadwell viewed the physiology of animal sex with fascination and excitement, coupled with his nonessentialist aim of going animal, suggests that his own pleasures (dead-set as they were on animal objects) escaped heteronormative control" (509). For Carman, Treadwell does indeed project his desires onto the bears, but this does not eliminate the possibility of an encounter across the animal/human border since Treadwell's queer desire for the bears unsettles this very distinction. In this reading, Treadwell's erotic attachment to animals does not make his relationship with them disingenuous, but rather interrupts anthropocentric attachments to nature/culture binaries.

This love is transgressive in the Bataillean sense, since it flirts with the boundaries of subjectivity through a desire to exceed itself. As Foucault argues in "A Preface to

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[48] His confession here seems at odds with the obvious love for him that his ex-girlfriend Jewel Palovak and friend Kathleen Parker display in interviews, not to mention the fact that Treadwell was accompanied by women on a number of his Alaskan summers. Herzog points out that his footage avoids shooting these women because they contradict his vision of himself as a lone adventurer, an interpretation that lends itself to the above speculations about Treadwell's sexuality as somehow queer.

Transgression" (1988), Bataillean transgression does not reinforce binaries but rather mobilises and unsettles them:

> Transgression, then, is not related to the limit as black to white, the prohibited to the lawful, the outside to the inside, or as the open area of a building to its enclosed spaces. Rather, their relationship takes the form of a spiral which no simple infraction can exhaust. (35)

Because transgression is related to finitude in that it measures "the excessive distance that it opens at the heart of the limit" and thereby "affirms limited being" (36), it cannot be totalising or impartial; instead, transgression exposes the limits of knowledge and subjectivity, beyond which nothing can be known. Treadwell's love for the bears therefore affectively engages us with the possibility of not-knowing, of losing ourselves at the limits of our finite human perspective. Treadwell's death, understood in this way, is one part of the circumvoluted process of transgression. We see another part of this process in a scene in which he expresses his delight upon encountering the fresh excrement of Wendy, one of his favourite bears: "It was inside her!" he exclaims, touching it to feel its warmth. Bataille associates excrement, along with sexuality and other acts of expenditure and abjection, with the excessive realm of general economy. To put it more crudely, for Bataille shit both sustains and unsettles a system. This act of seeking to understand Wendy based on what she has expelled aligns with Treadwell's generally transgressive relationship with the bears: his love for them consistently troubles but can never eradicate the distinctions between human and nonhuman, subjective and objective.

Herzog's Romantic Nihilism

Herzog's attitude towards nature, though more nihilistic than Treadwell's, is no less romantic. Like O'Gorman, I mean this both in the sense of romanticism as a movement, and love as affect: just as O'Gorman associates SR's romanticism with unabashed love for objects, Herzog's romanticism, in the end, betrays a sentimentality that exceeds his attempts at rationalisation. Numerous readings of the film position Herzog in relation to German romanticism, which views nature in terms of binaries such as "beneficent" and "baneful", "reason and passion, civilization and wild nature, and knowledge and belief" (Johnson 2016, 2). Johnson argues that "Herzog is simultaneously an exponent and critic of romanticism" in that he "develops and reinterprets several of [its] most progressive and skeptical features," including "an ironic exploration of the limits of Enlightenment thinking

about nature, individual consciousness, and community" (3). Prager makes a similar claim, reading Herzog's interest in themes such as the sublime in relation to German romanticism, though like Johnson he cautions against the "assertion that Herzog is a Romantic in the traditional sense" (2007, 12); rather, Prager argues that Herzog's stance is more critical in that it echoes ideas from "the best Romantic works [that] are meant to call into question our ideas concerning the limits or the boundaries on perception" (12). For Prager and Johnson, Herzog aligns with versions of romanticism that posit an irreparable fissure between humans and nature, rather than more sentimental notions of nature as authentic, beautiful, or idyllic. Benjamin Noys also picks up on Herzog's nihilism by reading his films as representing a kind of anti-nature by evoking a "constant fascination with the violence of nature and its indifference, or even hostility, to human desires and ambitions" (2007, 38).[49] Whether Herzog is read as a romantic or anti-romantic (or both), romanticism remains a key reference point in interpreting Herzog's representations of nature.

Herzog's relationship with romanticism leads to questions about whether his view of nature in *Grizzly Man* is more "truthful" than Treadwell's, or whether it too involves projection. By exploring these issues, this section will suggest that although Herzog's feelings towards nature as expressed in the film are obviously different from Treadwell's erotic and sentimental attachments, they can also be characterised in terms of love. By discussing Herzog's perspective, I do not mean to speculate about his intentions as an auteur or his feelings as a person. Rather, I am concerned with his presence in the film as both a character, seen in his voice-over commentary and interactions with interview subjects, and narrative voice, seen in, for example, the stylistic interventions on Treadwell's footage, such as editing decisions or music. "Herzog" within *Grizzly Man* is therefore a discursive pattern that relates to Treadwell's position in various ways – generally through conflict, but also sometimes through convergence.

While Treadwell is concerned with the crossing of boundaries – of blurring the lines between human and animal – Herzog insists on reinforcing them, and his voice-over

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[49] Noys's Lacanian reading does not explicitly reference romanticism, but he sees Herzog's position against very romantic ideas of nature as harmonious and totalisable: "Herzog links the disharmony of nature to a refusal of the erotic relation, which would promise reconciliation between the human subject and nature. Again this converges with Lacan's suggestion that the lack of the sexual relation is not simply a discordance for human nature but rather the ruination of any conception of totality and harmony" (2007, 41).

frequently expresses scepticism about our ability to see past certain limits. In his first voice-over, Herzog tells us that Treadwell crossed an "invisible borderline," a comment that plays over hand-held footage of a bear investigating Treadwell's presence. Treadwell reaches out to touch the bear, before the bear suddenly gets too close and Treadwell threatens it in order to dissuade its aggressive advance. This sudden shift in tone, from curiosity to aggression, is highlighted by an abrupt stop in the music, a stylistic intervention that reinforces Herzog's moralising about Treadwell's transgressions. Herzog's scepticism about the possibility of knowledge about nature is also seen in the way that he repeatedly turns the focus away from questions about external reality and towards questions about inner nature: for Herzog, Treadwell's is a story about "human ecstasies and darkest inner turmoil" rather than a positive connection with wild nature. In line with this assertion, he often psychologises the Alaskan landscape, and at one point he says over spectacular helicopter shots of glaciers: "it seems to me that this landscape in turmoil is a metaphor of his [Treadwell's] soul." This refusal to read the landscape as itself, instead insisting that it can only reveal subjective human truths, suggests that meaning for Herzog remains restricted to the realm of the human, though his characterisation of nature as founded on "chaos, hostility, and murder" implies that human claims to significance can be violently disrupted by an unknowable external reality.

Like Treadwell, Herzog projects his own vision onto the landscape, but he does so in a way that is arguably more self-aware in its recognition of the limits of that vision and its impotence in the face of a larger, indifferent reality. The self-acknowledged finitude of Herzog's perspective in the film leaves a number of gaps in *Grizzly Man*'s construction of knowledge. Herzog uses Treadwell's death as a case in point about the indifference of nature, since it violently undercuts Treadwell's attempts to find meaning with the bears. Herzog can only appropriate the footage in Treadwell's absence, resulting in a representational fissure that hangs over the entire film: Treadwell's death throughout *Grizzly Man* is referred to obliquely through language or symbolism, but is never directly represented. This lack of representation seems to be the result of deliberate omission rather than lack of information, since Herzog refers several times to photographs of Huguenard's and Treadwell's corpses in the coroner's office.

The much-discussed scene in which Herzog listens to an audio recording of their deaths reinforces the gap between representation and reality, as Treadwell's death is only shown

to us through multiple layers of mediation.[50] In the scene, Herzog explains in voiceover that Treadwell's camera was on during the event, though he was not able to remove the lens cap. Herzog faces away from the camera with headphones over his ears; he is visible but out of focus on the left side of the frame, while Treadwell's friend Jewel Palovak sits facing him. At first, the spectator cannot see Herzog's reactions – we can only hear him describe the first few moments of the attack – but can only see Palovak responding to them. The camera tracks to watch her expressions for a moment before panning to settle on the side of Herzog's face, hidden from us by a hand raised to his furrowed brow. He tells Palovak to turn it off, and insists that she destroy the recording. These multiple refractions of the event – first through the audio recording, then Herzog's descriptions, Palovak's expressions, and the camera shooting the scene – distance the spectator from Treadwell's death as well as making her viscerally aware of it. The apparently indexical relationship between the recording and the real event, as well as the interdiction on its direct representation within the film, establish Treadwell's death as the film's invisible, traumatic centre.

This trauma is represented simultaneously through lack and excess, as the absence of more direct representations (through the audio recording or the medical examiner's photos) leads to over-determined interpretations of the event that can never quite appropriate it. Treadwell's death is described as a tragedy, as well as a case of him "getting what he deserved" (in the words of pilot Sam Egli); some suggest that his death was an inevitable or unsurprising consequence of his interactions with the grizzlies, while others claim that it was only a series of uncharacteristic mistakes in his last summer that lead to the attack. These conflicts between lack and excess – between the absence and over-determination of meaning – can be related to the structure of desire, both in the Bataillean sense (to which I will return shortly) and the more conventional, psychoanalytic sense. In their article "What Is a Posthumanist Reading?" (2008), Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus argue that psychoanalysis is useful for considering our relationship with the nonhuman, since it both

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[50] Jewel Palovak reveals in a Reddit interview that it was she rather than Herzog who insisted that the audio would not be included. Palovak owns the rights to Treadwell's estate, including his footage, and she explains: "When we started production everyone involved, except for myself, wanted to use at lest [sic] a bit of the audio tape in the movie, but contractually it was off the table. I agreed to let Werner hear it because I felt as the director it was important to his perception. Once he listened he knew that it didn't belong in the movie."
https://www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/comments/25gw7r/hello_reddit_i_am_jewel_palovak_confidante_and/

recognises the role played by our desire in dealing with the nonhuman as well as the influence of forces beyond our own subjectivity on that desire. They write: "Desire, as psychoanalysis tells us, it at once blind and uncontrollable. It is an essential aspect of the human but at the same time it is a threat because it does not distinguish in its object between human and inhuman" (101). They relate their argument to Neil Badmington's Lacanian posthumanist critique in *Alien Chic* (2004). There, Badmington argues that the lack that constitutes desire causes it to trouble humanist distinctions between human and nonhuman: "Desire is unruly, troubling, ongoing. It never falls under the control of the subject of humanism. It mocks mastery" (139). Though desire is anthropocentric in that it structures human subjectivity, it also continuously undermines the subject's position through lack: desire longs for its impossible completion in the other, and therefore undermines the human subject's mastery over extraneous nature.

Because desire for the other is based in our own lack, it is unsurprising that Herzog's position in *Grizzly Man*, which is predicated on the inexorable finitude of the human perspective, betrays a desire that exceeds his authorial control. Herzog establishes himself as a voice of reason within the text, aligning himself with various experts (such as bear biologist Larry Van Daele, and Alutiiq museum director Sven Haakanson Jr.) that denounce Treadwell's attitude towards the bears as dangerous, over-sentimental, and irrational. This would seem to suggest that Herzog's feelings about nature are more akin to the environmentalist *agape* advocated by Bratton than Treadwell's erotic attachments to the bears. While Herzog is obviously in awe of nature, the relationship he espouses is not predicated on reciprocity or empathy; Herzog feels towards nature without expecting it to feel or respond back. However, by viewing nature as uniformly chaotic, hostile, or indifferent, Herzog's position is also selective in its interpretation, as his scepticism causes him to overlook the possibilities for genuine cross-species communication that I discussed in the previous section. As the romantic interpretations of his work suggest, Herzog's awe in the face of nature's overwhelming indifference is no less a projection than Treadwell's belief in the bears' friendliness. Gelikman sees a complicity in their positions, since the "vehemence of Herzog's rebuttal bespeaks an identification with his protagonist, for the indifference of nature overwhelms only as part of the pastoral scheme. The sentiment of indifference presupposes an irreducible demand for empathy" (2012, 1159). While Herzog's characterisation of nature is different from Treadwell's, he similarly desires something from nature that it cannot provide: it is neither totally empathetic nor

antipathetic, and therefore exceeds the dialectic staged between *Grizzly Man*'s two central perspectives.

This excess is Bataillean in that it does not result in a positive meaning – the synthesis that completes the Hegelian dialectic – but rather in an abstract negativity linked to the real of Treadwell's death. In *The Comedy of Philosophy* (2007), Lisa Trahair describes the difference between the productive negativity of the Hegelian dialectic and the abstract negativity of Bataillean general economy, both of which result from an encounter with the other. While the Hegelian dialectic is related to the struggle "to the death" between the master and slave, Trahair explains that Bataille makes a mockery of this by pointing out that "if a real death were to result from the duel between two consciousnesses, there would be no meaning" (8). This is because death is not the "sublative negativity" of the dialectic that can be systematised into a higher order truth – an antithesis that can be synthesised into a positive meaning – but is rather "abstract negativity, death pure and simple, mute and non-productive death, meaningless within the system and losing meaning in any effort to make it meaningful" (8). So while we might see a dialectic functioning between the perspectives of Treadwell and Herzog in the film (the conflict between Treadwell's beatific view of nature and Herzog's more nihilistic one might be synthesised into a view that sees nature as somewhere in between or, as mentioned earlier in the chapter, that sees Treadwell and Herzog as two sides of the same coin), Treadwell's death complicates the process. The representational gap in *Grizzly Man* surrounding the real of Treadwell's death is in part a recognition of death as abstract negativity, and its resistance to incorporation within a system. This negativity intrudes on the dialectic between Treadwell's and Herzog's views of nature, since Treadwell's death exposes the limits of both perspectives and their inability to come to terms with nature as abstract negativity. Both Treadwell and Herzog impose meaning on nature according to their respective desires, but *Grizzly Man*'s representational gaps prevent these from being synthesised into a coherent, objective whole. The multiple mediations of Treadwell's death do not replace or cover over the event, but rather gesture towards it as an excess of representation, an abstract negativity that unsettles any sense of stable, self-contained subjectivity.

Despite *Grizzly Man*'s representational interdictions, however, and despite Herzog's insistence on the indifferent brutality of nature, he nevertheless cannot keep from attempting to find meaning in Treadwell's death. Rather than relating this meaning to the bears or the Alaskan wilderness, Herzog locates it in the medium of cinema: he praises

Treadwell as a filmmaker who was able to, often despite himself, shoot scenes with "a strange secret beauty." He makes this claim during a scene in which Treadwell repeatedly moves in and out of the frame, repeating takes in what Herzog calls his "action movie mode." Treadwell runs out into the foliage behind him, leaving the camera to capture the wind rustling through tall grass and deciduous leaves. Herzog muses that "sometimes images themselves develop their own life, their own secret stardom." This scene is, in one way, remarkably non-anthropocentric in that the spectator's attention is drawn away from Treadwell and towards his natural surroundings, the frame emptied for a moment of his figure. But Herzog's allusions to the magic of cinema, rather than of nature itself, make it clear that these representations are still inevitably tethered to the camera and its construction of reality, and this scene betrays a sentimentality for the cinematic image that encourages affect over rational argumentation.

Cinema can be described as a form of love for the real, a desire to obtain from reality something that it cannot provide. In a much quoted passage from *What Is Cinema?* (1967), Bazin writes about film's origins in photography and its associated relation with realism:

> The aesthetic qualities of photography are to be sought in its power to lay bare the realities. It is not for me to separate off, in the complex fabric of the objective world, here a reflection on a damp sidewalk, there the gesture of a child. Only the impassive lens, stripping its object of all those ways of seeing it, those piled-up preconceptions, that spiritual dust and grime with which my eyes have covered it, is able to present it in all its virginal purity to my attention and consequently to my love. (15)

The relation between the photographic/cinematic image and the real is related to our desire to see the world objectively, unfettered by "piled up preconceptions." This desire, like all desire, is impossible to fully satisfy, and Bazin's myth of total cinema, which he describes as the driving impulse of the medium to provide a perfect and objective reproduction of reality, is therefore an unobtainable goal. Just as O'Gorman argues that speculative realism evinces a fantasy of objectivity – an erotic longing for the real – rather than a grasp on objectivity itself, for Bazin cinema is based on the desire to access reality in its "virginal purity" rather than any actual possibility of doing so. Crucially, this does not preclude a relation to the real, but is rather the very condition of it: Bazin's famous claim that realism can only be achieved through artifice (as also discussed in Chapter 3) is a recognition that our access to the real is limited by and mediated through perception. Herzog's love for the

cinematic image in *Grizzly Man* can be related to this desire for the real, a desire that is inevitably frustrated but that nevertheless persists as a condition for our relation to nature.

But there is a more obvious way that Herzog expresses sentimentality in the film, one that links his authorial voice to Treadwell's preferential love for nature and eventually turns the gesture towards the spectator. Malacaster Bell (2014) points out that the ending of *Grizzly Man* is undeniably sentimental, despite Herzog's frequent diatribes against Treadwell's sentimentality in his voice-over narration. After Herzog tells us that Treadwell's story gives us insight into our inner nature, ultimately granting meaning to his life and death, we see Treadwell's friend, pilot Willy Fulton, flying over the Alaskan coast, singing along to Don Edwards' "Coyotes" – which is, as Bell points out, a "highly sentimental song" (23) about the disappearance of an old way of life. The song continues as the shot transitions to Treadwell walking up a sunlit stream with two grizzlies following close behind him. As Bell writes, the "scene is in soft focus and is without a trace of menace or danger – it really is as if Treadwell and the bears have bonded … as children of the universe" (23). Bell explains this as evidence that even Herzog cannot quite rid himself of sentimental attachments, though Herzog himself might say that he is sentimental about the cinematic image rather than the actual relationship between Treadwell and the bears.

Bell argues that our relationships with animals are particularly prone to sentimentality because the extent of our ability to know them is uncertain. Sentimentality for Bell involves overlooking the complexity of the object of affection in order to align it with some symbolic virtue; often innocence, as with children (another frequent target of sentimental attachments), or moral purity, as with Treadwell's refusal to see the bears as anything other than totally good (2014, 29). This means that "[w]e may get so caught up in valuing the target as a symbol for some value that we neglect the real interests of the target or fail to respond properly to its value" (29). So while Bell argues that a convincing case can be made that Treadwell did "at least have partial knowledge" of the Alaskan bears (33), as evidenced by his ability to peacefully co-exist with them for many years, his sentimentality eventually became problematic and resulted in harm to both parties. But sentimentality for Bell is an ambivalent rather than wholly negative aspect of our loving relationships, since although it poses problems in its selective appreciation of the other it can also provide us with the reassurance we need to overcome solipsistic attachment to our own species or subject positions: "It is natural to experience anxiety and frustration as we attempt to gain knowledge of another. Sentimental affection is valuable because it allows

us to continue to love in the face of anxiety" (35). Sentimentality allows for this because it simplifies the overwhelming complexity of the other and reduces it to terms that we can understand and align with our own emotional attachments. Although Bell warns that sentimentality should not be our sole mode of engagement with nonhuman animals, he insists that it is unavoidable and can have positive effects.

Sentimental attitudes are important for my purposes because, as a way of dealing with anxiety over uncertainty about the other, sentimentality could provide a means of responding to what I have termed the "impossible imperative" (our responsibility to know the other despite our inability to do so). Bell's argument suggests that while complete knowledge of the nonhuman other's complex existence is impossible, the over-simplification of sentimentality can encourage enough positive affect that we might at least keep trying, rather than retreating into solipsistic doubt about the existence of nonhuman minds (2014, 34-36). That *Grizzly Man* finishes with sentimental, positive affect despite the doubts raised through the narrative about our ability to know nonhuman minds has implications beyond the Treadwell/Herzog dialectic: while I have been discussing love for nature in terms of representation, as something that *Grizzly Man* explores on the level of content, the final sequence also turns sentimentality towards the spectator. I, for one, never fail to find this sequence incredibly moving, and inevitably finish the film by feeling Treadwell's death as a tragic but meaningful loss despite my complicated and frequently negative attitudes towards him over the course of the film. Against the better judgment of its own authorial voice, *Grizzly Man*'s final scene encourages an affect in the spectator that the film itself has often deemed irrational. This final emphasis on irrational sentimentality is, I think, the most radical aspect of *Grizzly Man*'s treatment of nature love: it provokes an affect in excess of reason, and asks the spectator to love despite an abundance of arguments against it.

Our Mind/Our Land Beautiful

Though *Grizzly Man*'s sentimental ending hints at optimistic possibilities for human-animal relationships, the actual results of these interactions within the film are hardly reassuring. I have been arguing that love is a necessary and desirable part of our ethical engagement with nature, but I certainly do not wish to suggest that we all risk death by plunging into the wilderness in the vain hope of forging an uncertain connection with dangerous animals. While the textual density of *Grizzly Man* makes it an apt object for

teasing out some of the implications and contradictions of human love for nature, this section will look at a somewhat more hopeful example of what this love might look like. *Konelīne* offers an example of love for nature on a formal level, since its mode of representation operates through aesthetic *eros* by encouraging sensory engagement with the landscape.

Similar to *Grizzly Man*, *Konelīne* negotiates between a number of perspectives on the relationship between humans and the landscape they inhabit. The description on the film's website reads: "Some hunt on the land. Some mind it. They all love it. Set deep in the traditional territory of the Tahltan First Nation, *KONELĪNE* captures beauty and complexity as one of Canada's vast wildernesses undergoes irrevocable change."[51] The film centres on the controversial Red Chris mine in north-western British Columbia, and though it does not avoid the intense polemics surrounding the construction, it exceeds them through what I will describe as a loving aesthetic. *Konelīne*'s interview subjects are all residents or visitors to the region affected by the Red Chris mine: Wild interviews a number of Tahltan – both those opposed to the mine for environmental reasons and those economically dependent on its construction – as well as local business owners and workers who exhibit a range of opinions. Interviews are intercut with spectacular sequences of natural, social, and industrial activities, often enhanced through a percussive score and vibrant, slow motion cinematography. There are a number of striking helicopter shots of forests and rivers; electrical towers are installed; fish are harvested, moose and stone sheep are hunted; the owner of a hunting expedition company uses a boat to bring her team of horses across a rushing river; Tahltan men and woman participate in an energetic gambling tournament; a blockade is established against mining and government officials.

Konelīne does not distinguish aesthetically between "natural" and "unnatural" elements of the environment, as industrial equipment/labour and scenes of natural splendour are shot with the same spectacular cinematography and similarly enhanced with stylistic techniques such as slow motion (in this it is similar to *Tectonics* – see Chapter 3). The result is an

[51] https://www.canadawildproductions.com/film/koneline/

emphatically beautiful film that aestheticises all aspects of the landscape, from trees and rivers to power lines and quad bikes to the fresh blood of salmon and moose.

While the film garnered praise and awards at a number of Canadian festivals, it has yet to receive academic attention and all of the major reviews of *Konelīne* come from Canadian newspapers. The film received a warm reception from both left and right-leaning papers, perhaps because of its refusal to draw binaries and its emphasis instead on spectacle and positive affect: Chris Knight (2016) for the conservative *National Post* gives the film three and a half stars out of four and praises it for its "moral ambiguity" and "fantastic visuals"; Kate Taylor (2016) for the more liberal *Globe and Mail* gave it a full four stars and lauded the film for being "subtle and remarkably even-handed"; Linda Barnard (2016) for the *Toronto Star*, also relatively liberal, applauds Wild for her "restraint in stepping out of the way to let people from tribal elders to a wilderness hunting guide and miners tell their stories without passing judgment." The praise garnered by the film, though modest in scope (*Rottentomatoes.com* lists five reviews), suggests that the film ruffled few feathers despite its potentially controversial subject matter. The conflicts between environmental and economic interests are particularly heated in Canada, which relies heavily on primary sector industries such as mining and oil and gas extraction that face frequent resistance from environmentalist and indigenous groups. Though its poetic approach might be viewed as a failure to mobilise environmental sentiments for political change, however, *Konelīne* also holds potential for encouraging an ecological awareness of the landscape by negotiating its various perspectives and tensions without implying that they can finally be solved. Given that I have been defining love as an ever-unfinished and uncertain attempt to respond to something outside of ourselves, we might read *Konelīne* as using beautiful aesthetics to express and evoke love – in all its indeterminacy – for nature.

Konelīne begins with a spectacular helicopter shot of dense green pine forest and water mirroring a bright blue sky as a man says in voice-over, "There is no word in our language, there is no word for wild. How can you have an up if you don't have a down, right?" This breakdown of the binary between natural and cultural spaces foreshadows the film's holistic view of the changing landscape. The film is not an argument for or against the mine, somewhat of a departure from Wild's previous documentaries: *FIX: Story of an Addicted City* (2002), for example, chronicles the establishment of the first North American safe injection site in Vancouver, while *A Place Called Chiapas* (1998) looks at the Zapatista indigenous uprising in Mexico, and ticket sales were used to help raise funds

for the group.[52] While *Konelīne* does not shy away from the social and environmental issues raised by the Red Chris mine, nor does it moralise or take a position from the various perspectives examined in the film. Rather, it situates its characters and events in a broader ecology, viewing them all as part of a changing landscape.

Among *Konelīne*'s central subjects are Oscar Dennis (the man in the voice over from the beginning) and his family. Dennis works to record and preserve the Tahltan language, while his mother leads a blockade against the mine. The white proprietor of a local eatery also opposes construction, since it disrupts the breeding ground of the local stone sheep; she tells us this as she strokes a stuffed specimen of the species, one of many that decorate the walls and corners of her establishment. Her position is complicated somewhat by the mixed patronage of her restaurant: she talks about educating tourists and hunters as Tahltan children tell us the names of the stuffed animals in their language, but we also see workers on break, identifiable through their high-visibility vests and boots. That the workers' labour is probably connected to the mine (either directly or indirectly, through the power companies that supply its electricity) highlights the complexity of negotiating economic and environmental concerns in the area. Wild also interviews a number of workers at the mine, some of whom seem to have uncomplicated and positive views of the construction – one man explains that being outdoors is much better than sitting in an office – while others are more ambivalent. A Tahltan worker describes his caution in talking freely to either his family members or his bosses, but that in the end the mine provides a roof over his head and food for his children. Chad Day, the young president of the Tahltan nation, is willing to hear out the representatives from the mine and the BC government because of the economic opportunities the project could offer the community, while some elders express their discontent with the lack of transparency in the process. Dennis, who fiercely opposes the construction, in the end concedes that the community needs the mine for economic reasons, though he bitterly expresses his desire to leave the area before it turns into an industrial wasteland.

The film's refusal to draw the conflict along strict racial lines is part of the reason for its reception as "remarkably even-handed," despite the fact that the film's obvious sympathies

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[52] Wild's website says that "*A Place Called Chiapas* opened in over 80 cities throughout Canada and the United States and was instrumental in raising funds which went directly to the indigenous people of Chiapas." https://www.canadawildproductions.com/about/

are with the Tahltan and local workers rather than government officials or company executives; there are no extended interviews with the latter. However, nor are there overt attempts to discredit or undermine these individuals or their institutions, somewhat of a departure from the Griersonian tradition of Canadian documentary that seeks to persuade the public to take sides in social issues.[53] This tactic is familiar from other important Canadian documentaries about indigenous blockades, such as Alanis Obamsawin's *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* (1993), which explicitly seeks to find an alternative to the dominant white narrative by giving voice to the Mohawk struggle during the Oka Crisis.[54] *Konelīne*, which is far less polemical, gives voice to a variety of perspectives all connected by the land without trying to resolve their differences or reduce them to familiar binaries. The film's paralleled hunting sequences are a case in point here. Wild follows two Tahltan men who hunt moose using high-powered rifles and a pickup truck; the scene is intercut with two white hunters using bows and arrows to hunt stone sheep. Given the differences in their effectiveness – the Tahltan hunters efficiently kill and butcher a moose cow, while one of the white hunters explains rather sheepishly that he's been hunting since 1975 and has never killed anything with a bow and arrow – it would be easy for the spectator to pass judgment here, but the film itself is sensitive to all of the hunters' claims that the activity connects them with their ancestors and with the landscape. How is such sensitivity possible?

Konelīne emphasises affect in representing these connections between humans and nature. In the moose hunting sequence, a series of close-ups aestheticise the action: bright red blood drips and foams on the green grass; skin and white strips of fat are cut from the carcass; muscles are exposed, twitching in the gleaming sunlight. There is no sense of horror here (though squeamish spectators may be horrified regardless), but nor does the

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[53] John Grierson, the Scottish filmmaker and theorist famous for coining the term "documentary," was also the first Canadian Film Commissioner. He founded the National Film Commission in 1939, which later became the National Film Board of Canada. The NFB has long been associated with the kinds of persuasive, socially-conscious documentaries advocated by Grierson, who believed that documentaries could serve an important social role in persuading the public. See *Grierson*, Roger Blais's 1973 NFB documentary available at: http://www.nfb.ca/film/grierson/

[54] The Oka crisis was a 1990 land dispute between the Mohawk community of Kanehsatake, Quebec and the town of Oka over the proposed construction of a golf course. The situation escalated to an armed stand-off, and Obamsawin's documentary chronicles the military siege tactics used against the Mohawk protesters. Though *Kanehsatake* was produced by the NFB and won a number of awards, it was rejected by the CBC in Canada and premiered instead in Britain on Channel Four. *Kanehsatake* is available here: https://www.nfb.ca/film/kanehsatake_270_years_of_resistance/

event seem trivial or wasteful, as one of the men laments that the act is hard to do and he commemorates it by carving a notch into his knife handle. The scene echoes an earlier sequence of a salmon harvest, with similarly spectacular shots of pooling blood and carcasses being cleaned in the river and hung to dry. Milton draws from anthropologist Tim Ingold in order to argue that (somewhat counterintuitively to a city-dweller like myself) hunting is linked to heightened identification with animals: "Subsistence hunters know a great deal about what animals do and why, and so have a particularly strong sense of their personhood" (2002, 50). Milton draws from evolutionary psychology to argue that anticipation of animal behaviour is linked to a theory of mind, and that our tendency to anthropomorphise animals (whether we hunt them or not) could be linked to the advantage this provides hunter-gatherers in anticipating the movements of prey.[55] Hunting in *Konelīne* is similarly represented as a means of connecting with animals: one of the white hunters explains that it allows him to get as close to the stone sheep as a natural predator would, and implies that this "closeness" is metaphysical as well as geographical.

But *Konelīne* suggests that this knowledge of animals does not always lead to death or harm, as the fishing sequence is paralleled to a scene in which the locals band together to help fish move upstream to spawn after a rockslide blocks the river. Children run with wriggling fish and toss them in a tank; salmon are transported by helicopter in big metal canisters; a woman kisses a salmon gently before submerging it, and describes how the Tahltan formed a chain to pass salmon upstream after a landslide in 1965. Unlike Treadwell's sentimental view of his relationship with the grizzlies, *Konelīne*'s beautiful aesthetic does not shy away from death, but nor does it insist on death as a threshold to the sublime. Death is represented as merely part of an ecological process: the Tahltan help the salmon to spawn so that they will have fish to catch and eat in a few years' time, part of a cyclical process in which the Tahltan have been participating (as a woman tells us in voice-over) for eight thousand years. Dying may mark the limit of the human subject, but *Konelīne* gestures towards the part it plays in an irreducibly complex ecology that expands far beyond our finite frameworks and timescales. In Bataillean terms, the film

[55] See page 34-36 on "Innate learning mechanisms" for her argument's basis in evolutionary psychology, and Chapter 3, "Knowing Nature Through Experience" on the personhood of animals.

acknowledges that the restricted economy of the human is related to the general economy of its ecological relations.

But while the idyllic fishing and fish-saving sequences might suggest a naïve endorsement of a return to nature or a problematic romanticisation of indigenous relationships with the land, *Konelīne*'s industrial sequences suggest that there is no difference between natural and artificial relationships with nature. Von Royko's cinematography does not distinguish between shots of Tahltan fishing as they have for millennia and workers putting up electrical towers to provide power to the new mine, suggesting a parallel in how these actions affect and are affected by the environment. This is not to say that the film endorses both activities equally; the refusal to moralise suggests instead that *Konelīne* recognises that humans are irrecoverably part of the north-western BC ecology, and that nature/culture binaries falsely distance us from our points of connection with the natural world.

A particularly spectacular sequence observes a group of workers erecting an electrical tower. A helicopter flies the tower through a mountain pass as the men crouch in anticipation; percussive sounds and chimes rise on the soundtrack as we see wind from the propellers blow dust around the men. The helicopter dangles the tower and the men grab hold, grappling with the wind and the weight of the large steel object in spectacular slow motion for a few minutes before they lock the tower into a pole on the ground. Shaviro, summarising Whitehead, "defines beauty as a matter of differences that are conciliated, adapted to one another," which means that "beauty is appropriate to a world of relations, in which entities continually affect and touch and interpenetrate one another" (2014, 42). If beauty is relational, then the helicopter sequence's beauty is in the dynamic encounter it evokes between wind, steel, workers, soil, camera, and spectator. *Konelīne*'s aestheticisation of the north-western B.C. landscape draws on these relational aspects of beauty with its dynamic images of encounters between various elements of the environment, natural as well as human-made.

Shaviro (following Harman) advocates aesthetics as first philosophy, since our aesthetic relationships with things precede all other modes of encounter: "When objects encounter one another, the basic mode of their relation is neither theoretical nor practical and neither epistemological nor ethical. Rather, before either of these, every relation among objects is an aesthetic one" (2014, 52-53). He continues that:

> Aesthetics is about the *singularity* and *supplementarity* of things: it has to do with things insofar as they cannot be cognized or subordinated to concepts and also insofar as they cannot be utilized, or normatively regulated, or defined according to rules. No matter how deeply I comprehend a thing, and no matter how pragmatically or instrumentally I make use of it, something of it still escapes my categorizations. (53)

Shaviro links aesthetics explicitly to affect, in that an aesthetic experience involves feeling this excess in the object. He avoids anthropocentrism by asserting that all objects participate in aesthetic experiences since they all feel something of other things, in their own ways: the men feel the wind from the helicopter that hovers above in the air and dangles the electrical tower so that its movements are swayed by a push and pull of multiple physical forces. Crucially, for Shaviro this emphasis on aesthetics does not eliminate the need to theorise the subject, despite his insistence on undermining anthropocentrism. He explains later in the chapter that "aesthetic experience is always asymmetrical; it needs to be posed in terms of a subject, as well as an object" (63). Relations are not homogenous and equal, so that subjects and objects can no longer be differentiated; rather, these differences are established only from particular, situated perspectives, which change when they come into contact with each other.

Like Shaviro, *Konelīne* implies that affective relationships to the landscape come prior to ethics or political debate, as its dynamic aesthetics encourage the spectator to feel before coming to any conclusions. Because *Konelīne* mediates these experiences through cinema, it must represent them for the human subject that is inevitably implied by the apparatus. But this ostensible anthropocentrism, read through Shaviro's aesthetics, also calls attention to the ways that the human subject is situated in the film's perceptual ecology, and alerts her to the excess of representation that Shaviro argues characterises every aesthetic experience.

Konelīne's emphasis on aesthetics does not preclude political debate, but rather indicates the relation between particular and general economy. Like *Konelīne*, Bataille links human economic interests to ecology, a connection that he argues is neglected in conventional economics. A passage from *The Accursed Share* is worth quoting at length here:

> The human mind reduces operations, in science as in life, to an entity based on typical *particular* systems (organisms or enterprises). Economic activity, considered as a whole, is conceived in terms of particular operations with

> limited ends. The mind generalizes by composing the aggregate of these operations. Economic science merely generalizes the isolated situation; it restricts its object to operations carries out with a view to a limited end, that of economic man. It does not take into consideration a play of energy that no particular end limits: the play of *living matter in general*, involved in the movement of light of which it is the result. On the surface of the globe, for *living matter in general*, energy is always in excess; the question is always posed in terms of its extravagance. The choice is limited to how the wealth is to be squandered. It is to the *particular* living being, or to limited populations of living beings, that the problem of necessity presents itself. But man is not just the separate being that contends with the living world and with other men for his share of resources. (1967a, 23)

The realm of general economy – of "living matter in general" – is associated with death, eating, sex, and waste, which Bataille argues are all related to unproductive expenditure that cannot be subsumed into the particular requirements of restricted economies (whether it be a single human subject or an entire culture). While we might read these activities through restricted frameworks of meaning – as I am doing here, for example, by discussing them through language – something always exceeds these efforts, and is therefore wasted rather than serving the aims of a system.

I have been arguing throughout this thesis that although these excesses cannot be appropriated by language, they can be gestured towards through art. The beauty of *Konelīne* exceeds the rational frameworks of polemic and politics by insisting on affective engagement over argumentation. This is not the naïve holism of someone like Timothy Treadwell, who projects onto nature and believes in the fundamental interconnection of all things; nor is it the problematic back-to-nature rhetoric that romanticises indigenous cultures as the answer to global capitalism, thereby relying on problematic us/them dualisms. Rather, *Konelīne*'s is the holism of general economy, one that recognises a world of irreducible difference and complexity. This world is not disconnected from human politics and economics, as the film's central conflicts make clear, but rather exceeds them, is affected by and affects them. The film's loving aesthetic positions the spectator in relation to these processes, and although it cannot escape the trappings of the apparatus – representation remains irrevocably for us – *Konelīne*'s excesses alert us to differences that cannot be reconciled or explained away. This is seen in the ways that tension between environmental and economic concerns is explored rather than adjudicated, as well as in how parallels are drawn between different people and activities (white and Tahltan hunters,

natural and industrial activities) without collapsing them into a reductive argument or restricted economy of sameness. *Konelīne*'s aesthetics affirm Shaviro's point that aesthetics precedes ethics or politics, that reality is experienced before it is judged or carved up by language. That the camera inevitably represents these experiences in relation to a human spectator does not undermine the film's ecological message, but rather reinforces that humans are involved in the ecology of the represented landscape.

Towards the end of *Konelīne*, Oscar Dennis explains the use of pronouns in the Tahltan language to describe something as beautiful: the "k" in "konelīne" is a personal pronoun for the landscape, so that it means something like "our land beautiful." He continues that the pronoun can also refer to a mental landscape, so that that one can use the same word to say, "my cognitive landscape is beautiful." The word indicates a turning inside-out of the subject in a way that resonates with Bataillean *eros* – the relation between the restricted economy of a human subject and the general economy that exceeds her. That the word *konelīne* draws this parallel through beauty speaks to the relationship between aesthetics and love; Bratton refers to this relationship as aesthetic *eros*. But while Bratton argues that aesthetic *eros* can be overly subjective, selective, or self-centred, *konelīne* suggests that the ambiguities and ambivalences inherent in love for nature ought not to be corrected but embraced. The absence of an adjudicating God or coherent, totalisable notion of objectivity make it difficult to determine how to escape the subjective trappings of aesthetic *eros*, such as projection or sentimentality; but recognising that we can only love nature as ourselves, and not in a God-like, holistic, or totalising way does not imply that we resign ourselves to solipsism. Though aesthetic *eros* carries risks (as do all forms of love), it also holds the potential to disrupt anthropocentrism by exposing the subject to what is in excess of itself. The beautiful aesthetics of *Konelīne* evoke a world of differences beyond subjective limits; these differences are not opposed or reconciled but placed in dynamic relation, represented for a spectator who is encouraged to feel and, hopefully, to love.

Conclusion

Though it would be too much to say that love provides a solution to the fraught and difficult relationship we have forged with nonhuman reality over the modern era, I have argued that it is an important part of the way that we relate to nature and therefore cannot be left out of environmental ethics. Cinema, which often centres on themes of love, can help us to trace the paradoxical movements of various kinds of love for nature. *Grizzly*

Man enacts a dialogue between various perspectives on nature, and its excesses of representation spiral around the limit between human and nonhuman realities. The film's multiple layers of mediation – through Herzog's appropriation of Treadwell's footage – do not refract or cover over the real of nature, but rather touch on it from several different directions by pointing out the limits of various subjective viewpoints. I attributed the contradictions and ambiguities of *Grizzly Man* to the ways that it mobilises different forms of love, since Treadwell's erotic fixation on the bears is negotiated by and against Herzog's conflicting awe at the sublimity of nature. While in *Grizzly Man* these differences are often staged through violence and conflict – between Treadwell and Herzog, and between Treadwell and the bears – *Konelīne* offers a more optimistic view of what love for nature might look like. *Konelīne*'s beautiful aesthetics exceed the polemics surrounding the Red Chris mine, and the film explores various perspectives without attempting to reconcile their differences, emphasising instead a kind of affective engagement that I described as aesthetic *eros*.

Erotic attachments to nature are inevitably subjective and therefore anthropocentric, but they also bring the subject to her limit and expose her to the not-self, the not-human. This does not constitute a "solution" to the ethical problems posed by ecological crisis, but theorising our response through love implies that there can never be a solution. There is only a process, which we must keep on adjusting based on responses from the beloved. That there is no possibility for an understanding of nature unfettered by subjective desires and projections does not imply that we are imprisoned within our perceptual spheres; as Bell points out, sentimentality is often a response to our contact with the outside, a way of bringing the unknowable within the boundaries of what we can know and cope with. This inevitably results in over-simplification but, because we are finite after all, the question is not how to avoid these reductive conclusions but rather how they might contribute to better engagements with the world.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This thesis has proposed a new philosophy of the moving image for the twenty-first century, in the context of the Anthropocene. My point of departure for this philosophy was the end of the world: I connected the stakes of my argument to Timothy Morton's assertion that hyperobjects such as climate change are calling anthropocentric modes of thought into question. I have proposed limit cinema as a category of films that destabilise humanist assumptions while simultaneously bearing witness to human finitude and fallibility. Bataille's philosophy provides a useful method for theorising this tension, since transgression emphasises the contradictions at the limit between self and world rather than overstepping this limit or attempting to reconcile its differences. Because cinema negotiates tensions between subjectivity and objectivity – between its indexical mode of representation and its basis in human subjectivity – it is integral to the philosophical questions at the heart of this thesis. In this conclusion, I will explore some of the broader implications of my arguments in the preceding chapters. My analysis has focused primarily on aesthetics and metaphysics by theorising the relationship between cinematic representation and the unrepresentable outside of thought; I have also asserted, however, that the stakes of my claims are ethical, driven by the urgency of the ecological crisis. I will look at the relationship between these various concerns throughout this thesis, as well as potential directions they raise for future research.

I began by framing my methodology in the context of film ecocriticism and the nonhuman turn in the humanities. The nonhuman turn in general seeks to decentre human subjectivity in favour of a more holistic ontology that grants agency to other perspectives; film ecocriticism applies this by calling attention to aspects of cinema usually overlooked by methodologies such as psychoanalysis or cognitivism that base themselves in the structure of human subjectivity. I argued for a middle road between the sometimes-myopic humanism of twentieth century thought and the decentred ontologies of the nonhuman turn, since striving towards objectivity sometimes leads us to overlook places where our thinking is incorrigibly subjective. I proposed Bataille as a thinker that allows us to theorise the fraught territory between self and world, and argued that limit cinema articulates this territory through a Bataillean logic of transgression. The films discussed in this thesis evince a desire to overcome subjective limits while also bearing witness to the impossibility of doing so.

While Bataille provides the framework, cinema gives us a way of seeing the limit itself. Since cinema is founded in subjective modes of perception, it can help us push against the boundaries of our human ways of apprehending the world. The ontological question at issue in the nonhuman turn – how do we think beyond ourselves? – becomes an aesthetic question in the films I have categorised as limit cinema, since they all use the qualities of the medium in order to rethink cinematic representation. Limit cinema is therefore about the relationship between representation and the unrepresentable, and although I have remained sceptical about our ability to access the latter I have argued that the tension between these two concepts is a productive area for philosophical inquiry. This is not a new question, of course; Cary Wolfe argues in *What Is Posthumanism?* that art's privileged relationship to the sublime relies on the way that it dislocates perception and communication, a point that resonates with Fred Botting's summary of the Bataillean real as "an impossible, inexpressible, ineffable, and undifferentiated space outside language" (1994, 24). However, while my discussion throughout this thesis has frequently touched on the sublime (especially in Chapter Five, where a posthumanist ethics of love is contrasted and contextualised with romanticism), the sublime itself is not the object of my analysis. Rather, limit cinema exposes us to the place where we touch on the real, but do not cross over into it; just like the absent interiority in Nancy's invaginated concept of the body, the real remains forever on the other side of a twisting and convoluted skin. Theorising the sublime through transgression means that it is not a static entity – a monolithic void at the edge of reason – but rather operates in dynamic relation to the autopoietic system of subjectivity. Though we cannot see it "in itself", this thesis has been an effort to trace its effects on the cinematic medium, from within the boundaries of human thought and perception.

Part One, on Objectivity, looked at different ways of characterising and relating to the outside of thought through cinema. In Chapter Two, objectivity was considered in terms of the Bataillean sacred, and the films of Ben Wheatley and Apichatpong Weerasethakul were interpreted as evincing two kinds of relationships to the sacred natural world. Wheatley uses generic structures against themselves though a logic of sacrifice: not only is sacrifice a recurring narrative trope, it also inheres in the formal structure of his cinema. In *Kill List* and *A Field in England*, expectations associated with British cinema and especially the pagan folk revival of the 1970s are suddenly and unexpectedly upended, complicating any efforts to straightforward interpretation. Instead of positive meaning, Wheatley's cinema emphasises death as abstract negativity: the deaths of characters in *Kill List* and *A Field in*

England are repetitive and ritualised, but rather than resolving narrative problems they rupture holes in the films' narrative structures. Wheatley's films therefore operate through an aesthetics of *sacrifice for nothing*, which clings to the desire for transcendent truth inherent in Western conceptions of sacrifice (especially Christian sacrifice) but forecloses any possibility of its attainment. The aesthetic of sacrifice in Wheatley is therefore thoroughly post-theological, since it undermines theological ways of thinking from within. The aesthetics in Apichatpong, on the other hand, operate through eroticism, framing the relationship between humans and nature in terms of ambiguous sensual encounters. While Wheatley operates in a Western and specifically British context, Apichatpong combines Western influences (especially Surrealism) with Thai politics and religion: in Wheatley, the sacred is associated with pre-Christian Paganism, but in Apichatpong it emerges from the animist traditions of the Isaan region, in contrast with mainstream Thai Buddhism. The divide between humans and nature in Apichatpong is therefore related to a number of other complicated distinctions, including East/West and animism/Buddhism.

I have been careful to situate Apichatpong's cinema in context, and have tried as much as possible to derive my conclusions from the films rather than a forced or rigid application of my theory (with the inevitable caveat that the perspective from which these conclusions emerge is my own, inflected with my interests, preconceptions, and limited frames of knowledge). Questions remain, however, about the ethics of applying my admittedly Eurocentric philosophical framework to non-Western cinemas. I argued in Chapter One that my motivation for selecting films from a variety of national and cultural contexts is tied to the global stakes of the ecological crisis. Phenomena such as global warming transcend national boundaries, and my analysis of the ecological implications of cinematic representation has attempted to follow suit. My ability to do so has been limited by the scope of this project, since I have opted for depth over breadth in my selection of examples. Because this thesis builds a new methodology, my examples were chosen because they illustrate various possibilities for a Bataillean approach in the context of the Anthropocene: the films discussed herein articulate the relationship between humans and nature as complex and contradictory, a dynamic process that is aptly theorised through Bataille’s ideas of transgression and inner experience. Apichatpong's Surrealist influences make his films amenable to Bataillean analysis, though they also push against Bataille's thought in a number of interesting ways (as mentioned in Chapter Two, the transgressions of his films are much quieter than those of filmmakers like Wheatley that exploit the shock value of explicit violence). Lisandro Alonso, whom I discuss in Chapter Three, refers

deliberately to familiar generic codes (such as the western in *Jauja*) but unsettles their ethical implications, resulting in a refusal of meaning similar to the aesthetics of sacrifice in Wheatley. If my methodology is to prove useful, however, its reach will have to be expanded to include a wider range of films from a variety of cultural contexts. My methodology is not intended as static or hermetically sealed, but ought rather to change in response to new objects of inquiry; though pursuing this through a "world of cinemas" (Martin-Jones 2016a) carries risks (reading films out of context, mischaracterising or misunderstanding unfamiliar references and histories), I would rather confront these risks through careful research than avoid engaging with films that may not align with my point of view. I hope that the reader has been convinced that Bataille's philosophy, which is open to difference, contradiction, and change over time, opens new possibilities for reading the relationship between global cinema and the nonhuman.

While Chapter Two largely focuses on representation by engaging in close textual analysis, Chapter Three raises questions about the cinematic medium and its ability to represent nonhuman reality. I argue that although films are able to call attention to perspectives beyond the human, their ability to break with anthropocentric modes of perception is ultimately limited by the apparatus. There is therefore a conflict between form and content when films attempt to break with human perspectives, a conflict that I argue is productively interrogated in Lisandro Alonso's *Jauja* and Peter Bo Rappmund's *Tectonics*. Both films de-emphasise the human figure and foreground geological time, but they also gesture towards the subjective position implied by cinematic representation through the reflexive use of techniques such as single-point perspective. An ecocritical reading of both films therefore requires analysis on two levels: close textual analysis reveals elements of content and style that undermine anthropocentrism, while considerations about the medium itself reveal ways that these films remain implicated in human ways of seeing. I argue that both *Jauja* and *Tectonics* self-consciously make use of this conflict in order to undermine the sense of objective mastery implied by the apparatus.

My reading of *Tectonics* and *Jauja* draws an analogy between the need to push against the limits of the human – the ethical project necessitated by the ecological crisis – and the need to push against the limits of the cinematic medium. This ties ethical responsibility to aesthetic inquiry; the need for a more holistic worldview is tied to an understanding of the relationship between representation and reality. While films are no more able to transcend their modes of representation than humans are able to break with their modes of

perception, they can undermine the sense of objective mastery implied by the apparatus from within. These methods of rupturing totalisable knowledge are useful for considering how we humans might make room for the nonhuman in our ethics and ontologies. Undermining anthropocentrism – acknowledging that we are not everything, and that our perspectives are not the only ones that matter – requires us to recognise our limits and avoid mistaking particular points of view for objective truth. Chapter Three is only a starting point in this regard, and it raises a number of questions about how cinema and media theory might contribute to the task of deconstructing anthropocentric notions of objectivity. How do other forms of media articulate the relationship between human perception and extrahuman reality? What changes when technologies are not based in Renaissance principles of perspective (for instance, in the case of motion capture [Bédard 2017])? While these questions raise exciting possibilities for future research, I would caution against assuming that other media might somehow be "better" at attaining any kind of objective or nonhuman perspective. All modes of representation are finite in their ability to express or communicate reality, and a central aim of this thesis has been to assert the importance of paying attention to these limits.

Part Two, on Subjectivity, conceded that if we cannot escape human subjectivity, we might as well rethink it. Chapter Four argued that film ecocriticism needs a new way of thinking subjectivity and spectatorship, one that recognises the limitations of the human perspective while also acknowledging its implication in cinematic representation. I proposed a new way of thinking cinematic subjectivity, through Bataille's notion of inner experience. I argued that the autopoietic structure of inner experience – internally closed but open to outside influence – allows for a less anthropocentric theory of cinematic subjectivity, since it can help us understand the ways that human subjectivity is articulated in relation to a wider reality. In order to avoid reading the Bataillean subject as a stable or consistent entity (it is not the self-contained and self-evident interiority of the Cartesian *cogito),* I also referred to Nancy's notion of invagination. For Nancy, subjectivity can only be read on the surface, which is constantly folding and reversing across the limit that distinguishes self and world. I traced these movements in two films that explicitly represent human subjectivity in relation to nature: Lars von Trier's *Nymphomaniac* and Jonathan Glazer's *Under the Skin*. The latter articulates invaginated subjectivity in representational terms, as we literally see inner spaces being turned inside out; the latter destabilises subjectivity through form, calling its own humanist hermeneutic framework into question. Both films understand subjectivity as an unstable surface, a thin membrane that always pushes what it

cannot contain to the other side. This "other side" is unknowable and unreachable, but I suggested that we can gesture towards it through self-reflexive representational lacunae.

Both *Under the Skin* and *Nymphomaniac* construct these lacunae through sex and violence: like Bataille, they associate eroticism and death with nature and the unknowable outside of thought. My reading of Bataillean transgression throughout this thesis has tended away from more its more traditional associations with cultural taboos about sex and violence, reading it instead as a crossing of the boundary between the human subject and nonhuman reality. Chapter Four, however, suggests points of connection between my largely metaphysical interpretation of transgression and more conventional ethical interpretations of the concept.[56] These are connections I would like to explore further in future research. I mentioned in Chapter One that my motivation for selecting art films and similarly artistic documentaries was that their excessive stylistic elements more clearly reflected the ambiguites of transgression, but that I would like to eventually expand my Bataillean methodology to address more mainstream genre and Hollywood films. Such a project could potentially build on the connection between my ecocritical reading of transgression here and more conventional, ethical readings of Bataillean transgression. Genre cinema is generally more rigidly structured than the limit films I have analysed here, and a Bataillean reading of more mainstream ecocinema would have to contextualise itself within genre history and theory (in contrast to this thesis, which focused primarily on its contribution to film ecocriticism and the nonhuman turn). I would be particularly interested in framing ecocinema as a kind of genre of excess (Williams 1991). I have characterised limit cinema as excessive in that it pushes against its own logic of representation and gestures towards something that cannot be contained by the narrative, a description that echoes interpretations of the mise-en-scene in melodramas (Gledhill 1987); further, the emphasis on sexuality and death as a means of relating to nature raises potential points of connection with pornography and horror. Excess in horror and melodrama is generally related to the unconscious, to repressed desires and fears that emerge and evoke extreme effects in the body of the spectator (Williams 1991); I would like to frame excess in a somewhat

[56] It also forms a bridge between this thesis and my earlier published works, which focused on the transgressive sex and violence in European new extremist cinema: see Birks 2016; Birks and Coulthard 2016a, 2016b.

different way, following my argument in this thesis that ecocinema relates to a reality outside of human perception.

In Chapter Five, I noticed a trend in contemporary genre cinema to address ecological catastrophe in terms of romance, and films such as *Bee Movie*, *Avatar,* and *The Mermaid* would be a good place to start in considering more mainstream examples of limit cinema. Doing so would further the ethics of love that I advanced at the end of this thesis. I have asserted throughout that the ecological crisis makes an ethical demand that is impossible to meet, since it encourages us to respond to a reality that we can never fully understand. Love is a way of exceeding our subjective limits and is therefore theoretically impossible: as Marcel O'Gorman points out, love is a notoriously troublesome and messy concept, and it is difficult to constrain it within the confines of reason. This impossibility at the heart of love is analogous to the impossible demand posed by the Anthropocene. *Konelīne* and *Grizzly Man* both encourage a love for nature that exceeds rational argumentation: the sentimental ending of *Grizzly Man* suggests a sympathetic reading of Treadwell's relationship with nature, in contradiction to the position expressed by Herzog's authorial voice; *Konelīne* operates through an aesthetics of love that explores different perspectives without reconciling their differences. The ethics of the latter relies on its emphasis on affect before argumentation, as aesthetic *eros* provides a way of exceeding polemics, of viewing the landscape as beautiful and worthy of protection despite the abundant political and environmental challenges it faces. I wanted to end this thesis on an optimistic note, and to suggest a way forward despite our limited ability to think about and respond to the ecological crisis. If hyperobjects like climate change are so irreducibly complex that they exceed our frames of thought and extend farther into the future than we are capable of imagining, then reason alone is insufficient for confronting the problem. I have offered love as an alternative, since love is an impossible relationship with alterity; it recognises differences without needing to constrain them to a rational framework. Jean-Luc Nancy argues that writing about love is a way of expressing it, so that love is deployed by our attempts to understand it rather than "being something we can extricate and contemplate at a distance" (1986, 83). I therefore offer this thesis as an act of love – love for this fragile, imperfect, and overwhelmingly complex world, and for all of the plants, people, and creatures that inhabit it with us. I hope the reader has been encouraged to share in this love with me.

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