Feminisms
Mulvey, Laura, Backman Rogers, Anna

Published by Amsterdam University Press

Mulvey, Laura and Anna Backman Rogers.
Feminisms: Diversity, Difference and Multiplicity in Contemporary Film Cultures.
Amsterdam University Press, 2015.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/66283.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/66283

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2319467
PART V

Discussions:
Dialoguing Difference and Extremity in Contemporary Cinemas
Film, Corporeality, Transgressive Cinema: A Feminist Perspective

Martine Beugnet and Laura Mulvey

The dialogue I initiated with Martine Beugnet for this book is a formal continuation of a series of conversations that have taken place between us over several years. Although our theoretical approaches to cinema are, in many ways, radically different, I became extremely interested in the way that her use of haptic theory could advance feminist thinking about the “problem” of the woman’s body and its representation in cinema. Influenced by American film theorists Vivian Sobchack and Laura U. Marks, in particular, her knowledge of French cinema, both of the recent “transgressive” genre (on which our dialogue is focused) and the history of French film more generally, places her in a perfect position to reflect on the series of encounters that we cover here. In the first instance, the centrality of the body and “embodiment” in this cinema is, in itself, a challenge to traditional feminist thinking (in which I include myself) about the female body on the screen in relation to women’s avant-garde film. In a negation of the woman’s body as object of the look and its sexualization in all the multivalent forms of patriarchal culture, feminist experimental film tended to adopt a minimalist aesthetic, very often in combination with the theoretical or essayistic. Beugnet has traced the return of early, pre-minimalist engagement with the body (for instance in the films of Carolee Schneemann) in some performance and installation work by recent women artists. In our dialogue, however, she finds a similar preoccupation with corporeality in the “transgressive” feature film genre. While this is, in itself, of interest to film aesthetics, the unusual number of women directors associated with this cinema is of very particular interest to feminist film aesthetics. The work of the women directors discussed below has, of course, attracted a considerable amount of interest over the years, particularly due to their insistence on the corporal and their unhesitating willingness to display female sexuality on the screen, not as sanitized but as persistently associated with violence, sexual violence, bodily disintegration, and so on. Beugnet’s use of haptic theory and its acceptance of the bodily and the sensuous enables a feminist approach to these films that cuts across both the American theorists’ unwillingness to be limited by a feminist label and the particular directors’ unwillingness to be categorized by gender. Furthermore, Beugnet locates this eruption of the
body, its flaunting on the screen as a site of disgust, within particular social and historical contexts. She looks back to the moment in French history, the late 1950s and early 1960s, when a fetishized culture of feminine cleanliness, as well as the “whiteness” and polish of the modern kitchen with which it was closely associated, “masked” the atrocities of the Algerian war and the wounds that it left on the French male psyche. Beugnet suggests that the corporeality of recent women’s films may represent a return of that historic repressed. She also suggests, however, that the dematerialization of the female body in digital representation gives the insistence of the corporeality of the feminine an immediate, contemporary context. In our discussion, Beugnet extends these topics into areas of more aesthetic concern in which she reflects on the “transgressive” films’ use of a particular cinematic style that raises consciousness of other bodily senses to challenge the usual domination of the optical. Here she notes that the materiality of the human body may fuse with the materiality of film itself, confusing not only the interior of the narrative with the surface of the screen but also challenging the traditional distance between spectator and the cinema. Ultimately, she argues for a cinema that enables its spectator to think through sensuousness and sensation in a way that is of extreme interest to and relevance for feminist film theory.

– Laura Mulvey

LM: I am extremely interested in the way that you have written about a group of recent French films as “a cinema of transgression” and, most particularly, that you have discussed their shared aesthetic in terms of corporeality and sensuousness. Perhaps you could begin by explaining how this critical encounter came into being?

MB: I became interested in this group of French films because I sensed they formed a distinctive thematic and formal approach, one that broke away from the filmmaking conventions and strategies of mainstream as well as classically auteurist cinema. I felt those films showed a willingness to return to cinema as the medium of the senses, in some ways reconnecting with the experiments that marked the early years of cinema’s existence, but with the aesthetic and thematic concerns of the late twentieth- and early twenty-first century. I related this trend to Antonin Artaud’s call for a “third path” in cinema (a form of cinema that would develop out of conventional narrative cinema – or psychological cinema as he calls it – on the one hand, and abstract experimental film on the other) because in this cinema, film is explored not so much as a narrative vehicle but as a form of embodied thought, as an art whose primary power is to move us both viscerally and intellectually.

The work of directors Olivier Assayas, Bertrand Bonello, Patrice Chéreau, Gaspar Noé, Catherine Breillat, Claire Denis, Virginie Despentes, Coralie Trinh Thi,
Pascale Ferran, Philippe Grandrieux, Bruno Dumont, and Marina de Van, to name but a few, are extremely diverse in their subject matter and style, but some of the films have jointly attracted the attention of critics and theorists because they share a willingness to address onscreen corporeality in sensuous, visceral, graphic, and in some cases horrific terms. Although these works remain within the boundaries of what can be loosely called narrative fiction cinema, the directors knowingly deploy an array of stylistic techniques, editing, lighting, framing, and sound effects that compete with or exceed narrative requirements and call attention to the materiality of the film itself. Not surprisingly, it is not only the directors but the work of some of their key collaborators that has gained recognition: I am thinking of Agnès Godard and Caroline Champetier’s noted camerawork and photography for instance.

A number of the directors concerned engaged with the kind of cinematic corporeality I have described in order to evoke a contemporary state of existential malaise. Implicitly or explicitly, many of the films deal with the effect of exile, madness, illness, isolation, and exploitation. They evoke liminal universes, film worlds that are permeated with angst and, often, violence. Frequently, the relation of the subject to others and to his/her environment is one of profound disjunction, and the encounter with nature and the inanimate world is infused with fear, throwing into relief the vulnerability of the human body and of human subject-hood. But to focus solely on the more dystopian of the films is, I think, to miss out on the larger picture and its implications in terms of historical and aesthetic significance. For, it seems to me, part of the production of that period, and indeed, those films that still participate in this form of cinema today, are interested in exploring the “confusion of the limit between subjective body and objective world,” but not necessarily as one of existential horror: in these cases it becomes, rather, a process of existential expansion. I am paraphrasing Vivian Sobchack who, commenting on Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s memorable passage about the impossibility of safely establishing “the limit between the body and the world,” stressed that the issue of mutual permeability can be put alternatively “in terms of existential ease or horror, awesome or awful encounters with inanimate ‘things’, inherence in the world or alienation from it.”

LM: To my mind, the cinematic strategies that you evoked a little earlier as “stylistic techniques” move between an aesthetic that has been traditionally associated with melodrama but also, in introducing materiality, relate to an aesthetic more usually associated with the avant-garde. The surprise, as it were, in the conjunction here is that they generate the states of “confusion” that you mention above very specifically around the human body and its limits. But to draw back for a moment, is the quotation from Merleau-Ponty specifically a comment on the human body in film? Clearly the cinema would be the medium par excellence to
MB: Merleau-Ponty used the word *flesh* to describe embodied consciousness.⁴ For him, consciousness does not arise in transcendence but through inherence of the body-subject to the world, to the material state of *flesh*. Crucially, however, in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, as in the existentialist school of thought, inherence does not amount to passivity (existence as predestination, the absence of freedom): the construction of the self happens through exchange, as an inter-subjective and reversible process, and Merleau-Ponty further insists on the porosity and continuity not only between subject and world but in the *sense* of an outer and inner self. Sobchack quotes from *Le Visible et l’invisible* rather than from *Le cinéma et la nouvelle psychologie* (1945), but in the latter Merleau-Ponty does talk about cinema’s ability to show “la conscience jetée dans le monde” (“consciousness thrown into the world”) and points to the simultaneous development of the cinema with that of a phenomenological approach in contemporary philosophy.⁵ In effect, for him, it is in the medium’s aptitude to show (rather than explain) the inherence (temporal and spatial) of the self to the world and to others that cinema and phenomenology find a common ground. Although his analysis of the cinematic techniques that can make this happen is limited, he senses that the cinema is, as you said, the medium to experiment with the notion of the human body and its limits, the permeability of outer and inner reality.

Similarly, early film theorists as well as avant-garde filmmakers were interested in the productive confusion that emerges through the sense of continuity between the materiality of the human body and that of the medium. They stressed cinema’s ability to explore the relation of subject to world not merely as a detached and observing camera-eye – a surrogate human subjectivity – exploring a pro-filmic that is passively waiting to be discovered and made sense of but as a dynamic relationship that shapes both the filmed and the one who is filming/watching. By extension, they thought of cinema as a medium with an ability to merge outer and inner vision as well as evoke inner feelings through images of the world. This has remained a key aspect of experimental filmmaking practice and film theory: I am thinking of Stan Brakhage’s *Metaphors on Vision*, of course, but also Bruce Elder’s *A Body of Vision*.⁶ Subjectivity as “un-difference” is also, unsurprisingly, a key feature of women film theorists and women’s film practice. Carolee Schneemann’s films are exemplary in their subversion of fixed subject – gendered – positions and their fusing of the human body and film body (Elder talks of Schneemann working “with the film’s own flesh”).⁷

Although, as I stressed before, the kind of cinema that I described earlier (a cinema of transgression, a “corporeal cinema,” or a “cinema of the senses” if we have to give it a name – the denomination can vary) belongs to the broad category of narrative fiction film, there is a similar interest in unsettling or confusing the
border between subject and object, between the human figure and its animate and inanimate surroundings. It is a cinema that works within the broad conventions of the fiction feature film but favors de-familiarizing techniques: playing on duration, de-framing and de-centering shots, counterpointing the effects of medium and long shots with the frontality and hapticity of close-up and extreme close-up shots that do not so much fragment as fail to contain bodies within the confines of the frame. In effect, the physicality or viscerality of the filmmaking is often simultaneously played out on the bodies of the characters and inscribed in the filmic body itself – in the blurred, tumultuous images and chaotic sounds of Philippe Grandrieux’s films, for example, or in the split screens that appear at the beginning and at the end of Marina de Van’s, DANS MA PEAU (IN MY SKIN, 2002) or in Bertrand Bonello’s L’APOLLONIDE (SOUVENIRS DE LA MAISON CLOSE) (2011), both of which feature characters involved in body mutilation.

The films generally associated with the French “cinema of the senses” characteristically offer themselves to the spectator as deeply sensuous universes in which the audio-visual medium of film is used to evoke other senses (taste, smell, and, crucially, touch) so that they can be said to encourage a “tactile,” “haptic” gaze and empathetic involvement from the viewer. By extension, if the characters they feature are, as with any mainstream film character, caught in the web of signs that transforms bodies into codified, functional narrative components – gender, race, class, appearance, all meant to determine behavioral and emotional patterns – they also operate at the “micro level” (elemental alterations, or transformations that pertain to the level of affect). To borrow a now classic term from Deleuze and Guattari: they are figures of “becoming.”

I am aware that I started my answer with Merleau-Ponty and that I am concluding with Deleuze who are, of course, unlikely bedfellows. Thinking about Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze in relation to cinema and to feminist film theory brings me back to my earlier comment concerning the coexistence of contrasted trends within a contemporary cinema of sensation: one that explores the limit between the body and the world in terms of existential horror, and one that explores the limit between the body as inherence in the world and existential expansion. In the context of this dual cinema, Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty are relevant in different ways. Merleau-Ponty talks about flesh, Deleuze about meat. They are both interested in zones of un-difference or indecidability, but where Merleau-Ponty envisages being-in-the-world as a process of conciliation between subjective body and objective world, Deleuze is interested in the shock of sensation, in disruption and disjunction.

LM: Could you, at this point, comment more particularly on the remarkable presence of women in the cinema of transgression? I believe that these women directors don’t necessarily take to being categorized as “feminist” or even as “women.” But from your perspective, to what extent has this genre attracted women,
such as the ones you mention above, and to what extent has it enabled them to touch on questions of the body, violence, the fantastic, and so on in a way that is unprecedented in the history of women’s cinema?

**MB:** Certainly, a number of the films appeared to blur the frontier between art cinema and the genres of excess – as Linda Williams coined them – namely horror and pornography. There is no doubt that the reworking of the conventions of the genres of excess, including the appropriation of a cinematographic language that breaks away from the safe standardized visions and set tropes of mainstream cinema, opens a space where a subversive, abject femininity can be explored, one that refutes the normalizing power of commodification and spectacle. This kind of visceral outburst, in the context of women artists’ production, had happened in performance art, in experimental film, but not in feature film. It was a radical move, and there is no denying the intense satisfaction one may find in the way some of these films probe and upturn traditional tropes and willfully parade a femininity that revels in mess, dirt, and violence.

But if we think of transgression in broader terms, formal as well as thematic, it is possible that some of the denominations assigned to the French cinema of that period – I am thinking, for instance, of “French Extreme” – may have pre-empted or limited the way we look at them as an ensemble. In effect, it is also in the cinema that probes a sense of “inherence in the world” as existential expansion that we find some of the most arresting work by women filmmakers: I am thinking in particular about the work of Claire Denis (NÉNETTE ET BONI, VENDREDI SOIR, 39 RHUMS) and Pascale Ferran’s (LADY CHATTERLEY, BIRD PEOPLE), though to a certain extent, some of Catherine Breillat’s work on fairytales would also fit in this. Although we readily associate them with the enduring and reductive power of archetypical representations (of women in particular), fairytales and costume dramas also open up spaces where non-commodified corporealties and desires can be explored. Denis’s VENDREDI SOIR (FRIDAY NIGHT, 2001), with its very specific sense of a suspended time where modern life with all its trappings is brought to a standstill, is, in that sense, close to Ferran’s LADY CHATTERLEY (2006) and BIRD PEOPLE (2014) and – at the crossroads between the beautiful and the abject – Breillat’s BARBE BLEUE (BLUE BEARD, 2009) and LA BELLE ENDORMIE (THE SLEEPING BEAUTY, 2010). These films pay great attention to surfaces, textures, colors, and the haptic effect of camera work, as can be seen in the beautiful, lush display of fabrics and colors in Ferran’s and Breillat’s costume dramas, and in their powerfully sensual camera work and photography. Their films show their characters engaged in an intensely tactile relation to the world around them and, by extension, offer themselves to spectators as heightened sensory experience.

You could say that films such as VENDREDI SOIR, LADY CHATTERLEY, and BIRD PEOPLE exemplify what Vivian Sobchack describes as the “ethical grace”
of a cinema that yields to the “unity of the look” – the ability to evoke, through the operations of film, a subjective body/objective world relationship that is not merely a relationship of disjunction, appropriation, and consumption (of the object by the subject) but also one of continuous co-presence and reciprocity. As with De Van’s DANS MA PEAU, but without the recourse to horror, these films deal with the awakening of a female character to a world of sensation that, in turn, profoundly alters and expands these characters’ access to and understanding of the web of social, economic, and cultural relations that shapes their environment and determines the way they are supposed to live their life. Framing, camera movements, the variations in focus and depth of field, in the color, tone, and intensity of the audio-visual field work to create an enhanced awareness of one subject’s relationship with other subjects and with the world, animate (human, animal, and vegetal) and inanimate. In the way these films demonstrate a commitment to capture and convey the richness of even the humblest aspect of the profilmic reality through the texture and sensual properties of the images and soundtrack, they bring to mind the films of Yasujirō Ozu and the writings of certain early film theorists: Béla Balázs on the physiognomy of film, Jean Epstein on photogénie. Yet George Bataille’s writing on eroticism and Julia Kristeva’s on abjection are not far away. There is continuity in the approach, in particular for women directors who, in the filmmaking, straddle both aspects of this cinema of corporeality: the dystopian evocations of being-in-the-world as loss of subjecthood and bodily integrity, and the exploration, through the operations of film, of “the subjective body and objective world […] passionately intertwined,” as Sobchack puts it.12

LM: You just mentioned Bataille, but you also mentioned Kristeva on abjection. Does the cinema of transgression relate to theories of the abject? That is, in Kristeva’s concept as developed in Powers of Horror (later taken up by feminists such as Barbara Creed),13 the abject is a residue of the mother’s body and emerges out of the subject’s only partially successful differentiation of the self from the all-encompassing maternal. On the face of it, although the abject seems to be relevant to this cinema, the maternal seems to be irrelevant. Do you have any thoughts about this?

MB: You are right, Kristeva’s concept of the abject is relevant in particular where the blurring of borders between subjective and objective occurs (the ultimate occurrence being that of the body turned corpse), but I am not convinced the maternal as such is a prominent trope of this cinema. It is present, of course. Some of the characters I have mentioned – Lady Chatterley, Nénette – are pregnant. It creates an interesting situation in NÉNETTE ET BONI, for instance, where at the end, Boni, the brother, decides to take care of his sister’s child. In Breillat’s ROMANCE X, thanks to parallel editing (birth is compared with the explosion of the
flat where the father of the newborn baby stays) and the documentary close-up shot (of the baby being born), the ending clearly associates birth with a moment of pure abjection, as an example of the feminine’s power to blast asunder the familiar systems of meaning.

However, as with other cinemas, where French cinema most readily addresses the maternal in connection with the abject is probably in films that clearly belong to the horror and gore genre (traditionally not a prolific area of French filmmaking): I am thinking of À L’INTÉRIEUR (Julien Maury, Alexandre Bustillo 2007), where Beatrice Dalle plays a psychopathic killer determined to steal a baby from its mother’s womb. I will spare you the details...

LM: I am convinced: the maternal is not a key point of reference for the “cinema of transgression”! To go back to some important points you made earlier... You have evoked the aesthetic strategies employed by the women directors of the genre very effectively in terms of the affect theories of Laura Marks and Vivian Sobchack, emphasizing the way that diegetically depicted textures (cloth, color, etc.) then infuse the cinematic image itself, suggesting a tactility that carries sensory experiences from the screen to the spectator. Although it has been argued (by Marks) that haptic cinema isn’t necessarily “feminist” or does not even have to do with the “feminine,” does a gender perspective throw an interesting light on the concept of the haptic as a political as well as aesthetic theory? In developing a concept of cinema based on the senses and sensuality, a critique of a prioritization of the optic has been key. Is there a political dimension to this?

MB: The critique of the prioritization of the optic is, it seems to me, where haptic theory meets feminist film criticism. If we define optical modes of vision as vision that is objective and distanced and organized according to the rules of perspective, that is, detached from its object and bent on interpreting, investigating, and visually “consuming” the object of the gaze, then both haptic theory and feminist film theory partly stem from a critique of the ways in which optical vision is naturalized and instrumentalized in cinema.

Both stress that in terms of representation and in terms of the organization of vision, the dominance of the optic – and the superseding of other senses and other modes of visual perception – is a historical process (of which cinema is a part through the development of the set of conventions that characterizes mainstream filmmaking). Cultural historians, Robert Muchembled and Michel Foucault amongst others, have traced this evolution of Western modes of perception and representation as far back as the Middle Ages, while noting that the advent of the industrial and capitalist era has accelerated the process of the prioritization of the optic. In The Skin of the Film, Laura Marks remarks on the apparent “atrophy of sensuous knowledge in industrial and post-industrial societies.” For most critics of contemporary Western epistemology, it is through the optic

194 MARTINE BEUGNET AND LAURA MULVEY
that the gaze is, potentially, transformed into a gaze of ownership. To put it
simplistically, the way the optic relies on isolating the object of the gaze from its
surroundings and on maintaining a distance between a seemingly omniscient
viewing subject and the object of his/her gaze resonates with the capitalist mode
of instrumentalization of desire and of vision as consumption. Although, for the
development of her theoretical framework, Marks relies on thinkers that are not
directly concerned with the political implications of such critique, her own inter-
est is in “intercultural cinema” – a cinema of exiles, developing as a form of
resistance to colonial and postcolonial modes of representation. She stresses the
ways in which ocular centrism and optical vision readily serve the needs of the
colonialist and capitalist appropriation of modes of representation. Though she
differs from classic feminist theory in her rejection of the psychoanalytical model
in particular (because of the latter’s depiction of all forms of visuality as forms of
alienation), the critique of the optic creates a point of encounter.

Starting with “Visual Pleasure,” feminist film theory has demonstrated how
the objectifying power of the camera gaze was, in mainstream cinema, typically
put in the service of a male point of view, taking the female figure as its object of
investigation and consumption. One often overlooks the fact that the develop-
ment of feminist film theory went hand in hand with experimental film practice,
which haptic visuality had been a part of from the start. Seeking to destabilize the
visual field and to bring the attention back to the materiality of film, avant-garde
and experimental cinemas have always explored ways of rendering the film image
more tactile, less immediately “readable.”

Prior to becoming interested in a certain French cinema as a cinema of the
senses, I had associated the political potential of the shift from optic to haptic
primarily with experimental cinema, though it was also found in art cinema. The
film most directly concerned with gender politics in this way was Sally Potter’s
ORLANDO (1992), the concluding sequence of which neatly summed up the
film’s complex exploration of politics and/as the construction of the gaze. You
remember those humorous sequences of Orlando who, having recently turned
into a woman, finds herself strapped into corset and hoop skirt, and attempts to
negotiate the encumbered space of her English castle under the unflinching eye
of the distant camera and against a soundtrack of peacock cries – by the book
“to-be-looked-at-ness”… In contrast, at the end of the film, divested of her title
and attendant material possessions, Orlando sits in a field while her small
daughter, armed with a video camera, runs about, laughing and filming at ran-
dom. The result, a sequence of dynamic, motion-blurred images of tall grass,
trees, and sky, forms a lively evocation of the little girl’s empathetic and joyful
relationship with her surroundings.

Agnès Varda includes a similar sequence in LES GLANEURS ET LA GLANEUSE
(The Gleaners and I, 2000). As is well known, in this documentary she ex-
periments with the possibilities of a mini DV which allows her to film unencum-
bered by heavy equipment. At the heart of her project is the possibility to glean images and in particular to include the kind of visual material that is normally not deemed adequate in well-structured, productive storytelling.\textsuperscript{16} At one point, at the end of a sequence, she forgets to switch off her camera. Dangling freely from her wrist, the camera goes on recording the ground on which Varda walks, creating a sequence of experimental-looking footage, a kinetic evocation of the body-machine assemblage which the director decides to include in her film, accompanied by a jazzy soundtrack.

To go back to the cinema of transgression, in spite of the different strategies adopted by the directors concerned, one finds in evidence a willingness to question the optic as a form of visual mastery and, by extension, of the way the female body is reified, instrumentalized, and regulated within the contemporary politics and economics of the body. If, as Marks and Sobchack remind us, an economy of the look based on the observer’s detached gaze tends to establish a one-sided relation of visual consumption or ownership, then the films’ insistence on touch and tactility testify to a willingness to evoke a relationship based on reciprocity and debunk the tendency towards vision-as-consumption of which the female figure remains a primary object.

\textbf{LM:} Perhaps I could interrupt here? This might be a moment in which I can reflect on my rather contradictory relation to theories of the optical… In principle, I understand that a critique of optical vision brings haptic visuality and feminist film theory together. And Laura Marks’s concept of the haptic in the context of intercultural cinema makes a key political contribution to the aesthetics of experimental cinema diegetically especially through the dispersal of a distanced vision into a sense of screen surface. And the way she brings economic structures and widespread cultural contexts together to bring a particular “movement” to life is fascinating. There are necessarily points of coincidence: for instance, from the perspective of Hollywood spectatorship as “masculinized” (my old “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” essay), a number of these points ring true. But my argument was fundamentally generated by questions of sexuality and of power. And I would still hold on to this critique: that images of women circulate at the heart of the society of the spectacle as objects of consumption, not only in cinema but also in other media, performance etc. To my mind, this circulation, and the power relations it signifies, cannot be detached from the sexual, which gives the optical its particular “drive” or power and is found to an exaggerated degree in a certain kind of cinema. Needless to say, the power of the gaze is also literally brought to bear in colonial and class contexts but is, by and large, detached from the spectacular that characterizes the economic structures of commodity culture and should (as a number of theorists have) be analyzed from a different political/economic position.
However, at a certain point, I find I baulk at a totalizing critique of the optical as such. Without going into excessive detail, I associate, for instance, optical distance with tricks of vision and trompe l’œil effects (on which the illusion of cinema is itself based) which have their own self reflexive wit – and, risking going out on a limb here, I would include perspective painting in this category with its generally incomplete and uncertain techniques. (In fact, I have never quite understood why the “Italian Renaissance” with its fascinating tensions between religious iconography and fragmented observation of the natural world has been so denounced – going right back to the old days of Screen! To use the perhaps more convincing aesthetic categories of heterogeneity and dispersal...)

However, this “defense” of optical visuality may well be due to the intractability of my age and my generation, as the optical has always been closely connected with processes of deciphering and interpreting. I have tried to think this approach through in terms of curiosity, that is, a drive to look associated with women, which does involve distance and inquiry but not mastery. I have been interested to see that Laura Marks specifically takes issue with the Brechtian active spectator due to his/her exercise of “critical” distance. To sum up this rather rough intervention, my continued investment in optical visuality contains within it both the inquiring pleasure of curiosity and the investigative critical gaze I have always associated with feminism...

MB: You are absolutely right. It is important to reiterate that what we are dealing with is visuality: a historical, evolving process. We have been discussing ways in which the optic can be instrumentalized, not “essential” qualities of optic vision. It is equally important to remember that haptic and optic are not opposite but continuous: often, in film, haptic effects happen through the passage from one mode of vision to the other. Reading your writings on curiosity, gaze, and the feminine for instance, I was reminded of this small, wonderful moment in Vendredi soir when the character of Jean first appears and is “chosen,” as it were, by the camera and by Laure. So far, the camera – and the film – have been seemingly undecided about which story, which character to follow through. The film’s main character, Laure (Valérie Lemercier), is in her car, stuck in a traffic jam. Denis uses slow shutter speed to capture the fast-walking crowd, which produces the characteristic impression of a blurred field of moving colors. One of the shots cuts almost invisibly into a medium shot of Jean (Vincent Lindon) in perfect focus, his silhouette delineated against a shallow depth of field, standing motionless, his precisely outlined face appears above the flow of passers-by. The contrast between sharpness and blur creates a delightful visual shock and (although the character is seen for the first time) an uncanny sense of recognition...

LM: I would like to get back to the political questions raised by some of the films made by women in transgressive cinema. Although we agreed that the maternal
did not play a central role in these movies, there is a sense that an insistence on the body – on disgust at the wounded female body – is a recurring motif. I have been reminded of recent American women artists who have been working with and around these ideas – for instance Marina Abramović or, closer to my interest, Cindy Sherman’s work in the late 1990s that explores the abject or disgusting aspect of the female body as it might be understood, that is repressed, perhaps particularly in consumer society. To get back to the French cinema that we are discussing, could you place a film such as DANS MA PEAU within the pressures of a society in which young women’s “surface appearance” is fetishized? Is there a kind of return of the repressed?

**MB:** Yes, the notion of a return of the repressed is pertinent, especially in the context of a cinema that borrows from the codes of the horror genre. In my discussion of Denis’s TROUBLE EVERY DAY, I envisaged the film in the context of a resurfacing of the colonial past as well as an evocation of the murky underbelly of global capitalism.18

Carrie Tarr described De Van’s film as a study of “the commodification of the individual in the context of socio-economic and cultural processes which turn human beings into instruments in a market and sexual economy.”19 DANS MA PEAU’s main character is a successful, “well adjusted” young professional woman, an up-and-coming executive working in a modern high-rise of the Parisian business district of La Défense. She inhabits a typically materialistic and competitive world that reduces the body, and, with particular (implicit and explicit) violence, the female body, to its cultural, socio-economic functions. Just after receiving a significant promotion, she starts mutilating herself, becomes obsessed with open skin and flesh. From then on, the visceral aesthetics of the sequences of mutilation, with their messy depiction of lacerated skin and open wounds, represent an increasingly radical disruption of the central character’s professional and personal environment – an environment that had initially been safely described through classic mise-en-scène and camera work. We could also compare Kristin Ross’s description of the car and the modern home as the emblem of social achievement and individualism in Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture20 to the disturbing cynicism with which Manu, the heroine of Baise moi (2000), compares the episode of her rape with parking a car in the projects and having it broken into. The sequence is shot in a derelict warehouse, in the film’s typically drab, low-definition video look.21 Similarly, in my discussion of Denis’s TROUBLE EVERY DAY, I made references to Kristin Ross and I envisaged the film in the context of a resurfacing of the colonial past as well as an evocation of the murky underbelly of global capitalism.22

This question of “surface appearance” can be traced in films that are very different in tone, however. In BirdPeople, Ferran starts by describing a constellation of characters reduced to precise professional and social denominations, in-
terchangeable workers and travelers trapped in the typically dehumanised, “any-space-whatever” environment of an airport hotel. Ferran’s filmmaking, however, implicitly challenges the unquestioned acceptance of such a state of affairs. Her sensuous treatment of the profilmic and her blurring of the limits between inanimate and animate and human and animal worlds (one of the hotel maids transforms into a bird, leading to exhilarating sequences of flying) emphasize instead a sense of continuity and reversibility denied by productivity-centered strategies of efficiency, standardization, and consumption. As Sobchack summarizes it: “[It is] the camera eye’s unity of the look [that] gathers the material world in the attentive and passionate embrace of its gaze, making little distinction between human flesh and the flesh of inanimate things – at the same time neither reducing human beings to mere objects nor reducing things by ‘raising’ them as subjects but only ‘for us.’”

Gertrud Koch and Miriam Hansen once stated that at a time when, “in current film theory, the linguistic paradigm has displaced phenomenological approaches,” Béla Balázs’s theory of film, and in particular, his “physiognomy of objects,” reminded us of alternative ways of considering the medium of the moving image. In his writing, he envisaged cinema as a democratic form of expression where “all positions are available and intelligible, all objects assume the dignity of aesthetic perception and sublimation.”

Koch and Hansen wrote about this in the late 1980s. Given that the films discussed here are recent releases, the premise should be upturned: it seems that at a time when, in current film practice as in film theory, phenomenological and haptic approaches are challenging the linguistic models anew, films like Ferran’s offer us again what cinema as an art form is so well suited for, yet rarely realizes: the possibility to feel and think, through the operations of film, a reciprocal relationship between subjective body and objective world.

Directors resort to haptic strategies of imaging to explore anew such a relationship, or on the contrary, to stress the brutality of its denial. I have paired De Van and Ferran’s films. I could also have discussed ELLE EST DES NOTRES (Siegfried Alnoy, 2002) together with Denis’s NÉNETTE ET BONI or VENDREDI SOIR in similar terms. In effect, it is interesting to contrast this French cinema to other traditions of art cinema too. One could look at Ferran’s “unifying gaze” in relation to Sofia Coppola’s dystopian description of American girlhood in THE VIRGIN SUICIDES (1999). Coppola deploys a comparable attention to detail and creates highly sensuous images, yet her female characters are trapped in an oppressive world of objects and male gazes that progressively hollows them out, reducing them to ghostly emanations, scattered, cliché visions created by adolescent imaginations and the fetishization of a few trinkets abandoned on a dressing table.

In effect, an attempt at contextualizing these kinds of echoes between American and French cinema would bring us back to the issue of film, the feminine
body, and consumer culture with which we started. As I said before, Kristin Ross’s study of post-war French society remains a key source for me. In *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies*, she investigates the cultural impact of late capitalism and the fast-pace modernization undergone by France in the 1950s. The American model – its insistence on efficiency and cleanliness, its fast cars and powerful aspirators – was embraced, she argues, as a means to counterpoint the reality of an “unclean,” murky history, to efface the memory of the disastrous conflicts and genocides of the recent World War as well as the traces of the colonial wars. Women were cast as central vectors of this change in their role as managers of the domestic space; their bodies, clean, groomed, and cinched waisted a symbol and evidence of the change. One of the most discussed films of this period is Agnès Varda’s *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1962), shot against the backdrop of France’s “dirty” war – the Algerian War of Independence. *Cléo* is a beautiful, smartly dressed young actress. But inside her fine-looking body, a cancer is growing. Its presence forces her to see beyond the appearances of the spectacle of a careless Paris in the spring.

You could say that in a contemporary cinema of excess, the cancer is not hidden anymore. In fact, in their films, De Van, Denis, and Breillat create a dual aesthetics to suggest that the discourses of corporate efficiency and corporeal disintegration are intimately connected. In Breillat’s *Romance X*, the cold sterility of the hospital, which matches that of the young couple’s designer domestic interiors, serves as the backdrop to the reduction of the female body to an object of medical investigation. In Denis’s *Trouble Every Day*, we see lab workers secluded in the sterile environment of cutting-edge scientific laboratories, removing neat slices out of the smooth, soft shapes of preserved brains. But science is of no help to the main characters who, infected with a disease contracted as a result of the exploitation of natural resources in ex-colonial land, have turned into blood-thirsty monsters who devour their victims.

**LM:** In our conversations you have suggested that the cinema of transgression and its insistence on the bodily might be a response to the disembodied nature of the digital. Could you say something about this? And also, might there be a sense of a “return of the repressed,” a refusal to “clean away” the detritus of society similar to Kristin Ross’s argument in *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies*?

**MB:** Cinema, as a machinistic art form, challenged by new forms of recording and watching moving images, is necessarily concerned with the explosion of virtual culture, the emergence of a “posthuman” perspective, and the increasing overlap of the biological and the cybernetic, which, as Katherine Hayles puts it, “privileges informational pattern over material instantiation.”

To a certain extent, the promises of the digital era echo and extend those of the post-war modernization as described by Ross: in the context of consumer cul-
ture, the digital brings with it not only the possibility to endlessly record, retrieve, and archive, it also erases traces of deterioration and "cleans" the image up. By extension, the digital treatment of the image tends to ground representation in a regime of timelessness from which "imperfection," aging, and death are increasingly evacuated. In this sense, the often-quoted sequence of *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse* where Varda turns her newly acquired, hand-held digital camera towards herself and films her aging body in close-up offers itself as a compelling film manifesto.

There is continuity in this, between art cinema and experimental cinema. In the latter, the physicality and vulnerability of the old medium of celluloid film has been hailed as a precious quality rather than a flaw, an element of superiority over the digital: film’s ability to deteriorate or age is a means to testify to human finitude. Women have been prominent amongst experimental filmmakers seeking to problematize the shift from analogue to digital by focusing on the old medium’s physicality: there has been a flourish of practices emphasizing the materiality of the medium in connection with the materiality of the human body, its organs and fluids – using menstrual blood, as in the case of Louise Bourke’s *Jours en fleurs* (2003), or tears and spit, like the British artist Vicki Smith, to alter the surface of the celluloid film for instance.

The arguments advocating the advent of the digital as progress, however, are well known: there is new freedom to be found in “digital identities.” If technologies render our old flesh-and-blood bodies superfluous (to paraphrase Baudrillard), if identities, including digital identities, can be constructed anew, then gender and gender issues effectively become obsolete. Moreover, from touch screens to virtual grabbing, there is an emphasis on new technologies as enhancing embodied perception rather than rendering it obsolete and, indeed, as potentially challenging the cinematic paradigm of dominant optic visuality with more tactile and interactive models.

Yet on the whole, on our screens, stereotypes are, if anything, reinforced: whilst the female body retains its “privileged” status as object of commodity fetishism, “retouching” has become the norm in digital imaging. On the other hand, the construction of virtual identities has provided mainstream cinema with a steady stream of scenarios where hyper-feminized yet disembodied female characters (I am thinking in particular of a recent string of films in which Scarlett Johansson stars) stand in for the anxiety generated by the prospect of a world where traditional distinctions (gender, object/subject, human/post-human) may be disappearing. At the same time, for all the talk about interface, digital “communication” often appears to encourage a non-reciprocal, user-centered mode of image consumption. However, it is interesting to observe that haptic aesthetics, with its insistence on the tactile and the corporeal (including its most abject, disfigured, filthy incarnations) and their inscription in and through the medium’s material presence, emerges as a key strategy deployed by filmmakers, and
in particular contemporary women directors, at the same time as the establish-
ment of digital electronics as the main mode of communication brings with it the
prospect of “escaping” the so-called “shortcomings” of our flesh and blood
bodies.

The recourse to haptic techniques of filmmaking and the extreme corporeality
of the genres of excess can also be read in this context. In its flaunting of the
body in all its visceral presence – cut up, opened up, filthy, soiled, and contami-
nated – extreme cinema offers itself as the counterpoint to digital postproduc-
tion’s perfected female body, a reminder of the existence of actual sentient gen-
dered bodies beyond the dematerialized workings of digital imaging and
communication.