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Visceral Material:

Cinematic Bodies on Screen

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PhD Film Studies

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Declaration

This is to certify that that the work contained within has been composed by me and is entirely my own work. No part of this thesis has been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Signed:

Małgorzata Bugaj

Abstract

This thesis investigates cinema's attempts to engage in a dialogue with the trace of the physical body. My concern is with the on-screen presentation of the body rather than its treatment as a representation of gender, sexuality, race, age, or class. I examine specifically *The Elephant Man* (Lynch, 1980), *Crash* (Cronenberg, 1996), *Attenberg* (Tsangari, 2010), *Taxidermia* (Pálfi, 2006), and Sokurov's family trilogy (*Mother and Son*, 1997; *Father and Son*, 2003; and *Alexandra*, 2007). The recurring tropes in these seven films include references to the medical gaze (both objective and objectifying) and haptic visuality which privileges sensual, close engagement with the image of the material object. I consider the medical and the haptic as metaphors for depictions of the body in cinema. To develop my analysis, I draw on the works of Michel Foucault, Laura U. Marks and Vivian Sobchack amongst others. I conclude that the discussed films, preoccupied with images of corporeal forms, criticise cinema's conventional treatment of the body as simply a vessel for a goal-driven character and portray bodies which appear to consciousness in their own right.

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INTRODUCTION

Ours is a period of intense fascination with the body. Numerous discussions within recent social, political and cultural theory centre around human corporeality. It is, however, becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the fact that such an emphasis on the body (as embedded within these contexts) has gradually obscured its actual material nature. When considering different accounts and perspectives on the notion of human corporeality, Holliday, and Hassard observe that “while there has been an incredible explosion of work on the body in theory, it’s often hard to spot the material, the corporeal, the guts and goo that constitute the body itself” (1). Similarly, Hayles remarks:

> One contemporary belief likely to stupefy future generations is the post-modern orthodoxy that the body is primarily, if not entirely, a linguistic and discursive construction . . . Although researches in the physical and human sciences acknowledged the importance of materiality in different ways, they nevertheless collaborated in creating the post-modern ideology that the body’s materiality is secondary to the logical or semiotic structures it encodes. (192)

In the domain of film studies, the body is ordinarily investigated as a representation of gender, sexuality, nationality, race, age or class. There has been, however, relatively little analysis of those instances when cinema focuses on the very materiality and biology of the body presented on screen. While reasons for such a limited presence of the material body in public discourse are manifold, I will concentrate here on two. For one, Western philosophy and culture, heavily reliant on the Cartesian duality, tend to emphasise the importance of the mind over the body. For another, the acute awareness of our corporealities in everyday life is typically perceived as negative, that is linked with uncomfortable states of the body.

Cartesian duality

Grosz remarks that Western philosophical thought has long been preoccupied with Descartes' distinction between the mind and the body, with the latter half of this dichotomous structure deemed inferior:

> Body is thus what is not mind, what is distinct from and other than the privileged term. It is what the mind must expel in order to retain its 'integrity'. It is implicitly defined as unruly, disruptive, in need of direction and judgement, merely incidental to the defining characteristics of mind, reason, or personal identity through its opposition to consciousness, to the psyche and other privileged terms within philosophical thought. (*Volatile Bodies* 3)

Following the lead of Elizabeth Grosz, Hallam, Hockey and Howarth point to the prevailing perception of the body as subordinate to and dependent on the mind: "in the absence of the mind, body loses value, its opposite number or defining better half having ceased to be linked with it in any tangible sense. Freed from the body, mind, however, continues its existence in the form of its products, reputation, and influence" (70-71). This binary opposition of the ideal and the material implies the need to discipline the unruly body - material and mortal, revealing our connection with animality and nature - and impose the rule of reason over matter and the senses.

Grosz emphasises that such a perception of the body pre-dates Descartes. In antiquity, "the body has been regarded as a source of interference in, and a danger to, the operations of reason . . . a betrayal of and a prison for the soul, reason, or mind" (*Volatile Bodies* 5), while within the Christian tradition, the sinful and mortal carnality is contrasted with the God-given immortal soul. With regards to contemporary times, Shaviro suggests that "postmodern Western culture is more traditional, more Cartesian, than it is willing to admit; it is still frantically concerned to deny materiality, to keep thought separate from the exigencies of the flesh" (*Cinematic Body* 126). Our era is characterised by an attempt to deny the biological basis of the body that is, according to Baudrilliard, seen as a "threatening double" (*The Consumer Society* 131). As a "threatening double", corporeality ceases to be a

transparent site of subjectivity. In other words, contemporary culture attempts to conceal the fact that, essentially, we are bodies.

Bodies appearing to conscious awareness

In our everyday lives we are surrounded by items of particular transparency. Objects performing particular functions are imbued with certain significance but as such usually disappear from our conscious perception. Brown, in his "Thing Theory" maintains, however, that "we begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us" (140). Correspondingly, a malfunctioning body brings to prominence its physicality[1]. The material nature of our corporeality comes to the fore when it breaks or loses its proper role and is thus turned into an alien thing perceived as separate from the self. Leder discusses the general transparency of the body in everyday experience and its emergence into our awareness at times of dysfunction: "our organic basis can be easily forgotten due to the reticence of visceral processes . . . These disappearances particularly characterise normal and healthy functioning, forgetting about or 'freeing oneself' from the body takes on a positive value" (69). The body that manifests its own physicality becomes an awkward presence, threatening or limiting.

Leder[2] considers numerous instances when the body is brought to our conscious attention at times of disruptive experience. These include illness or a dangerous situation (for example the threat of death), urgent physiological needs (such as hunger or thirst), discomfort or weariness (weakness or fatigue), or phenomena connected with changes in the body (puberty, ageing or pregnancy). Similarly, Elaine Scarry in her study devoted to the suffering body, points to the

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[1] Mary Borden provides an interesting example of the objectification of the "broken body" in her *The Forbidden Zone* she considers wounded bodies of soldiers from the position of a nurse at a war hospital. Here the wounded body is perceived as a malfunctioning object which is broken and should be either mended or discarded.

[2] To describe the body emerging to consciousness and becoming a focal point of attention, Leder suggests the term *dys-appearance:* "in contrast to the 'disappearance' that characterises ordinary functioning, I will term this *principle of dys-appearance.* That is, the body *appears* as thematic focus, but precisely as in a *dys-* state. *Dys-* is from the Greek prefix signifying 'bad', 'hard' or 'ill', and is found in English in words such as 'dysfunctional'" (84).

nullifying power of pain and its ability to obliterate psychological content, the self and the world; "to split the human being into two", and impose a "distinction between a self and a body, between a 'me' and 'my body'" (48-9).

When considering the body emerging as an object foreign to subjectivity, Leder also elaborates on instances when corporeality is exposed to the objectifying gaze. To be subjected to such a gaze is to become aware of one's own physical nature and clearly perceive the split between the self and the objectified body. This type of surfacing of the corporeality refers mainly to the differing body (e.g. race or gender divergence), the body exposed to the eroticised or aestheticised gaze (such as that of a fashion model), or the body inscribed in scientific discourse (for example examined by a doctor) (92-99). Another example is the body displayed to the objectifying gaze on the cinema screen. My concern is instances when the cinematic body rises to conscious awareness in the gaze of the audience. I investigate occasions when spectators become aware of the materiality of the body watched on screen.

Bodies in cinema

Gaudreault remarks about the very beginning of the cinema that:

> the earliest film primarily displayed a 'view', presenting something that filmmakers thought would grab the audience's attention. This means that the earliest films dealt less with telling stories (let alone developing characters) and concentrated more on presenting what we have called 'attractions', usually brief items of visual interest. (19)

Soon, the filmmakers learnt that tricks, records of motion or gags could be edited together in order to create longer stories. By 1907, fiction films which "depended to a greater degree on developing characters who could convey individual personality and motivations" (20) came to prominence.

In its dominant mode (commercial films), cinema is "character-centered, i.e. personal or psychological causality is the armature of the classical story" (Bordwell,

Staiger, and Thompson 13). As "the prime causal agent" (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 13), the classical film character can be clearly defined through qualities consistent with one another, "typed by occupation, age, gender, and ethnic identity" (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 14). These features provide motivation for the story: "Hollywood protagonists tend to be active, to seek out goals and pursue them rather than having goals simply thrust upon them. Almost invariably, the protagonist's goals define the main lines of the action" (Thompson 14). In short, characters in Hollywood films are goal-oriented and driven by their desires.

It is worth noting that Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson's remarks are made in the context of Hollywood cinema from its inception to the 1960s (as well as the 1970s New Hollywood cinema (370-77)), a point when international cinema became more widely influential and began to challenge the dominance of classical cinema. While the authors offer a historical account of a particular film practice at a specific moment in time, "an examination of Hollywood cinema as a distinct artistic and economic phenomenon" (xiii), their observations also constitute "an attempt to articulate a theoretical approach to film history" (xv). Such an investigation of classical style as a set of norms and conventions "gives privileged place not to the aberrant film that breaks or tests the rules but to the quietly conformist film that tries simply to follow them" (10) and "constructs the model of an ordinary film" (10). Whereas I agree with the authors that also today "the classical style remains the dominant model for feature film making" (370), my discussion focuses on European art cinema, which, as Bordwell notes, "defines itself explicitly against the classical mode, and especially against the cause-effect linkage of events" (57). Specifically, my thesis is concerned with the images of the corporeal form presented in the films under discussion which can be contrasted with Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson's observations on the understanding of the on-screen body within the story causality (13-18). Their metaphor of the body as a vessel for a goal-driven character accurately describes the function of the body in mainstream cinema[3].

[3] Importantly, Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson's theory which I refer to is by no means the only example of a theoretical position opposed to the one I have taken. However, detailed analysis of other perspectives, such as those offered by phenomenology, cognitivism, or feminism, are beyond the scope of this thesis.

The bodies of actors, ordinarily in the centre of the filmic universe, do not draw attention to themselves, but rather to the character they are reconstructing. Cinema, particularly in its mainstream mode, endeavours to enchant the spectator in order to validate time and space as well as people and events, as factual, not fictitious: "it presents its characters as real people, its sequence of words or images as real time, and its representations as substantiated fact" (Stam 1). On-screen bodies are dressed, both literally and figuratively, in a certain costume and to some extent treated as yet another prop. In Wieczorkiewicz's words, "the fabrication of the body refers to both its form and its understanding. Constructed, de-constructed and re-constructed, the body is in a sense 'decorporealised'" (350). These manufactured cinematic bodies refer us back to Debord's society of spectacle, where the body is lived and mediated through appearance.

Such division is illustrated by Kwiatkowska's notion of *somatography*: the process of turning an actor's body into an image, which distinguishes between an actor, a figure and a character. Kwiatkowska refers to an actor as one who acts, a person with all his or her pre-filmic dimension, such as the relationships with other people working on the film or the public image, but also his or her physical body (31-32). A figure in Kwiatkowska's discussion is an audio-visual record of an actor's expressiveness, his or her body composed within the frame and presented on screen; in other words, a figure is "what is seen", "what is present on the flat image" (32). A character is defined as a construct introduced by the film narrative, a fictional persona forwarding the story; it is who an actor plays and who a viewer identifies with.

My argument is not concerned at the level of the character, but rather that of the figure, that is, the body. To be more specific, my point of investigation is a body that draws attention to its own materiality. In other words, this thesis does not look at the corporeal form as a representation of race, class, gender or sexuality. Rather, I consider an on-screen body detached from its historical, geographical, cultural and social context and as the trace of once present materiality, the reminiscence of a physical body now projected as image and sound. As a result, the material body gains importance of its own, it is no longer only a vessel for the character. Such an

emphasis on the body shifts the focus from the self, and thus away from the goal-driven character that moves the plot forward.

I base my study on a series of dichotomies: figure vs. character (Kwiatkowska); a "view", or "an item of visual interest" (Gaudreault) vs. "psychological causality presented through defined characters acting to achieve announced goals" (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 17); the body transparent in everyday experience vs. the corporeal form which emerges to conscious awareness in the gaze (Leder); and the rational mind vs. the body as "brute, animalistic, inert, outside of history, culture and socio-political life" (Grosz, *Sexual Subversions* xiv). With reference to these binary pairs, I investigate the conscious presentation of the material body that interrupts or subverts the plot. My main purpose is to explore cinema's attempts to show "the material, the corporeal, the guts and goo" (Holliday and Hassard 1).

In this thesis, I analyse the ways in which David Lynch, David Cronenberg, Alexander Sokurov, Athina Rachel Tsangari, and György Pálfi criticise cinema's conventional treatment of the body primarily as the vessel for the character. I consider specifically *The Elephant Man* (1980), *Crash* (1996), Sokurov's family trilogy (*Mother and Son,* 1997, *Father and Son,* 2003, and *Alexandra,* 2007)*, Attenberg* (2010) and *Taxidermia* (2006). The human corporeality in the discussed films, I argue, calls attention of spectators to their own materiality.

I do not deny that the cinematic works within the scope of this discussion address subjectivity; my study is not reductionist. Instead, the attempt is to shift the focus prevailing in cinema criticism, that sees the body simply as another prop, a vehicle for the character that it represents. I seek to invert the centrality of the character "typed by occupation, age, gender, and ethnic identity" (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 14) and move the figure - the material body - to the centre of the analysis.

By way of introduction, I provide a brief overview of the notions deployed in my thesis. The theoretical section (chapter 1) concentrates on two broader notions recurrent in the films under discussion: haptic perception and the clinical gaze. Close

and involved, the haptic mode of expression (figuratively) engages other modes of perception than vision and hearing and appeals to sensual memory of the spectator. On the contrary, the objective and objectifying discourse of medicine focuses on investigations of the biology, the physical dimension of human body. I consider haptic expression and the clinical gaze as metaphors for perceiving the body in cinema, which intensify the engagement with the trace of the material presented on screen.

Other repeated tropes in my thesis include body genres (Clover and Williams), considered in detail in chapter two, and self-reflexivity (Stam), analysed in chapter three. Although the films investigated in this study contain elements of body genres (horror and pornography), they do not offer "over-involvement in sensation and emotion" (Williams, "Film Bodies" 5). In this way they move beyond what is deemed as obscene and invite the aesthetic appreciation of the body. Additionally, the cinematic bodies that call attention to themselves (rather than to the characters that they represent) subvert cinematic concept of the body and thus refer to Stam's discourse on reflexivity. By stripping the body of its on-screen costume, such mediations on the physical nature of human corporeality point to the manufactured status of the body on screen.

Chapter two begins my close analysis of films: *The Elephant Man* and *Crash* open my consideration of the trace of the material presented in cinema. Following my reflections on Cartesian duality, I interpret these films as exploring a number of dichotomies. On one level, they present the spectacle of divergent corporealities based on a certain excess in regards to the body (freaks and post-crash bodies); it is the corporeal form that is central the identity of the characters in *Crash* and *The Elephant Man*. On the other, by evoking other types of bodies - those operating on imaginary investment (freak show performers and film icons) - these films consciously subvert this symbolic spectacle (in a freak show and lecture theatre, or of reconstructions of fatal car crashes), thus commenting on the nature of the on-screen body.

The following chapter, devoted to *Attenberg,* forwards the discussion on the split between the self and the body. The main character of the film, Marina, is a

young girl trying to "learn the body", particularly its sexuality and mortality. Through the employment of distancing devices (acting and setting), exploring human commonality with animals, and reflecting on medicalised, sexualised and mortal corporeality, *Attenberg* points to the fundamental alienation from the body. For Marina, detached from her own body and its sensations, the body emerges as a thing alien to the self. Reflecting her perception, the film brings the awkwardness of the material nature of human form to the level of acute awareness.

Chapter four shifts from a general focus on the material (as contrasted with the ideal or the symbolic) to the bodily exterior. *Mother and Son, Father and Son,* and *Alexandra* engage with different functions of skin: a cover disguising the inside, a medium of communication with the outside world, an imprint of identity, and, finally, a site of sensations. Additionally, the trilogy explores skin as a surface and contemplates its minute details: texture, dryness and subtle differences in colour. By addressing other senses than vision and hearing (touch and smell in particular), these films intensify the engagement with the trace of the material presence on screen.

The final chapter dealing with *Taxidermia* provides a reverse image to the preceding one. While in its first acts Pálfi's film links with Sokurov's family trilogy through its initial focus on skin, in later segments it invites us to explore the visceral depths of the body. I then move on to consider how *Taxidermia* employs an allegorical understandings of the corporeal. Firstly, by discussing politicised bodies, with the biology of the human form commenting on the official social systems, secondly, by contrasting Bakhtin's grotesque body displaying its carnal nature with Baudrillard's body as the finest of consumed objects (*The Consumer Society* 131), manufactured and obsessed with its surface appearance. I propose that in its last segment, *Taxidermia* returns to my discussion of *The Elephant Man* and *Crash* and their comments on the manufactured nature of the body as a spectacle.

The present analysis is not intended as an exhaustive survey of the films that place the figure – specifically the material body - rather than a character, in their centre. Instead, it proposes a series of filmic encounters with on-screen bodies. I suggest that *The Elephant Man, Crash, Attenberg,* Sokurov's family trilogy and *Taxidermia* all concentrate on the examination the trace of the material body through

exploring skin and viscera, through investigating the body that “takes over” the self, or through conscious subversion of a spectacle of the imaginary presented on screen. I propose to interpret these films as revolving around the biological nature of human corporeality recorded in sight and sound.

CHAPTER ONE

Theoretical introduction

This theoretical introduction gives an overview of two central notions that recur within the films discussed in my thesis: haptic perception and the clinical gaze. I put forward an argument that the haptic and the medical employed in cinema draw attention to the physical aspect of the body; it is precisely the interest in the material that makes them central to my analysis. Rather than seeing the haptic and the medical as irrevocably polarised, I try to draw a common thread between them. By highlighting films positioned at the intersection between the haptic and the medical, I focus on the moments in cinema that challenge the perception of the body solely as the site of the self. I propose that in *The Elephant Man, Crash, Attenberg,* Sokurov's family trilogy and *Taxidermia*, the haptic and medical elements subvert the perception of the body as simply a vehicle for a character in a film.

This chapter begins by addressing how haptic perception is considered in film theory (particularly in the works of Laura Marks) and provides examples from films. It briefly discusses Sobchack's reflections on the "as-if-real" nature of cinematic experience and hapticity as a metaphor for material presence. It then concentrates on the notion of the medical, in particular Foucault's "clinical gaze". These reflections on objectivity and objectification in medicine are followed by a commentary on the presence of medical images in popular culture. I interpret haptic visuality and clinical gaze employed in cinema as metaphors for the perception of the body in films.

The haptic

Classical approaches to film theory revolve around the ocularcentric paradigm that is vision, the sense that is capable of operating over distance and is central to cinema. Conversely, by prioritising the eye, films downplay the contact senses of smell, taste and touch, and at the same time diminish the importance of physical presence. Cinema can, however, address other senses than vision and hearing. As Sobchack

remarks, while meditating on Jane Campions's *Piano* (1993), "we see and comprehend and feel films with our entire bodily being, informed by the full history and carnal knowledge of our acculturated sensorium" (63). In other words, we are capable of grasping the meaning of an image by referring to knowledge acquired by touch, smell and taste.

In her exploration of multi-sensory cinematic experience, Marks compares two modes of looking: the optical and the haptic. She observes that "while optical perception privileges the representational power of the image, haptic perception privileges the material presence of the image" (*Skin of the Film* 162-3). Marks emphasises that the optical mode of perception "allows us to symbolize, to give an object a name, and for the same reason it blinds us to the richness of sensory experience" (*Touch* 12). Necessarily distanced from the image on screen, optical vision enables us to follow the evolving narrative and identify characters.

By contrast, haptic visuality operates to a large extent outside of the narrative and suggests a different relation to its object than that conventional to cinema. It invites viewers to meditate on images rather than just passively digest them. Haptic moments in cinema require an active mode of spectatorship, they present, as Marks puts it, "an object with which we interact rather than an illusion into which we enter" (*Skin of the Film* 190). Instead of giving precedence to the representational dimension, haptic images focus on the trace of the physical presented on screen.

The haptic qualities of cinematic perception have been discussed by Laura Marks in her major publication on the subject, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses*. Marks refers to the films of artists who live outside their native country. Here, she purports, hapticity conveys their longing for and remembering of their homelands through sensual experience. The book is followed by *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*, a collection of essays in which Marks develops her appreciation of haptic spectatorship and comments on the works of Ken Jacobs and Quay Brothers, along with a number of other film and video artists. Vivian Sobchack in *Carnal Thoughts* continues the discussion about hapticity particularly in "What My Fingers Knew", where she applies haptic criticism to Jane Campion's *Piano* (1993). Martine Beugnet in her *Cinema and*

Sensation: French Films and the Art of Transgression refers to cinema as the medium of senses. Whilst analysing contemporary French films that celebrate the sensual, Beugnet points to their subversion of the traditional mode of spectatorship. Jennifer M. Barker in *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* centres on the connection of the body in film with that of the spectator. By referring mainly to the films of Tarkovsky, Polanski, Lynch, Resnais, Keaton and the Brothers Quay, Barker discusses elements of haptic qualities of cinematic perception such as kinaesthetic empathy between the audience and the film, and the visceral response of a spectator to a film. Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener's *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses* retraces key film theories from the 1920s to the present and proposes re-readings of classic films, placing the sensual body at the centre. Another important publication in the field is Paul Elliott's *Hitchcock and the Cinema of Sensations* which applies the theoretical tools provided by haptic criticism to the cinema of Alfred Hitchcock. Elliott supports his theories of the haptic with findings from the fields of neurology and biology. Davina Quinlivan's *The Place of Breath in Cinema* contributes to the discussion on embodiment in film by focusing on the breathing body and postulating the notion of *tactile breath*. Quinlivan investigates the films of Atom Egoyan, David Cronenberg and Lars von Trier, and considers breathing evoked by and evocative of the material body.

Types of haptic expression in cinema

Haptic moments in cinema are generated through the use of a wide range of techniques that include: blurring on-screen images, references to the materiality of the film strip and the cinematic screen, the drawing of attention to conspicuous textures, and the evocation of "carnal identification" (Sobchack 65). In this section, I consider each of these four instances of haptic expression.

Blurred cinematic images (changes in grain, focus and exposure) introduce haptic moments that often leave an audience unsure as to what they are watching. These "incomplete" images constitute a visual puzzle the solution of which is aided

Figure 1: ***We Need to Talk about Kevin*** **(2011), dir. Lynne Ramsay.**

by imagination and memory; often that of senses other than vision and hearing (Marks, *Touch* 9). Spectators are effectively kept in a state of suspension. Following a moment of uncertainty during which they have to fill in the gaps in perception, they gradually decipher what an object on screen is. The gaze, as Marks observes, “moves on the surface plane of the screen before the viewer realizes what she or he is beholding” (*Skin of the Film* 162-3). In *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2011), Eva (Tilda Swinton) – and the viewer - sees a dim array of colours as she drives back home, tired after a difficult day. After a short moment, the image regains its sharpness and the colours turn out to be streetlights. It is at this very instance that the film reveals what we are looking at - the multi-coloured blur becomes a recognisable object.

The notion of the haptic gaze in cinema can refer to the screen or film strip itself which, decaying, acquiring scratches and other surface damages draws attention to its own materiality (Barker 26-34). In the field of experimental film, such an investigation of the materiality of cinematic medium is central to Structural Film (see Gidal; Adams Sitney). Within the domain of popular cinema, the experience of watching deteriorating filmic images is less common. An example here is the closing scene of Pedro Almodovar’s *Broken Embraces* (2009) in which Mateo/Harry (Lluís Homarthe), who has lost his sight, recalls his last moments spent with his lover. The recollection is first apparent by his voiceover and later presented on a TV screen as a picture destroyed by time. The corroded videotape mirrors Mateo/Harry’s incomplete, eroding memory. The juxtaposition of the material basis of the image

Figure 2: ***Broken Embraces*** **(2009), dir. Pedro Almodóvar.**

with decaying remembered past is highlighted by the image of his hands moving on the grainy TV screen.

The close-ups of surfaces with discernible textures refer to the sense of touch. They (figuratively) pull us close to an object turned into a cinematic image, to nearly intimate proximity with it. In this way, they invite an exploration of its texture, rather than focus solely on the flow of narrative. Elsaesser and Hagener claim that,

> the depiction of a haptically charged surface such as the close-up of a body (e.g. an animal's skin or raised hairs, goose bumps), or any other conspicuous and interesting texture if not the film itself in its materiality, call forth memories which were virtually present and needed the film to be actualised. (124)

An example illustrating such engagement with conspicuous surfaces is the opening sequence of Jane Campion's *Bright Star* (2009). We watch an extreme close-up of a thread being pulled through the eye of a needle. Presented in such proximity, this looks almost like rays of different-coloured light. The next cut takes us to the subtle image of feathery white fabric recalling snowy hills or bright seawaves. Submerged in gentle hues of grey, white and blue, the image evokes a sensation of touching a fabric with one's skin, exploring its uneven texture with extreme nearness. After a while, a needle pierces the soft surface, recalling the act of stitching. Finally, the

Figure 3: ***Bright Star*** **(2009), dir. Jane Campion.**

camera slowly zooms out resolving into figuration - or shifting from the haptic to the optical - first showing the needle sewing a shirt, then a woman stitching by the window.

By coming intimately close, haptic perception requires a different type of identification than more distanced viewing; as Marks asserts: “characters are shown eating, making love, and so forth, and we viewers identify with their activity. We salivate or become aroused on verbal and visual cue” (*Skin of the Film* 213). Through appealing to a memory of an emotion or sensation, cinema is capable of evoking bodily responses ranging from nausea and involuntary bodily movements, to heart pounding or arousal. In such circumstances what Sobchack describes as “carnal identification” (65) is a useful term term. The notion of carnal identification is particularly valid in the discussion of slapstick comedies (Barker 69-73, 94-106) and body genres, such as pornography, horror and melodramas (as discussed by Clover and Williams). An invitation to carnal identification through an experience of taste - the sense missing from cinema - is a scene in Guadagnino’s *I am Love* (2009) in which Emma (Tilda Swinton), the main character in the film, samples a dish cooked by her lover. The sequence is preceded by a presentation of the restaurant’s kitchen; we are shown the ingredients of the dish, kitchen utensils and the intricate process of

meal preparation. Following this introduction, three women indulge in a conversation; a waitress interrupts to announce "marinated egg yolk, pea cream and zucchini flowers, prawns with ratatouille and sweet-and-sour sauce; and mixed with crunchy vegetables". Enchanted

Figure 4: ***I Am Love*** **(2009), dir. Luca Guadagnino.**

Emma looks at her plate; the camera assumes her point of view and closes up on the dish, and later on her eyes. The light directed at her face brightens up as she begins her meal and the colours are intensified. For a few seconds, the camera fixes its gaze on her face, showing the ecstasy she is experiencing. The sound of the conversation fades and is replaced by operatic music and the soundtrack from the kitchen. Diegetic sound (that of the restaurant) is replaced by the kitchen noise (which is not actually in

Figure 5*:* ***I Am Love*** **(2009), dir. Luca Guadagnino.**

this space) and operatic music - again, to intensify the immersion in sensation that Emma is experiencing. This fragment is composed almost solely of close-ups of the dish and of fragments of her body: eyes, lips and hands. The film provides information about the background of the meal itself (preparations in the kitchen and the waitress describing the meal). The effect is the quite literal whetting of an audience's appetite. Through intensified colours, lights, and close-ups, the scene seeks to portray the overwhelming sensation of taste. By

Figure 6: ***I Am Love*** **(2009), dir. Luca Guadagnino.**

appealing primarily to one of the senses, this sequence invites carnal, rather than

narrative, identification by inviting spectators to participate in the sensual (taste) experience of the dining character.

Marks's theory of the sensual representations in film asserts that in order to grasp the meaning of haptic images in their entirety, an audience can resort to a certain intelligence and knowledge of the body. Marks notes that "haptic visuality inspires an acute awareness that the thing seen evades vision and must be approached through other senses - which are not literally available in cinema" (*Skin of the Film* 151). Although cinematic experience is not readily linked with taste, smell and touch, films are capable of blurring boundaries between senses. The audio-visual medium can be enriched by synaesthetic reference to smell, taste and touch.

Sobchack points to the particular characteristics of film as a medium: cinematic representations evoke an ambivalent perceptual response, a certain "confusion of our sense at the movies or having both a 'real' (or literal) sensual experience and an 'as-if-real' (or figural) sensual experience" (*Carnal Thoughts* 73). Films provide an audiovisual, flat image that is capable of evoking knowledge encoded in other senses than sight and hearing, and give an illusion of (or acts as a metaphor for) material presence. At the same time, the domain conjured on screen is different from the real sense of the materiality in everyday interaction. Sobchack elaborates on this "as-if-real-ness" in cinema:

> Even if the intentional objects of my experience of the movies are not wholly realized by me and are grasped in a sensual distribution that would be differently structured were I outside the theatre, I nonetheless do have a real sensual experience that is not reducible either to the satisfaction of merely two of my senses or to sensual analogies and metaphors constructed only 'after the fact' through the cognitive operations of conscious thought. (76)

Although film can appeal to multiple senses and evoke the memories of the material presence, it is not capable of a precise replication of a smell, an exact simulation of a sensation of touch or a reconstruction of an actual taste. In other words, haptic

images do not attempt to deny Sobchack's "as-if-real-ness" of cinema; on the contrary, to some extent they seek to confess to its inability to recalling the precise physical presence of an object. Haptic moments in films "search the image for a trace of the originary, physical event" (Marks, *Touch* xi) by figurative rather than literal evocations of sensations other than those provided by sight and sound.

I am not interested in the hapticity of the screen or filmstrip revealing cinema as a material medium. Rather, my argument is concerned with cinema's appeal to multi-sensorial memory, knowledge and imagination. I explore the moments when films move from optical to haptic, instances that call for more active spectatorship. In other words, I investigate sequences that index a shift away from a focus on the narrative, from symbolic identification. These include close-ups which (figuratively) appeal to senses other than vision and hearing in order to create audio-visual correspondences, blurred or fragmented images of the body which need to be deciphered with reference to other senses, as well as the sensual reaction of the embodied spectator. In these haptic moments, cinema attempts to conjure "as-if-presence" of the trace of the material recorded as an image and sound of an object, particularly the human body. I propose to consider the haptic as a metaphor for physical proximity, intensifying the illusion of presence.

The medical

Reflecting on the development of the medical perception of the body, Foucault asserts that the clinical gaze - the pervasive mode of seeing in the domain of medicine[4] - appeared with the birth of modern medicine at the end of the eighteenth

[4] Interesting juxtapositions of discourses on the body in medicine are those of Descartes and La Mettrie. Samson points to the Cartesian duality of body and mind as the basis for modern medical philosophy: the body,"having severed its spiritual links with the soul, not only continued to be profane but, with developments in scientific method, became a spiritually free-floating object, mere matter, operating according to the laws of mechanics" ("Biomedicine" 4). As Wright asserts, Descartes clearly separated the tasks of the body from those of the mind: "he identified the thought functions as understanding, willing, imagining, and sensing, and argued that only these are to be ascribed to the soul" (245). In Cartesian thought, the human essence is the mind; the corporeality is a part of the material world (akin to the animal) and, as such, can be "exhaustively characterizable in terms of

century (*Birth of Clinic* xii). The medical gaze is reserved for specialists with knowledge, recognised authority and the legitimacy provided by an institution. With anatomical dissection as an essential ingredient of medical education, medical doctors are trained in the detached observation of the body: "through this training physicians are supposed to eliminate their own visceral bodily and affective responses to the sight of naked bodies, blood, and guts" (Ostherr 222-3). This way of looking relies primarily on objectivity (of the medical practitioner) and objectification (of the patient). In medical experience, the body of a patient is a passive object, a sick organism under the distanced gaze.

The objectivity - linked with standardised and detached observation - aspired to by scientific discourse is, as Daston and Galison suggest, "knowledge that bears no trace of the knower - knowledge unmarked by prejudice, or skill, fantasy or judgements, wishing or striving" (17). This type of perception, ideally free from human interference and without subjective intrusions or ambiguities, highlights medicine's confidence in scientific observation.

With reference to objectification, Foucault in his reflections on the clinical gaze in *The Birth of Clinic* states that "paradoxically, in relation to that which he is suffering from, the patient is only an external fact; the medical reading must take him into account only to place him in parentheses" (2). In medicine, the patient's subjectivity, his or her feelings and personal history do not take priority over the material; this is a domain that "separated the humanities from the sciences, the spirit

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shape and number, and the principles that govern it and allow explanation of it are - apart from the influence of soul - exhaustively mathematical" (Voss 180). The body is here a physical, mechanical thing "the thermically run hydraulic automaton" (Voss 184). Wellmann sees Julien Offray de La Mettrie, whose merit was to "bequeath a lasting basis for a medical understanding of human nature" (ch. 10), as a crucial figure in the development of medicine from the 18th century onwards. She continues: "for La Mettrie, empirical studies must replace metaphysics, and the finding and the methods of medicine and physiology must be used to critically reappraise philosophy" (ch 6). His biologically oriented materialism bypasses Descartes' "I think therefore I am". Wellman emphasises La Mettrie's interpretation of the functions of the mind as dependent on the body and points to the argument that "the soul must be completely identified with the physic functions of the body" (Wellmann, ch. 5). Not only did La Mettrie oppose Cartesian thought "in rejecting substance dualism and arguing for 'the material unity of man'" (Wright 243), but also stressed similarities between humans and animals - the bodies of both can be studied in the same way as machines. For La Mettrie, a medical practitioner, whose task is to understand of how the body works, examines the human being as a material entity and searches for irregularities in "these springs of the human machine"(62).

from the matter" (Baranowska 40). Examined in such a way, the physical aspect of the body, that is its materiality and biology, comes to fore.

Dwelling on objectification (particularly in a sexual context), Nussbaum implies that this notion, once discussed almost exclusively within feminist theory, has now become widely used in a more general sense (250). In response to Nussbaum's argument, Langton defines objectification as treating or presenting as an object, but also adds "treating something as objective, when it is not" (Langton 11), thus equating objectivity with objectification. Moreover, objectification, as Nussbaum explains, connotes "a way of speaking, thinking, and acting that the speaker finds morally or socially objectionable" (249). She argues that it assumes negative associations if it involves the degrading of one person by another through articulation of power relations and hierarchy, or when a morally irrelevant feature, such as one's class, rank, race or gender, becomes prominent. In response to feminist discourse, Nussbaum emphasises that "there seems to be no other item on the list that is always morally objectionable" (290); objectivity does not have to be considered as a negative notion[5].

When considering the complexity of the term objectification, Nussbaum identifies seven different notions linked with it: instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, fungibility, violability, ownership, and the denial of subjectivity[6]. Langton adds three more concepts to the cluster concept of Nussbaum: reduction to body, reduction to appearance, and silencing (228-9)[7]. Nussbaum's analysis of the notion of objectification, specifically its denial of autonomy and subjectivity, inertness and

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[5] See Nussbaum's discussion of the eroticised fragment of D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) as an example of positive objectification in sexual context.

[6] By referring to the world of things and our relationship with them, Nussbaum points to several notions involved in the idea of objectification: "1. Instrumentality: The objectifier treats the object as a tool of his or her purposes. 2. Denial of autonomy: The objectifier treats the object as lacking in autonomy and self-determination. 3. Inertness: The objectifier treats the object as lacking in agency, and perhaps also in activity. 4. Fungibility: The objectifier treats the object as interchangeable (a) with other objects of the same type, and/or (b) with objects of other types. 5. Violability: The objectifier treats the object as lacking in boundary- integrity, as something that it is permissible to break up, smash, break into. 6. Ownership: The objectifier treats the object as something that is owned by another, can be bought or sold, etc. 7. Denial of subjectivity: The objectifier treats the object as something whose experience and feelings (if any) need not be taken into account" (257).

[7] Langton's additions include "Reduction to body: one treats it as identified with its body, or body parts . . . Reduction to appearance: one treats it primarily in terms of how it looks, or how it appears to the senses . . . Silencing: one treats it as silent, lacking the capacity to speak" (228-9).

fungibility, as well as Langton's understanding of the concept as reduction to the body, can be related to medical experience.

The objectification of the human body in medical discourse is not interpreted as negative; rather, it marks a deliberate approach. Medicine understands an individual as primarily a material and biological entity. According to Leder:

> Since the seventeenth century the body has been primarily identified with its scientific description, i.e. regarded as a material object whose anatomical and functional properties can be characterised according to general scientific laws. As such, the human body, while perhaps unusual in its complexity, is taken as essentially no different from any other physical object. (5)

Under the auspices of science, the human body is turned into a biological specimen and investigated in the same way as an object of any other scientific observation. Human corporeality needs to be objectified in a scientific examination in order to be analysed, described, and compared with the bodies of others.

Considering the body within the medical discourse, Foucault postulates a need for a new language which would "authorise a knowledge of the individual that was not simply of historic or aesthetic order" (xv), that is, a knowledge beyond the symbolic and ideal. Within this new language, the definition of human being would be similar to that of any other object of scientific examination: "by acquiring the status of object, its particular quality, its impalpable colour, its unique, transitory form took on weight and solidity" (xv). This language articulates the physicality of the subject and the attributes. It thus makes objective and rational analysis possible, allowing for an individual to be inscribed within the scientific discourse.

It is important to note a slight shift in Foucault's perspective on the clinical gaze (and, simultaneously, on the formation of the subject linked with this mode of perception) when we compare his 1963 *The Birth of the Clinic* with *Discipline and Punish* published 12 years later. In *Discipline and Punish*, his reading of the medical gaze is critical rather than supportive: Foucault considers the body as passively organized by techniques of power with medical knowledge as a type of surveillance

justified by scientific pursuits[8]. Medicine is here an example of a discipline which "produces subjected and practised bodies, 'docile' bodies" (138) with "the hospital as an 'examining' apparatus" (185). A similar discourse on control is also present in such institutions as the school, workshop, barracks, factory, asylum and prison (141-143). With the instruments of regulation, namely "hierarchical observation, normalising judgment and their combination in a procedure that is specific to it, the examination" (170), these are the sites where the activities of individuals and knowledge about them are strictly organized, regulated and inscribed within power relations.

However, as Osborne notes, the discussion on Foucault's perspective of medicine as a type of surveillance "tends to be done not so much on the basis of Foucault's only book on medicine as such – *The Birth of the Clinic* - as on that of a book primarily directed towards the question of prisons and punishment: *Discipline and Punish*[9]" (252). In contrast, my own consideration of the clinical gaze is conducted through a more neutral lens: I concur with Dews' observation on *The Birth of the Clinic* that "although it [the gaze] does not lose its implications of surveillance - the predominant function of the gaze is epistemic" (160). Whereas in everyday discourse, the body, with its biology, is perceived as "a threatening double" (Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society* 131), medical objectification and objectivity allow us to approach the body as simply an object of scientific investigation. In other words, the clinical gaze moves the corporeality from the domain of fear and the unfamiliar and into arena in which it can be analysed and described. Rather than only inscribe the body within the discourse of power, the primary function of this mode of perception and knowledge (the way of seeing the body and talking about it) is to provide us with the detachment necessary for epistemic understanding.

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[8] Interestingly, Foucault compares docile bodies in these institutions to La Mettrie's *Man a Machine*: "La Mettire's L'Homme-machine is both a materialist reduction of the soul and a general theory of dressage, at the centre of which reigns the notion of 'docility', which joins the analysable body to the manipulable body. A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved. The celebrated automata, on the other hand, were not only a way of illustrating an organism, they were also political puppets, small-scale models of power" (Foucault, D*iscipline and Punish* 136).

[9] In my thesis, this approach is considered briefly in chapters on Taxidermia (see p. 179) and The Elephant Man (see p. 48)

Medical images in popular culture

The medical mode of perception, originating within the domain of science, has been incorporated into different forms of artistic expression; film is here no exception. Ostherr observes that the meaning of material classified under the umbrella term of medicine's visual culture changes depending on the context, that is: why and by whom it is created, what constitutes the space of exhibition and who is the recipient. As she emphasises, "one experiences an X-ray differently in a hospital than one does in art gallery, even if the same technology is involved in producing the images" (18). Transplanted into the individual and subjective discourse of art (and outside its proper domain, that is outside the clinic), the objectivity of the medical gaze is challenged.

Figure 7: Medical x-ray of Wilhelm Roentgen's wife.

The introduction of medical elements to cinematic fiction merges two types of looking: that particular to the clinic (objective and objectifying, focused mainly on the material) and that characteristic of cinematic works (subjective, creating a story and centring on the psychology of characters). Medical images address the physicality of the body and introduce documentary material from the domain of medicine. In cinema, they are frequently employed to call attention to the biology of the body on screen.

Kevles maintains that "in mainstream film, medical imaging, like other techniques, is used to add authenticity to place and, occasionally, to plot" (264-5). Images created in a medical setting are perceived as carriers of scientific (that is objective) truths. In scientific documentaries, they are regarded by audiences as legitimate and exact. The value and significance attributed to medical depictions changes when they are utilised in fictional narratives. Van Dijck asserts that "when they dramatize and narrativize the clinical images they absorb, viewers must oscillate between the 'objective' pictures produced by medical instruments and the 'subjective gaze' directed by the television camera" (13).

For van Dijck, “in everyday culture, we see so many of these images that we are tempted to believe we understand their (medical) meaning” (12). The general audience is rarely trained in decoding scientific images (produced in their original context for medical practitioners) and relies on common connotations brought about by such depictions. The frequent appearance of medical images in popular culture, particularly cinema, has constructed a number of fixed connotations; ultrasound, for instance, is usually associated with pregnancy, MRI scans with cancers. Through their presence in general discourse, such topographies of the inside of the body (the view intended mainly for medical practitioners) have become recognisable, although not understandable, to a lay audience. As Kevles maintains:

> We are getting used to false-coloured three dimensional images of our brains just as we once got used to enhanced images of the moons of Jupiter, and we walk through holograms of hearts and brains that may be reconstructed from data of our own vital organs, or from our idealized models pulled from the ether. (269)

Images conceived at the junction of medicine and visual arts have gained a pervasive presence in mass-media creating points of dialogue between popular culture and the scientific domain.

A substantial body of literature has considered the intersection of medicine and film from a variety of angles. Several studies significant to my research have explored the employment of medical images in popular culture. Lisa Cartwright’s *Screening the Body: Tracing Medicine’s Visual Culture* discusses the encounter of film with physiology, neurology, microscopy and radiology. From the position of cultural studies, Cartwright traces the history of medicine’s visual culture - screening the body, that is looking through living body - and what it reveals about our understanding of the corporeal form. Bettyann H. Kevles’s *Naked To The Bone: Medical Imaging in the Twentieth Century* focuses on the history of medical images from X-rays through fluoroscopy, ultrasound, CT and PET scans, to MRIs. Kevles points to the cultural implications of their development from Victorian attitudes; she also considers their multiple incarnations in film and literature and their inspiration

for artists like Picasso or Warhol. Examining the pervasiveness that images of the corporeal depths have gained in 20th century visual culture, José van Dijck's *The Transparent Body: A Cultural Analysis of Medical Imaging* addresses scientific images and their meaning within and outside the medical context and considers how they affect the understanding of our bodies. Van Dijck is interested in X-ray, endoscopy, and recordings of surgical operations, as well as plastination and digitalisation of corpses. Kirsten Ostherr's *Medical Visions. Producing the Patient Through Film, Television, and Imaging Technologies* considers images produced in clinical contexts and their presence in mainstream discourse, from the first experiences with medical filmmaking, through 1960s educational documentaries, to TV dramas of the 1980s.

Significant contributions to the field have been made via a collection of texts on general medical topics and perspectives considered in films. Graeme and Moor's *Signs of Life: Medicine and Cinema* brings together essays investigating filmic representations of aspects of medicine: practitioners (doctors and nurses) and patients, diseases and disabilities, health education and ethical issues. Considering a wide range of cinematic genres (particularly in biopic and comedy), the book contains contributions from both medical professionals and film scholars. Edited by Lester D. Friedman, *Cultural Sutures: Medicine and Media* is a collection of texts that addresses the intersection of medicine and media, from print journalism and advertisement to cinema and television. *Medicine's Moving Pictures: Medicine, Health, and Bodies in American Film and Television* (Reagan, Tomes, and Treichler) investigates health films and their relation to American cinema by emphasising their power to educate and shape perception.

Numerous publications examine evolving perceptions and stereotypes concerning medical professionals in films: Ann Paietta and Jean Kauppila's *Health Professionals on Screen*, Peter Dans's *Doctors in the Movies*, and Brian Glasser's *Medicinema: Doctors in Film* are worth mentioning. An interesting proposition is Michael Shortland's *Medicine and Film: A Checklist, Survey and Research Resource*, an annotated survey of English-speaking films with medical themes made between 1899-1988.

My thesis investigates how *The Elephant Man, Crash, Attenberg, Father and Son* and *Taxidermia* employ cultural appropriation of both medical images and the clinical gaze. The films under discussion centre on human corporeality; the introduction of medical elements, I argue, is yet another facet calling attention to the materiality of the body. *The Elephant Man* revolves around a body displayed in the context of a freak show and medicine - here the outer form forms a diagnosis. The film investigates the intersection of entertainment and medicine, a certain confusion of the theatrical and the scientific (with a lecture theatre as the stage for such confusion), as well as the medical and pornographic gaze (by comparing the interest of medical doctors with the curiosity of freak show visitors). Such an intersection of medicine and pornography is explored even further in *Crash,* which presents the after-effects of clinical intrusions. In the film, scars, bruises, prosthetic devices and disfigurations of the body form the basis for transgressive desire. Moreover, the film's aesthetics are based around the cold, detached gaze, which refers to clinical ways of looking. The mode of observation is also crucial to *Attenberg,* which studies its characters in both a tender and distanced manner, similar to that of nature documentaries, but also (in its detachment) of medicine. With the hospital as one of the major settings, the Greek film portrays the uncomfortable, awkward body. Moreover, in the scenes featuring MRI images, it presents the abstracted body in the clinical and mechanical gaze - here medicine comments on an alienation from the corporeal form.

Two further films in focus address the convergence of scientific and artistic discourses around the body. *Father and Son* considers the history of medical imaging recalling early anatomy depictions (an écorché figure) and an x-ray. By juxtaposing the functions of skin both as the site of sensuality and as a medical organ (a cover for the inside of the body), Sokurov's film moves between the objective (medical), subjective (emotional), and artistic. Lastly, considered as contrasting when juxtaposed with *Father and Son, Taxidermia* in its last segment explores the aestheticised body interior; moving between medicine and art, it offers an exploration of the beauty of viscera and medical tools. Additionally, Pálfi's film points to medicine's power to both heal and kill.

I contend that these films - through the introduction of medical images and the clinical mode of looking - subvert readings of the body solely as the site of self, as a vehicle for a goal-driven character. Exhibited in this way, the body is subject to the detached gaze similar to the clinical way of seeing described by Foucault: it is turned into a material object, calling attention to its physical properties (here, those recognised audio-visually).

The haptic and the medical as metaphors

Considered in juxtaposition, the films under discussion examine the inside and outside of the body from different angles and proximities. I regard close exploration of the skin and its sensual capacities (primarily in Sokurov's family trilogy, but also in *The Elephant Man, Crash, Attenberg,* and *Taxidermia*) within the framework of haptic expression. The depictions of viscera, in contrast, open a discourse on the medical. These feature in *Attenberg* which refers to MRI images; *Father and Son,* which presents an x-ray (a photograph of the body interior and a depiction of the flayed body destined for medical discourse); and *Taxidermia,* which offers aestheticised images of the open body. These films avoid depicting the messiness of viscera; rather, they portray clear, aestheticised and abstracted body interiors. Additionally, in the two latter films, such views are enabled by medical technologies.

While the haptic promotes sensual knowledge of the body, the medical privileges the biological and anatomical. If the former calls attention to the personal, emotional and subjective (with regards to reception and memory), then the latter focuses on the depersonalised, detached and objective. Correspondingly, while haptic perception concentrates on the unique and individual, the clinical gaze compares to the standardised (or ideal) type; it studies and analyses. Employed in cinema, the haptic stands for the close gaze, proximal investigation of the object, while the medical is a metaphor for detached and distanced observation. In other words, these elements signal either intimate proximity to the character, immersion in his or her experience (the haptic) or the medicalised, objectified body as a purely material entity with its physical properties.

By appealing to contact senses (smell, taste and touch), haptic images in cinema call attention to those physical properties of the body which can be (figuratively) comprehended by all faculties, not only vision and hearing. The medical does the same with reference to a scientific understanding of the corporeal form as a material entity whose properties can be analysed and described through reference to multiple modes of perception.[10] The gaze in both cases is a figurative term that encompasses other senses than vision.

I consider the haptic and the medical as metaphors for the perception of the body in cinema and as devices for pointing to, or intensifying, the trace of the material recorded on screen. In *The Elephant Man, Crash, Attenberg,* Sokurov's family trilogy and *Taxidermia*, the haptic and the medical modes of perception are employed in order to meditate upon the material aspect of the body. Their reoccurrence and repetition in these films acutely aware of the human corporeality is a deliberate choice. They are deployed in order to investigate the physicality of the subject, rather than used primarily as features (props or costumes) to forward the story.

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[10] Foucault points to tactile and auditory dimensions of the medical gaze, "a gaze that touches, hears, and, moreover, not by the essence or necessity, sees" (*Birth of Clinic,* 164). Similarly, Osborne draws attention to the inapt use of the term gaze with regards to clinical experience, the notion which implies seeing: "the gaze here relates less to the seeable, or sayable, than to the tangible" (79).

CHAPTER TWO

The Elephant Man and *Crash*

David Cronenberg and David Lynch are recognised as leading directors within the cinematic genre of contemporary horror (Badley 14-18, 23-31; Derry 347) largely due to their interest in corporeal anxieties. Such preoccupations present themselves in an accumulation of visceral images of the human body throughout their films. The directors question the conventional treatment of the body - as the representation of gender, character, sexuality, race, age and class; instead, their cinema revolves around the human corporeality. In other words, Lynch and Cronenberg invert the primacy of the ideal and rational (associated with mind) and instead move the material (the body) to centre stage, thus challenging the Cartesian duality which imposes the dominance of reason over the flesh and the senses. This conscious subversion of the traditional notion of the on-screen body (as simply a vessel for a goal-driven character) situates these two auteurs at the fringes of mainstream cinematic conventions.

Lynch's films revolve around a number of dichotomies; McGowan suggests that "rather than complicate or even undo binary oppositions, Lynch revels in them. Not only that: he pushes binary oppositions to an extreme. In his films we see stark oppositions in character, in mise-en-scène, in editing style, and in narrative structure" (12). Primarily, however, the director is preoccupied with the dualism of the body and mind. In Alexander's view, "Lynch's recurring contrast lies between the perfect body and the imperfect body, between wholeness and decay" (24). Lynch's cinema shifts in its exploration of surface and depth, particularly with regards to the human body. In his films, we often see formally dressed characters in a buttoned shirt and tie - the immaculate bodies of consumer culture, embodying the American norm - represent the ideal and the rational. At the same time, however, "Lynch is particularly interested in the horror that lies beneath the seemingly normal surfaces of everyday suburban life" (Creed, "Untamed Eye" 128-9). Similarly, McGowan emphasises that "through the act of taking normality to its logical extreme, Lynch reveals how the bizarre is not opposed to the normal but inherent within it" (12).

Figure 8: ***Amputee*** **(1973), dir. David Lynch.**

Lynch's is the horror of the quotidian and the ordinary which in his films assume the form of the uncanny (see Freud 124-132). These immaculately standard models of corporeality are juxtaposed with imperfect bodies that, in their diseased or deformed appearance, call attention to their material nature. Lynch's films are littered with grotesque bodies (Baron Harkonnen in *The Dune,* 1984, a monstrous baby in *Eraserhead¸*1977) and those of disabled or crippled characters (the protagonist in the short *Amputee*; 1973; the one-armed man in *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me,* 1992). The body in his films is often presented as fragmented (literally, cut off from the whole, or figuratively, by using close-ups) or distorted in the eye of camera (*Inland Empire,* 2006; *Wild at Heart,* 1990). Lynch frequently highlights human biology, particularly in bodies that are shown to lose control over their physiological functions (vomiting blood in *The Alphabet,* 1968; urinating in *Blue Velvet,* 1986, and *The Grandmother,* 1970).

Figure 9: ***Inland Empire*** **(2006), dir. David Lynch.**

A preoccupation with Cartesian duality is also present in Cronenberg's films (Riches 1-2). Freeland asserts that his cinema "reflects back the fact that our human embodiment is fraught with danger, limitation, and risk . . . He might even be described the filmmaker of the mind-body problem par excellence" (88-9). The director himself comments:

> I don't think that the flesh is necessarily treacherous, evil, bad. It is cantankerous, and it is independent. The idea of independence is the key. It really is like colonialism. The colonies suddenly decide that they can or should exist with their own personality and should detach from the control of the mother country. At first the colony is

> perceived as being treacherous. It's a betrayal. Ultimately, it can be seen as the separation of a partner that could be very valuable as an equal rather than as something you dominate. I think that the flesh in my films is like that. (in Rodley, *Cronenberg on Cronenberg* 80)

Cronenberg's cinema challenges our reading of the body as primarily the site of self; instead, it portrays corporealities that appear to be conscious on their own right.

The films of the Canadian director offer (pseudo-)scientific explanations for the abnormal, particularly with regards to human form. His early works are preoccupied with the terror of human biology. As the director himself says,

> the phrase 'biological horror' – often attached to my work – really refers to the fact that my films are very body-conscious. They're very conscious of physical existence of a living organism, rather than any other horror films or science fiction films which are very technologically oriented, or concerned with the supernatural, and in that sense they are very disembodied. (in Rodley, *Cronenberg on Cronenberg* 58)

Cronenberg's films frequently present graphic images of diseased bodies (*Shivers,* 1975; *Rabid*, 1977) or monstrous transformations (*The Brood,* 1979; *Scanners,* 1981). They also dissolve seemingly fixed cultural categories by merging flesh and machine (*Videodrome,*1983; *Crash*, 1996), or human and animal (*The Fly,* 1986).

Figure 10: *The Brood* (1979), dir. David Cronenberg.

Cronenberg raises questions not only about our fear of the body, but also of the mind (Riches 1). From *eXixtenZ* (1999) onwards, he shifts focus to psychological terror. e*XistenZ* and *Spider* (2002) - films with puzzle-

Figure 11: ***A Dangerous Method*** **(2011), dir. David Cronenberg.**

solving structures - explore the labyrinths of the human mind in the contexts of, respectively, video games and mental illness. In later films, *A History of Violence* (2005) and *Eastern Promises* (2007), Cronenberg investigates family relationships against the background of the criminal underworld and its conflicted psychologies (Mathijs 10), as well as the search for identity and authenticity (Moseley 130). In *A Dangerous Method* (2011), Freud and Jung take their place amongst the many scientists in Cronenberg's films who tackle both bodily and social repression. This study of the beginnings of psychoanalysis features sequences that return to the director's focus on the corporeal. Distorted through the lens and camera work, the body of the main female character, Sabina Spielrein (Keira Knightley), in a fit of hysteria (Ratner 21-2) is a corporeality that she attempts to master, but which "seems to race ahead of her mind and act primitively, instinctively" (Lowenstein 30). Cronenberg's recent *Cosmopolis* (2012), an exploration of world of the financial instability, bears clear resemblances to his previous works. It is "infused with a perverse numbness that most obviously recalls the director's other psycho-mobile nightmare *Crash"* (Romney, "A Womb with a View" 17), and, similarly to *Videodrome,* "is a zeitgeist movie in which a new technology brings forth 'a new flesh'" (Taubin).

This chapter focuses on Lynch's *The Elephant Man* (1980) and Cronenberg's *Crash* (1996), which, I argue, reflect the directors' preoccupation with Cartesian duality. I suggest that in these two films the conventional notion of mind over matter is subverted as their protagonists are defined primarily through their corporeal forms. *The Elephant Man* and *Crash* both revolve around corporealities that diverge from the prevalent norm. The carnival freaks in Lynch's film and car accident survivors in Cronenberg's feature are bodies marked by physical differences that cease to be a transparent site of self; instead, they draw attention to their own material nature. It is the materiality of the body that becomes central - the characters are defined by their bodily form.

The first section discusses *The Elephant Man*, the story of John Merrick, a man whose disfigured body is the object of a spectacle, first in a freak show and then a medical lecture theatre. By drawing comparisons between the domains of sensational entertainment (Merrick as a carnival monster) and scientific analysis (Merrick as a medical specimen), the film comments on the objectification of the body in those two contexts and the similarities between the gaze particular to horror and the gaze as specific to medicine.

The second section explores *Crash,* a film that introduces a group of car accident fetishists and centres around extreme bodily sensations. It juxtaposes bodies focused on their surface appearance (the perfect bodies of consumer society) with those celebrating their physical nature (the post-crash bodies of the crash survivors). Additionally, *Crash* discusses the spectacular bodies of the deceased film icons, James Dean and Jayne Mansfield, performed to the public as fetishised images. The extreme sensations evoked in the restaged fatal car crashes of the stars subvert the dichotomy between these spectacular images and the physical body in both its biological and individual dimensions.

Separate analyses of *The Elephant Man* and *Crash* are followed by a synthesis that compares the ways in which these films challenge how imaginary investment affects the perception of bodies (supernatural explanations of the deformation of freaks and the perception of film stars seen as nearly immaterial ideals). By revealing the manufactured nature of freak performances and Victorian

medical lectures (Lynch), as well as restaged car-crashes (Cronenberg), these films inscribe themselves as well as the displayed bodies in Stam's "other tradition": the tradition of pointing to its own status of a pre-prepared artificial construct. *The Elephant Man* and *Crash* consciously question the illusion of representation and, instead, draw attention to the biological and material nature of the body.

The Elephant Man

Made in 1980, David Lynch's *The Elephant Man* tells the story of John Merrick, a man severely afflicted with a disfiguring disease. The film, loosely based on Sir Frederick Treves' *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences*, revolves around three characters inspired by real-life people: John Merrick (Joseph Carey Merrick, 1862-1890), Doctor Treves (1853-1923) and Bytes (in real life Tom Norman, 1860-1930). The story moves between different perspectives: that of Merrick (John Hurt), a freak show performer; Treves (Anthony Hopkins), a man of science; Bytes (Freddie Jones), an entertainer; and, finally, a number of peripheral observers from both the high and low classes of Victorian society. Moreover, by shifting between the sideshow and the hospital - the main spaces in the film - *The Elephant Man* comments on the gaze particular to those domains.

Figure 12: Joseph Merrick.

Joseph Merrick, commonly referred to as The Elephant Man, was born in Leicester in 1862, with severe disfigurations and a progressing congenital disorder (Montagu, *The Elephant Man* 82-87). After years spent in a workhouse, he

chose to pursue a career as a sideshow freak. Subsequently, from 1886 until his sudden death in 1890, he was a resident patient of the London Hospital where his remains are still held today (Howell and Ford 52-63, 99-102, 146). In this period, he gained celebrity status in British high society and the favour of Alexandra, Princess of Wales (Treves 24-5).

Figure 13: Sir Frederick Treves.

Sir Frederick Treves, a renowned British surgeon, lecturer in anatomy, and the author of numerous medical texts, holds a place in popular culture through the life-saving operation he performed on Edward VII and the discovery of the Elephant Man in a Victorian freak show (Howell and Ford 154-158). Events from Merrick's life are recounted (and to a certain degree romanticised) in the doctor's 1923 memoirs (Evans 49).

The character of Bytes, the Elephant Man's carnival proprietor, is based on Tom Norman, one of the most famous Victorian travelling showmen specialising in the display of freaks. He was born the son of a Sussex butcher, and before becoming involved with the show business, he followed his father's trade (Howell and Ford 65-69). The collaboration with Merrick marks a relatively short episode in Norman's diverse career as a manager of novelty acts, an auctioneer, and the owner of thirteen show shops in London (Durbach 37). Durbach points to the contrast between Treves' version of the Elephant Man and that of Norman, which appeared in the 1923 letter to *World's Fair,* the contemporary showmen's journal, and also in his memoirs, *The Penny Showman: Memoirs of Tom Norman, The*

Figure 14: Tom Norman

Silver King. Norman emphasises the value of freak shows as a source of income for those who would otherwise struggle to support themselves (Durbach, 33-37).

For Durbach, "the nineteenth century . . . marks a key moment of contestation between popular and professional ideas" (22-3). The Victorian era, as depicted in *The Elephant Man,* was a period when the scientific and the theatrical frequently overlapped. In freak shows, visited by both gawping crowds seeking entertainment and scientists aiming to further their academic knowledge, theatrical drama and the conventions of the medical lecture combined around the exhibited bodies. On this subject, Adams suggests that,

> while the goal of the cultural institution was to enlighten, civilize, and discipline its beneficiaries, entertainers sought to thrill and amuse in order to turn a profit. While the former aimed to improve its audiences by offering instruction and moral guidance free of the marketplace, a consumer-oriented popular culture catered to their desires and pleasures. Yet education and entertainment often merged in tense, if profitable, collaboration around the display of freaks. (27)

On the one hand, spectacles at freak shows, such as those depicted in Lynch's film, were often styled as medical lectures and appropriated scientific rhetoric in order to add legitimacy to the event (Adams 27-9). According to Durbach, such testimonials "suggest that the discourses of professional medicine were not in fact exclusive and could also be exploited for other ends entirely" (41-2). On the other hand, these sites of leisure did constitute a supply of raw material for the medical investigation of physical anomalies. However, scholars and doctors were not expressly open about their interactions with freak shows. As Adams observes they "attempted to distance themselves from the entertainment industry as they were pushed into competition for its audiences" (27), nonetheless, teaching-oriented lectures did frequently recall the entertaining shows.

In order to reflect this dual nature of freak shows, *The Elephant Man* juxtaposes two main characters: Bytes, a showman motivated by profit, and Treves, a

Figure 15: *The Elephant Man* (1980), dir. David Lynch.

man of science with social authority and seemingly altruistic interests. The film emphasises the similarities between Victorian medicine and entertainment, particularly with regards to the display of the human body. The first encounter of the characters takes place at a freak show, the space of the entertainer. After a private show paid for by the doctor, Bytes remarks: "more than money has changed hands. We understand each other completely, my friend". Correspondingly, in his memoirs Norman calls Treves "also a Showman, but on a rather higher social scale" (qtd. in Durbach 55).

The Elephant Man revolves around the spectacle of the abnormal body, but the perception of the divergent human form in the film changes depending on the space it is exhibited in. Lynch compares two events during which the body of Merrick is turned into an exhibit: the performance in a freak show prepared by Bytes, and the lecture for the pathology society delivered by Treves. The displays of a monstrous body in *The Elephant Man*, both in the context of a sideshow and in the medical environment, are highly theatrical. While Merrick is an object of guilty curiosity in the freak show, he is considered with legitimate scientific interest in the lecture theatre.

Inside a freak show

The Elephant Man begins by establishing a space central to the film: the freak show. The opening scene, cued by bursting flames, situates us within a carnival

environment. It is a crowded and noisy place with music, balloons, fireworks and a variety of performers. We are introduced to one of the main characters: a mysterious man in a hat who is drawn to a large sign reading ‘FREAKS’ above the entrance to one of the tents in the fair. Framed in medium shot, he stands with his back to the camera facing circles containing moving spirals (a possible hint of the hypnotic power of this place). After a moment, the man suddenly turns round and starts walking through the dense crowd of amused visitors. The subsequent shot offers a close-up of a ‘NO ENTRY’ notice at a door to the tent. Ignoring the sign, the character walks in. The interior space is contrasted with the bustling fairground. The cheerful noise of the exterior is not audible; instead, all we can hear are raised voices and repeated, hysterical laughter reminiscent of the auditory leitmotif in Tod Browning’s *Freaks.*

Lynch revisits the 1932 film, which proved scandalous due to its cast of disabled actors (Hawkins, 142-3). Adams interprets Browning’s film as “the foundational text through which authors and artists in the twentieth century came to understand the freak show . . . a point of reference for all subsequent representations of that culture” (63). She asserts that *Freaks* “made in the context of the sideshow’s growing obsolescence, in the face of the medicalization of disability and changing notions about respectable entertainment . . . reanimates the figure of the freak and the culture of the freak show for a new generation of American audiences” (62-4). Similarly, Lynch’s film resurrects the figure of a carnival freak and the discourse it invites for a 1980s audience.

Figure 16: *The Elephant Man* (1980), dir. David Lynch.

Figure 17: ***The Elephant Man*** **(1980), dir. David Lynch.**

Returning to *The Elephant Man,* after entering the tent, the man in the hat walks through a dark, labyrinthine corridor passing mirrors that distort his body. This serves to signify a shift into the domain of the corporeal difference. One of the first exhibits he encounters is a jar containing a human foetus displayed against the backdrop of a painting showing Adam and Eve in Paradise. The exhibit is labelled as "the fruit of the original sin". Adam and Eve are portrayed naked, save for leaves covering their genitals, standing next to the Tree of Knowledge. Here, *The Elephant Man* explicitly evokes the biblical iconography. The presence of a snake points to the moment of gaining the knowledge of good and evil, as well as acquiring awareness of the physical nature of the body. This canonical biblical scene is subverted by placing an embryo next to a half-eaten apple; the sin has already been committed. This image embeds the foetus in the religious discourse, linking human sin directly with sexuality and conception.

In this scene, Lynch presents the inside of the freak show as a dark space laced with guilty secrets. This setting is cloaked in mystery, and conjures connotations with taboos and allusions to the breaking of laws established by society (via the presence of the police and a banning notice) and religion (reminders of the original sin). Thus, the light-hearted atmosphere of entertainment at the beginning of the scene gains the weight of guilty curiosity and forbidden pleasures.

At this point, the film begins a move from the one to the many, from one foetus to multiple freaks, in the context of sin and an ominous atmosphere. While

following a policeman, the man passes a laughing bearded woman, a couple of dwarves watched by an amused crowd and a crying woman. At the end of a narrow corridor, he hears a disembodied voice say: “You can’t do this”. The camera shifts slightly to reveal the author of the statement, it is a police officer who further declares: “this exhibit degrades everyone who see them as well as the poor creature himself”. The official, positioned in front of a poster depicting the Elephant Man, argues with a man who states, “He is a freak. How else will he live?”. This question remains unanswered and the crowd is ushered out of the room. This sequence refers us to Doctor Treves’ memoirs: “in England the showman and Merrick had been moved on from place to place by the police, who considered the exhibition degrading and among the things that could not be allowed . . . The official mind there, as elsewhere, exposure of Merrick and his deformities transgressed the limits of decency”(9). In a freak show the spectacle of a different corporeality satisfies the curiosity for looking at what is deemed illegitimate in the general discourse. Its main attractions are the lack of restrictions with regards to gazing at the corporealities of others, along with the excitement of breaking cultural taboos pertaining to viewing the body.

The diversity of freak performers investigated in this sequence is also explored later in the film, when Merrick returns to the freak show after his stay in the hospital. Ushered in by lightning and the image of a dwarf winding up a gramophone, the scene begins. A tracking shot presents sideshow performers: a giant on the stage, Siamese twins, a tattooed man showing off his muscles, a lion-man against the background of a poster explaining his story, an Asian couple in traditional costumes and, finally, the Elephant Man introduced by Bytes in French. Exhibited on a stage and separated by partitions, each of the performers is given their own space. This display - effectively a series of vignettes mirroring the hybrid cast of a variety show - places the spectator in the role of a visitor walking around the space.

Such a presentation illustrates Bogdan’s division of freak show exhibits into three main categories (6-10). The first comprises of people of exotic races whose arrival in Europe was the consequence of a curiosity raised by the exploration of the world by Western Europeans; in *The Elephant Man* they are represented by the Asian

Figure 18: ***The Elephant Man*** **(1980), dir. David Lynch.**

couple. The second group discussed by Bogdan consists of self-made freaks, usually with self-inflicted body modifications; in the film, this is reflected by a man with tattoos covering nearly all of his body. The third group of carnival monsters constitutes disfigured bodies with deformations later classified as medical conditions; Lynch shows us a giant, dwarves, Siamese twins, and the Elephant Man himself.

Treves describes Merrick as "so vilely deformed that everyone he met confronted him with a look of horror and disgust" (8). The doctor recalls instances when "a dozen times a day he [Merrick] would have to expose his nakedness and his piteous deformities before a gaping crowd who greeted him with such mutterings as 'Oh! What a horror! What a beast!" (16). Similarly, Francis Carr Gomm[11] (in the film played by John Gielgud) declared of his appearance that it was: "so terrible indeed that women and nervous persons fly in terror from the sight of him" (qtd. in Montagu, *The Elephant Man* 110). Adams emphasises that "the centrality of the body remains a constant and determining feature of the freak's identity" (6). A monster, or a "human form mirrored back in distorted embodiments" (Adams 6), draws the attention of a spectator primarily to his or her own physical nature. Such a body ceases to be a transparent site of self and, instead, its materiality becomes the centre of attention.

[11] The chairman of London Hospital's House Committee and the author of a letter to *The Times* in which he asked for financial support for Merrick.

This challenging of the borders between human and non-human that makes a monster "threatening and impure" (Carroll 34), is a staple ingredient of the horror film. For Creed, "the concept of a border is central to the construction of the monstrous in the horror film" (*Monstrous Feminine* 48). The bodies of carnival freaks raise questions about (and at the same time reinforce) prevailing cultural schemas by undermining seemingly clear-cut categories defining humanity (such as sex or race). In Durbach's view, "it was precisely this corporeal and social volatility - this refusal to uphold the natural order, that in turn sanctioned the social order - that made the freak so socially and politically disruptive and thus so frightening" (4). Additionally, Grosz points out that:

> freaks cross the borders that divide the subject from all ambiguities, interconnections, and reciprocal classifications outside of or beyond the human. They imperil the very definitions we rely on to classify humans, entities, and sexes – our most fundamental categories of self-definition and boundaries dividing self from otherness. ("Intolerable Ambiguity" 57)

Treves, when describing the image of the Elephant Man presented on a poster, points to the blurring of the boundary between the human and the animal:

> It was the figure of a man with the characteristics of an elephant. The transfiguration was not far advanced. There was still more of the man than of the beast. This fact – that it was still human – was the most repellent attribute of the creature. There was nothing about it of the pitiableness of the misshapen or the deformed, nothing of the grotesqueness of the freak, but merely the loathsome insinuation of a man being changed into an animal. (1-2)

For centuries, those who stood out due to bodily differences were to a large extent excluded from the rest of society and evoked sufficient interest to be an object of the gaze (Daston and Park 190-198). Labelled as monsters, such divergent bodies

featured frequently at carnivals and fairs in the Middle Ages, and since then, have appeared frequently in both medical contexts and popular culture. The perception of physical irregularities varied. In theocentric Middle Ages, freaks assumed an allegorical role of signs of God's wrath and punishment, omens of the imminent end of the world, or "emblems of the traditional sins of sodomy, avarice, pride and worldliness" (Daston and Park 183). Bodies that deviated from an accepted norm often appeared in the collections of the wealthy (both in cabinets of curiosity and royal courts), where they functioned as objects of curiosity but also of aesthetic appreciation (Daston and Park 209).

The nineteenth century saw the rise of freak shows, which Bogdan defined as:

> formally organized exhibition of people with alleged and real physical, mental, or behavioural anomalies for amusement and profit. The 'formally organized' part of the definition is important, for it distinguishes freak shows from early exhibitions of single attractions that were not attached to organizations such as circuses and carnivals. (10)

Gerber interprets this phenomenon as "a response to the growing market for amusement generated by urbanisation and economic growth" (42). With the birth of cinema, monstrous bodies found their place in films, particularly horrors (Durbach 174), or what Hunter calls *freak film* (7), as well as medical documentaries and sensational TV programmes (van Dijck, ch.2). It was not until the twentieth century that freaks came under the purview of science, and became "medical cases that fade into hospitals, physicians' texts and specimen shelves" (Thomson 79). Within the medical context, divergent bodies were divided into types and cases, and afflicted individuals were reclassified as patients within medical establishments.

Essentially, the notion of a freak is created by prevailing discourses about the body; for Bogdan, "the social construction - the manufacture of freaks - is the main attraction" (3). Similarly, Shildrick observes that "monsters operate primarily in the imaginary" (9), and indeed, the perception of carnival freaks that originates from

medieval times, points to the confusion of creations of nature with products of fantasy. Such belief-based presumptions concerning the disfigured body are present not only in Lynch's film, but also in Doctor Treves' memoirs. Of his first encounter with Merrick he writes: "from the intensified painting in the street I had imagined the Elephant Man to be of gigantic size. This, however, was a little man below the average height and made to look shorted by the bowing of his back" (4).

Crucially, the Elephant Man's name is a part of the show, ensuring imaginary investment. As such, it echoes those of other popular freaks of that time, such as dog-men or ape-women (Hunter 35-52). As Montagu asserts,

> for the purpose of attracting attention of those who would be willing to pay their pennies to gape at a man who looked like an elephant, 'the Elephant Man' was a good description as any. And so John Merrick became 'the Elephant Man'. The name was a showman's choice, and in no way bears any relation to the disease known as elephantiasis. (*The Elephant Man* 82)

Apart from the name, the pre-performance imagery suggests a sensational background to the event and builds the anticipation of witnessing a supernatural creature. In his memoirs, Treves describes the poster advertising the show:

> painted on the canvas in primitive colours was a life-size portrait of the Elephant Man. This very crude production depicted a frightful creature that could only have been possible in a nightmare . . . some palm trees in the background of the picture suggested a jungle and might have led the imaginative to assume that it was in this wild that the perverted object had roamed. (2)

Figure 19: ***The Elephant Man*** **(1980), dir. David Lynch.**

In the film, the poster promoting “The Terrible Elephant Man” features an image of a human being with a head of an elephant presented against a backdrop of exotic plants - this image implies an uncanny union. The miniature portraits of a woman and an elephant on the either side of the poster also suggestively mark the Elephant Man as the fruit of an unusual conception. Popular beliefs linked with divergent bodies strengthened by the pre-performance imagery, ensure imaginary investment on the part of the audience.

Prior to the spectacular event, Bytes leads Treves through the narrow hallway to the room where Merrick is hidden. The geometrical architecture of the corridor they walk through - its diagonal lines, stark angles, the exaggerated contrast between light and dark, and the long shadows thrown by the characters - endows the space with an air of mystery and danger. This fragment is a direct reference to early horror cinema, in particular German Expressionism, which includes films such as *The Golem* (1920), *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1920) and *Nosferatu* (1922). *The Elephant Man* employs these cinematic quotes to build our anticipation of encountering the horrific body.

The private performance in the freak show is orchestrated by Bytes who begins the event by turning on a lamp. In a theatrical pose and with a raised stick, employing exclamations and exaggerated gestures, Bytes introduces Merrick: “life…is full of surprises…consider the fate of this creature’s poor mother”. The pre-

Figure 20: ***The Elephant Man*** **(1980), dir. David Lynch.**

performance account delivered by Bytes describes how Merrick's mother was struck by an elephant during her pregnancy, elaborating on the story presented on the poster[12]. For Huet, "a remarkably persistent line of thought argued that monstrous progeny resulted from the disorder of the maternal imagination" (1). In popular discourse, the impressions a mother had when pregnant were seen as having a crucial influence on the future physique of her new-born. The showman's narration plays on the audience's anticipation of a sensational event. For Kember, "Bytes delivers a well-practised spiel to Treves but, gazing outward to the left and right of the screen, he ominously addresses it to absent 'ladies and gentlemen'" (25). Such an address includes the cinematic spectator in the act of looking as part of its target audience.

In a freak show, such as that depicted in Lynch's *The Elephant Man,* the spectators were often presented with a story or imagery that emphasised and exaggerated the physical features of the exhibit (Bogdan, ch. 4). According to Bogdan, these additions are crucial in constructing the stage identity of freaks: "by using imagery and symbols they knew the public would respond to, showmen created for the person being exhibited a public identity, a presentation, a front, that would have the widest appeals" (95). Bytes' introduction escalates expectations concerning the body to be exhibited and provides a sensational explanation of Merrick's misshapen figure. The account of the showman purports to give objective facts, but at the same time, it plays on the sensational.

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[12] In the film, the reference to Merrick's mother is also present in the surreal opening sequence of the film (with slow motion, distorted images and sound) depicting a woman attacked by the animal.

As Bytes concludes the speech, an assistant opens the curtain to begin the display of the deformed corporeality: the camera reveals a figure covered with a torn piece of clothing. Bytes, the conductor of the performance, orders Merrick to stand up and turn around several times in order to assure better presentation of his deformed body. Meanwhile, the assistant repeats these commands in a loud voice. The growling of the Elephant Man and his half-nakedness emphasise his animality. During this scene, the Elephant Man's body is shown only briefly to the film viewer and is for most part hidden in shadow. Lynch comments: "I showed more, and then re-cut it to show less. I think that the compromise was to show something, because otherwise I felt that people would start looking at it too much like a horror film" (in Rodley, *Lynch on Lynch* 101).

In his memoirs, Treves describes the first (private) performance of the Elephant Man he witnesses (interestingly, in the film, part of this description is delivered by the doctor during the medical lecture):

> The showman - speaking as if to a dog - called out harshly: 'Stand up!' The thing arose slowly and let the blanket that covered its head and back fall to the ground. There stood revealed the most disgusting specimen of humanity that I have ever seen. In the course of my profession I had come across lamentable deformities of the face due to injury or disease, as well as mutilations and contortions of the body depending upon like causes; but at no time had I met with such a degraded or perverted version of a human being as this lone figure displayed. (3)

The film, echoing this description, focuses on the emotional response of Dr Treves rather than the disfigured body of The Elephant Man. The camera fixes on his face, which reveals both fascination and horror: he begins with an expression of sheer curiosity, which changes to terror but, eventually, is taken over by compassion. In the concluding shot, the camera zooms in to present his emotional reaction; for Kember, "a protracted close-up of Treves' frozen and astonished face, a tear rolling from his eye, serves to sentimentalise and prolong the suspense" (25). Here, *The Elephant*

Figure 21: ***The Elephant Man*** **(1980), dir. David Lynch.**

Man repeats references to the tradition of horror film; according to Carroll, "our responses are supposed to converge (but not exactly duplicate) those of the characters; like the characters we assess the monster as horrifying sort of being . . . This mirroring-effect, moreover, is a key feature of horror genre" (18). The reaction of the cinematic audience watching the Elephant Man is supposed to be in parallel with that of Treves: the move from terror to sentimental sympathy.

The scientific gaze

The Elephant Man begins at a site of entertainment and sensationalism (a carnival freak show), but promptly moves to a sharply contrasting setting. The following scene, akin to the opening sequence in a freak show, is cued by an image of flames. In the hospital's operating theatre, we see an unconscious patient, medical devices and Doctor Treves (the character central to the preceding scene). Revealing his occupation reclassifies the mode of regarding the human body and marks him as distinct from the amused crowd in the freak show. Treves is still "one of the curious", as he introduces himself to Bytes, but the gaze of curiosity changes in the medical context. Although *The Elephant Man* begins amidst the crowd gathered at the fair seeking the entertaining and sensational, as Chion remarks, "throughout the beginning of the film, our curiosity will accompany that of Fredrick Treves, the respected, humane surgeon" (51).

Figure 22: ***The Elephant Man*** **(1980), dir. David Lynch.**

The gaze directed at human exhibits in a freak show, objectifies the human body and reduces it to one dimension, the physical. In this respect, a similar act takes place in the domain of medicine (Voss 180-184; Leder 5), however, a medical practitioner is a person with recognised knowledge and experience supported by an institution. Medical doctors have the authority and social permission to observe and objectify the human body, as well as to discuss the notions linked with its material nature (Foucault, *Birth of Clinic* xv). The scientific gaze is reserved for the specialists, rather than for the popular audience.

In *The Elephant Man,* the freak show performance draws parallels with a scientific lecture. Treves' speech in the medical setting, as it is presented in the film, contains strong theatrical elements and recreates some of the freak show dynamics. In this scene, the camera constantly changes its position of observation in order to explore various elements of the staged lecture (the setting, the audience and the presenters), which brings to mind Foucault's discussion of Bentham's panopticon (*Discipline and Punish*). The attention of those invited to watch the event - the medical professionals in the auditorium - is focused on the speaker (Doctor Treves) and the subject of the talk (Merrick). For the cinematic audience, however, the interest is shifted away from Merrick (the obvious target of observation), to a

Figure 23: ***The Elephant Man*** **(1980), dir. David Lynch.**

presentation of a multi-layered spectacle. Primarily this exploration of different modes of looking makes us aware of our own gaze.

On the superficial level, we watch a lecture with doctors as an audience and a lectern as a stage. Doctor Treves is revealed as the presenter of the talk, essentially repeating the crude performance of the freak show. Similarly to Bytes' spectacle, the lecture begins and ends with the appearance of stage lights that cue the opening and closing of a curtain. Treves uses a short stick to draw the attention of the audience while the assistants point to the discussed parts of Merrick's anatomy and move his body in order to ensure a better view for the audience. The doctor reveals factual information about the patient: "He is English. He is twenty-one years of age. His name is John Merrick". He continues his narration by announcing that the audience is about to watch the "most perverted and degraded version of a human being", a statement that adds a hint of sensational anticipation similar to that provided by the pre-performance story in the freak show.

The second layer is a shadow play performed by the Elephant Man for the cinematic audience. Here Lynch references techniques of the shadow theatre (see Schönewolf, Currell). *The Elephant Man* shows the front view of the assistants pulling back the curtain in order to reveal Merrick's body, at which point the camera reverses its position to view him from behind another curtain against the backdrop of the auditorium. As Merrick is fully exposed to the audience of doctors, the cinematic spectator sees only his shadow projected onto the medical screen. Only the invited

Figure 24: ***The Elephant Man*** **(1980), dir. David Lynch.**

professionals are allowed to view the horrific body, for the cinematic spectator it is shown as a two-dimensional silhouette; we are not to see what is hidden behind the curtain. The screen acts as a protective device separating the cinematic audience from the views of the obscene body and from access to the scientific gaze.

There is also a third level: a performance seen on the doctors' faces. The emotional expression Treves displays during the freak show exposition is here repeated and multiplied in the faces of the on-looking medics. A tracking shot presenting close-ups of the doctors' faces reveals their curiosity and fascination, as well as shock and horror. Simultaneously repulsed and attracted by the exhibit, they are taken over by the pleasure of guilty gazes and double-takes. We are invited to watch as their initial response of disgust, or compassion, changes to one of excitement. This reaction is similar to that of the audience in the freak show watching the sensationalised spectacle of corporeality earlier in the film. Such an exploration of the facial vocabulary of the characters refers us to the reading of *The Elephant Man* as "a film of faces" (Chion 57; Kember): Merrick's body is interpreted through the gazes of other characters.

The display of disfigured bodies of freaks in the carnival in *The Elephant Man* provokes a surface reaction of repulsion, but at the same time relies on a certain titillating aspect of the act of viewing. This is also illustrated by the response of the doctors watching Merrick in the lecture theatre: they are initially repulsed and terrified, but gradually overtaken by curiosity and excitement; disgust and fear turn

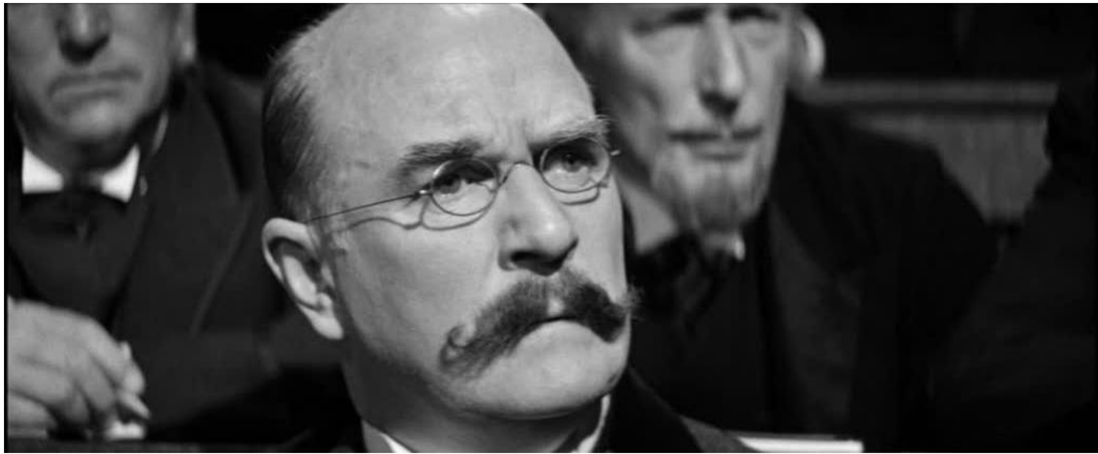

Figure 25: ***The Elephant Man*** **(1980), dir. David Lynch.**

into pleasure with the visual. Miller makes the following observation about just this kind of response:

> It is a commonplace that the disgusting can attract as well as repel; the film and entertainment industries, among which we might include news coverage, literally bank on its allure. The disgusting is an insistent feature of the lurid and the sensational, informed as these are by sex, violence, horror, and the violation of norms of modesty and decorum. And even as the disgusting repels, it rarely does so without also capturing our attention. It imposes itself upon us. We find it is hard not to sneak a second look or, less voluntarily, we find our eyes doing 'double takes' at the very things that disgust us. (x)

This type of looking is key to horror and pornography, genres that *The Elephant Man* make strong reference to. Similar to the mode of viewing intrinsic in witnessing a freak show, these genres bring to mind the idea of peeking at what is behind the doctor's curtain. These *body genres* (Clover, Williams), preoccupied with the corporeal and the sensational, bank on the attraction of looking at the exposed body and at what is deemed obscene. This type of gaze is labelled with a 'NO ENTRY' sign, just like the entrance though which we pass to enter the freak show in *The Elephant Man*.

Extraordinary bodies – between entertainment and medicine

Juxtaposed in the film, the similarities between the performances in the freak show and the lecture theatre are made evident. In both spaces, as Kember asserts, "Merrick himself remains silent, unresponsive and all but invisible, his face hidden beneath his cap and hood or behind curtains and medical screen" (26). Both entertainment and science objectify Merrick's body by transforming it into an exhibit and focusing solely on its physical nature. For Durbach,

> Treves's 'riveting' and repeated presentations of his medical specimen at meetings of the Pathological Society of London necessarily echoed the sensationalism of the sideshow . . . But while Treves sharply contrasted is own 'careful' and scientific examination of 'the Elephant Man' within the privacy of the London Hospital with Merrick's public - and, in his opinion obscene - display across the street, he omitted from his memoirs his own role in the exhibition of 'the Elephant Man'. (40)

Her statement echoes that of John Bland-Sutton, the assistant surgeon from Middlesex Hospital who had encountered the Elephant Man in a freak show before witnessing Treves's lecture:

> my surprise was great . . . a fortnight later to find this man exhibited by Treves at the Pathological society of London. He not only submitted Merrick for examination by members of the Society, but published a detailed and illustrated account of this unfortunate man in the Transactions for 1885. (qtd. in Howell and Ford 27)

Bland-Sutton points to the sensational element of Treves' lecture with regards to the choice of the exhibit, which echoes Bytes's remark after first meeting Treves ("we understand each other my friend").

By comparing and contrasting the spectacular performance of abnormal corporeality in a freak show and in a medical environment, *The Elephant Man* comments on the gaze particular to these two contexts. The film presents the freak

show as a dark place filled with shadows, reinforcing the notion of the mysterious and the secret; darkness can easily mislead the eye. In this space, Merrick is accompanied by a sensational story and becomes an object of imaginary investment (that is, he becomes the Elephant Man). By contrast, the lecture theatre is shown as a bright space facilitating careful observation; in this setting the eye seeks the truth. Under the auspices of medicine, Merrick's body is described with scientific detachment and turned into a biological specimen examined in order to further knowledge about the human body. The type of gaze that is conceived as voyeuristic and tending towards the obscene in the context of a freak show, is justified within the domain of medical research.

Crash

Based on the 1973 novel by J.G. Ballard, David Cronenberg's *Crash* (1996) portrays a group of people fascinated with car accidents who fetishise their aftermath. The story is told from the point of view of James Ballard (James Spader), a young producer of TV commercials. After a head-on collision with Helen (Holly Hunter), he is introduced to car crash victims obsessed with fatal car accidents: real, re-staged and simulated. James and his wife, Catherine (Deborah Unger), both pursuing extra-marital sexual thrills, are drawn into this dangerous cult and begin to share the interests of its members. The group is led by Vaughan (Elias Koteas) who re-enacts celebrated fatal car crashes. We read in the book: "Vaughan dreamed endlessly of the deaths of the famous, inventing imaginary crashes for them. Around the deaths of James Dean and Albert Camus, Jayne Mansfield and John Kennedy he had woven elaborate fantasies" (Ballard 8). His lover, Gabrielle (Rosanna Arquette), whose corporeal form "like the deformed bodies of the crashed automobiles, revealed the possibilities of an entirely new sexuality" (Ballard 81), represents the ideal post-crash body.

Crash centres around the materiality of the body. By merging the domains of Eros and Thanatos, the film shows human corporeality as a site of the extremities of pleasure and pain. It juxtaposes three types of bodies: the perfect corporealities of

consumer culture, the subversive post-crash bodies and the idealised images of film stars. *Crash* starkly contrasts the figures society considers attractive with those ordinarily seen as defective.

Sanitised bodies

Crash starts (and ends) with the portrayals of James and Catherine. At the beginning of the film they are presented as the glossy and glamorous bodies of consumer society; fit and beautiful, as if lifted straight from TV commercials (such as those produced by the lead character himself) or fashion photography, an undeniable influence on the film. Placed in the centre of the story, they illustrate Springer's suggestion that *Crash* is fascinated with the surface ("Seduction of the Surface" 206). Such bodies, narcissistically obsessed with their appearance, block any reference to their material nature. As Beard implies they

> have banished the messy internal body with its visceral liquidity and its expelled or leaked fluids and waste substances. The external body, concomitantly, has been cleaned, smoothed, manicured, sheathed, and sculptured into an object nearly as artificial and impermeable as a machine. (289)

Catherine, in particular, is portrayed as abstracted and cold. In the film, she is first presented against the background of a shiny plane; essentially, we are watching two glossy constructed bodies. Her boredom and emotional inertness is reflected in her icy beauty, completed by a vacant gaze. Catherine constantly copies the poses of fashion models (for example, the scene on the balcony is clearly inspired by the fashion photography of Helmut Newton). As Springer notes, "she is presented in an entirely conventional way. She is a mannequin: a smooth, shining female object of desire with a hard lacquered surface and a stunned, vacant demeanour" ("Seduction of the Surface" 209). In Ballard's novel, James describes his fascination with his wife's sanitised, perfect physicality:

> What had first struck me about Catherine was her immaculate cleanliness, as if she had individually reamed out every square centimetre of her elegant body, separately ventilated every pore . . . During our first sex acts, in the anonymous bedrooms of airport hotels, I would deliberately inspect every orifice I could find, running my fingers around her gums in the hope of seeing even one small knot of trapped veal, forcing my tongue into her ear in the hope of finding a trace of wax, inspecting her nostrils and navel, and lastly her vulva and anus. I would have to run my forefinger to its root before I could extract even a faint scene of faecal matte, a thin brown rim under my fingernails. (90)

Catherine and James are introduced through their erotic adventures with anonymous lovers. *Crash* opens with a trio of sex scenes: Catherine in a plane hangar, James in an editing suite, and wife and husband on the balcony overlooking the city. These highly conventionalised and stylised erotic scenes feature stock partners (a sexy camera girl in torn jeans and a muscular flight teacher with three-day stubble), cliché settings (a private airplane hangar and a secluded room on a film set), and a selection of common fetish objects (lingerie, stockings and heels). Here, the film consciously refers to the genre of soft pornography (Barker, Arthurs, and Harindranath 40).

Figure 26: *Crash* (1996), dir. David Cronenberg.

As representations of male and female sexuality, James and Catherine embody Mulvey's "airbrushed cosmeticised image that found a consumer acceptability that had evaded previous sex publications, and that was perfectly in keeping with the ethos of the time" (*Fetishism and Curiosity* 48).

Their extramarital sex, discussed by husband and wife at the end of the day, is like a banal and mundane activity comparable to the dull monotony of repetitive work. In the book, James fantasises during his X-ray: “I thought of my last forced orgasms with Catherine, the sluggish semen urged into her vagina by my bored pelvis” (Ballard 30). These are the bodies of sanitised sexuality conforming to the demands of consumer culture; their desire is devoid of heat and emotion, their physical sensations dimmed.

Post-crash bodies

The introduction of serial car crash victims, Vaughan and Gabrielle, presents a sharp contrast between their disfigured (and, in the case of Gabrielle, disabled[13]) bodies and those of air-brushed Catherine and James. The heavily marked figure and ragged facial features of Vaughan are mementos of numerous encounters between metal and flesh, while the leather, steel and plastic of Gabrielle’s prosthetic devices, become the permanent theatrical costume that reconfigures her corporality. Beard notes that “if James and Catherine are too beautiful and clean and impervious, these people are their didactic antithesis, as it were the goal they are trying to achieve” (401). Flawless, good-looking James is placed in contrast to scarified Vaughan, just as Catherine is almost an opposite double of Gabrielle.

Figure 27: *Crash* (1996), dir. David Cronenberg.

While the Cronenberg film portrays Vaughan and Gabrielle as the leaders of the group of car accident obsessives who celebrate the extremities of their post-crash

[13] *Crash* has been discussed as lifting the cultural taboo on the sexual life of the disabled; see, for example Tom Shakespeare’s “Sex, Death and Stereotypes: Disability in *Sick* and *Crash*”.

corporealities, the book recounts their lives before joining the cult. While describing Vaughan's apartment, the novel points to the dominance of photos documenting this pre-crash period of his life, narcissistically treasured by the character. Ballard writes that "Vaughan was self-consciously absorbed in these fading images, straightening their curling corners as if frightened that when they completely vanished his own identity would also cease to matter" (138). The book also evokes Vaughan's powerful image before the accident:

> As one of the first of the new-style TV scientists, Vaughan had combined a high degree of personal glamour - heavy black hair over a scarred face, an American combat jacket - with an aggressive lecture-theatre manner and complete conviction in his subject matter, the application of computerised techniques to the control of all international traffic systems. In the first programmes of his series, three years earlier, Vaughan had projected a potent image, almost that of the scientist as hoodlum, driving about from laboratory to television centre on a high-powered motorcycle. (Ballard 48)

In contrast, Beard describes Vaughan's look in the film in the following terms:

> he has so many scars he almost looks pieced together like Frankenstein's monster. His sick pallor, dead black hair and hollow mouth - and eye caverns, greasy hands and dirty fingernails, his strange hunched movement and constant gum chewing make him into a creature - moreover a creature who delights in his creatureness - and as far distant from James's evocation of the well-dressed good looking yuppie as can be imagined. (401)

Correspondingly, in the book, we find a description of Gabrielle's transformation after the accident, a process recorded in photos taken by Vaughan:

> The agreeable young woman, with her pleasant sexual dreams, had been reborn within the breaking contours of her crushed sports car . . .

> The crushed body of the sports car had turned her into a creature of free and perverse sexuality, releasing within its twisted bulkheads and leaking engine coolant all the deviant possibilities of her sex. (Ballard 79)

Gabrielle's post-crash body has been locked in an apparatus of steel and leather. Her nearly theatrical appearance brings to mind sadomasochistic pornography. She is portrayed as a fetishised sex toy and contrasted with the cold Catherine. Beard describes Gabrielle in Cronenberg's film as

> struggling to move, encased in braces and harnesses and aided by a cane, she is at the same time sending the strongest possible signals of a totally different set of stereotypes. Part biker sex-girl (with a black leather bodice that outrageously cuts out a zipper hole around one breast), part cyberpunk robot-of-desire (*Metropolis* flashes briefly to mind), part sword-and-sorcery dominatrix in fishnet stockings. (412)

Sex in this domain is liberated from social taboos: disfigured bodies and fetishes shunned by popular culture and its "dams of disgust, shame, and morality that worked to repress desire for forbidden objects" (Miller 128), are here celebrated as the materiality of the body and its interior.

Crash repeatedly examines post-accident bodies that bear the traces of violence inflicted by the other (Catherine's body after the violent intercourse with Vaughan) or by the machine (James, Gabrielle and Vaughan after car crashes). The camera insistently focuses on the aftermath of collisions and offers

Figure 28: *Crash* (1996), dir. David Cronenberg.

Figure 29: *Crash* (1996), dir. David Cronenberg.

visual exploration of skin (scars, wounds and bruises). The film contains a number of scenes that reveal fascination with disfigured corporealities. It underscores this obsession through both visual close-ups and detailed verbal descriptions (such as that of Catherine observing Vaughan's marked chest or fantasising about his scarred penis).

The film's fascination with post-crash bodies is particularly evident in the fragments that follow the induction of sanitised bodies into this murky world: James's after his crash with Helen and Catherine's after violent sex with Vaughan. From the scene of James's car accident at the beginning of the film, *Crash* cuts to the close up of a complicated steel construction: James's leg in steel braces. The slow movement of the camera presents the skinscapes of the bruised surface of the body and the pieces of steel placed deep in the marked flesh; it is a site of encounter of flesh and metal. The camera travels slowly along the injured limb examining its uneven surface. The next cut takes us to the close up of a wounded neck; the screen is filled by a static shot of a bruised collarbone and a long stitched wound. We notice slight movements of the flesh caused by shallow breathing. A few moments later, the film shows another close-up of James' injured leg; the camera zooms on his

Figure 30: *Crash* (1996), dir. David Cronenberg.

discoloured flesh merged with metal as he walks along the hospital corridor. He meets the other crash survivor, Helen, and Vaughan who scrutinises his injured limb. The book offers a detailed description of James's bruised body on the hospital bed:

> The skin was broken around the lower edge of the sternum, where the horn boss had been driven upwards by the collapsing engine compartment. A semi-circular bruise marked my chest, a marbled rainbow running from one nipple to the other. During the next week this rainbow moved through a sequence of tone changes like a colour spectrum of automobile varnishes. (Ballard 18)

Similar attention is paid to Catherine, now transposed to the domain of post-crash corporealities. We read in the book:

> In the elevator I held Catherine closely, loving her for the blows Vaughan had struck her body. Later that night, I explored her body and bruises, feeling them gently with my lips and cheeks, seeing in the rash or raw skin across her abdomen the forcing geometry of

> Vaughan's powerful physique. My penis traced the raw symbols that his hands and mouth had left across her skin. I knelt over her as she lay diagonally across the bed, her small feet resting on my pillow, one hand over her right breast. She watched me with a calm and affectionate gaze as I touched her body with the head of my penis, marking the contact points of the imaginary automobile accidents which Vaughan had placed on her body. (Ballard 137)

In the film, after the scene following the eroticised violence Catherine willingly subjects herself to, the film moves to her and James' bedroom. The camera lingers on her bruised skin, slowly following the caressing movements of James's hand. This singular instance of warmth and romanticism in the film (soft lights, gentle music and the tender touch of a lover), paradoxically, reveals fascination with the aftermath of violence.

These two scenes depict tableaux composed of skin, bruised and scarred. Post-crash bodies that display their material nature invite our gaze to admire their ragged beauty. As Beard writes about the scene presenting James in the hospital: "James's leg-brace is far too wonderful to be simply functional, and it is appreciated both by 'doctor' Vaughan and the camera as the expressive sculpture it is" (420). Lingering, tracking shots presenting the surface of the body in close-up emphasise

Figure 31: ***Crash*** **(1996), dir. David Cronenberg.**

the proximity to the object in focus (Baker 61-2) and engage in on-screen intimacy with the marked corporealities. Such close-ups, in a sense, pause the unfolding narrative (Doane 97-8): the image fills the screen for a few seconds in order to facilitate meditation on the visual properties of the object in focus (here, human skin, particularly its colour and texture). Skin is here considered as "a haptically charged surface" (Elsaesser and Hagener 124) bearing the marks of a violent encounter. In both sequences, looking is, metaphorically, merged with touching, illustrating Marks's statement that "the vision itself can be tactile, as though one were touching a film with one's eyes" (*Skin of the Film* xi).

Spectacular bodies

The perfect corporeal forms of consumer society (sanitised bodies) and those that subvert ideas of conventional beauty (post-crash bodies) are in *Crash* juxtaposed with the spectacular bodies of film icons. In the film, James Dean and Jayne Mansfield represent certain archetypes, or in Mulvey's terms, "ego ideals" ("Virtual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" 18), and, at the same time, opposing sides of classical Hollywood. These film stars are not physically present in *Crash*, rather, they are channelled through the characters' re-enactment of the stars' car-induced deaths.

Figure 32: Jayne Mansfield.

Jayne Mansfield, one of the leading sex symbols of the 1950s, was a Playboy playmate and the first Hollywood actress to appear nude in a mainstream film (Callan 146). Her films emphasised her physical attributes, and Mansfield came to represent a 1950s glamour in which the female form was presented as an eroticised spectacle on screen, Mulvey's "sexuality of the surface" (*Fetishism and Curiosity* 14). Her image was constructed (through films, pin-ups,

Figure 33: James Dean.

public appearances and photos[14]) almost purely in terms of stereotypical feminine sexuality, turning her into a “woman-as-body, woman-as-spectacle” (Dyer 22).

Next to Jayne Mansfield, *Crash* conjures up the presence of James Dean, who, unconventional in his physical way of acting (Dalton 53-4), embodies changes in the factory of dreams and a break with classical Hollywood as personified by Mansfield. James Dean who “made teenagers defiantly visible for the first time” (Dalton 57), stands for the archetypal angry young man. Linked with the emergence of rock-and-roll and the renunciation of old values, the actor has been perceived as the face of his generation.

These media icons of the 1950s, turned into manufactured spectacles on the screen or in photos, recall Debord’s society of spectacle, where “life presents itself as an immerse accumulation of spectacles” (1). In the spectacular society, the body is lived and mediated through appearance; the raw materiality of corporeality is concealed from public discourse. Placed out of reach on the glossy surface of the screen, film stars - crucial ingredients of Debord’s “pseudo-world” (2) - conceal the physical nature of their bodies and become fetishes. These “spectacular representations of a living human being” (Debord 60), stand for those that seemingly lived: even during their lifetime celebrities exist in public discourse largely as pure images.

A celebrity operates within the dichotomies of private/public, individual/star and natural/manufactured. What is crucial here are carefully managed on and off

[14] Mansfield’s biography reveals: “Jayne refused to visit a nudist colony after her guide, a snake dancer Luz del Fuego, explained that she’d have to strip. ‘It’s too bad I’m not Marilyn Monroe,’ she said. ‘She’s a naturalist. But I would not feel right. I am sorry” (Saxton 106). Mansfield emphasized her manufactured status as a sex symbol, while Monroe’s image, in contrast, pointed to her naturalness.

stage/screen appearances layered upon the real person in order to construct a spectacle. Such a dichotomy replaces facts with a belief. The latter wipes away the imperfections of the natural body (mortality, ageing, illnesses), while the former marks the body of a singular human being in its temporality and materiality. However, Dyer observes that:

> Logically, no one aspect is more real than another. How we appear is no less real than how we have manufactured that appearance, or than the 'we' that is doing the manufacturing. Appearances are a kind of reality, just as manufacture and individual persons are. However, manufacture and the person (a certain notion of the person, as I'll discuss) are generally thought to be more real than appearances in this culture. Stars are obviously a case of appearance – all we know of them is what we see and hear before us. (2)

Hollywood, "the finest-tooled spectacle of the modern age" (Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity* 25), attempts to conceal the flaws of the natural body[15]. The dream factory denies not only its own materiality (the modes of its production), but also the materiality of the bodies on screen (the physical nature of the bodies of its stars). The bodies of both Dean and Mansfield are projected to the public as eroticised surface images, spectacles detached from the actual physical existence of the celebrity.

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[15] The bodies of Hollywood stars, such as those of James Dean and Jayne Mansfield referred to in *Crash*, are characterised by the dichotomy similar to that discussed by Ernst Kantorowicz. In his *The King's Two Bodies* written in the context of medieval political thought, Kantorowicz investigates the problem posed by the body of a king as the divine representative of the crown and the incarnation of ruling power. Kantorowicz points to the split between the king's body natural, or corporation sole, and his superbody, or *body politic*. The latter wipes away the imperfections of the natural body (mortality, ageing, illnesses) and constructs the symbolic ideal, while the former marks the body of a singular human being in its temporality and materiality. Such a divide replaces facts (king as an individual with a physical body) with beliefs (king as an omnipresent superhuman, the spectacular body). The result is, as Kantorowicz remarks "that kind of man-made irreality – indeed, that strange construction of a human mind which finally becomes slave to its own fictions – we are normally more ready to find in the religious sphere than in the allegedly sober and realistic realms of law" (5).

James Dean and Jayne Mansfield died in car collisions several years before *Crash* (the 1973 novel and the 1996 film) was released (in 1955 and 1967, respectively)[16]. The premature deaths annihilated their material bodies, but enshrined these 1950s icons as Hollywood legends. In a way, their status remained unchanged when their material presence in the world discontinued. Dalton observes that "there is a sense in which celebrities are already dead. As remote from us as the dead, their death merely seals the bargain. They are suspended in life" (219). He continues: "'Death,' for James Dean, came in quotes . . . To his fans, for whom Jimmy was never entirely mortal, his death was mere formality" (149). In the film, Vaughan comments: "James Dean died of a broken neck and became immortal".

The staging of James Dean's fatal accident is re-enacted in front of a small audience including James and Helen. Initially, the camera first focuses on Vaughan, who appears in the centre of the screen caressing the car interior. The character recounts the details of the accident in preparation for the main act: the collision of two cars; the novel emphasises "Vaughan's present role in the stadium seemed that of a film director" (Ballard 67). Through the introduction of facts (such as Dean's

Figure 34: *Crash* (1996), dir. David Cronenberg.

[16] The novel mentions another celebrity: Vaughan stalks Elizabeth Taylor and finally dies in a car crash with the actress' limousine, however, the film drops the allusions to the star, who was still alive at the time of its production.

date of death: “The year: 1955. The day: September 30”) and fictional embellishments (for example, Dean’s last words, “Don’t worry, that guy’s gotta see us”), the narrator (Vaughan) builds anticipation of the sensational event.

While the past event occurred without witnesses, the re-enactment bears clear marks of a staged performance: it is introduced and narrated by Vaughan, it has been meticulously planned and prepared, and it features actors.[17] The pre-prepared narration underscores the artificiality of this performance by repeating the words: “replica”, “impersonator”, “played by” and “the role of”. The camera cuts to and from the spectators making us aware of their presence, the scene includes clapping from the audience and the flashes of cameras.

The preamble continues as the vehicles reverse in preparation for the main event. The establishing shot of the replica of James Dean Porsche 550 Spyder and a close-up of its nickname, “Little Bastard”, initiate this sequence. While the two cars back away from each other, the film cuts between the image from the hood framing Vaughan and Seagrave, and a shot presenting the point of view from the other car. The end of this sequence is signalled by the sound of a gear change and the image of Vaughan on his walkie-talkie, calling for the start of the crash sequence proper.

While the cars rush towards each other, the film presents rapid intercutting and changes in the camera position similar to those in the previous sequence: rear-facing shots of Vaughan and Seagrave speeding, point-of-view shots from the other car, and side-wing shots (bumper style), maximising the sensation of speed for the audience. At the very moment of impact, the camera withdraws to present an external view of both colliding cars. The sequence is finalised by the side-wing shot framing the wrecked Porsche at rest.

Here Cronenberg’s film recalls the Hollywood convention of sensational car crashes prevalent in 1970s action films such as 1968 *Bullitt* or 1971*The French Connection* (Orr, ch.7; O’Brien 32-40; Romao). The detailed introduction of the car

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[17] Collin Seagrave, a former stuntman plays the role of James Dean, Vaughan impersonates Dean’s car mechanic, Rolf Vudrich, and Colin Turnipseed, a student Dean crashed into, is played by another cinema stuntman.

reflects a common trope of car chase cinema – it is prominent, for example, in *Bullitt,* where the car is strongly identified with a character. Similarly, multiple camera positions, rapid editing and the escalating sound of engines echo the clichés of the genre. At the same time, however, a number of elements subvert the convention of car chase films. The pre-performance story sets up the context and builds anticipation of the audience. There is as much time devoted to the set-up (the cars backing away) as to the actual event (the cars speeding towards each other). Additionally, while the cars reverse, the camera presents the point of view of a passenger (Vaughan/mechanic), rather than the driver, thus inverting the genre convention. We see from the point of view of the surviving witness, again clearly highlighting the status of the sequence as an artificial construct; we are in no doubt that it is a staged event re-creating violence inflicted to the body of somebody else.

In contrast to the reconstruction of James Dean's collision - planned to involve no casualties and featuring spectators watching violence as entertainment - the re-staging of Jayne Mansfield's accident takes the form of a real-life experience; it is not a simulation. This time Vaughan delivers "the ultimate in authenticity" by portraying the appropriated physical experience of a celebrity. Vaughan, Catherine and James (as a driver) find the site of a violent accident surrounded by police officers and fire fighters. The setting of the fatal crash proves fascinating for both

Figure 35: *Crash* (1996), dir. David Cronenberg.

Vaughan and Catherine who arrive here soon after the event and begin an exploration of the space. While Vaughan, captivated by the sight of the accident, frantically takes photographs to add to his private collection, Catherine wanders around immersed in the atmosphere of trauma and violence. If her sensations are ordinarily dimmed, this highly charged place gives her the thrill she seeks. Vaughan helps Catherine by acting as a guide in this space, pointing to the crucial details of the collision. For Mathijs, "the Mansfield crash site certainly resembles a movie set, the kind of a car commercials director like James would dream about after having a crash" (187). While shattered glass and metal covered with blood create their own cold aesthetics, smoke and coloured lights add to the visual composition of this fragment. Initial silence is replaced by the theme used during the opening credits of *Crash*. Such an exposition reinforces Vaughan's perception of the accident site as a work of art.

This elegant scenography, submerged in a cool colour scheme, is the setting for more visceral images. As the camera reveals the last car, we are presented with Seagrave's twisted body dressed in a pink jacket, a costume prepared for the reconstruction of Jayne Mansfield's crash[18]. In this scene, less attention is paid to the actual fatality (Seagrave) than to the star he is recreating (Jayne Mansfield): Seagrave's death is linked with the thrill of staging somebody else's bodily experience. Callan fictionalises the accident in Jayne Mansfield biography:

> the Buick powered into the back of the slow lorry, the tail section of which scythed into the car, tearing off the roof. Broody and Harrison were flung from the car and killed instantly. Jayne Mansfield was decapitated, and flung out. The body of her tiny chihuahua Pudu landed on the wet earth near her. (189)

In the film, the camera slowly examines the elements that point to the fact of re-enactment: a blond wig is stuck to the door of the car (a reference to the hairpiece of the actress which was left a few meters away from the spot of her fatal accident), an artificial breast rolls down (Mansfield was famous for her large bosom), and a

[18] Significantly, in the book Seagrave wears Elizabeth Taylor's costume (Ballard 154).

Figure 36: ***Crash*** **(1996), dir. David Cronenberg.**

stuffed chihuahua is present (the post-crash photographs of the star featured the same breed). These details are highlighted by the flashes of Vaughan’s camera.

In Cronenberg’s film, the re-stagings of car crashes point to their own manufactured nature by recalling the elements constructing the performance. The accidents refer to what Beard calls “a world of pain and terror, of a vivid awareness of mortality, and at the most basic level a consciousness of the body in all its sentience” (390). In both re-enactments, the body of a film icon (Dean and Mansfield) is replaced by that of an impersonator who reconstructs fatal accidents. In one of the conversations with James, Vaughan comments on his performances: “the car crash is a fertilizing event rather than a destructive event - a liberation of sexual energy that mediates the sexuality of those who have died with an intensity impossible any other form. To fully understand that, and to live that . . . this is my project”. Such an appropriation of a dramatic event (violent death) symbolically connects the body in the performance to that of a Hollywood star.

In *Crash,* the violence inflicted to the body in a car collision and its re-enactment, reveal the dichotomy between the body-image of a film star and the physical nature of his or her body. While the body of a celebrity is fetishised on the

screen and in the photos where it seems nearly immaterial, in the performances of violent car accident in *Crash*, it, metaphorically, materialises, but only in the moment of its violent death. Extreme sensations, even these repeated in the borrowed experience of someone else, intensify the sense of the materiality of the body.

Additionally, in *Crash,* the re-enactment of the violent experience of a celebrity satisfies the desire to crack open the glossy surface, break into the private, or even intimate domain of a star and reveal the physical nature of the celebrity's body (that is its mortality and materiality). Springer emphasises that,

> part of the public's fascination with star photographs is the knowledge that a real and imperfect person exists somewhere behind the glossy surface of the image, and so there is a strong urge to discover a blemish behind the perfection. Hence the extraordinary fascination with stories that purport to 'tell all' about a star, with star scandals, and, more intensely, with star deaths. (*The Many Faces of Rebel Iconography* 89)

This desire to confirm "an endlessly played out revelation of 'the truth behind the image'" (Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies* 76) is highlighted in the film by clear references to paparazzi culture through repeated images of camera flashes. Correspondingly, the book mentions Vaughan's obsession with photos and cameras:

> His imagination was a target gallery of screen actresses, politicians, business tycoons and television executives. Vaughan followed them everywhere with his camera, zoom lens, watching them from the observation platform of the Oceanic Terminal at the airport, from hotel mezzanine balconies and studio car parks. (Ballard 8)

Such subversion of the spectacular body projected to the public represents the shift from the domain of the "fantasised, fictional identities" (Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies* 76), to that of an individual with his or her bodily form. In restaged performances of

fatal car accidents of film icons, this division between the singularity, or privacy, of an individual and his or her public image – their manufactured representation - is made particularly visible.

Outside horror and pornography

With its visually and thematically seductive elements that bring about morally and aesthetically ambiguous discourse, *Crash* transgresses social taboos with reference to the body (Barker, Arthurs, and Harindranath, 2-6). The film challenges a viewer with its controversial subject matter (the portrayal of the group fetishising violent car crashes and their aftermaths) and subversive sense of beauty (the aesthetics of wounds and scars). At the same time, however, its emotional disinterest and the lack of judgement, along with detached formal aspects of the film - measured camera work, lighting in cold whites and blues – distances viewers from what are explicit topics. Barker, Arthurs, and Harindranath point to the use of the word "cold" repeated in film reviews with regards to its aesthetics, its detached stance as well as (un)emotional interactions of the characters (19). Similarly, Dick describes the film as "cool" and "detached" (34-5), while the President of BBFC states: "the film stood back in icy astonishment" (qtd. in Barker, Arthurs, and Harindranath 18). The critics employ the words "clinical" and "medical" to the same effect. Dick suggests that "the film turns its medical gaze on an obsession, and it does not seduce us into partaking in this obsession" (34). Similarly, Barker, Arthurs, and Harindranath call the film "a clinical study of sexual obsession" (18), and Derry mentions its "morbid fascination and clinical distance" (338). The medical gaze denotes here a certain detachment in its distanced and scientific mode of observation.

Crash is particularly difficult to classify in terms of genre (Barker, Arthurs, and Harindranath 5). It exhibits extreme violence against the body and graphic erotic images and has, therefore, been accused of coming close to pornography (Mathijs 184) and horror (Springer, "The Seduction of the Surface" 209), however, it cannot easily be described as belonging to either. The film begins with three erotic sequences in a row, and for Barker, Arthurs, and Harindranath "a series of sex scenes like this would usually occur in pornography. Yet various things (the slow tracking

camera in the first scene, for example, or the lack of explicitness in the way these scenes are shot) alert viewers to the problem of simply assigning the film to this genre" (40). Correspondingly, *Crash* does contain elements of horror, but rather than immersing the spectator in the on-screen brutality, it focuses on the aftermath of violence, and its traces on the body (scarred, bruised, open bodies)[19]. As Browning remarks, "these might be potentially horrific but there remains a strong sense of fascination, which we are encouraged to share by Cronenberg's insistence on opening up and showing aspects of bodies, at which we might otherwise choose not to look" (14-15). References to the genre of horror are also present in the camera work: "its slow, deliberate movements evoke conventional horror film cinematography that lurks on the periphery of events and pursues characters in long, suspenseful track-ins" (Springer, "The Seduction of the Surface" 209).

Crash imposes its own sense of beauty with reference to the body and swerves away from traditional aesthetics. The display of wounds, scars and prosthetic devices, as well as the bodies opened after car crashes (such as in the fatal collision of Seagrave) act as reminders of violent events. The film is characterised by stylistic excess: its carefully chosen costumes, stylised cinematography and lighting (Springer, "The Seduction of the Surface" 209), as well as sets refer to its own manufactured nature. It is consciously self-reflexive; its looks: "incredibly polished and clean, pursuing a fetishistic purity of photography, framing and camera movement, textures and colours and rhythms" (Beard 362), balance the sensational subject matter. The transgressions in *Crash* are tightly controlled and contained. Freeland's comment about Cronenberg's cinema in especially valid with regards to *Crash:*

[19] In its allusions to pornography and horror, *Crash* frequently features medical references. The novel describes "the pleasant surgical odour from Gabrielle's body, the tang of the mustard leatherette, hung in the air" (Ballard 147). Earlier in the book, James recounts his encounter with radiology after the accident: "I was sent to the X-ray department, where a pleasant young woman who discussed the state of the film industry with me began to photograph my knee. I enjoyed the conversation, the contrast between her idealistic view of the commerical feature-film and the matter-of-fact way in which she operated her own bizarre equipment. Like all laboratory technicians, there was something clinically sexual about her plump body in its white coat" (Ballard 28-9). In the film, hospital is the space where Catherine and James begin their fascination with post-crash bodies.

> This Canadian director is self-conscious about the horrific: his movies give us a theatricalized version or performance of horror. They force us as audiences into reflexive awareness of our interest in the spectacles of horror and in actual 'mechanics' or mode of delivery of these spectacles. (87)

It is this particular sense of beauty and the highly auteurist vision of the director, rather than sensational excitement, that is central to the film.

The Elephant Man and *Crash* – spectacular bodies disenchanted

Crash and *The Elephant Man* consciously layer spectacles for the cinematic audience and point to other film traditions. As these performances revolve around the corporeal display, the films in focus subvert the illusion of representation and draw attention to the very materiality of the body. Through such centering around the physical nature of the human form and exploring topics which question prevalent body norms, Lynch and Cronenberg refer to another tradition: that of *body genres*.

Clover coined the term *body genres* to describe subversive and illicit on-screen images of the body: "on the civilized side of the continuum lie the legitimate genres; at the other end, hard on the unconscious, lie the sensation or 'body' genres, horror and pornography, in that order" (189). Both horror and pornography call the viewers' attention to the carnal: "what we witness is also the body, another's body, in experience: the body in sex and the body in threat. The terms 'flesh film' ('skin flicks') and 'meat movies' are remarkably apt" (Clover 189). Linda Williams expands on Clover's idea (adding melodramas) and points to the body genre's focus on "the spectacle of the body caught in the grip of intense sensation or emotion" ("Film Bodies" 4) - the images of sexually ecstatic bodies in pornography, and the portrayals of terror and violence in horror. When discussing these films, Williams draws attention to the importance of the spectacle of the body, rather than the unfolding story. Body genres objectify the body and bring its material nature to the fore; carnality takes over the subjectivity.

Figure 37: ***The Elephant Man*** **(1980), dir. David Lynch.**

Whilst centering on images of the body, *The Elephant Man* and *Crash* portray corporealities that diverge from the norm: the disfigured carnival freaks and the post-crash figures of car accident survivors. These bodies call attention primarily to their material nature and cease to be transparent sites of the self; they become the defining feature of one's identity. Their exhibition invites the type of looking similar to that in pornography and horror: we are simultaneously fascinated and repulsed by excessive carnality of these bodies (Miller x).

Additionally, *Crash* and *The Elephant Man* merge the seemingly incongruous discourses of entertainment and science. It is medicine in particular - objectifying and focused on the physical aspect of human corporeality - that provides the titillating possibility of looking behind the curtain, or an alibi for looking at the exposed bodies. In *The Elephant Man*, the main character, Treves, is a medical doctor who attempts to provide rational explanation of the disfigured body. In *Crash* the aesthetic and the scientific in reference to the body intertwine: Vaughan wears a laboratory kilt and watches scientific crash tests videos with members of his group. Correspondingly, Ballard's novel features repeated medical descriptions and metaphors.

The bodies of freaks in *The Elephant Man* and those of celebrities as portrayed in *Crash* point to the confusion of a product of nature (human corporeality) and a construct of imagination (the perceived image of the body). The audience suspends rational explanations when confronted with the symbolic corporealities of

freak show performers or the idealised bodies of film icons on screen. In both films these bodies are presented as spectacles, thus, their perception depends on an imaginary investment from viewers.

The body of a freak show monster, such as that in *The Elephant Man,* considered too carnal and therefore obscene, challenges conventional norms and categories. For centuries, distorted bodies have invited sensational explanations, particularly in popular discourse. Deformed figures have been perceived as supernatural signs, the result of merging species or products of disrupted maternal imagination. In a freak show, such bodies are encountered from a distance imposed by a stage - an audience is not permitted to interact with them - which ensures the maximal manipulation of imagination and emotions. Here, the spectacle of the corporeal, its terror or marvel, depends on belief-based presumptions.

In contrast, the Hollywood stars evoked in *Crash* are presented as idealised bodies corresponding to particular social norms (e.g. rebellious masculinity of James Dean or feminine sex-appeal of Jayne Mansfield). Turned into manufactured illusions on screen, these "spectacular representations of a living human being" (Debord 60) exist in public discourse as fetishised images detached from the material form. They are mediated solely through appearance: their materiality and biology - the imperfections of matter - are concealed. Fetishised bodies on screen are stage-managed; the spectacle of their corporeality is tightly controlled.

The bodies of freak show performers and those of Hollywood stars are carefully presented in terms of costume. A fantasy linked to their corporealities, either assigns allegorical value to the excessive materiality (in case of carnival freaks) or idealises and fetishises it (in case of film stars). These bodies are enveloped in a particular set of beliefs that play on the sensational elements appealing primarily to the emotions and imagination of the spectators, and their willingness to co-operate in the creation of an illusion on screen or stage. In *The Elephant Man* it is a spectacle of god-offence, in *Crash* it is a belief in film stars and their demi-god status. These metaphorical representations can also be considered in contrast to one another. While the materiality of the body of a film icon is concealed in stage-managed popular discourse, "the human form mirrored back in distorted

embodiments" (Adams 6) calls attention primarily to its own materiality. If carnival monsters challenge moral and aesthetic standards concerning the body and thus introduce anxieties about (seemingly) established categories, the bodies of celebrities create and confirm social norms and ideals.

Although *The Elephant Man* and *Crash* reflect on the perception of the bodies that depend upon the investment of imagination, in both films the sensational element is subverted. Through an attempt to provide a rational explanation for the monstrous body in the medical discourse - detached and de-sensationalised (*The Elephant Man)* - or by appropriating extreme sensations recalling the mortality of Hollywood icons (*Crash)*, these films undermine the dichotomy between the belief-created body and the actual corporeality in its biological dimension. As a result, the fabricated spectacle of the body collapses.

It is not only the belief-based perception of the bodies of film icons and carnival freaks that *The Elephant Man* and *Crash* subvert. The films under discussion consciously reveal the process of spectacle production by pointing to the elements constituting a staged show, featuring performances-within-performances, and containing clear references to other film traditions. Both revolve around spectacular happenings (in *The Elephant Man,* the events in a freak show and a lecture theatre; in

Figure 38: *Crash* (1996), dir. David Cronenberg.

Crash, the reconstructions of famous car accidents). These performances invite the audience to investigate the composition and structure of both the staged event presented within the film and the film itself. Anti-illusionist and self-aware, *The Elephant Man* and *Crash* situate themselves in Stam's "other tradition", which "straight-forwardly admits its status as representation" (1). By drawing attention to its artificiality and constructed nature, the "art of interruptions" (Stam 5) invites to investigate its composition and structure. Rather than conjure an illusion, the performance reveals itself as "a made thing, a laboriously constructed artefact" (Stam 102).

The spectacular presentation in *The Elephant Man* (the exhibition of a deviant body in a freak show and a lecture theatre) and *Crash* (the reconstruction of James Dean's fatal car accident) feature assistants facilitating the events, an audience and a stage. Bytes and Treves (in Lynch), and Vaughan (in Cronenberg) are revealed as the authors of the events who direct the attention and imagination of spectators. Their narrated stories elevate the performance to the status of a sensational happening. In *Crash,* during the restaging of James Dean's fatal accident, Vaughan's account points to the fabrication by using phrases emphasising its (re-)constructed nature (such as "impersonator" or "the role of"), and thus clearly marking it as a staged production. The event includes camera flashes - a reference to the tradition of sensational celebrity photos, an important ingredient of modern popular culture (and also mainstream cinema and its star system). In *The Elephant Man,* the performance in the lecture theatre features a medical curtain that acts as a screen for a shadow show and likens this event to a cinematic production that is also screen-based. Additionally, by repeated close-ups of the faces, the film comments on different act of looking and makes us aware of our own gaze.

Both Cronenberg and Lynch layer the spectacles for the cinematic audience. The scene in the lecture theatre in *The Elephant Man,* apart from the actual presentation of a medical talk, focuses mainly on the involuntary performance on the faces of the doctors and the shadow theatre performed by Merrick hidden behind the curtain. In *Crash*, the sequence of the reconstruction of Jayne Mansfield's fatal accident offers a view of a site of a car crash but simultaneously recalls a highly

stylised film set. Moreover, the performances in *Crash* and *The Elephant Man* frequently and consciously refer to other cinematic traditions. The spectacle in the freak show prepared for Treves recalls German Expressionist cinema thus situating the monstrous body within the conventions of the early horror film. The reconstructions of celebrities' fatal accidents in *Crash,* especially that of James Dean, allude to Hollywood action films with car chases as their staple ingredient. We are made aware of these films' existence among other cinematic works of art.

CHAPTER THREE

Attenberg

Along with *Dogtooth* (2009) and *Alps* (2011) - both by Yorgos Lanthimos (the producer and one of the actors in *Attenberg*) - and Babis Makridis's *L* (2011), Athina Rachel Tsangari's *Attenberg* (2010) is considered a representative of what critics tentatively call[20] "Greek New Wave" (Bradshaw), "Greek Weird Wave" (Rose), "Young Greek Cinema" (Chalkou 244) or "Greek Absurdism" (Fairfax). Described as "surreal, deadpan" (Rose), with "an underlying illogicality" (Fairfax), these films share certain similarities in terms of their thematic[21] and stylistic concerns[22]. Kerkinos observes that "they stress the personal over the political or the social, they are interested in a micro- rather than a macro-history", while Chalkou points to their "shift away from history, ancient drama and issues of Greekness to the present reality, which is confronted with sharpness, irony, demystification and cold criticism" (245).

The main character of *Attenberg*, Marina (Ariane Labed) is a 23-year-old girl coming to terms with the impending death of her terminally ill father, Spyros (Vangelis Mourikis), an architect disillusioned about his projects. At the same time, she becomes increasingly aware of her own sexuality, particularly when she meets a visiting engineer (Giorgos Lanthimos) and observes the erotic encounters of her best (and only) friend, Bella (Evangelia Randou). Marina is fascinated by the documentaries of David Attenborough; his films about nature, rather than interactions with people and their bodies (even her own body), inform her understanding of the world. Taking its name from a mispronouncing and misspelling of his name, *Attenberg* is a study of human beings as specimens of natural history.

Nayman juxtaposes *Attenberg* with Claire Denis's *35 Shots of Rum* (2008), another film which analyses a changing relationship between father and daughter:

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[20] While considering the present renewal of Greek cinema, Dimitris Kerkinos points to its similarities to 1970s New Greek Cinema of Theo Angelopoulos, Nikos Panayotopoulos and Stavros Tornes.

[21] These include family relationships and intimacy as well as the emphasis on the body, particularly through acting.

[22] *Dogtooth*, *Alps*, *L*, and *Attenberg* share austere, minimalist aesthetics.

"Tsangari's precise images are antithetical to Denis' sensual cinema, but what she shares is a knack for physical casting and for wringing revelations from bodies". The Greek film is both fascinated with and detached from investigations of the body, reflecting Marina's perception of her own corporeality; the order of the material seems to pose a threat to her alienated calmness. The body, seen through her eyes, emerges in conflict with the self. *Attenberg* portrays a lesson in the awareness of one's own physicality, an "awakening to the agony, ecstasy, and awkwardness of the human body" (Longworth). This awkwardness subverts the conventional reading of the body as a vessel for character and makes corporeality a focal point.

Scott observes that "*Attenberg* is suffused with a sense of malaise - of stasis, if you prefer a Greek word" ("Searching for Herself"). This alienation takes several forms: alienation from other human beings, alienation from life, alienation from affect, alienation from the body, alienation from surroundings, and alienation from both culture and nature. As Scott continues, the Greek film "depicts a reality in which religious and secular structures of meaning have collapsed, in which motivation is in short supply, but in which life must nonetheless go on" ("Searching for Herself"). Boredom, aimlessness and emotional inertness make the characters of *Attenberg* similar to Catherine and James at the beginning of *Crash,* with their dimmed senses and a certain listlessness. Marina especially, lacks any desires or aims, and her sensations are muted.

Following Tsangari's claims that she is preoccupied with "biology and not psychology" (in Rose), I propose that the acting and setting in *Attenberg*, as well as the film's consideration of the discourses on mortality, sexuality and human relationship with animals, work in unison to highlight the materiality of the body. Simultaneously, they emphasise the main character's detachment from her own corporeality which she perceives as awkward.

Acting

> The figures present in these films persistently skirt the uneasy threshold between the conventions of naturalistic acting and something far more radical - something which at times seems to be recitation, as if the characters were rehearsing lines to themselves for the performance they are to give. (Fairfax)

Fairfax's comment on the style of acting characteristic to the films constituting Greek New Wave (*Dogtooth, The Alps* and *L)* is especially valid with reference to *Attenberg.* Such an approach to the performance is employed, in particular, in the opening kissing lesson and the walk sequences repeated throughout the film. What seems to be a staged recitation and rehearsing, underscores the artifice of these scenes.

Attenberg begins with a kissing lesson presented before the opening credits. Its exposition takes place in front of a white wall with the paint peeling. Obviously nervous, Marina steps in from the right side of the screen, followed by Bella appearing from the left. The girls now stand in the centre of the frame, their bodies far apart from each other. Awkwardly moving their jaws and necks, they rub their tongues against one another. Marina voices her discomfort when faced with physical

Figure 39: ***Attenberg*** **(2010), dir. Athina Rachel Tsangari.**

intimacy and acts with clumsiness: “I’ve never had something wiggling in my mouth before”, she comments and compares the tongue to a slug. Bella assumes the position of a teacher who attempts to introduce her friend into the realm of the sexual and provides a set of instructions after which they reassume the training. Marina, however, interrupts again in order to express her resentment: “How do people do that?”, she asks.

This sequence, containing the most publicised still from *Attenberg* (an image of two kissing girls), in a way seduces the viewer into watching a film by playing on its sexual connotations. In actuality, as Cronin remarks: “it’s perhaps one of the least erotic kisses seen on screen”; any hint of passion is absent. Presented in silence, with only Marina’s comments on the new experience and detailed directions provided by Bella, the scene is portrayed as counter-erotic rather than arousing and recalls an instructional video. In this sequence, the awkwardness of the physical expression signals a body that seems to have gained control over the self, in a way not unlike Keira Knightley’s re-enactment of a hysterical fit in *A Dangerous Method*, a film that is similarly “about communication and its discontents” (Ratner). The play-acting (blatant role-playing) and the consciously staged setting highlight the artificiality of this sequence.

Correspondingly, the walk scenes in *Attenberg* act as breaks from the main

Figure 40: *Attenberg* (2010), dir. Athina Rachel Tsangari.

story; Tsangari comments: "it's like in Greek tragedy - you have the chorus, which is simply moving across the stage chanting, as a commentary on the plot and then you continue" (in Nayman). Performing in the same location (with the exception of the night scene), Marina and Bella wear similar costumes and look directly into the camera. These sequences reinforce the idea of repetition. Moreover, most of the choreographed walks constitute loose impressions of animals and their behaviours: Marina and Bella mimic penguins, horses and birds. This style of acting - "animalistic bodily performances" (Nayman) - represents a body that escapes the civilised context and is taken over by the animal.

These scenes recall Brecht's *alienation effect* and his idea of consciously detached spectators and actors. Brecht observes with reference to Chinese theatre, that "the Chinese artist never acts as it there were a fourth wall besides the three surrounding him. He expresses his awareness of being watched" (Brecht 91-2). By looking straight into the camera in the walk scenes, Bella and Marina break the fourth wall and show that they are aware of being looked at. The camera is placed in front of them while they consciously engage with it, emphasising a certain clumsiness in their own acting and "holding [themselves] remote from the character portrayed" (Brecht 93). Brecht continues: "the artist's object is to appear strange and even surprising to the audience. He achieves this by looking strangely at himself and his work . . . Everyday things are thereby raised above the level of the obvious and automatic" (92). This effect of alienation in *Attenberg* is illustrated, for example, by the aforementioned kissing lesson, in which instinctive physical closeness with another human being does not come to Marina naturally, but emerges as something strange and alien. The character is trying to learn something "obvious and automatic".

By placing emphasis on their own artificiality (in a way not dissimilar to *Crash* and *The Elephant Man*), the kissing lesson opening *Attenberg* and the walk scenes punctuating the film can be usefully discussed with reference to Stam's notion of reflexivity. According to Stam, art of an illusionary nature seeks to conceal the process of its production and pretends to portray a verifiable truth rather than an artificial artistic construct. In the domain of cinema, the illusionist nature of films

“turns flickering two-dimensional images into perceived ‘reality’” (Stam 12). In contrast, anti-illusionist art employs discontinuity as its central narrative strategy and “calls attention to the gaps and holes and seams in the narrative tissue” (Stam 7). The transparency of a work of art is negated in order to demystify its fictional status and interrupt the spectacle. The interpretation of this “art of interruptions” (Stam 5) is in *Attenberg* literal. The walk scenes, which constitute blatant intrusions in the narrative, disrupt the viewer’s immersion in the illusion conjured on screen; they punctuate the spectators’ involvement with the characters, their actions and goals. In doing so, the film subverts the on-screen illusion and alienates the viewer.

The effect of alienation and self-reflexivity, evoked in *Attenberg* through clumsy physical acting that draws attention to the body, interrupt in the viewers’ immersion in the progressing story. The film portrays the body that “straight-forwardly admits its status as representation” (Stam 1). The walk scenes, in particular, introduce an uncertainty of representation due to a lack of clarity as to whether at this point the film is dealing with the characters (Marina and Bella) or the actresses (Labed and Randou) filmed during a rehearsal. In other words, in these sequences *Attenberg* confuses the level of the actor with that of the character (Kwiatkowska 31-34) with the body as a point common to them both.

Architecture

Attenberg investigates the relationship of the body and its environment, here an almost empty town. The film employs several visual clichés of its Greek setting (showing white walls, clear sky, and blue sea) in recurring (although rare) views from the windows of Marina’s car or the room where she meets with Bella. Another (contrasting) element of the setting prominent in *Attenberg* is that of an impersonal industrial landscape. Such depictions are repeated throughout the film: in a long tracking shot of Marina and Spyros driving a moped against the backdrop of a complex steel construction, when the father and daughter are on a motorboat presented against an industrialised coast, and in the image of an overwhelming factory building with its white peeling walls shown in silence. In the film, the town is an environment that alienates the body.

Figure 41: ***Attenberg*** **(2010), dir. Athina Rachel Tsangari.**

Tsangari chose Aspra Spitia in the Corinthian Gulf, the town she grew up in, as the location for *Attenberg*. The director describes the short-lived zenith of its affluence: "it was a company town, built in the 60s. Lots of young engineers moved there in the 70s and moved their families into this kind of modernist utopia . . . I remember the town as very vibrant, and very happy, full of sport and art. It was such a cultural environment" (in Cronin). When she returned to shoot the film, the space was nearly empty: "it felt like a bit of a ghost town, which suited me very well. It fitted with Spyros's acknowledgement of the failures of the 20th century" (in Cronin). Reflecting this mood, *Attenberg* begins its silent observation of vacant spaces in the opening credits: the fixed camera presents sprinklers in a garden (also featured in *Dogtooth)*, the interior of a restaurant, a tennis court, a church, a hedge-enclosed road, and the outdoor terrace of a house. In these populated spaces, there is only a hint of a recent human presence to be seen: the sprinklers are watering a neatly cut lawn, the TV sets in the restaurant are switched on, in the tennis court the chairs are arranged as if a game has just been played, the church has fresh flowers, the hedges are manicured, there is a toy left on the terrace. This exploration of vacant places of interaction points to fractures in human relations and a certain abandonment of communication.

Correspondingly, Romney points to *Attenberg*'s distinctive camera-work, its static shots and long takes ("Life on Earth" 42). Apart from utilising slow or still camera shots, the film insistently returns to a series of vignettes exploring vacant urban spaces: the opening sequence, that exploring the town at night, focusing on industrial settings or investigating a seemingly deserted hospital. In the final scene, the camera comes to a complete halt: the closing credits appear against the background of reddish spoil heaps, chimneys from a large industrial plant, excavators and transport lorries working on the site. Bella and Marina, lost in the overwhelming setting, return to their vehicles in yellow anoraks making them conspicuous within the terrain. In *Attenberg,* such measured camera work allows time for meditation on the landscape and draws attention to the elements constructing the setting. Simultaneously, it conveys the sense of inertia of both the locale and its inhabitants, especially the character central to the film: Marina.

In *Attenberg*, the setting - a frame for the body - constitutes a reflection on corporeality by echoing Spyros's failing health, as well as Marina's inertness and alienation from her physicality. I analyse the urban images in the film with reference to Grosz's suggestion of two models of interrelations between bodies and cities: causal (that I associate with Spyros) and representational (that I link to Marina). In Grosz's causal pattern, the city "is a reflection, projection, or a product of bodies.

Figure 42: ***Attenberg*** **(2010), dir. Athina Rachel Tsangari.**

Bodies are conceived in naturalistic terms, predating the city, the cause and motivation for their design and construction" ("Bodies-Cities" 245). In other words, an urban environment is produced and transformed by human agency. The representational model "proposes a kind of parallelism or isomorphisms between the body and the city. The two are understood as analogues, congruent counterparts, in which the features, organisation, and characteristics of one are reflected in the other" ("Bodies-Cities" 246). Thus here, the body and the urban space reflect each other.

On the one hand, Tsangari remarks about the creators of the place she was born in:

> the film was shot in Aspra Spitia, a town in the Corintian Gulf designed in the 1960s by the firm of architect and urban planner Constantinos A. Doxiadis. The intention was Utopian - to make an organic, non-alienating habitat for the workforce of an aluminium plant . . . the town of Aspra Spitia was 'an experiment that failed'. (qtd. in Romney, "Life on Earth" 42)

In *Attenberg,* Marina's father is an architect; in one of the scenes the film shows him packing his things in the studio. Spyros is one of the designers of the town, as he admits a now failed project. Such a portrayal of the character echoes Morgan's remark about changes in the profession of an architect in recent decades:

> in the past the architect felt it was incumbent on him, as heroic demiurge, to take upon his shoulders the burden of responsibility for building the right, improving context for society. In the postmodern world, the restrictions of a particular place appear to have been circumvented. One might not have or know any neighbours, but instead be in regular, even intimate, contact with people all over the globe whom one has never met *as such*, according to traditional notions of encounter. (123)

Figure 43: ***Attenberg*** **(2010), dir. Athina Rachel Tsangari.**

For Grosz, “the human subject is conceived as a sovereign and self-given agent which, individually or collectively, is responsible for all social and historical productions. Humans make cities” (“Bodies-Cities” 245). A desolate landscape of identikit housing developments mirrors the alienation and the breakup of human relations. It is an environment shaped by people; a structured, organised vision of the world that came to life only to be later abandoned and deemed a failure. Such a depiction of the town in *Attenberg* corresponds closely with the perception of corporeal forms. It reflects the disintegration and erasure, which is tied to the father’s failing health and his ultimate death; the town, just like disillusioned Spyros, is dying.

On the other hand, *Attenberg* inscribes itself in a long tradition of encounters between film and urban architecture. Images of city environments prevailed in the 1920s films, particularly those linked with Expressionism, Futurism and Constructivism (*Metropolis*, 1927; *Berlin, Symphony of a Great City,* 1927; and *Man with a Movie Camera,* 1929, are just a few examples). In early cinematic avant-gardes, these depictions reflected a fascination with motion and perceptual over-stimulation, which introduced anxieties and thrills linked with urban life (Neumann). In *Attenberg*, on the contrary, the town is inert and the senses of the central character

(Marina) are dimmed. This urban space is defined by negation; there is no potential to evoke excitement as the town is nearly empty.

The images offered later by Italian Neorealism are markedly different. For Barber, post-war filmmakers of the 1950s and 1960s "often became preoccupied in those post-war decades with the idea of urban space being integrally decayed and ruined, the cities enveloped by mysteriously corroded wastelands" (63). *Attenberg* clearly recalls this cinematic convention of portraying abandoned settings. This prompted Romney to call the Greek film "European's cinema's bleakest industrial locale since Antonioni's 1964 *Red Desert*" ("Life on Earth" 42). Antonioni himself considers *Red Desert* divergent from his other works: "it does not discuss feelings. I will go as far as saying that feelings have nothing to do with it" (83). According to the Italian director, the landscape in the film reflects the emotional state of the characters: "behind the industrial transformation lies another one - a transformation of the spirit, of human psychology" (284). The barren setting of *Red Desert* mirrors the psychological struggle of the protagonist, Giuliana, who "lives through a profound crisis because of her inability to adapt to the modern world" (285); the world appears to her as alienated and deformed.

Correspondingly, in *Attenberg* the empty landscape matches the emotional state of Marina. This echoes Grosz's remark about the corporeal and the urban: "the two are understood as analogue, congruent counterparts, in which the features, organisation and characteristic of one are reflected in another" ("Bodies-Cities" 246). As Reardon observes, "Tsangari has examined the distantiating nature of modern experience . . . *Attenberg* focuses on the difficulty of relations between people and their environment". Such alienation from the surroundings is illustrated by a scene in which the father and daughter are filmed against panorama of the town; this image is quickly replaced by one presenting the characters on the terrace of one of the many white buildings. "It's as if we were designing ruins", says the father, commenting on the failure of his architectural project. "I like it. It's soothing, all this uniformity", replies Marina. Their short dialogue is followed by a silent observational sequence exploring the modernist side of the town with its rows of uniform buildings. In the last shot, the silhouettes of the characters are presented from an aerial view, as lost if

Figure 44: ***Attenberg*** **(2010), dir. Athina Rachel Tsangari.**

on the pavement between the similar blocks of flats. Alienated from life and her own body and submerged in her own inertness, Marina feels at ease in this deserted space that lacks any stimuli. This is the space she belongs to.

Attenberg explores “mutually defining relation between bodies and cities” (Grosz, “Bodies-Cities” 242). According to Grosz, “the city is made and made over into the simulacrum of the body, and the body, in its turn, is transformed, ‘citified’, urbanized as a distinctively metropolitan body” (“Bodies-Cities” 242). *Attenberg* is set in a modern landscape composed of empty, silent spaces: an industrial complex, identical blocks of flats and empty hospital corridors. The alienating environment mirrors Spyros’ body and his approaching death. Similarly, it echoes Marina’s inertness and detachment from her own corporeality.

Human / animal

By referring to the genre of nature documentaries, *Attenberg* explores areas of commonality between humans and animals. As Tsangari notes,

> We are just another species, utterly alien, incomprehensible, and utterly spectacular. I suddenly felt that I'm part of this species, but if I extract myself from my 'civilized' context, without a soothing voice explaining to me who I am destined to be, this soothing voice be it God, or Bresson, I am just another Borneo slug, or Gallic donkey, or an Andalusian goat. (in Nayman)

Attenberg calls attention to human animal origins and affinities. It examines habits and social structures that we share with animals, but focuses mainly on the physical body. Human bodies, just like those of animals, are susceptible to natural forces of biology: vulnerable and mortal.

Tsangari remarks: "we watched lots of Attenborough clips because it was important to me to develop the characters like animals. Each of my actors had a favourite clip and a favourite animal. It was a memory that they had while they were acting" (in Cronin). Scenes where the characters mimic animal behaviour are repeated throughout *Attenberg*. Marina with her father or Bella, copy the animals she has seen in wildlife documentaries. The father and daughter pretend to be gorillas with all their complicated rituals. After the "kissing session" opening the film, the girls spit at each other as they behave like wild cats. During a scene in Attenborough's documentary describing the mating of pelicans, Marina makes noises similar to that of those birds. Schenker comments that "by taking on the personae of

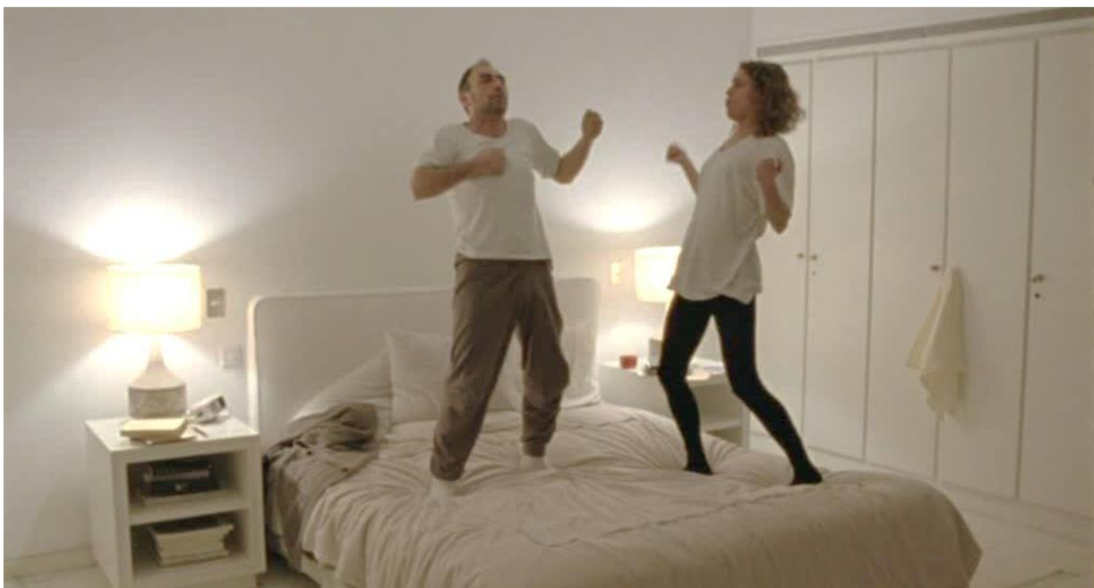

Figure 45: ***Attenberg*** **(2010), dir. Athina Rachel Tsangari.**

wild creatures, Marina signals her distance from humanity from which she seems to have intentionally withdrawn, while the sense of antic goofing provides a necessary outlet for her repression". The girl is alienated from life to the extent that she is compelled to imitate actions that come naturally to others, particularly those linked to human contacts. Animals are un-self-conscious and Marina wants to learn this un-self-consciousness.

These scenes, along with the kissing lesson opening the film and walk sequences punctuating it, are staged to recall games; here *Attenberg* refers to the domain of children and also to the world of animals. Sainsbury remarks that,

> life begins in play, and play involves pretense, making things up, fiction. Predatory mammals engage in pretend chase-and-kill routines from almost as soon as they can move. From at least as early as about eighteen months, when their use of language is still pretty primitive, human children engage in spontaneous pretense, as fun. (1)

With a sense of pretending, mimicking or playing at something, the film echoes Walton's theory of make-believe explained in terms of imagination and analogies between the children's games and representational works of art. Walton suggests that "engaging in make-believe provides practice in roles one might someday assume in real life, that it helps one to understand and sympathise with others, that it enables one to come to grips with one's own feelings, that it broadens one's perspectives" (12). In *Attenberg,* Marina is playing the game of interaction before actually engaging in human relations (other than those with her father and best friend), she rehearses contact with others in a safe space.

Tsangari further emphasises the similarities of humans and animals by comparing her style of directing to that of Attenborough's documentaries. Essentially, Tsangari sees Attenborough as a cinematic director on the same level as classic masters of cinema:

> When a friend introduced me to Attenborough's TV series, I was taken aback. You know, it's not what I previously considered 'grand cinema'. Attenborough crept up on me. I watched Bresson, then Attenborough, then Fassbinder, then Attenborough, then Buñuel, then back to Attenborough. (in Nayman)

Bagust points to "steering the nature film towards the conventional structures of 'regular' genres like comedy, drama, melodrama and tragedy, but with animal, not human, protagonists" (218). Attenborough's documentaries focus on an individual animal or groups of the same species - representative specimens - portrayed as characters in dramaticised stories. Bouse comments that "this can entail the classic, animal protagonist-centered narrative, or some version of the 'family romance,' or even a narrative centering on the filmmaker's encounter with the animals, but in any case usually includes some dramatic chases and escapes" (134). In an attempt to make the subject unique by observing traits that makes it distinct from other members of the same species, these documentaries frequently endow animals with features particular to humans (e.g. shyness, secretiveness), offer numerous close-ups (especially of eyes and faces), and examine social structures and practices (such as harsh social systems, warfare, or mating). By making comparisons between humans and focusing on an individual chosen from a group (recalling Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson's "goal-driven characters") these films invite strong emotional attachment to their subjects. Attenborough's voice-over functions as "the mediator between the audience and the animal" (Fijn 299), helping to draw a narrative thread through each piece by evoking emotive responses in the viewer with subjectively charged evaluative descriptions (such as "majestic" or "splendid").

Attenberg refers to the cinematic qualities of the British naturalist, his particular way of observing both individuals and groups. Tsangari comments: "he's near and detached at the same time, like melodrama, as I call it. It really suits me as an aesthetic . . . It's a big example to me, in how to approach characters in cinema" (in Cronin). The Greek director analyses the traits of her characters and the environment they inhabit by employing a method similar to Attenborough's

approach to his subjects. On this subject she remarks: “I thought it would be interesting to observe Marina the way Attenborough observes his subjects, with a kind of scientific tenderness” (in Rose). This “nearness and detachment”, or “scientific tenderness”, aptly describes *Attenberg*’s portrayals of its characters. The film explores communication and intimacy between a parent and a child (Marina - father), friends (Marina - Bella) and sexual partners (Marina - the engineer) in the way that the nature documentarian might examine the relationships within an animal herd. Another similarity is the portrayal of the environment. The films from Attenborough’s series typically open with a series of shots that establish the habitat of the animal in focus (for example, jungles, savannahs, or tropical forests) before introducing the subject itself. These documentaries highlight how the animals have adapted to their surroundings. *Attenberg* repeats the same technique within the sequence depicting the empty spaces of distinctively human environment presented to its opening credits. The habitat in the Greek film is shaped by people and suited to their needs. It is an intrinsically human surrounding. Moreover, the father is an architect and the constructor of the town, while Marina is inherently the product of this environment.

It is worth noting that *Attenberg* does not feature any diegetic animals; wildlife is only present in nature documentaries which Marina watches on TV,

Figure 46: ***Attenberg*** **(2010), dir. Athina Rachel Tsangari.**

specifically in two sequences from Attenborough's *Life on Earth* (1979): an iconic scene in which Attenborough meets a family of gorillas and one showing a group of pelicans. There is, however, a certain nostalgia for the contact with wildlife reflected in Marina's fascination with nature documentaries. This recalls Berger's *Why Look at Animals* and the notion of the absence of animals in human life from the nineteenth century onwards. In response to Berger's text, Lippit claims that "modernity can be defined by the disappearance of wildlife from humanity's habitat and the reappearance of the same in humanity's reflections on itself: in philosophy, psychoanalysis, and technological media such as the telephone, film and radio" (2-3). Genuine contact with nature has been replaced by certain fantasies with regards to animals. Portrayed figuratively, animals in cinema embody a variety of meanings; they are used, for example, to highlight a particular character trait such as greed or lust. Thus, while Burt discusses the proliferation of *rhetoric animals*: "as metaphors, metonyms, textual creatures to be read like words" (31), Wells observes that they are frequently anthropomorphised, particularly in the genre of animated films.

To a certain degree, such fantasies are also present in nature documentaries. Langley, when considering reasons for the popularity of the genre, observes that "the only way that most people come into contact with natural history is through their television screens; the enormous popularity of wildlife films show how important is even this second-hand contact" (1-2). Such a mediated connection with animals in wildlife documentaries recalls Pick's concept of "cinematic zoos" (106): films in which the presentation of animals acts as a substitute for a real encounter in nature.

The nature documentaries featured in *Attenberg* rely heavily on editing in order to turn raw footage of wild animals into a coherent narrative. By selecting key fragments from hours of material the filmmakers construct a story. As Burt notes in his *Animals in the Film*:

> More than most other forms of filmmaking, animal cinematography invariably requires considerable editing to fit the different shots into the required narrative structures . . . These assemblages can be somehow arbitrary and the same stock animal footage is frequently re-used in different films serving different plotlines. (87-88)

Wildlife films frequently employ what Langley calls "laboratory editing" (17): filming under artificial conditions. They make use of a wide variety of cinematic techniques, such as slow/fast motion, sophisticated camera-work, close-ups often achieved through long telephoto lenses which "give viewers an illusion of close proximity to the subject" (Bouse 121) as well as voice-over, music and sound effects which "retain added layers of authorial mediation" (Bouse 122). As a result, "it is difficult for an audience to know whether a scene is as it appears to be, or whether it is recreated" (Fijn 300).

As Haraway notes in the context of museums (particularly photography, taxidermy and sculpture), animals in contemporary Western culture are "re-presented" (157), that is shaped by an authorial vision of their reality. Haraway coins the term *natureculture* to describe the constructed domain in which animals are portrayed to fit human norms: "culture is figured as the force that transforms natural resources into social product" (202). Translated into a film image, animal "naturalness" is turned into fiction. "Re-presented" animals and depictions of the natural world in nature films, such as those evoked in *Attenberg*, are filtered through human understanding and detached from their original context, with culture layered upon nature.

The films that promise Marina a genuine contact with wildlife and on which she builds her understanding of the world, are in fact fantasies about animals contained in "cinematic zoos". They act as a certain substitute for a real encounter with wildlife and refer to *natureculture*: nature whose presentation is transformed by culture. This mediated representation (a second-hand encounter) further alienates Marina from her environment.

Attenberg comments on the commonality of animals and humans: the body and its biology is something we share with animals. Additionally, Tsangari considers Attenborough (a wildlife documentarian choosing animals as his main subject of investigation) at the same level as classical cinema directors and admits to heavy inspiration by his films[23], particularly their "detached and tender" manner of

[23] Nayman called Attenberg "a kind of anthropological drama".

observation of his subject, which she employs in *Attenberg*. Emphasising our commonality with animals, the film repeatedly presents Marina's games in which she mimics animals (recalling Walton's notion of make-believe), allowing her to rehearse both un-self-consciousness and interactions with other representatives of her species in a safe space. By presenting manufactured images of wildlife, however, *Attenberg* reveals the character's second-hand contact with nature, rather than genuine encounters. In this way, the film further highlights her alienation.

Sexuality

Although Marina's alienation from her body results in disgust towards her own sexuality, she attempts to learn un-self-conscious engagement in physical intimacy. *Attenberg* demonstrates her learning process first through conversations about the erotic, then by "detached and tender" observations recalling these in Attenborough's nature documentaries, and finally through engaging in sexual acts. For Marina, the behaviours that should come instinctively, do not: on the contrary, the physical closeness points to the awkwardness of the body. In *Attenberg,* the corporeal form in sexual experience reveals its own materiality and stands in the way. Additionally, the comments on emotional and physical proximity come dressed in surrealist references.

The only glimpse of Marina's true involvement in physical intimacy is the brief sequence in which she anoints her father's hands with balm collected from a cactus. In this tactile depiction, we observe the surface of their skin and transparent gel being rubbed by Marina into Spyros's hand. Captured in close-up, her movements are gentle and loving. This is a moment of genuine physical affection connected with love. This is the only instance in the film when she is not self-conscious and seems lost in the experience. By inviting the tactile gaze - exploring the act of touch on the texture of human skin - this sequence reminds of the beauty of the material despite its transience.

Figure 47: ***Attenberg*** **(2010), dir. Athina Rachel Tsangari.**

Attenberg analyses both repulsion and fascination with eroticism through the eyes of its central character. Marina's distaste at anything sexual is stated clearly in two conversations featured in the film: that with Bella when the more experienced girl recalls her dream about male genitals, and that with her father in hospital, about her aversion towards sexual passions. When recounting her dream, Bella provides a description of "something like huge prickly-pear trees, except instead of prickly pears, they were hung with pricks". The account is illustrated by her enactment of the penises' movement, the description of their taste, "like bitter almond", and the intense smell. She concludes: "it's one of those things you like, but at the same time makes you feel guilty". Upon hearing this, Marina admits she's terrified of male genitals. Correspondingly, in one of the scenes in the hospital waiting room, Marina confesses her lack of sexual desire: "I find it disgusting. Repulsive", adding that she even refuses to imagine sex. These two sequences reveal Marina's need to discuss and examine her own sexuality as well as her fear of it.

In *Attenberg,* Marina frequently adopts the position of a voyeur who examines physical intimacy from a distance not unlike the observational stance assumed by Attenborough during his observations of wildlife. The nature documentarian is at the same time sympathetic and detached; he is a scientist examining an object of study (another species) but at the same time he is also a part

of nature (as a representative of mammals). This is similar to Marina's investigation of her own kind, who seem almost like another species to her.

Marina is interested in both bodies and physical interactions. Her fascination is made evident in a scene in a changing room, which portrays a group of women after a visit to a swimming pool. Wearing dressing gowns, swimming suits, underwear or walking naked, they put their make up on, dry their hair or dress up. They are of different sizes and ages. Marina watches them and the distanced camera assumes her position of the detached viewer. Later, she recounts the event to Bella, admitting that her gaze directed towards the women is that of curiosity and aesthetic appreciation rather than of erotic fascination. It is about the study. Such observation facilitates understanding and taming fears of the corporeality and contact with others, it reflects her desire to learn her own body.

Marina also takes an interest in her own body. After a scene in a changing room, she watches herself naked in the mirror and draws comparisons between her own physique and that of the women around her. In another sequence, she plays with her shoulder blades, stretching them out in a way disturbing for a viewer. For a few seconds, they are presented in a close-up and it seems almost as if the bones were about to break the skin. When the camera backs away, the scene is revealed as a

Figure 48: ***Attenberg*** **(2010), dir. Athina Rachel Tsangari.**

performance for Bella, which emphasises, again, the idea or playing or rehearsing with the body. It is an experiment with the body and its limits. Marina tests the borders of the body, identifying its architecture and mapping what is beneath the skin. This image recalling a body-within-a body summarises how she feels about her own corporeality - it emerges as a thing alien to the self.

Additionally, Marina's detached observation is applied to the intimacy of others. In a scene on the beach, she contemplates Bella massaging her father's back with her feet. Indulging in sneaky glances of the closeness between her friend and her parent, she looks away refusing to be an obvious observer of somebody else's intimacy, but what happens next to her attracts her gaze. In another fragment, Marina watches Bella kissing passionately with a man in front of a restaurant. Similarly to the previous scene, she attempts to turn away from the view but curiosity of the intimate behaviour of others takes over.

In both scenes, Marina glances at her peer absorbed in the physical closeness - a sphere that both repels and fascinates her. The observation from a safe distance guards the girl from involvement in the encounter that is happening next to her. She is seesawing between her own fear and repulsion towards the physical and her fascination by the view. At the same time, she seems to appreciate the position of the observer. In merging such aversion and embarrassment with fascination and excitement, this gaze recalls Miller's remark that,

> so much pleasure is tied up in the violation of rules we are committed to, the very commitment providing the basis for pleasure in violation. And then we are punished; sometimes by external authority, but most often internally by such painful sentiments as shame, guilt, or disgust. (114)

Marina's gaze in these two scenes is akin to the type of looking that is particular to pornography and simultaneously attracts (as a hyped and titillating presentation) and repels (as guarded by taboos and infringing social norms)[24].

Finally, Marina's attempts to learn sexual behaviours are reflected in the sequences depicting intimacy between her and her lover, a visiting engineer. During their lovemaking, she insists on describing her actions and asks him for an opinion on what is happening, constantly analysing her own performance and her emotions. Just like in the opening scene ("the kissing lesson"), she is physically involved in a curious happening; it is a first-hand observation of something new. Her lover, who repeatedly reproaches her for examining the act, engages in the discussion of embarrassment and nervousness connected with lovemaking. She consciously distances herself from the sensations of her own body by verbal comments. Although *Attenberg* features graphic sexual scenes of intercourse between Marina and the engineer, it does not offer "the spectacle of the body caught in the grip of intense sensation or emotion" (Williams, "Film Bodies 4). The scenes presenting erotic encounters are clumsy; the characters are portrayed as direct opposites of "sensational bodies" (Williams, "Film Bodies" 4). This depiction of the erotic encounter makes the audience feel uncomfortable rather than aroused.

Attenberg's detachment with regard to cinematic conventions of depicting sexuality recalls surrealist shock tactics that simultaneously surprise and alienate the viewer. Crucially, two scenes revealing emotional proximity between Marina and her father - the one in which she hangs his clothes to dry and another in which they breathe through surgeon's masks - come dressed in surrealist references, particularly to the works of Rene Magritte. Such allusions highlight the girl's inability to talk about the proximity to the loved one by its metaphorical rather than literal or physical ways of expression.

In a sequence that opens with an image of clothes drying outside, Marina digs her face into her father's black sweater, tying its sleeves around herself. The scene represents loneliness and longing: clothes replace a real person; a costume acts as a

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[24] This recalls the gaze of the doctors in the lecture theatre in *The Elephant Man.*

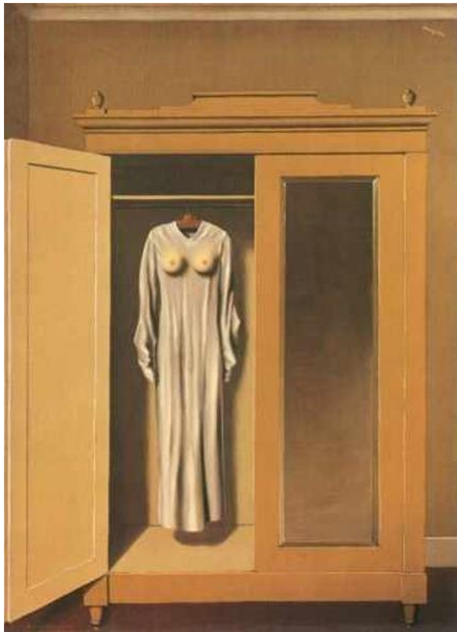

Figure 49: René Magritte, *Homage to Mack Sennett* (1937).

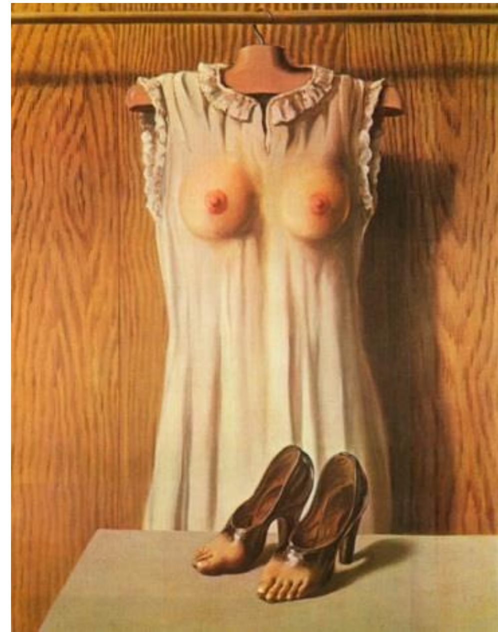

Figure 50: René Magritte, *Philosophy in the Boudoir* (1947).

Figure 51: Jacques-Louis David, *Madame Recamier* (1800).

Figure 52: René Magritte, *Perspective I: David's Madame Recamier* (1950).

Figure 53: René Magritte, *The Lovers* (1928).

Figure 54: René Magritte, *The Lovers* (1928).

Figure 55: ***Attenberg*** **(2010), dir. Athina Rachel Tsangari.**

substitute for a body. This is a repeated motif in René Magritte's paintings, such as *Homage to Mack Sennett* (1937), *Philosophy in the Boudoir* (1947), and, primarily, in his *Perspective I: David's Madame Recamier* (1950), a response to Jacques-Louis David's *Madame Recamier* (1800), Magritte's version commenting on the absence of the body of the dead woman's portrait.

The scene presenting Marina and her father in surgeon's masks is a variation on Magritte's *The Lovers I* and *The Lovers II* (both 1928), portraying a couple kissing while their faces are covered with white veils. Sylvester points to the painter's reference to Hollywood clichés when he says that both versions of *The Lovers* "look as if they are based upon film stills" (Sylvester, *Magritte* 18). *Attenberg* refers to and subverts the meaning of these paintings in several ways. The father and daughter replace the lovers of Magritte and their physical closeness is devoid of erotic context. Despite their obvious proximity, the surgeon's masks impose a certain sterile quality to the scene which can be read as a comment on Marina's perception of physical intimacy: distanced and detached. Additionally, *The Lovers* has connotations with death. When Magritte was a boy, his mother committed suicide by

Figure 56: ***Attenberg*** **(2010), dir. Athina Rachel Tsangari.**

drowning herself. When her body was retrieved from the river, Magritte saw that her face was covered with her white night dress (Sylvester, *Magritte* 12-20). In *Attenberg,* this sequence links with the imminent death of the father. The film plays on the necessity of masks in chemotherapy that protect the lowered immune system and thus points to a vulnerability of the body. Moreover, the *Attenberg* scenes juxtaposed with Magritte's paintings comment on the closeness of the bodies and the barriers to their contact through touch. They depict a longing for the unmediated encounter of two bodies and portray obstacles to such an encounter. Simultaneously, by including costumes and masks, they introduce an element of the theatrical.

Marina is a keen explorer the body who analyses every aspect of physical intimacy in a way similar to Attenborough's documentaries with a cool, detached commentary, on the one hand, and a curious sympathy, on the other. Erotic scenes in *Attenberg* are tense and clumsy; passion does not come naturally, desire does not blind the lovers, which subverts the conventional depictions of sexual acts in cinema, with "sensational body" (Williams, "Film Bodies" 4) and the aesthetics of hype.

Figure 57: ***Attenberg*** **(2010), dir. Athina Rachel Tsangari.**

Medicine

The illness of the father and his impending death introduce another discourse on the body: the medical. The vacant spaces of the hospital are among the most prominent settings in *Attenberg*. In this clinical environment we are presented with doctors' surgeries, patients' rooms and waiting spaces, all bathed in white and pale green. There is a certain sterility to this space. In the film, the hospital is empty and the medical staff are barely present. Many shots in this setting recall still life compositions, with a static camera, long takes, and an absence of movement within the frame. They are predominantly silent, occasionally sound-tracked by beeping medical machinery. This is a space of confinement, separated from the buzz of everyday life.

The body in hospital - the body dressed in hospital space - is not perceived in the same way as the body in a more typical setting, such as at home, a shop or in the street. The hospital introduces a sense of vulnerability; it is a space in which dealing with the body's biology has been delegated to specialists, an institution of relinquished control. When discussing Foucault's *The Birth of Clinic,* Osborne observes that "medical space – typified by the modern hospital – is considered, above all, to be enclosed space. Confined within the hospital the 'sick man' becomes

artificially cut off from the natural environment" (251). Medicine with its distanced and detached gaze is reserved for the specialist rather than the layman, introducing what Cartwright calls the "disjuncture between representation and 'object' [body]" (10). Within the objective and objectifying discourse of medicine in which scientific detachment in necessary, a "human body, while perhaps unusual in its complexity, is taken as essentially no different from any other physical object" (Leder 5). It is considered a biological specimen and thus an object of scientific observation, describable and analysable.

The hospital setting is also present in *The Elephant Man* and *Crash*, which centre on anxieties concerning corporeality by exploring the dichotomy between the spectacular image of the body on display and the physical corporeality in its biological and individual dimension. These films revolve around divergent human forms: the deformed corporeality of Merrick and the post-crash bodies of car accident survivors. Moreover, they comment on merging pornography, entertainment and horror with medicine, with the hospital acting as a key setting for this blurring of boundaries. Such confusion, however, is not present in *Attenberg*. In the Greek film, the hospital is a space of detachment and distanced observation.

In all three films the hospital acts as a site of transition; simultaneously, it is where anxieties about the body are neutralised. In *Crash* the medical setting represents a passing from the domain of the sanitised bodies (Catherine and James at the beginning of the film) to the sphere of post-crash corporealities that draw attention to their own materiality. The hospital is where James wakes up bearing traces of violence after his accident, and where Catherine admires his bruised body;

Figure 58: ***Attenberg*** **(2010), dir. Athina Rachel Tsangari.**

it is also where the couple meet Helen and Vaughan who introduce them to the dangerous cult. In *The Elephant Man,* the hospital is a space where science aims to tame the deviant body in order to incorporate it into the sphere of social norms and acceptance. Moreover, here, much like in a freak show, Merrick's corporeality becomes an object on display, attracting excitement and curiosity as well as fear and guilt, that is to say, merging medical interest and horror.

In *Attenberg,* the hospital is introduced as a space in-between. The film first presents this setting immediately after the opening credits, showing Marina and her father in an empty, white waiting room. The next shot moves to a room filled with medical machinery where the father and daughter kill time reading books. The silence is interrupted only by the beep of machines and the sound of turning pages. Spyros is going to spend his final moments here. It is the site of transition between the world of the living and the world of the dead: a purgatory.

Additionally, the medical setting in *Attenberg* distances conversations about the physical nature from social taboos ordinarily surrounding the corporeality, particularly those linked with sexuality and mortality. Focused on the materiality of the body, the detached and impersonal discourse of science displaces that of pornography and horror, the genres typically associated with cinematic observations of death and sex. The conversations in the hospital provide the father with an opportunity to discuss with his daughter matters linked with the body. The medical setting is where the father prepares himself for death, describes the process of a corpse's decay, and where he eventually dies. Here Marina confesses that she finds the idea of sex repulsive and Bella, asked by her friend, makes love to the father. It is also where the father and daughter engage in affectionate intimacy (the scenes with medical masks and the anointment with aloe gel).

Hospital scenes in *Attenberg* include medical images of the body interior. In one of the sequences, Marina watches from behind a glass window as her father's body is displayed on two monitors; his figure is barely visible in the background. In another, almost identical scene, the father is again inside the MRI scanner while the daughter is presented with photographs and a video revealing his bodily interior.

Figure 59: ***Attenberg*** **(2010), dir. Athina Rachel Tsangari.**

Featured in popular culture, images produced by medical imaging devices (such as MRI scans) typically signal a body in danger: the medicalised corporeality in special circumstances. At the same time, they draw attention to the biological aspect of the body and frequently act as reminders of our mortality. For van Dijck, we attribute certain meaning to medical images displayed within the context of popular culture. Ultrasound pictures, for example, are associated with pregnancies, PET scans with dysfunctions in the brain, while "MRI scans automatically elicit mental images of cancerous tumours" (12). In *Attenberg,* they inform about Spyros's terminal cancer, revealing a body that is about to die.

Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) offers a representation of the interior of the body based on a cross-sectional examination produced by means of magnetic field. The MRI scanner, whose central component is a primary magnet that measures the magnetic resistance of the different parts of the body, produces a stream of data (Brown and Semelka 1). These figures are analysed and an image is produced by inscribing colours to different values (the colour scale is created to draw attention to differences). This "map of the signal amplitude, which constitutes the image" (Storey 29) is based on the spatial distribution of the signal. MRI, as opposed to the X-ray, which is effectively a photograph, produces an image reconstructed by a computer from a set of measured data points (Storey 29-43). Its specific parameters (e.g.

colours) can be varied and determined by user-interface software (Brown and Semelka, ch. 6 and 7).

As radiology developed from X-rays (discussed in the chapter on Sokurov's family trilogy), CT (computerised tomograph) and MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) scanners "literally introduced the missing dimension into anatomical imaging - the third dimension" (Rifkin, Ackerman, and Folkenberg 253). The medical gaze has become increasingly mediated by technology that has automated diagnostic procedures and enhanced scientific objectivity. "The mechanical-clinical gaze - the gaze directed and mediated by imaging technologies" (van Dijck 11-12), alongside with data provided by laboratories and electronic devices, has reduced the importance of the doctor's sensory observation and the patient's description of sensations. Machines have directed attention towards "the measurable aspect of illness, but away from 'human' factors" (Reiser 229-230). As the physical content of the patient's body is transformed into visual evidence, the requirement of interpersonal relations in the process of diagnosis is reduced.

For Elkins, modern medical images constitute "subtle abstractions that turn the body toward the domain of geometry, architecture, or sculpture – or towards the weightlessness of the cathode ray tube" (134). A schema (such as in anatomical atlases), an abstracted photo (such as an x-ray), or an image reconstructed from data (MRIs) hide fluids and flesh, repress the messiness of the body and conceal the subjectivity. Such concealment is also reflected in scientific language: medicine dresses the procedures of dissection and the descriptions of viscera in medical technology, impersonal and distanced (Elkins 134).

Medical technologies (such as X-rays of MRIs) render the inside of the body visible and offer a view unavailable to the naked eye: that of the abstracted body. The familiar sight is distorted; a complete body becomes a flat fragment. Medical presentations of the internal geography of the body are foreign to everyday experience, closer to a map than to three-dimensional, immediately recognisable views. By replacing viscera with coloured contours, such clinical depictions provide clear, sterile images of the body, which is subsequently turned into a scientific specimen. With MRIs this defamiliarisation and abstraction is developed even

further: “bodies become reconfigured into landscapes, graphs, maps and colour resonates” (Samson, “Biomedicine” 16). Additionally, reducing the body to a data visualisation is another tool with which science abstracts medical procedures. Contemporary scientific representational conventions reduce the human body to flat, sterile fragments:

> Imaging technology fragments the human body into cell-lines, graphs and colour codes. The patient is rendered as a universalized datum, disconnected from both any tangible, corporeal body and the sentient human being, becoming an image that can be moved through computer networks anywhere around the world. Understanding such a patient does not require human touch. (Samson, “Biomedicine” 17)

Pictures of the body mediated through X-rays or MRIs are clean and abstracted; these forms of medical images conceal the reality of the body interior. Kevles remarks about the invention of Roentgen rays that “the black and white images of the early X-rays simplified interior spaces that, until then, had been seen mostly by surgeons - bloody, messy, and confused with multiplicity of colours and textures” (2). This move towards the abstraction of the physical into data is interpreted by Cartwright as “symptomatic of a more pervasive cultural disavowal of the physical body as a phantasm, as nightmarishly visceral and disorderly - a denial rationalized by a modernist demand for order, simplicity, particularity, and clarity” (91).

Clean and distanced, images produced through MRI techniques are close to Marina’s perception of the physicality. Detached medical procedures relieve her fear of the material body. This is how she wants to perceive the body: as removed from its materiality, particularly mortality and sexuality. In the film, the abstracted medical images filtered through the mediation of technology point to an alienationation from the character’s physical side.

In *Attenberg*, the discourse of medicine is limited to the vacant and sterile spaces of the hospital, the space in-between, detached from everyday experience.

Here, matters linked with corporeality, in particular mortality and sexuality, can be considered with a certain detachment. Medical images draw attention to the material and biological dimension of the human body, however, in *Attenberg* they also point to an estrangement from the materiality of the body and its awkwardness. In the film, the body within medical discourse is denoted as safe, tamed and placed under control. Such a presentation of the corporeal form comments on the mode of perception enabled by medical imaging devices, where the abstracted body is represented through data and colours, and human contact is minimised.

Death

Death is one of the central motifs in *Attenberg:* terminally ill Spyros is preparing for his own passing away. The film illustrates Glasser's discussion of illness in cinema and his statement that,

> another common model for death-from-sickness is the death of the supporting character - someone who is less weighty than a co-star but more substantial than a secondary personage . . . In these films, terminal sickness is still used as the springboard to new levels of awareness. ("Magic Bullets" 10)

In *Attenberg*, the illness and subsequent death of Marina's father triggers her reflections on the materiality and mortality of the body.

Calm, devoid of fear or the will to fight, Spyros seems to be at ease with his impending death. In contrast to conventional depictions of mortality in cinema, in *Attenberg* death is presented without pathos or sensationalism. If a crucial aspect of the Western perception of death is its particular detachment and exclusion, our mortality-denying culture is at the same time obsessed with sensational images of death. Hyper-real portrayals of death on televisions, computer screens and in cinemas, seem omnipresent. Death is also pervasive in print media, filled with dramatised exaggerated articles reporting violent deaths, on the one hand, and with

solemn obituaries reporting the quiet passing of individuals, on the other. Meyer remarks about such thanatological entertainment:

> Using unique and powerful technology, film and TV violence portrayals are presented in ways that are not and cannot be a part either of observation of or participation in real-life violence. Production or editing techniques package violence in unprecedented and often bizarre ways that audiences come to regard as being 'natural', when, of course, these presentations are anything but. (3)

Similarly, Gorer, whilst elaborating on the contemporary pornography of death, points to the proliferation of its fabricated images in popular culture: "while natural death becomes more and more smothered in prudery, violent death has played an ever-growing part in the fantasies offered to mass-audiences" (173). Various genres, from westerns, through crime or war films and melodramas, to horrors, bank on its allure (Hagin 4).

The films discussed in the previous chapter (*The Elephant Man* and *Crash*) consider two dominant (and often conflicting) ways of representing death in the cinema. The first, a drama focusing on the tragic death of an individual, offers a chance to participate in the emotional intimacy of a quiet, but significant passing away. The second, in contrast, plays upon the conventions of horror and action cinema to present vivid and violent portrayals of spectacular deaths.

The Elephant Man can be considered a conventional tragedy of one man where an audience is encouraged to invest emotionally in the protagonist. Merrick's death, expected, though not imminent, finally comes after a long-suffering life. In the lingering death scene, the camera is focused on the character who is preparing to realise a long held dream, sleeping in a horizontal position, "as normal people do", which he knows will result in his subsequent passing away. Following his last moment, the camera moves in to present a close up of Merrick's face and then pans across the objects he was sentimentally attached to: the photos of his mother and his best friend, a Bible and a model of a cathedral. Finishing with a close-up of the cross

on top one of the cathedral spires, this sequence inscribes Merrick's death into religious discourse. The film closes with the voice of Merrick's mother half-whispering the phrase, "Nothing will die". Such a way of presenting the final moments of the protagonist, filled with pathos and sentimental music, guides the emotions of spectators.

Consciously over-stylised, *Crash* is of a breed of films which, as Meyer suggests, "go to great lengths to show graphic consequences, including death, calling on an impressive arsenal of special effects, props, or make-up, to shock or impress viewers" (3). In the film, death (that of film stars, James Dean and Jayne Mansfield, and the impersonators, Vaughan and Seagrave) is both literally and figuratively present. Portrayed, or rather recalled (as the cinematic audience do not actually see the very moment of Seagrave's or Vaughan's death) as a sensational event, illuminated by camera flashes, it is loud and heightened. The very passing of the characters is not important, what matters is the hyped violence.

In contrast to *Crash* and *The Elephant Man, Attenberg* moves away from overwrought depiction of death. The Greek film does not attempt to present the images of human mortality as titillating. On the contrary, its detached tone distances viewers from the emotional portrayals of death. The very moment of the father's passing is a quiet, non-spectacular event removed from the centre of attention: in the darkened room, we can see his still silhouette hidden in half-darkness. Marina, also present in the room, begins singing along to background music, her voice grows

Figure 60: ***Attenberg*** **(2010), dir. Athina Rachel Tsangari.**

more and more anxious. It is the daughter who is placed in the foreground; we are made to sympathise with those who remain alive rather than the dying. It is a variation on a motif of deathbed scene, with the body of the father covered with white sheet and a mourner (Marina) present.

Additionally, the period of anticipation of Spyros' imminent end is considered in a detached, matter-of-fact way. The father's passing in the film, although not without significance, it is not invested with heavy emotions on the part of the dying one. Moreover, the character seems to actively discourage them in Marina through light comments about his impeding end, the film infusing its observations on death with a dose of absurd humour. Examples are multiple: after the bed-ridden father describes to his daughter how a corpse is devoured by worms, she dismisses his monologue: "anyway, you always told me that architects would burn in hell"; she adds: "I am trying to fend off your macabre pronouncements with bad jokes". Later Spyros remarks on his wish for his ashes to be scattered in the sea: "I donate my body to our next fish soup"; "Spyrosoup", replies Marina. The father also comments on sending his corpse to Germany: "I've never been to Hamburg".

A number of jokes concern formal funeral procedures. For example, when a funeral parlour representative asks for the finish of the coffin, Marina replies: "it can't be synthetic…he's allergic", before realising the absurdity of the situation. The text on the cremation form the father signs concerns becoming a member of an organisation supporting the right to cremation in Greece and agreeing to receive free pamphlets on the subject. At this he comments: "good to keep abreast of developments where I'm going".

Shaw remarks: "the father's illness and death becomes a narrative strand with plenty of guilty laughs". Rather than presenting the terror of the dead body, *Attenberg* inscribes itself in the genre of medical comedies infused with absurd humour (Shortland; Harper and Graeme, "Either he is Dead or My Watch Has Stopped"), which, as such, subverts the convention of horror. Harper and Moor note that,

> in the genres of comedy and horror the discourse is oppositional. Film comedy works to unearth substrata by alerting the viewer to the possibility of alternative perspectives or by presenting established views, only to deconstruct them via comedic situations or events. The perspectives of comedy are those connected with incongruity or challenges to superiority and the resultant response, which will most often be laughter, not only encourages the viewer to engage at a highly-charged physical level with film, but also to consider their perspective in relation to the perspectives of those around them. (5)

Such thanatological humour typically eases anxieties about mortality, however, in *Attenberg,* it does not bring catharsis. Marina can understand the jokes, but she is not laughing; she is detached from any emotional response.

Death in *Attenberg* is characterised by an absence of spiritual dimension. While for a religious person death is typically considered the beginning of something new, for an atheist passing away is often linked with the fear of a definitive end. According to Hallam, Hockey and Howarth:

> in the discursive context of Christian liturgy, 'death' signifies the glorious, waiting world of spiritual life, the dominant half of the life/death binary. In more secular contexts, however, where medical science enjoys a position of privilege, 'death' has shifted to a position from which it signifies all that life is not, its shadow side of vulnerability, pain and the ultimate loss of individuality. (82)

Attenberg looks closely at death and its rituals through a secular lens. The father, an avowed atheist, carefully plans his funeral arrangements: a cremation that will reduce the body to ash. The film explores the challenges of such a choice as we see the father's body shipped abroad for a cremation forbidden by the Greek Orthodox Church. Ultimately, the final goodbye is performed by Bella and Marina in a small motorboat. Marina removes the urn from a plastic bag (a sign of modern times) and scatters the father's ashes in the sea. The characters follow the custom of dispersing

the ashes and of burial at sea, acts which purposefully forgo the establishment of a specific memorial location.

After Spyros' death, his body is subject to an array of official rules and regulations. The corpse and the rituals surrounding it have acquired a certain monetary value; they have been commoditised, turned into objects of commercial interest and competitive trade. Attenberg comments on such commodification of death in several fragments. In one of the scenes, shortly before the father's death, Marina, responsible for funeral arrangements, meets a funeral parlour representative. In an elegant office, a man in a suit presents her with various types of coffins in a neat catalogue: "Here we have a modern range. Oak, walnut, cherry, pine or mahogany. Excellent finishes, clean lines". Subsequently, she is also presented with a choice of urns. The sales representative then offers a detailed description of how the body is shipped abroad for cremation and the ashes returned home after the procedure. Here we deal with customised choices for the coffin, urn and music, all with an array of samples and options. In another sequence, this time soon after the father's death, Marina is required to answer a series of administrative questions while the camera fixes on her face filmed from behind a glass serving-window. She asks about a death certificate, gives a delivery address for the body and is invoiced for the outstanding costs incurred by the dead. Marina's final encounter with her father's

Figure 61: ***Attenberg*** **(2010), dir. Athina Rachel Tsangari.**

Figure 62: ***Attenberg*** **(2010), dir. Athina Rachel Tsangari.**

body takes place at the airport. There, the girl, accompanied by a funeral parlour representative, observes as her father's coffin is packed, signed for and loaded for transportation. The coffin is simple with no embellishments, it is, in effect, a box for the transport of cargo; there are no pretensions, the focus is squarely on the practicalities linked with the materiality of the body. A forklift truck takes the coffin to be scanned and packed to the plane. Stickers illustrating the cargo are stuck to the box as it comes off the conveyor belt.[25]

The persistent desire to place death under control is realised through its administration (as illustrated by the examples above) and its confinement to segregated environments: graveyards, funeral homes and crematoria, in other words, "urban planning for the dead" (Spyros). These are accompanied by a complex repertoire of funeral rituals: church services, receptions, remembrances, memorials and community responses. The task of handling death has been delegated to the professionals whose duty is to distance the process from daily life. As Bauman observes:

[25] These funeral practices can be interpreted as a modern incarnation of the myth of Charon (Stevens 215; Edmonds 127; Grinder-Hansen 207) with its notion of crossing into the realm of the dead after paying a fee (here by plane), a presence of a ferryman (a funeral parlour representative) and final depiction of a boat.

> The most universally and continuously practised expedient has been the spatial separation between life and death through the exclusion of the dead - making the dead ‘cease to exist’. They proclaim the dead abnormal, dangerous, those to be shunned. They expel the dead from the company of the normal, the innocuous - those to be associated with. (24)

Excluded from the mundane and ordinary, death has been discretely removed from our view. Discussions of mortality, guarded by social taboos, have been pushed to the margins of everyday discourse and face-to-face encounters with human mortality, without the meditation of screen or paper, are rare. This inability to deal with the death of a loved one is explored in *Attenberg*. Marina does not know how to cope with the end of her father’s life.

Although various philosophical systems inscribe death with deep meaning, upon expiration, the dead body is turned into an inanimate object; “I” becomes “it”. Hallam, Hockey, and Howarth emphasise that contemporary Western culture presents us with cleansed corpses whose organic nature has been obscured and deemed threatening:

> these descriptions and definitions have been extracted from a Western social context where the corpse usually lies hidden from the public gaze, visible only under the strictly controlled conditions of the mortuary or Chapel of Rest. As a result, for many viewers, the strangeness of the dead body lies precisely in its materiality, a quality which appears to predominate in the absence of the other attributes such as warmth, muscle tone, facial expression and speech. Indeed, it is the body’s materiality which must be dealt with as a matter of urgency, lest it smell, produce fluid or infect the bodies of the living. (62)

Attenberg comments on the physical reality of the corpse: during one of the hospital scenes, the father describes how a dead body is eaten and digested by worms. While

Marina massages his hand with aloe gel, Spyros provides a graphic description of what happens to a corpse after burial: “Basically, we’re eaten by the worms. They start from the eyes. They’re the softest. Then they go in through the nostrils. They get inside. They burrow. After a while only your skeleton is left”. His voice is in the background while the camera is focused on Marina’s face, which is blank and motionless.

Death draws attention to the physicality of the human body and recalls the Cartesian-based notion that the material and mortal body is capable of destroying the very self. The physical body, the part of us that is undoubtedly mortal, emerges “as a monster of ambivalence: half-friend, half-enemy - the object and the means of the struggle” (Bauman 36). A corpse is blatantly organic, it decomposes just like any other example of dead matter. Death ultimately reveals the materiality of the body and situates us in the site of the biological.

Called by Romney an “absurdist black comedy” (“Life on Earth” 42), *Attenberg* considers death largely as a rationalist condition, a material necessity of the body. It points to the commodification of passing away, not only by revealing the corpse and funerary practices as objects of commercial interest, but also by presenting images of dying as devoid of any titillating aspects. The film subverts conventionalised and commoditised depictions of dying, particularly those in

Figure 63: *Attenberg* (2010), dir. Athina Rachel Tsangari.

mainstream cinema, and interrogates the ambivalent stance on death in our culture: its exclusion from the everyday spaces on the one hand, and the hyped, sensational approach to it, on the other. Essentially, it shows the ordinariness of death, dressed in detachment, and aided by humour and strict formalisation.

Attenberg explores a fundamental alienation from life itself, especially from the mortality and materiality of the body. In this sense, it bears similarities to *Crash*, as in both films there is little difference between life and death; life itself is presented as a waiting space. The cold and detached aesthetics of *Crash* and the (initial) lack of affect of the main characters make them seem almost dead during their lifetime. Preparing for, and later faced with, the death of her father, Marina goes through the act and tries to learn how to react, waiting for a reaction to happen.

The body vs. the self

In this chapter I have analysed *Attenberg* as a film preoccupied with anxieties and discontents surrounding the material body. *Attenberg,* as I have suggested, contains a number of instances when the physical nature of the body emerges to consciousness (Leder), among them is illness and the situation of danger (here cancer and the subsequent death of the father), the body objectified in the gaze (Marina observing herself and other women), the body detached from its surroundings (the appearance of the town pointing to clear elements of alienation) and the body which reveals its own materiality either when it encounters another body (the erotic scenes between Marina and the engineer) or when it becomes a corpse (the father's body after his death). By revealing its "thingness", the body brings to prominence its own materiality and emerges an object in conflict with the self.

Attenberg centres around notions linked with the materiality of the body, particularly its mortality and sexuality, depictions of which are typically reserved for pornography and horror. It portrays the inside of the body (corporeal depths of the father examined in the hospital), but these are presented as clean clinical images remote from the sensationalism of horror (MRI imaging). It includes a scene of dying (the death of the father and his preparation for it), but the comments about death are

made with dry humour undermining the horror of mortality. It features graphic scenes of sexual intercourses (Marina and the engineer), but these are portrayed with a certain clumsiness that removes any arousing content (Marina’s awkward behaviour and her constant analysis of the erotic act). Moreover, while horror and pornography offer a “spectacle of the body caught in the grip of intense sensation or emotion” (Williams “Film Bodies” 4), *Attenberg* lacks any affects.

CHAPTER FOUR

Sokurov's family trilogy

Alexander Sokurov's impressive body of work spans documentaries, intimate dramas, historical epics, biopics, and literary adaptations. He has frequently been compared to Andrei Tarkovsky - a friend, a mentor, and also the subject of Sokurov's 1988 *Moscow Elegy* (Galetski 4; Alaniz 282). Both directors use long takes to meditate on images and build dream-like atmosphere into their slow-paced cinematic masterpieces. Iampolski, however, points to a particular strand of Sokurov's films, which make them different from those of the director of *The Mirror* (1975):

> Compared with Tarkovsky's characters, perennially engrossed in resolving agonizing moral problems, most characters in Sokurov's pictures strike one as looking and behaving like animals . . . The true heroes of his films are human bodies – lustful, heat-oppressed, mortified and mutilated. ("Truth in the Flesh" 70-71)

Sokurov is preoccupied with the corporeal aspects of human existence; bodies that draw attention to their own materiality, especially those which bear the signs of time are central to the interests of the director. Iampolski continues:

> Flesh absolutely prevails in Sokurov's model of casting. For example, he is totally indifferent to an attractive female body, because its harmonious features contrast with the tragic edge of the heroine's life. He is interested in timeworn, tired and angular bodies full of hysteria and dissatisfaction. ("Truth in the Flesh" 71)

The human body is crucial to Sokurov's aesthetic concerns particularly in his family trilogy and also in his tetralogy about dictators[26]: *Moloch* (1999), *Taurus* (2001), *The Sun* (2005) and *Faust* (2011). The first three parts of the leaders tetralogy centre around ageing dictators, presenting them as frail and failing bodies. In *Moloch,* Hitler[27] appears as a repulsive hypochondriac when juxtaposed with his athletic and beautiful lover, Eva, in *Taurus,* Lenin is seen descending into dementia and barely able to walk, and in *The Sun,* Hirohito has almost grotesque facial tics, his body relinquishing control of itself. None of the films are strictly historical; Sokurov subverts the established genre of a biopic by diverting attention from the political and the psychological and to the purely corporeal. Szaniawski notes about the tetralogy that "its historical actors are not represented on battlefields or in moments of glory, but in a morbid kind of intimacy, as they are immersed in their petty daily shortcomings" (147). Details shown in extreme close-ups - Hitler's protruding stomach and itching underarms, Lenin's toenails clipped by a servant and Hirohito's perspiring brow - expose the ultimate power of the material: a symbolic disintegration in the face of the inevitability of the ageing body.

Figure 64: *Faust* (2011), dir. Alexander Sokurov.

The tetralogy is completed with *Faust,* Sokurov's loose interpretation of Goethe's play concerning a scholar who strikes a bargain with the devil in order to gain ultimate knowledge. Against the background of Faust's intellectual struggle,

[26] Other Sokurov's statements about those in power include *Soviet Elegy* (1989) and *An Example of Intonation* (1991), both about Boris Yeltsin.
[27] Hitler is also the subject of Sokurov's *Sonata for Hitler* (1989).

Sokurov explores his carnal desire for Magritte, which ultimately proves destructive for both lovers. Through numerous close-ups of the bloated scrotum of a cadaver the film investigates an autopsy conducted by Faust complete with his reflections on the anatomical location of the human soul. The camera also focuses on the bizarre bodily form of Mephistopheles, with folds of flesh in front and deformed genitals at the back. In Sokurov's film, the materiality of the body is not overshadowed by the mind. *Faust* identifies the tetralogy as a statement on the will for mastery and dominance, but also a comment on the ultimate bodily nature of those who possess it. Those twentieth century leaders can therefore be seen as descendants of Goethe's character trading their souls for power.

Sokurov's family trilogy (the main focus of this chapter) is preoccupied with the surface of the body. Considered together, *Mother and Son* (1997)*, Father and Son* (2003) and *Alexandra* (2007) constitute a particular exploration of skin. Before moving on to the analyses of the individual films, I would like to briefly discuss them as a whole. Additionally, as an introduction to my argument, I will look at diverse functions and readings of skin.

The films constituting Alexander Sokurov's family trilogy are interlinked stylistically and narratively. The series depicts fleeting impressions connected with both the physical and the emotional, including notions particularly associated with the materiality of the body: ageing, illness, and mortality, juxtaposed with youth and vitality. The stories of all three films are simple and sparse: a mother dies, a father and son explore their emotional bond knowing that the latter will soon leave, and a grandmother visits her grandson, most probably for the last time. Their ponderous pace and long takes invite viewers to contemplate a series of tableaux, rather than a story, thus encouraging an audience to meditate on the aesthetic quality of the image.

The relationships portrayed in the family trilogy are at the point of perishing: the films inscribe themselves into Sokurov's series of elegies - the motif of loss and transience is persistent in the director's works (Binder; Galetski). At the same time, Sokurov investigates the palpable intimacy between close family members. The emotional proximity of the mother and son, the father and Alexei, and Alexandra and her grandson, are all given a physical dimension. For Iampolski, "love in Sokurov is

not primarily sexual, but it does not exclude corporeality" ("Truncated Families" 119-120), here devotion is translated into the sense of touch. The camera places us close to the characters and gives time for our gaze to settle. In this way, we are drawn into the intimacy between family members. *Mother and Son, Father and Son* and *Alexandra* emphasise the bodies of the characters on screen, as well as the contact between them. One of the facets of these films is a series of encounters with the physicality of the body, particularly skin, or rather its image. Skin is here read as the site of contact between the bodies.

Skin

Human skin is the subject of many discourses. As an outside layer of the body, it is an object of interest in both science and the humanities. It is examined as an organ with important biological functions; it is read as a text, or canvas, onto which our identity is inscribed; it both conveys stimuli to the outside world and receives them (as a site of momentary sensations and sensuality). It is also perceived as a container for the inside of the body (blood, bones, muscles, and internal organs) and, in more metaphorical sense, for memory and experience. According to Barker,

> both pleasure and horror arise from the skin's function as boundary - as something that keeps the carnality within us concealed and the carnality of the world at bay - but also as something that brings us into contact with the things in us and around us at the same time. The skin, then, puts us in an ambivalent place on the border of self and other, inside and outside, and proper and improper. (55)

On the one hand, skin can be considered from a scientific point of view and read through non-cultural interests. Composed of different layers, this organ (the largest in the body), "acts as a two-way barrier" (Rook et al. 125) protecting the viscera and "is in the front line of the defences of the body" (Rook et al. 131). Skin constitutes the window to the body; it can be a site of communication for medical

conditions (e.g. through bruises or rashes) and thus is often the first point of examination and diagnosis.

On the other hand, in Elsaesser and Hagener's view, "the skin is more than a 'neutral wrapping' for the body; it is a culturally and semantically charged surface of interaction and communication" (109). Skin is, to large extent, equated with identity, particularly gender, race, age and beauty. It carries the marks of life experience and can be read as a text revealing a personal history (through scars, wrinkles or pictorial inscriptions, such as tattoos).

As a border, skin is a site of communication with the outside world (that is outside of our bodies). Rook et al. assert that "a number of sensations - touch, pressure, warmth, cold and pain - are perceived by the skin" (131). It is also the locus of contact with other bodies and, as such, it is associated with touch. As a surface, skin can be distinguished through purely visual characteristics in terms of its own texture (firmness, dryness, roughness, pores and hair) and colour (tone, skin pigmentation, discoloration and blemishes).

Ours is the time of what Benthien calls the "smoothing of the body and the hardening of external boundaries" (31). Pervasive in today's mainstream culture (especially in popular cinema and advertising), are images of airbrushed, perfect, bodies. Connor suggests that,

> The flesh displayed in posters and magazines, and in the electronic screen that are more and more a feature of public space, looks touchable, caressable . . . odourless and texture-less these skins nevertheless acquaint us with a kind of higher touching, an immaculate, intactile, imperishable touch of the eye. Whenever we look at a poster or a projection on a human impersonal surface, we are looking at such an idealised, generalised human skin. (60)

Skin presented from a distance - on a screen or on paper - cannot be touched. Impenetrable and perfected, devoid of its natural orifices, roughness or imperfections, it denies its own biology. At the same time, the surface of the body acts as a glossy façade which can be altered according to our will.

A number of the discourses that skin lends itself to are intertwined in all three films constituting the family trilogy. *Mother and Son, Father and Son* and *Alexandra* consider the surface of the body from multiple perspectives: as an object of medical interest, as a sensuous border of the body, as a surface with its unique texture and as a carrier of identity. Each section of this chapter focuses on a specific part of Sokurov's family trilogy and the reading of skin central to it.

The first part, which examines Sokurov's skinscapes, revolves around *Mother and Son.* My interest is beyond the conventional presentation of skin in contemporary culture as a glossy bodily surface. Instead of inscribing skin within a metaphorical discourse, I concentrate on the objectified surface of the body stripped of representational value; not a costume but, rather, bare matter. Skin is here read as an object of purely aesthetic visual appreciation; a raw material used to construct an image with varied colours and textures.

I then move to the investigation of *Father and Son*. Apart from including haptic depictions of the bodily surface (that is, emotionally charged close-ups of skin), the film features medical imagery portraying the body without skin. Through the introduction of medical themes, the second instalment of the family trilogy moves towards the examination of skin as an object of scientific interest. The surface of the body in *Father and Son* is able to mask and deceive. The father appears to be a perfectly healthy individual, but when a medical diagnosis penetrates the skin, it reveals traces of serious wounds (in the previous film, on the contrary, the skin of the dying mother is openly presented as aged and bearing signs of illness).

The third part inquires into skin as a culturally charged border onto which identity is inscribed; here gender, occupation, and age. The surface of the body is a container for memory: the life experience of Alexandra and her personal history are transcribed onto her skin: mature and wrinkled. The marked body of the main character is here juxtaposed with the bodies of young soldiers which seem almost identical. This section also examines skin as a site of momentary sensations, a "surface of interaction and communication" (Elsaesser and Hagener 109). I discuss how *Alexandra* presents haptic images of the human body by exploring the

representations of the senses connected with skin (smell and touch) and thus moves the viewer beyond the limits of cinematic audio-visuality.

Sokurov's family trilogy privileges sensual, close engagement with its cinematic image. I argue that such an intensified investigation of the trace of material presence presented on screen, criticises cinema's conventional treatment of the body as a vessel for a goal-driven character, instead showing the body as an object displayed for aesthetic appreciation.

Mother and Son

Mother and Son, the film opening Sokurov's family trilogy, is the poetic tale of a son (Aleksei Ananishnov) who tends to his dying mother (Gudrun Geyer). The story takes place within a single day during which they begin a journey through an ethereal landscape. The plot of the film is sparse and simple, the number of characters is limited to the titular pair; Galetski emphasises that "all extraneous elements are removed in the attempt to render the essence of the relationship in the title. The characters don't have names. The setting is undetermined beyond what is seen on screen, and time seems to have a circular rather than linear quality" (4). Time, space and the bond between the characters hold symbolic meaning and constitute an exploration of ideal family relations.

Most shots in *Mother and Son* constitute broad painterly panoramas of the landscape, the figures of the characters lost in overwhelming nature. Less frequently, the camera frames their bodies in medium shots. In contrast, the film finishes with prolonged extreme close-up of their skin, strongly calling attention to the recognisable physical features of the human body. The surface of the body of the aged mother is juxtaposed with that of her young son, creating skinscapes constructed of the layers of human skin.

Landscapes

Hänsgen claims that "to Sokurov, the traditional medium of the fine arts serves as an inspirational reservoir of image motifs, shot compositions as well as perspective, light and colour arrangement" (50-51). Similarly, according to Botz-Bornstein, Sokurov's cinema can be discussed in a way akin to traditional oil paintings: the landscapes chosen by the Russian director, the organisation of figures, the particular focus on the texture and the use of colour make his films look "more painterly than typically 'cinematic'" (32). Sokurov frequently models his films on classic paintings. As he himself asserts,

> strictly speaking, the surface of the screen and that of the canvas are one and the same . . . The film image must be created according to the canons of painting because there are no others, and there is no need to invent them. They have already been meticulously worked out and extensively tested by time. The director of photography need invent nothing; he has only to educate himself. (qtd. in Sedofsky 125-126)

These painterly tendencies are particularly prominent in *Mother and Son*, with scenes "condensed to a few shots like cinematic paintings" (Hänsgen 50).

Sokurov frequently deploys an array of experimental techniques, such as shooting through painted glass, or using mirrors and anamorphic lenses (Bird 91; Hänsgen 51). In *Mother and Son,* stylised distortions of the image are persistent throughout the film, and are introduced from the first shot where we see the stretched silhouettes of the protagonists. The film explores skewed perspectives (for example in a scene when the son walks down the path), and unreal colours in landscape (e.g. in the depiction of the wind

Figure 65: ***Mother and Son*** **(1997), dir. Alexander Sokurov.**

moving crops). It also emphasises the flatness of the composition and the focus on textures. By employing these effects, Sokurov handles filmic images in *Mother and Son* in a way that brings to mind an oil painting.

Caspar David Friedrich's paintings were one of the major inspirations for the film's mise-en-scène (Sicinski; Alaniz 290). An atmosphere of stillness, a certain treatment of landscape and depth, limited range of colours, and the nostalgic tone that recur in Friedrich's paintings, can be seen echoed in the Russian film.[28] *Mother and Son* operates within what Hänsgen calls the "aesthetics of still images" (44), marking a similarity to Friedrich, who has been described as "the painter of stillness" (Wolf 36). Sokurov's film essentially constitutes a series of tableaux captured with a nearly static camera. It features repeated depictions of a landscape fixed on screen with minimal (or no) movement within a frame. This stillness begins with the opening image: the stretched silhouettes of the characters are fixed on screen and after a while, the son recounts his dream. The mother

Figure 66: ***Mother and Son*** **(1997), dir. Alexander Sokurov.**

Figure 67: Caspar David Friedrich, ***Sunrise over the Sea*** **(1836).**

[28] An interesting point of reference is here Vacche's analysis of Murnau's *Nosferatu* and its visual style recalling Romantic landscape painting (ch. 6).[28]

remains motionless for a brief moment and then replies, describing her nightmare. The scene is devoid of any movement apart from that of the characters' lips. According to Sokurov:

> The most important quality the film image can possess is its capacity to offer the viewer sufficient time to peruse the picture . . . Ideally, the filmmaker would never allow the viewer to comprehend or even perceive the image, at once, in its entirety. Confronted with a true cinematographic work of art, the viewer is never a passive contemplator, but someone who participates in the creation of this artistic world. (qtd. in Sedofsky 126)

The long takes employed in *Mother and Son*[29] invite the viewers to meditate on an image and, in a sense, pauses the narrative. For Hänsgen, "Sokurov's contemplative shots amount to a rejection of the aesthetics of identification of narrative cinema whose most developed forms can be found in the techniques of Hollywood cinema" (46).

The first instalment of the family trilogy is conscious of its two-dimensionality; Sokurov seeks to erase the illusion of depth in order to create a flat surface similar to that of a painting:

> The question is whether we need a three-dimensional space at all. The development of pictorial art reposes on the artist's understanding of the flat surface as a canon, an objective reality that should not be fought. Filmmakers treat it as a void that has to be filled - an absolutely ridiculous practice. (qtd. in Sedofsky 125-6)

Similarly, Friedrich's paintings (e.g. *Cross in the Mountains*, 1807/08) emphasise their two-dimensional nature and offer a very limited sense of depth (Wolf 23).

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[29] As Alaniz notes, "in seventy minutes of running time, *Mother and Son* contains only fifty-seven cuts" (304).

Figure 69: Caspar David Friedrich, *Riesengebirge Landscape with Rising Fog* (1820).

Futhermore, what Koerner observes about Friedrich's *Scene of Leave-taking* (1799) can readily be applied to *Mother and Son:* "landscape functions simply as the domain of analogy, in which the inner sentiments of the human subjects are pictured through appropriately evocative elements in nature" (108). The use of setting in the film points to the allegorical direction of its reading: the space becomes the text of mourning. Nature reflects the state of mind of the characters – here, melancholy. In the scene when the mother and son finish their last conversation, the woman expresses her immense sadness on leaving the son alone. This sequence is intercut with the depiction of stillness and silence of the outdoors: a dark cloud slowly covering the mountain landscape foregrounds the next scene - the mother's passing. Similarly, the son's walk before the woman's death - effectively an exploration of the landscape – is a reflection of his approaching mourning.

Figure 68: *Mother and Son* (1997), dir. Alexander Sokurov.

Human figure

In *Mother and Son,* it is the scenery that plays the lead role; the silhouettes of the characters are often lost in the landscape. The camera frequently abandons the focus on a human figure in order to explore the setting. For example, in a scene when the mother and son discuss their memories, the camera assumes a more distanced position in order to focus on their surroundings, rather the characters' silhouettes which occupy only a third of the screen. Correspondingly, in the sequence where the son carries the sick mother to take her for a walk, the characters are presented as if they were travelling through a painting and can be distinguished from the background only through their movement. The rich texture of the surface, the limited colour palette, and reduced depth of the image make the silhouette and ground resolve into a single plane. Thus, as Iampolski explains, "figures lose their autonomy in relation to the space that contains them" ("Truncated Families" 114). The landscape is in tune with the human form merged with its surrounding; the bodies of the characters are just another object in overwhelming nature.

A similar de-emphasis of a character in relation to the background can be observed in the scenes depicting the mother against the backdrop of conspicuous

Figure 70: ***Mother and Son*** **(1997), dir. Alexander Sokurov.**

Figure 71: ***Mother and Son*** **(1997), dir. Alexander Sokurov.**

surfaces. After the son sits her on the bench beneath the tree, their bodies and clothes in varied hues of grey and brown appear to merge with the background. As the woman rests on the bench, her eyes half closed, the bark of the tree mirrors her dry, wrinkled face. Later, when she rests among the crops, her pale face echoes the colour of the field in the background. Towards the end of the film, we watch the pale, sickly face of the mother melt into her surrounding: a stonewashed wall and the white sheet the son covers her with.

The integration of the human figure into the setting can be interpreted, symbolically, as foreshadowing the mother's death, the son finding solace in the landscape. To certain extent, it echoes Howes' observation that "in many societies the skin of the earth is thought to be replicated in the skin of the individuals who live on it. Just as the landscape may resemble a body, the body may seem like a landscape" (33). This is a further point of convergence with Friedrich's paintings in which the human figure is not welcomed in the desolate setting. In most scenes of the film, composition, light and colour function to valorise the setting; they do not distinguish or isolate the figure from the background.

Skinscapes

As Iampolski comments, in the first instalment of the family trilogy "the tension between the textured, the tangible and the painterly reaches its limit" ("Representation" 137); the camera cannot come closer. Similarly, according to Hänsgen, "*Mother and Son* emerges from the tension between the tactile quality of simulated painterly surface structure and the abstraction of visual representation" (52). In particular, the final scene of the film compels us strongly to focus on the texture of on-screen skin. This three-minute long sequence constitutes a meditation

Figure 72: ***Mother and Son*** **(1997), dir. Alexander Sokurov.**

on the surface of the body. The son mourns after the death of his mother: the close up of her wrinkled, still hand against a backdrop of rough fabric fills the screen. The man's face comes close to his mother's body, first only as a shadow. His hands, young and glistening, travel slowly on the uneven surface of the woman's pale fingers, examining the delicate folds of her skin. As he moves further, an image of his throat stretched over the hand of his mother is brought to prominence and the film focuses on the trembling muscles of the sobbing son.

It is the close-up in the film which is the nearest to the body itself; the technique sharply contrasts this sequence with the previous depictions of the characters' bodies as either lost in overwhelming landscape or merged with its surrounding. Here, the skin fills the screen and receives the full attention of the viewer. The surfaces of individual bodies – that of a young son and an elderly mother – become layers of each other and compose different parts of the image. This depiction is held on screen for a few minutes while the audience is invited to meditate on the varied hues and textures of the characters' skin; a notion more readily associated with oil paintings than with cinema. The film recalls the hilly scenery it presents in the preceding scene with the image constructed by varied geographical features, however, the geography of the landscape is replaced with that of the body. By presenting in close-ups contrasting surfaces of the body, Sokurov creates a "surface-scape" (Quinlivan 99), or more precisely, a "skinscape" composed of different layers of skin.

While comparing the literal meaning of the term *close-up* in different languages, Doane states that:

> in Russian and in French, the term for close-up denotes largeness or large scale (e.g. *gros plan* in French); while in English, it is nearness or proximity that is at stake. The close-up thus invokes two different binary oppositions -proximity vs. distance and the large vs. the small. (92)

In the final scene of *Mother and Son,* the extreme close-up emphasises the intimate proximity of the two characters. Premised on immediacy, which "requires a sense of proximity at the time the image is made (either through physical distance or artificial magnification)" (Baker 61-2), it attempts to bring the objects of its observation nearer and thus the uniqueness and materiality of their physical presence is intensified.

In *Mother and Son,* the final close-up delineates a certain duality. It symbolises and thus evokes the representational power of image (the information about the mother's death and emotions of the son), the feature Marks associates with the optical mode of perception (*Touch* 12). It also, however, opens us to "the richness of sensual experience" (*Touch* 12), by calling attention to the materiality of the body and its physical properties.

Münsterberg[30] argues that the close-up of an object can provide an explanation of the evolving story: "any subtle detail, any significant gesture which heightens the meaning of the action may enter into the centre of our consciousness by monopolizing the stage for a few seconds" (38). A close-up is capable of moving

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[30] The reference to Münsterberg's work published in 1916 - one of the first studies of cinema and also of the close-up - may seem somewhat historically anachronistic, especially when considered alongside the more recent theorists mentioned in this section. However, a considerable portion of Münsterberg's observations have not lost their validity, even taking into account a significant time gap during which substantial technical and aesthetic changes to filmmaking occurred (Griffith xv; Langdale 17-18). His reflections on the close-up and how it directs the viewer's attention dovetail with my analysis of the final scene of Mother and Son. On the one hand, the image of skin filling the screen acts here as a symbol providing an explanation for the evolving story - a subtle detail which, magnified, comes to the centre while "our attention is focused on it and we know that it will be decisive for the development of the action" (Münsterberg 38). On the other hand, it communicates the emotional response of the character, intensifying it, which echoes Münsterberg's remark that "the enlargement by the close-up on the screen brings this emotional action of the face to the sharpest relief" (48).

the narrative forward, as well as communicating its resolution. In the scene under discussion, the extreme close-up of the mother's pale, still hand first presented with a white dead moth resting on her fingers, signals her death. Münsterberg also points to the power of the close-up (especially that of a face) to mark an emotional response (48). Here, it presents the mourning of a son who has just learned about the death of his beloved mother.

However, in this sequence the human body is not only a vessel for meaning, but also an object that invites an appreciation of its physical properties. The final scene of *Mother and Son* draws attention to the surface of the body and enhances the tactile qualities of the image illustrating Doane's remark that "the close-up is an object of vision, not touch, but it nevertheless provokes a sense of the tangible, the intimate" (109). By engaging with the trace of the material presence and its uniqueness, such a "spatial, temporal, figurative, as well as perceptual disruption" (Beugnet 90) marks a shift from optical to haptic visuality.

Shown in close-ups, the surfaces of both the mother and son's bodies are de-familiarised through scale and the attention they receive. Skin is here de-contextualised and transformed into an abstracted object. This artificial amplification calls attention to the visually recognisable physical properties of the bodies, particularly their texture and hues. Skin is here treated as raw material, it is regarded as the distinctive surface whose texture and colour assume major importance. Its magnified features fill the frame, and the camera focuses on details of the skin: pores, hair, wrinkles, its roughness and dryness. The human skin –

Figure 73: *Mother and Son* (1997), dir. Alexander Sokurov.

presented with a closeness rare in our culture - displays itself as an object for visual appreciation.

Additionally, this prolonged close-up allows time for meditation on what is presented on screen in a sense pausing the story. It moves the image outside the conventional goal-oriented plot driven by the motivations of the characters (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 13-14; Thompson 13). For Doane, a close-up "escapes the spatiotemporal coordinates of the narrative" (107); it is "a momentous pause in the temporal unfolding of the narrative" (97-8). In the final scene of *Mother and Son,* the close-ups freeze the flow of the narrative and the bodies of the characters are "freed from [their] function as social, cultural and even gender signifiers" (Beugnet 96). Such techniques adapted in the film invite a mode of viewing that is different from the traditional cinematic experience: the *presentation* of the physical properties of an object (as opposed to subject) – here, the human skin – rather than the simple *representation* of characters we can identify with.

For Marks, "part of materialism, then, is celebrating the uniqueness of the other. Things, people, and moments pass, they age and die and can never be duplicated; so materialism's close corollary is cherishing" (*Touch* xii). The closing scene of *Mother and Son* is both a tactile evocation of the materiality of the body and a meditation on its ageing and mortality. The close-up of skin acts as a metaphor for death and mourning, as well as for physical presence. At the end of the film, the death of the mother reveals the physicality of the body ushered in through a prolonged, static, extreme close-up. This image invites the viewer intimately close to the body turned into cinematic image and enhances the importance of the trace of the material recorded on film (that is, the trace of the physical human body). In the final scene of the first part of Sokurov's family trilogy, the camera does not zoom out to resolve into figuration; the level of figure is not disclosed.

Landscapes to skinscapes

Mother and Son moves between the partial and whole, the representation and the presentation, the ideal and the material, the nature and individual. Its interest in the

human figure marks a cinematic encounter with the medium of painting. A series of nearly static images in the film invites a meditative approach to the visuals, rather than a focus solely on the flow of the story. The use of an extreme close-up at the end of the film, concentrating on the texture and colour of skin, represents a strengthening of the focus of many of Sokurov's previous films - the emphasis on the materiality of the body. By coming intimately close to the body, *Mother and Son* opens up the space for the engagement with the trace of the physical dimension of the characters' bodies; the close-up here "supports the cinema's aspiration to be the vehicle of presence" (Doane 93).

Father and Son

The opening scene of *Father and Son* – the recollection of a dream – links us back to *Mother and Son* with images of similarly stretched silhouettes and the same desolate scenery in an identical colour palette. The film is a story of a war veteran father (Andrei Shchetinin) and his son, Alexei (Aleksei Neymyshev)[31], a cadet in a military school. Shot between St Petersburg and Lisbon, the second part of the family trilogy is set in the allegorical space (Graffy 22). Equally symbolic is the relationship between the parent and child, loving and tender, frequently translated into physical (non-erotic) closeness (Goscilo and Hashamova 17; Alaniz 283). Sokurov comments: "with *Father and Son*, we didn't want the setting to be attached to any

Figure 74: ***Father and Son*** **(2003), dir. Alexander Sokurov.**

Figure 75: *Father and Son* (2003), dir. Alexander Sokurov.

specific time or place. What really matters in the movie are the eternal bonds that exist between the characters" (qtd. in "*Father and Son*: Press Conference Highlights"). Such proximity strikingly contrasts with the military ethos of the army background they both share and its very formal environment, which has frequently been depicted in the Russian director's films from the 1990s onwards (Alaniz 289).

In *Father and Son,* Sokurov pursues his preoccupation with human corporeality by focusing on the sculpted bodies of two soldiers. The exploration of them as physical figures begins with the opening scene where the main characters are presented half-naked and in each other's embrace. Throughout the film, we watch the father weightlifting on rooftops, or the son stepping out of the shower. Alexei is observed during martial art training, or exercising on the ladder, the father and son play football and talk about their physical fitness; their muscular physiques are accentuated by their sleeveless tops and tight T-shirts. The camera work and lights also emphasise the physical aspect of the characters' bodies. They are usually presented bathed in bright yellows and oranges, or subdued sepias, and frequently in close-up shots.

The second part of the family trilogy begins with the investigation of the bodily surface and muscular silhouettes. Skin is here interpreted as the site of

sensuality and contact with the other body, as well as the cover for the bodily interior. As we learn later in the film, the body of the father – on the surface an example of health and fitness – hides a lung injury. The recurring image of his chest x-ray and conversations about it bring about the discourse of medicine and that which is concealed by skin.

The sensuous

The opening scene of *Father and Son* is blank. After watching the black screen in silence for a short moment, we begin to distinguish the anguished breaths of two men, one trying to console the other. In the ensuing sequence, the soundtrack continues the close exploration of breath, and an image appears. We can see distorted surface of the body: the depiction of struggling hands and naked chests pressed to one another is deformed on screen. The next cut is to an image of open lips, which recall a dark cave surrounded by a fold of skin; it is the space where the sound comes from. Finally, the image resolves into the clear figuration of two embracing men.

The beginning of *Father and Son* presents a certain incompleteness: first it is the lack of images, then distorted close-ups. The sonic (and, later, visual) puzzle, "offering a vague sensation rather than specific information" (Elliott 171), refers us to Marks's notion of haptic visuality and her statement that "rather than making the object fully available to view, haptic cinema puts the objects into question, calling on the viewer to engage in its imaginative construction" (*Touch* 16). Similar to when

Figure 76: ***Father and Son*** **(2003), dir. Alexander Sokurov.**

presented with blurred visuals and audio, the spectator needs to create mental pictures based on the sound. As Beugnet points out: “where the image does not show, the sound’s synaesthetic presence feeds into the viewer’s imagination and gives materiality to the invisible” (91). Here, the concealed is gradually visually and sonically revealed.

Initially, the camera comes close, as if probing the body; close-ups index proximity. Akin to the scene of *Mother and Son* discussed earlier, the exteriors of two different corporealities create layers that construct the image; our eye lingers on the corporeal surfaces that fill the screen. With these skinscapes, the close-ups of the father and son’s bodies register their intimacy, as well as the muscularity of their silhouettes. From an appeal to the multi-sensory memory (which aids deciphering the images), we move to the identification of the figure (as opposed to the close-up, at the end of *Mother and Son*). According to Marks, “changes of focus and distance, switched between more haptic and more optical visual styles, describe the movement between a relationship of touch and visual one” (*Touch* 16). Here, after the camera assumes a more distanced stance, we are able to identify the characters.

Father and Son opens with a particularly intense and visceral evocation of breath. Next to visuals, the sound in the film is the most crucial in evoking the haptic mode of perception. The proximity of the camera to the bodies of the father and son is additionally emphasised by evoking breath. For Quinlivan, “hearing the ‘grain’ of a breathing body posits a dimension of breathing visuality informed specifically through sound and its haptic implication” (137). To foreground breath is to engage in

Figure 77: *Father and Son* (2003), dir. Alexander Sokurov.

intimacy, to recall the trace of the material object on screen and to "offer a profound sense of the palpability of the body" (Quinlivan 139). Such a meditation on breath "tends to evoke a bodily presence that is differentiated from the body in the frame of the film", it prompts us to think about "an imprint of their existence that lives on beyond the earthbound realm of the film's diegesis" (Quinlivan 55). In other words, breath calls attention to the trace of the physical presence recorded on film.

The first association we might make with heavy breathing in film is with horror or pornography. In the opening scene of *Father and Son*, the breathing resonates with the idea of bodily intimacy, but not in terms of a sexual encounter[32]. The initial (supposed) erotic overtones are subverted by the subsequent dialogue (the description of a disturbing dream in which the son is left alone on a country path) and by who the characters are (a parent and a child). Such registration of breath still emphasises the emotional and physical bond between two men, however, It debases "the modern taboo on men touching men" and a "hands-off masculinity" (Classen 156).

The medical

Father and Son considers the surface of the body not only as the site of sensations, but also as a cover, its appearance belying the condition of that which is beneath. By introducing internal images of the body - an x-ray and an anatomical poster - the film explores skin as "just another wrapping, something to be removed to reach what was more valid beneath it" (Kevles 28). It conceals the uncanny viscera, intimate and familiar, yet eliciting horror and fear when exposed (see Freud 124-132).

[32] Sokurov ruled out the possible homoerotic reading of the film: "European society has reached a blind alley, and that can explain why people tend to think that. In Russia, that isn't something that would come to mind. I want father/son and mother/son relationships to stay as warm and natural as possible. For me, a son will always be his father's child, even when he's grown up. We should maintain the tenderness that exists in human relations" (qtd. in "Father and Son: Press Conference Highlights").

Figure 78: ***Father and Son*** **(2003), dir. Alexander Sokurov.**

When Alexei returns home from the military academy, he finds an x-ray of his father's ribcage. The medical photograph is first presented in close-up, the hand of the son travelling across its surface: the screen is filled with a black and white image of the corporeal interior. The film then cuts to a blurred portrait of the son's face shot in soft focus, recalling a reflection on water or the shadow of a radiographic photograph. The camera briefly dwells upon the father's silhouette that "appears behind him [Alexei], ghostlike, more a hazy reflection of Aleksei's inner thoughts than a concrete figure" (Alaniz 297). It then quickly returns to the examination of the son's expression that changes from a smile to a distressed frown as he investigates the Roentgen representation. "It's your portrait", explains Alexei to his parent, "it's still a photograph. Just a little more revealing. You're not hiding behind clothes…nor your muscles". The son, who studies medicine as a part of his course, is capable of reading the photo, yet refrains from discussing it with his father. Later, he shows the x-ray to his friend: "It's a thoracic cage. My father's thoracic cage", he explains. He concludes with a comment of: "Look at those lungs, not the ribs...He had a lung wound".

As the hand of the son moves slowly across the surface of the radiographic photograph, almost caressing it, the film juxtaposes the outer part of the body with its inside. The x-ray image - "a representational technology creating an illusion of

unmediated, objective reality" (van Dijck 98) - denotes certain impersonal (that is, medical) truths about the body; here, it is the father's war injury. The introduction of elements from the domain of medicine, detached and distanced, turns the body into an object of scientific analysis. By penetrating the body, medical technologies, such as Roentgen rays, offer views that are unavailable to the naked eye. Skin ceases to be the boundary of the visible, the gaze of the observer is able to reach deeper, "the border of the self is no longer the skin, the shape of the body no longer just the outline in the mirror, and the story of an individual body no longer just an autobiography" (Helman 99). This is a more revealing portrait of the father: "the celluloid x-ray metaphorises the movie's own mode of representation: making the unseen - emotions, spiritual longing, aspects of masculinity usually hidden - nakedly visible" (Alaniz 297). In the discussed scene, *Father and Son* juxtaposes corporeal depth with the surface of the body. The absolute intimacy of coming immediately close and unmasking what is disguised under the skin, is linked with a distanced view of the transparent flesh unveiled in medical discourse.

X-ray images move within the aesthetics of abstraction: the complete, dimensional body is turned into a flat fragment and the recognisable represention of human corporeality becomes distorted. What Cartwright writes in the context of microscopic images can equally applied to x-rays:

> the microscopist sees the body in a manner that effectively distances the observer from the subjective experience of the body imagined. Excised from the body, stained, blown up, resolved, pierced by a penetrating light, and perceived by a single squinting eye, the microscopic specimen is apparently stripped of its corporeality, its function, and its history even as it serves as a final proof of the health, pathology, or sexuality of the subject whose body it represents. (83)

The body in medical imaging is what Lingis calls the "'body in the third person', a body constructed out of the data of external observation and measuring instruments" (47), essentially, the body estranged from the everyday experience of the individual.

Cartwright calls attention to the distancing effect of medical imaging. The body turned into an object of scientific investigation invites a perception different to that elicited by our ordinary interaction with the human body in its full dimension:

> whereas the motion picture of the eyeless, toothless body of a woman . . . repels and shocks, the image of a sliced, stained and magnified fragment of the body tissue is more likely to elicit viewer responses ranging from lack of interest to mild curiosity, or even aesthetic appreciation. (83)

Within the medical discourse, the inside of the human body is nothing more than an object of scientific analysis, however, in *Father and Son*, the close-ups of the hand, with the focus on human skin and the act of touching, invite tactile perception. For Iampolski, "an x-ray of the father's chest that father and son study can be seen as an allegory of total proximity. This image of absolute penetration, of absolute transparency, unveils the source of death lurking in the healthy and beautiful body" ("Truncated Families" 120). This fragment echoes the emotional overtones and intimacy of the opening scene with its emphasis on the closeness of the filmed body. Additionally, the strong visual style of the sequence (it is filmed through soft lenses with subtle hues) adds a personal and artistic touch to the image produced in the context of medical analysis.

The discovery of the Roentgen rays raises a number of interesting points. The late nineteenth century ushered forth a number of mechanical forms of reproduction, with the film projector, gramophone and x-ray among them: "each of these apparatuses enabled a 'mechanical' inscription of the body's image or sound, the realistic quality of which yielded the illusion of physical presence" (van Dijck 84). Reiser noted the numerous changes brought about by visual diagnosis based on x-rays, which include minimising the risk of subjective distortions and allowing for intersubjective perception and evaluation (68). Similarly, van Dijck points to "the replacement of the doctor's subjective sensorial impressions by supposedly objective visual evidence" (86). Over time, the significance of mechanically generated proofs

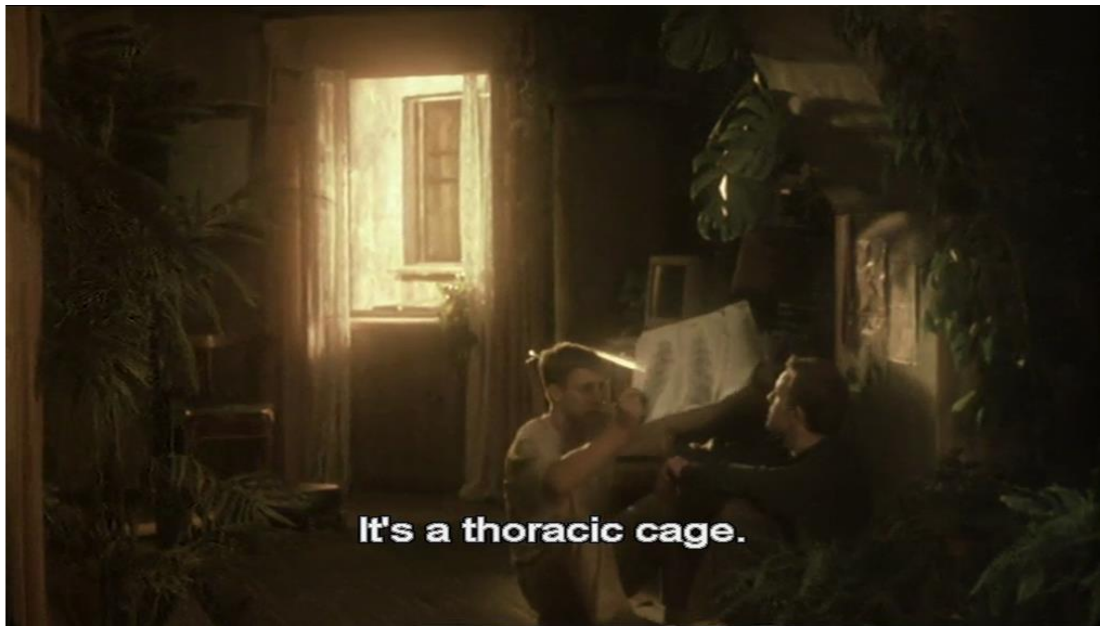

Figure 79: ***Father and Son*** **(2003), dir. Alexander Sokurov.**

increased, while medical practitioners' dependence on the evidence provided by their own senses diminished in importance. The medical gaze became partially replaced by mechanical-clinical gaze (van Dijck 12), which reduced human contact (also in the case of x-rays): "it became apparent that the centre of subjectivity had gravitated from listening and palpating doctor to the seeing specialist" (van Dijck 87).

It is worth noting that x-ray technology had a great impact on the collective imagination in the era in which it was conceived: "the meaning and value of the new technology was not exclusively medical but had a much wider resonance, as the culture at large tried to make sense of it mysterious transparent qualities, adjusting the spectator's gaze to a changing scopic regime" (van Dijck 84). For Cartwright, the early interest in Roentgen's invention represented the point of intersection of specialised knowledge and popular fantasy. From its inception, X-ray has lent itself to a number of public interpretations and fantasies: "from pulp fiction to the fine arts, writers, artists, and movie-makers played exuberantly with the idea of seeing through bodies with invisible rays, of looking for secrets beneath the surface" (Kevles 4).

Additionally, before the emergence of modern imaging techniques, looking at the inside of the body had strong connotations with death. Hence, portrayals of the

corporeal depths, even those presented as abstracted x-ray photographs, evoked fear "literally foreshadowing man's deadly destination and turning the body into a transcendent object" (van Dijck 94). Although Wilhelm Röntgen's discovery opened the possibility of inspecting the bodily interiors of the living, x-ray images are still associated with the materiality and mortality of the human body. This anxiety is reflected in Sokurov's film: the son's knowledge allows him to read a terminal illness from the radiographic image, while the father's ignorance leads him to dismiss his own x-ray as little more than something "for scaring children".

Another scene in *Father and Son* offers a different comment on the medical perception of the body. After a game of football between the father and son, Alexei is shown standing almost still in front of an image depicting an écorché figure. The picture of a flayed human form portrays a gymnast on rings, his skin removed in order to demonstrate the anatomical position of muscles in the human body. The son smiles, his face lit by soft hues of sunlight as he listens to his father calling his name.

The écorché figure is situated between the artistic (individual and subjective) and the scientific (distanced and objective). The body, devoid of its protective surface, recalls the function of skin as an envelope for the corporeal depths: "only a cover, the inexpressive surface of the body" (Elsaesser and Hagener 115). With a

Figure 80: *Father and Son* (2003), dir. Alexander Sokurov.

complete human face (as the locus of the self), a stylized pose, and a prop (the rings, which place the body in context and simultaneously appeal to the imagination of the lay audience), the picture points to early anatomy drawings with their distinctive aesthetic take on medicine.

Anatomical drawings dating from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century - intertwined the scientific with the artistic.[33] In order to conceal the violence linked to the penetration of skin and remove the taboo of such an exposure of the body interior, images created by early anatomists were inscribed within aestheticised and symbolic discourse. Benthien notes about such depictions that: “the incisions in the body are shown to be emphatically clean and smooth; they highlight the artificial moment of the sculpture, the gesture of the virtual: they show an imaginary view under the skin that eliminates the bloodiness” (48). In *Father and Son,* the idealised representation of the flayed figure aestheticises the uncanny: the body interior is presented as verging on the artistic and the scientific.

Numerous medical models created in this period were based around the theme of flaying. Anatomical Venuses by Clemente Susini and Francesco Calenzuoli (respectively, 1782 and 1818) show attractive women with half-open skin revealing the corporeal depths. Many works portray bodies which take an active part in their flaying process, often by appearing to open the skin themselves in the manner of “an entrance curtain in front of a mysterious world” (Benthien 45) inviting us to explore the corporeal secrets. Here significant examples include images from Giulio Bonasone’s *A Male Écorché Figure* (15--) and Pietro Berrettini’s *Tabulae anatomicae* (1741). Other depictions present a human figure holding skin as drapery, or a trophy; these include Juan de Valverde’s images from *Anatomia del corpo humano* (1560) (bearing similarity’s to St Bartholomew depicted by Michaelangelo) and William Cowper’s *Myotomia reformata (1694).* An interesting case is also the frontispiece for Thomas Bartholin’s *Anatomia Reformata* (1655) - the anatomical

[33] The most significant examples here are those included in Andreas Vesalius’s *On the Fabric of the Human Body* (1543) and Juan Valverde de Amusco’s *Juan Valverde de Amusco: Anatomia del corpo humano* (1560).

Figure 81: Clemente Susini, Anatomical Venus (1782).

Figure 82: Francesco Calenzuoli, Anatomical Venus (1782).

Figure 83: From Pietro Berrettini's *Tabulae anatomicae* (1741).

Figure 84: Giulio Bonasone, *A Male Écorché Figure* (15--).

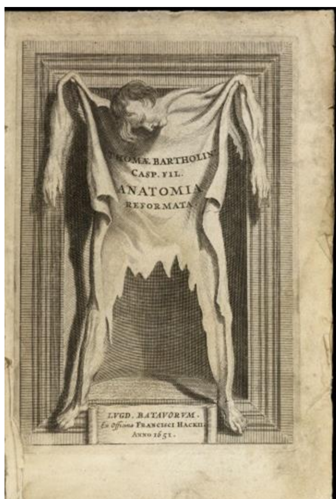

Figure 85: Frontispiece for Thomas Bartholin's *Anatomia Reformata* (1655).

Figure 86: From Juan Valverde de Amusco's, *Anatomia del corpo humano* (1560).

study is introduced by the image of human skin only; the inside of the body is removed[34].

The scene presenting Alexei exercising on the rings (followed by that of the character examining an x-ray of his father's chest) allows us to draw parallels between the anatomical image of the flayed figure featured in the film and the son's body, as both are portrayed in the same positions. If the depiction of the écorché figure is to echo Alexei's fit figure, then the x-ray is similarly associated with the uncanny depths of his father's body. *Father and Son* juxtaposes a photograph of an individual (an x-ray) with idealised representation (the image of the flayed figure). Both pictures, destined mainly for the domain of medicine, show the body in absence of its outside layer. An x-ray is a unique record of a particular body at a specific point of time created through mechanical means of reproduction and inscribed within the discourse of medical objectivity. By contrast, in the image of the écorché figure, the removal of skin is embedded within the symbolic and the ideal. The anatomical picture of a flayed human form is an artistic representation, a schema based on standardised body type and norm. In her cultural analysis of medical images van Dijck asserts that:

> between the early fifteenth and the early twenty-first century, a plethora of visual and representational instruments have been developed to obtain new views on, and convey new insights into, human physiology. From the pen of the anatomical illustrator to the surgeon's advanced endoscopic techniques, instruments of visualisation and observation have mediated our perception of the interior body through an intricate mixture of scientific investigation, artistic observation, and public understanding. (4)

[34] The body without skin – frequently depicted in medical domain – has now moved to the sphere of horror (consider flaying in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) or *Hellraiser (1987)*).

Figure 87: ***Father and Son*** **(2003), dir. Alexander Sokurov.**

Through juxtaposition of early and modern medical images of human anatomy, *Father and Son* draws attention to the biological aspect of the bodies of the titular characters.

Additionally, the film comments on the history of scientific depictions of human corporeality. Foucault begins his *The Birth of Clinic,* a book about "the act of seeing, the gaze", with the discussion of a shift within medicine that changed the balance of visual knowledge and power (see also *Discipline and Punish).* The French philosopher maintains that modern medicine - born at the end of eighteenth century - ushered in scientific objectivity and medical rationality with its careful observation of the physical properties of objects. Until the mid-eighteenth century, the language of medicine could be described as that of myth and imaginary investment. From the nineteenth century onwards, medicine turned to precise and rational modes of description based on the neutral gaze of "greater value, solidity, and objectivity" (xii). The medical images in *Father and Son* illustrate this shift in medical ways of seeing.

The drawings of early anatomists, such as those of Vesalius (which Samson considers "the founding document of Enlightenment medicine" ("Biomedicine" 5)) and Valverde de Amusco, or flayed anatomical models, situate themselves on the border between science and art by displaying the body in stylised, often symbolic

contexts. In such depictions, bodies demonstrating certain aspects of human anatomy frequently assume the poses of classical sculptures, and are presented against the background of a landscape, or supplied with a prop. These images are designed to draw direct parallels between the human body as it appears every day, and the human anatomy within.

The artistic and subjective elements proved superfluous when faced with the modern requirement for precise data and schemas: "imagery full of visual elements that would be not only useless but positively distracting to a medical student or practicing doctor" (Rifkin, Ackerman, and Folkenberg 319). The highly precise nature of contemporary anatomical illustrations (such as *Gray's Anatomy*, 1858, Netter's *Atlas of Human Anatomy*, 1989, or digital atlases such as *The Visible Human Project*) and medical imaging (e.g. x-ray, CT, MRI) allows them to be used as effective diagnostic tools. Accuracy has become a decisive factor. Rifkin, Ackerman, and Folkenberg suggest that,

> scientific accuracy calls for greater precision in rendering and the sacrifice of such artistic values as composition and proportion; clarity, not expressiveness; and a sharp focus on the parts that need to be mastered by the student, with distracting elements omitted. These factors explain the widespread popularity in the second half of the nineteenth century of anatomical atlases like Gray's, which an artist might see as being plain and uninspiring. (319)

Such precision and objectivity, however, entails certain depersonalisation. The mediation of an artist has been removed, the image is recorded directly by and onto the machine.

Between the medical and the sensuous

Father and Son probes the body from varied proximities: from extreme close-ups registering the breath and skin of the characters in the first scene, through exploration of what is concealed under the skin in an x-ray and an anatomical schema, to the investigation of the whole muscular figures of the characters as encountered in

everyday experience. The film contrasts the body caught in haptic expression with the scientific detachment offered by scientific images. It comments on the history of medicine's visual culture by featuring both contemporary and older representations of the inside of the body.

The second part of the family trilogy explores different meanings of physical intimacy: the bodily interior in the discourse of medicine (the x-ray and the anatomical depiction of a flayed figure) and the investigation of the characters' personal proximity (an immersion in the bodily experience heightened through an appeal to senses other than vision and hearing). Such penetration of the inside and outside, as well as the juxtaposition of the haptic and medical, calls attention to the material and biological dimension of the human body and thus brings out the trace of the physical presence on screen.

Alexandra

Continuing the military theme of *Father and Son*[35], this time in a Russian army camp in Chechnya, *Alexandra* sketches a portrait of a grandmother (Galina Vishnevskaya) who visits her grandson, Denis (Vasily Shevtsov), a captain in the Russian army.[36] The elderly woman travels together with a group of military men and stays with them in a camp. In this male-only domain, she becomes a symbol of femininity and warmth. The film is founded on contrasts: the aged body of the titular character is juxtaposed with the young, masculine corporealities of soldiers.

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[35] *Father and Son* and *Alexandra* are "warless war films" about army in which Sokurov is "denying the voyeuristically comforting pay-offs of action, killing, and gore" (Ratner 52). Other Sokurov's films about army include *Spiritual Voices* (1995), or *Confession. From the Commander's Diary* (1998).

[36]Goscilo and Hashamova note about Sokurov's preoccupation with lives of soldiers: "military discourse, reinforced by Cold War, remains sedimented in Russian culture and above all in the collective memory of its older population, while also kept alive for anyone tracking the wars in Afghanistan (1979-89) and Chechnya (1994-96, 1999-   ), insomuch as it still permeates official documents, pronouncements and interviews with government representatives" (15).

Figure 88: ***Alexandra*** **(2007), dir. Alexander Sokurov.**

The last instalment of Sokurov's family trilogy begins with a sequence presenting Alexandra's body from different angles. She is portrayed in medium close-up from the back (she sits inside a bus, her hair pinned in a bun), the camera pans down to focus on her feet (she leaves the bus), it shows her from the front (she examines her surroundings) and then moves slightly around the character. Finally, it zooms out to reveal the whole figure of Alexandra. She stands against a background of the desolate landscape, looking slightly lost. With its insistent gaze, the camera pays ample attention to her figure; from the beginning Alexandra remains the centre of attention. Throughout the film the constantly shifting focus of the camera - from close-ups fragmenting the character's body to presentations of her whole silhouette - constructs what seems to be nearly her three dimensional portrait[37].

Figure 889: ***Alexandra*** **(2007), dir. Alexander Sokurov.**

In the next scene Alexandra, accompanied by a few soldiers, walks to a train station. She is greeted by army men entering the carriage: the gaze of the camera is fixed on the woman's face while the recruits only flash by as they pass. After they

Figure 90: ***Alexandra*** **(2007), dir. Alexander _Sokurov.**

[37] Here *Alexandra* recalls Beugnet's reading of *Zidane* (170-175).

assume their places, the camera scans the features of the young men, briefly focusing on one face after another. We watch similar bodies, in the same uniforms and with identically organised sets of activities. The soldiers stare at Alexandra, which emphasises her difference and incongruence.

This series of juxtapositions not only, as Sicinski notes, "highlights a favourite personality type in Sokurov's work: the frail, the infirm, or otherwise subprime physical specimen", but also calls attention to the physical properties of the body. Elderly Alexandra is compared with the masculine corporealities of the soldiers; her wrinkled, dry skin is contrasted with sweaty muscles of the military men. The film juxtaposes the individual with the group, youth and maturity, a woman and men, however, the easy equating of old age with death and youth with life, is here reversed; these young soldiers are fragile and fleeting, likely to die soon. With Alexandra as the embodiment of Mother Russia (Christie), ageing is here a symbol of eternity, not death; she is unbreakable and eternal.

Primarily, in *Alexandra*, the viewers "informed by the full history and carnal knowledge of our acculturated sensorium" (Sobchack 63), are compelled to read the film through references to smell and touch. This part of the family trilogy invites spectators to activate senses other than vision and hearing, it encourages them to "almost touch" and "almost smell" the places the titular character explores. The film evokes the hapticity of images by presenting either the actual act of touching and smelling, or alluding to it. It refers us to the kind of communication that overcomes the limitations of the audio-visual: carnal (sensual) comprehension (see Sobchack 76). The experience of a viewer is intensified by appealing to senses other than vision and hearing in an attempt to engage more with the trace of the material presence recorded in the film.

Smell

The bodily organ traditionally associated with olfactory perception (and simultaneously with breathing) is the nose. We recognise odours through nerve endings stimulated by chemical substances. Smell used to be essential from a survival point of view; it alerted us of dangers (allowing us to recognise burning

objects or dangerous foods through their odour). Today, olfactory perception is usually associated with extremes, as we are able to discern very enjoyable smells and very unpleasant ones, while odours in the middle of the spectrum often remain vague or unnoticed.

Like touch, smell can be indicative of material presence, yet, while both are proximal senses, the act of smelling does not require the intimate closeness of touch. Classen, Howes, and Synnot point to the proliferation of commercially produced smells:

> today's synthetic scents are evocative of things which are not there, of presences which are absent: we have floral-scented perfumes which were never exhaled by a flower, fruit-flavoured drinks with not a drop of fruit juice in them, and so on. These artificial odours are a sign without a referent, smoke without fire, pure olfactory image. (205)

Such artificial odours cannot be traced back directly to their source, but rather imitate the presence of an object.

Odours can be indicative of not only physical, but also emotional, proximity; we recognise the smell of a person we are intimately connected with. Elliott asserts that "smell memories can transport us back through time and can elide space, engendering in us the feelings we felt when we were first presented with it" (134). As they maintain connection with an original experience, odours can trigger certain recollections by evoking an emotion associated with the initial experience of a scent.

Out of all of the senses, smell is considered the most difficult to translate into words. For Marks, "smells are easier to identify through personal memory associations than by name" (*Skin of Film* 205). For Classen, Howes, and Synnot, "odours, unlike colours, for instance, cannot be named at least not in European languages. 'It smells like...', we have to say when describing an odour, grouping to express our olfactory experience by means of metaphors" (3). It is by such

employment of figurative language that smells are evoked in *Alexandra*: "you smell good, the way men smell", says the titular character to her grandson, or*:* "it stinks of a dog in here", explains a soldier to Alexandra. The protagonists use comparisons or point to the sources of smells, they do not name odours directly. Correspondingly, it is difficult to convey smells in cinema. Although the world of film – what is presented on screen – is odourless, smell can inform cinematic experience. Marks suggests three ways in which odours can be evoked in films:

> (1) through identification with a character smelling something or a close-up of a fragrant object;
>
> (2) through the synaesthetic association of a smell with a sound, particularly when it is combined with a close-up;
>
> (3) through the appreciation of haptic images, that is images that appeal both to the sense of smell and vision (again, especially images presented in close-ups). (*Skin of Film* 195-206; *Touch* 117-118)

With an object featuring only as an audio-visual experience, films cannot recreate the precise sensation of smell (or touch), just like odours cannot be replicated in written language. Cinematic smells can point to the trace of the material presence and can evoke a memory of an odour, but cannot reconstruct it.

Alexandra includes moments that can "elicit an identification with the object itself, as much as with the person smelling it" (Marks, *Touch* 117). The act of smelling features next to the experience of touch in a gentle encounter between Alexandra and her grandson. Denis smells his grandmother's hair in order to evoke the memories from his childhood and to immerse himself in the warm aura of her personality; the presence of the grandmother elicits the trace of an original event. Here the film invites us to refer to our multi-sensory knowledge and to identify with the character immersed in the olfactory experience.

Figure 89: ***Alexandra*** **(2007), dir. Alexander Sokurov.**

Smells enhance the experience and understanding of a space. Frequently, particular settings are distinguished through distinctive odours creating readily recognisable smellscapes. According to Porteous, "the concept of smellscapes suggests that, like visual impressions, smells may be spacially ordered and place related" (25). A smell distinguishes a specific domain from its outside and emphasises its uniqueness. *Alexandra* pays ample attention to olfactory sensations in the smell-saturated army camp. Military life is characterised by a variety of odours: of male bodies, weapons, tents, wooden structures, machines, military vehicles and food. For Drobnick, "odour is thus a key constituent (and marker) of encountering difference, a sensory fact often remarked upon in tourism promotions and travel literature" ("Toposmia" 33). A visitor and a newcomer, Alexandra perceives smells more intensely.

Alexandra is immersed in smells that are new to her. She is not only an eyewitness, but also what Drobnick calls "the olfactory equivalent to the *flaneur*, namely that of the *flaireur*, or 'smeller'" ("Toposmia" 35). The film features repeated comments on the odours of the army camp. Inside the tank that Denis shows to Alexandra, she remarks: "It smells". "It's the guns, the iron, the men. You'll get used to it", replies her grandson. In another of her excursions, the grandmother

comes to the entry post and is encountered by two soldiers. They reluctantly allow her to sit down in their hut: “It stinks of dog in here”, warns one of the soldiers. “It always smells of something here. I am getting used to it”, answers Alexandra. Such comments make us aware that this setting should be understood also through the sense of smell; the film suggests haptic (olfactory) qualities of the images. This resonates with Marks’s statement that “haptic visuality inspires an acute awareness that the thing seen evades vision and must be approached through other senses – which are not literally available in cinema” (*Skin* 191).

For Elliott, smellscapes “are not only spatio-temporally based, but concerned with racial and cultural identity, they can be self-affirming and exclusive but they are always telling, being as they are the contingent product of lives lived” (135-6). The space of the army camp is filled with odours associated with masculinity. Through Alexandra’s references to the soldiers’ heat-oppressed and sweaty bodies we are constantly reminded that they are not indurate. “You can wash your clothes”, she states when a soldier helps her leave the train, and upon meeting Denis for the first time since her arrival, she jokingly comments: “You’re all sweaty! Where are your manners?”.

Alexandra repeatedly recalls the smells of this male dominated domain, the odours define it. While the olfactory confirms the identity of those inhabiting this space and marks the soldiers’ manhood, it also triggers contrasting associations. On the one hand, masculinity in the film is linked with certain pride and the provision of safety: “you smell good, the way men smell”, Alexandra says to her grandson. On the other hand, it is also connected with cruelty and fear. The film illustrates this when the titular character talks to Malika and describes the purpose of her visit (meeting her grandson), and the Chechen woman replies: “when we look at the Russian soldiers, they seem tiny. Just boys… even if they smell like men…they look like kids”. The military camp is a source of terror to those outside it, but the distinctive smells provide comfort and reassurance to those inside it.

Touch

Dependent on proximity and immediacy, touch is experienced through the surface of the body; it is a sense closely associated with skin, particularly the fingertips and lips. Linked directly with the material dimension, it is, arguably, the most direct of all modes of perception. Bentien points to "the perceptual aesthetic theory of the eighteenth-century sensualists – what is seen or heard can be an illusion, while things explored by touch prove to be compellingly real" (222). Similarly, for Tuan: "the real, ultimately, is that which offers resistance. The tactile sense comes up against an object, and that direct contact, felt sometimes as harsh impingement, is our final guarantee of the real" (78). In other words, touch is the sense we put most trust in.

Montagu remarks that touch can "vary from simple body contact to the massive tactile stimulation involved in sexual intercourse" (*Touching* 318). It can be a sign of affection (caressing, cuddling, stroking) or anxiety (scratching, rubbing). It can inflict pain (pinching, biting), have a calming effect (massage), or evoke disgust (contact with an object of unexpected surface). He suggests that "by touching is meant the satisfying contact or feeling of another's or one's own skin" (*Touching* 318). The tactile experience plays significant part in emotional relationships; it implies particular intimacy and closeness. It is thus particularly important in parenting and central to the erotic act (Montagu, *Touching,* 75, 157, 158-9). Correspondingly, touch is connected with haptic customs and different forms of communication (greeting by kissing, shaking hands, bowing, etc.). According to Montagu, touch "very much more than first-name-calling, reduces social distance and often constitutes a declaration of intimacy" (*Touching* 273). Touch is indicative of closeness, both physical and emotional.

In her meditations on film's power to call on other senses than vision and hearing, Marks considers cinema's capacity to appeal to touch, to invite the synesthetic shift from eye-gaze to skin-touch. The notion of the tactile generally refers to what is perceptible by touch - to what is tangible or conveys the illusion of tangibility. We can talk about tactile memories, tactile objects designed to be perceived by touch (e.g. tactile exhibitions for the blind) or people who express their feelings through touch ("a tactile person"). For Marks, "the vision itself can be tactile, as though one were touching a film with one's eyes" (*Skin of Film* xi). Tactile

Figure 90: ***Alexandra*** **(2007), dir. Alexander Sokurov.**

vision (or voyeuristic touch) imitates touch, or rather, constitutes a certain attempt of evoking the traces of the tactile.

Although *Alexandra* is set in the masculine domain of the overtly distant army camp the film features numerous scenes presenting or alluding to touch, which "stimulate the tactile consciousness" (Marks, *Skin of Film* 165). In one of them, the grandmother begins unplaiting her hair and Denis helps her. In two almost identical sequences, the camera closes in on his hands and follows the movements of his fingers in extreme close-up as they play with Alexandra's hair. The image composed of hair and skin on the background of a textile fills the frame. The focus is on the textures: of Alexandra's dry hair, her dress, and that of the rough hands of Denis. After a while, when the haptic returns to the optical, we can see the woman in the embrace of her grandson. A few moments later, following an intimate conversation, Denis combs and plaits Alexandra's hair. As the grandmother and grandson recall tactile memories from the soldier's childhood, he repeats a ritual from when he was a little boy. He devotes himself to a feminine, gentle activity that is very different from that of his everyday military life.

The scene evokes the tactile joy of physical proximity: feeling the body of the other, its smell, the texture of skin. With the act of touching in the centre, this sequence marks nearness, both physical and emotional, and appeals to the memory of the tactile. Such a presentation of the characters touching on screen appeals to our knowledge of tactile encounters and the emotions they can convey (Marks, *Skin of Film* 113). Close-ups of contrasting textures – the dry skin of Alexandra and young shiny skin of Denis - make the vision linger on the surface of the bodies of characters; our eyes act almost as the organs of touch. The evocation of touch captures not only the closeness, but also emphasises the physicality of the bodies, or rather, its trace presented on screen.

The investigation of contrasting surfaces continues as Alexandra explores new spaces. The film is set within a desaturated landscape: the limited palette of washed-out greens, greys and yellows of the scenery recalls the dry skin of the main character. The narrow colour range also calls attention to textures of objects (steel, wool, wood, rubber) and bodies (skin), thus echoing Tuan's statement that "most tactile sensations reach us indirectly, through the eyes. Our physical environment feels ineluctably tactile even though we touch only a small part of it" (76).

Alexandra has ample opportunity to explore the space in close proximity. After the first night spent in the army camp, she wakes up in a bright daylight and notices a man curled on the bed on the other side of the room. He is asleep which

Figure 91: ***Alexandra*** **(2007), dir. Alexander Sokurov.**

gives the woman a chance to examine his body and his belongings. The camera assumes her point of view and offers close-ups of objects she investigates: a pair of boots and socks along with a military uniform. As Alexandra leans over the sleeping grandson, the camera copies her movements and focuses on the head and arms of the soldier. Her gaze slowly moves down to Denis's bruised feet. This scene pays particular attention to the conspicuous textures: the uneven surface of the unpolished wooden floor, mud on the leather boots, the roughness of his woollen socks and military uniform fabric. The eye of the main character assumes the metaphorical role of an organ of touch.

Correspondingly, Alexandra examines objects soldiers interact with; the camera mimics her gaze through close-ups persistently repeated throughout the film. It explores military vehicles and weapons: the metal of tanks and cars - greasy and glistening just like the skin of soldiers - and the rubber of their tyres. Inside a tank, Alexandra is surrounded by steel, cables and rubber, these are slowly investigated from intimate proximity. When the soldiers clean their weapons, the camera observes the clash of textures – those of oil and stone - and examines the rough texture of a cloth presented on the background of unpolished wood. Here, the shiny, greasy surfaces of guns collide with that of leather and wood.

The investigation of "haptically charged surfaces" (Elsaesser and Hagener 124) extends to human skin. In the army camp Alexandra is surrounded by young

Figure 92: ***Alexandra*** **(2007), dir. Alexander Sokurov.**

men: the camera examines their faces with intimate proximity in the scene inside the train (where they are suspended in the situation of boredom and stillness), in the canteen (during Alexandra's observation of a row of shirtless recruits with shaved heads), and while they clean their weapons (the oily surface of guns is juxtaposed with the rough hands of soldiers and their smooth chests). It also focuses on Denis's wounded hand and bruised feet while he is sleeping. In all these instances, the texture of the skin is not a glossy, impenetrable facade that denies touch. On the contrary, our vision is compelled to investigate its surface. The gaze "moves along the surface of the object" (Marks, *Skin of Film* xiii), thus, as a viewer, one is (figuratively) "touching a film with one's eyes" (xi).

According to Elliott: "vision exists not only as a method of delineating shape, colour, light, and spatial relationships but, twinned with touch, in discerning texture, movement, three dimensional form and even kinetic energy" (168). To touch is to discern a texture. Watching an object in close-up necessarily involves engaging with textures and appeals to our imagination as a tactile experience. References to tactile sensations and the enhancement of the haptic qualities of on-screen depictions heighten the illusion of the material presence. Such images appeal (figuratively) to the knowledge encoded in the sense of smell providing "'as-if-real' (or figural) sensual experience" (Sobchack 73).

Cinema and proximal senses in *Alexandra*

With the opening scene exploring the body of the main character from different angles and proximities, *Alexandra* establishes itself as a film preoccupied with the body. The presentation of the titular character among the contrasting corporealities at the beginning of the film (those of Russian soldiers) calls attention the physical properties of the body, interpreted not only as a vessel for representation. Such an approach is strengthened by the film's investigation of the proximal senses of touch and smell.

The film appeals to the memory encoded in the sense of touch, thus "relating of visual images to the knowledge and experience of the flesh and the skin" (Elliott 167-8). Through imitating touch (via the close-ups of the camera), the film

contemplates details and conspicuous surfaces, inviting the tactile gaze. Additionally, the depictions of the characters immersed in tactile experiences (Denis and his grandmother embracing) index physical and emotional proximity and appeal to the memory of the sensation. Moreover, *Alexandra* frequently refers to smell through the verbal explanations of characters. In the descriptions of olfactory experiences – almost solely metaphors – language supports images. The film points to the source of smell ("it smells of…"), uses comparisons ("it smells like…"), and presents a person smelling something on screen encouraging our identification with a character in the film. To create such allusions to smellscapes is to enhance the cinematic experience of a space. In its exploration of smell and touch, *Alexandra* attempts to intensify the on-screen illusion of material presence. Haptic moments in the last instalment of Sokurov's trilogy "search the image for a trace of the original, physical event" (Marks, *Touch* xi), by figurative rather than literal evocations of the tactile and the olfactory.

Sokurov's family trilogy – the exploration of skin

In Sokurov's diverse body of work, the family trilogy stands out as the most intense exploration of the body. Although, to a large extent, *Mother and Son, Father and Son,* and *Alexandra* treat the human body as a representation of gender, nationality, class, and age, I focus on these films' presentation of human skin which is displayed as a object for aesthetic pleasures. The family trilogy analyses the surface of the body from divergent points of views. *Mother and Son* creates a painterly skinscape in which a close-up of skin fills the screen and invites the viewer to explore its textures and hues. *Father and Son* considers the outside layer of the body from medical point of view and juxtaposes it with the perception of skin as a sensual site of contact with another body. *Alexandra* explores the surface of the body as a text that reveals one's identity; it appeals to the senses connected with skin and the material presence - that is touch and smell -ordinarily downplayed in cinema. All three films viewed together create what could be interpreted as an orchestrated search for the trace of the material body in cinema.

Additionally, *Mother and Son, Father and Son,* and *Alexandra* investigate skin from the different distances and proximities imposed by painterly appreciation, medical interest, or haptic exploration. Through the extreme close-ups persistent in all three films, they meditate on the surface of the body thus emphasising the intimacy with its images. The family trilogy also engages with the figures of the characters: lost in overwhelming landscapes (*Mother and Son),* emphasising their perfect outer form (*Father and Son),* and explored from varied angles in a nearly sculptural way (*Alexandra). Mother and Son, Father and Son,* and *Alexandra* call attention to the reminiscence of a physical body now projected on screen. Such an orchestrated preoccupation with skin emphasises the importance of the material.

CHAPTER FIVE

Taxidermia

Born in 1974, György Pálfi represents a younger generation of Hungarian directors and is renowned mainly for his experiments with traditional cinematic storytelling. His 2003 debut, *Hukkle,* "performs a re-evaluation of the human being, a dislocation of the human subject" and "seems to create a film language that successfully breaks with the cinematic tradition informed by ideology and individualism" (Kalmár). It is a film in which "the observational and narrative aspects of the film co-exist in a non-hierarchical relationship" (Eleftheriotis 62). Pálfi followed his subtle and haunting *Hukkle* with the controversial and taboo-breaking, *Taxidermia* (2006)*,* the main focus of this chapter. Two years later, the Hungarian director made *I Am Not your Friend,* an improvisation on the part of the director and a non-professional cast sketching an intricate web of affections. As Pálfi comments, "the actors decided what they wanted to do. All I gave them was a situation, an impulse" (in Hoeij). His latest *Final Cut – Ladies & Gentlemen* (2012) reutilises images from nearly 450 iconic films in order to construct a new narrative. Kiss compares *Final Cut* to the montage films of Joseph Cornell, Bruce Conner and Christian Marclay.

The experimentations initiated in *Hukkle* (moving human characters away from the centre of the story and focusing instead on the world of the material) are continued in *Taxidermia.* By engaging with a diverse set of theories that refer to the body, *Taxidermia* explores the tension between the representation and presentation of the corporeal form. Shaviro suggests that "this conflict between visceral intensity and allegorical distance, or between vulgar bodily content and abstract, schematic form, is itself the whole point of *Taxidermia*" ("Body Horror" 11-12). With its exploration of the body as the major theme, the film lends itself to multiple interpretations. In its allegorical sense, *Taxidermia* portrays discourses of the body as representative of certain political eras. In its exploration of the skin and viscera, the film inverts their traditional representation in cinema. In its first part, *Taxidermia* concentrates on the surface of the body and points to senses other than vision and hearing by recalling associations with changing temperatures, smell and touch (thus referring back to the

chapter on Sokurov's family trilogy and haptic perception). In its final segment, the film travels to the bodily depths; aversion and fear ordinarily evoked by the inside of the body turned into aesthetic appreciation mark the shift from Burke's sublime to beautiful. Furthermore, the film resurrects Bakhtin's notion of carnivalesque that centres on the bodily life and privileges the world of matter and the sensuous. The grotesque body is contrasted with the corporeal form, which, having rebuked biological needs, is in the film reclassified as an object on display.

Inspired by the structure of *Taxidermia*, this chapter is divided into three parts. It begins by investigating how the film deals with bodies in relation to politics, progresses by discussing how it explores both the surface of the body and its interior, and finishes by juxtaposing Bakhtin's grotesque body with Baudrillard's body as the finest of consumed objects (*The Consumer Society* 131).

The politicized body

Taxidermia depicts three generations of a Hungarian family inscribed into twentieth century political contexts: National Socialism, Communism and capitalism. The film portrays individuals living under these regimes: a grandfather, a military orderly during the Second World War; a father, a sports champion during Communism; and a son, a taxidermist in a present-day consumer society. Described by Strausz as "the triptych of the body as a historical entity" ("Archeology of Flesh"), *Taxidermia,* I propose, investigates the corporeal forms of individuals as metaphors for political eras. The succession of characters' bodies reflects socio-political changes in twentieth century Hungary; according to Strausz, "for three generations of the family, bodily performance becomes the main tool in defying the restrictions of the historical era or the given political system" ("Back to the Past). Such portrayals of the body are obvious metaphors for the dominant ideologies, however, the focus of the film - both literal and figurative - remains firmly on the materiality and the biology of the human form.

Figure 93: *Taxidermia* (2006), dir. György Pálfi.

The character central to the first part of *Taxidermia*, Vendel Morosgoványi (Csaba Czene), is a soldier stationed at a remote post during the Second World War. At this time, quasi-monarchist Hungary was involved in a campaign against the Soviet Union, and, as "Hitler's reluctant satellite" (Kontler 364), hesitantly supported Nazi Germany (Hoensch 148-9). Both the period of war and Vendel's lower rank are signalled by the character's uniform; his life is regulated by military order and discipline, represented here by his lieutenant. Vendel's superior acts as a restrictive force curbing the soldier's desires, particularly those connected with sexual pleasure. While performing as a servant to the lieutenant's family, Vendel escapes into a world of day-dreaming and onanism. As Shaviro emphasises:

> Morosgoványi's phantasmic masturbation is the only form of action open to him in an entirely rigid social order. His every attempt to claim a bit of pleasure for himself is unavoidably transgressive; and he is eventually executed by the lieutenant in punishment for these transgressions. ("Body Horror" 36)

Vendel's fantasies become indistinguishable from reality when the result of a (possibly only imagined) sexual encounter with his lieutenant's wife is her unexpected pregnancy.

The second act of the film begins with a montage of communist symbols: stars, red flags, anthems, young pioneers in uniforms and cheering crowds. Such images recall the military regime portrayed in the first part of the film. With Kálmán Balatony (Gergely Trócsányi), (supposedly) the illegitimate son of Vendel, we move

on to the second generation of the family and Hungarian state socialism. Kontler notes that the Kádár era (1956-1989) was "the greatest period of *embourgeoisement* in Hungary: year by year, a slightly greater range of material and cultural satisfactions was made available for a slightly wider range of people" (436). The improved living conditions brought about a period of so-called "Goulash Communism", a quiet Hungarian form of state socialism with more consumer goods available to the public (Kontler 437-445). Kálmán is a champion of competitive speed-eating - in *Taxidermia* a serious sport - and is a representative of the Hungarian national team. After a romantic honeymoon with a top female speed eater, Gizi Aczél (Adél Stanczel), he becomes a father.

Figure 94: *Taxidermia* (2006), dir. György Pálfi.

The final part of the film concentrates on Lajos Balatony (Marc Bischoff), a taxidermist in present-day capitalist Hungary. The era of the free-market economy is marked visually, by identical blocks of flats and supermarket shelves stacked with similarly packaged products. Advertising billboards have replaced the propaganda posters of the previous period. The focus is on stock, on repetition, and also, ironically, on the individual (with personalised products and advertisements). In contrast to his oversized parents (again, the parenthood is uncertain as Gizi embarked on an affair with another speed-eater), Lajos is a skinny and anaemic man. Dedicated to taxidermy, he also takes care of his father who is now of monstrous proportions and unable to move.

Taxidermia plays in three distinctive parts reflecting three generations, three ideological eras, three representation of the male body and three aesthetics. The generations are (presumably) linked by blood ties but separated by their divergent

preoccupations with the body; the film's depictions of the corporeal forms and bodily urges constitute parodic comments on their respective political eras.

The era of the Second World War is here associated with masturbation (Vendel's self-erotic compulsion) and murder (Vendel is shot by the lieutenant). It is an age of obsession and compulsion that marries Eros and Thanatos, procreation and death. Here the film recalls the "equation of Nazism with sexual transgression [which] not only conflate[s] sexuality with pure evil and pure violence, but also reduce[s] sexuality to a narrative of repression" (Ravetto 14). With the state clearly represented by the lieutenant - the hand on the shoulder that says stop - military order and discipline are linked to sexual frustration. The political system is geared towards repression and restricts bodily desires and indulgences. Vendel's appearance (he is thin, uniformed and hare-lipped) comments further on the distortions created by Nazism.

Communism, as presented in the film, is concerned with competition and the display of excess; this element of *Taxidermia* restages "the official, self-celebratory culture of the system" (Strausz, "Archeology of Flesh") This is a spectacular display of over-indulgence, a celebration of the prowess of those privileged either through connections or special skills. It is staged as "a calculated figure for the excess, the bloated sense of importance, and the empty propagandistic displays that were characteristic of the culture of Eastern European socialist regimes" (Shaviro, "Body Horror" 34). With the competition between the nations (Kálmán is a representative of the national sports team) and the propagandistic demonstration of excess (similar to the space race or East Germany athletes), this part (with Kálmán's bloated body in the centre) is an allegory for the communist state showing off in the international arena. The emblem of this system is the speed-eating coach who constantly pushes his athletes to eat more. In the subsequent political era, Kálmán's obese corporeality becomes grotesquely deformed as it reflects the transition of the old generation to the new capitalist era, and comments on a communist regime whose authority has been lost (Strausz, "Back to the Past").

As previously mentioned, capitalist consumerism in the film is embodied by the skinny and anaemic looking Lajos, preoccupied with his taxidermy. His final

deed - the suicide and the subsequent freezing of the decay of his corpse in an attempt to achieve a certain kind of immortality - marks an ultimate rejection of the biology of the body and its needs. Simultaneously, it is a renunciation of the obsessions of his father and grandfather (that is, their indulgence in bodily pleasures). In the era of capitalism shown in *Taxidermia* (in contrast to that of Nazism and Communism), the political system remains neutral with regards to its influence on the body; the individuals' bodily life is left unchecked and the state does not seem to interfere. However, freedom in this respect exists only in theory, we see a larger system that has its own more subtle presence: social and aesthetic norms that regulate the body are represented in the film by posters of Arnold Schwarzenegger and Michael Jackson.

Paradoxically, the eras characterised by strict control and austerity, namely the periods of war and Communism, are distinguished in the film by surplus. The grandfather and father are driven by lust and gluttony, respectively, thus, by the over-indulgence of bodily desires. In contrast, capitalism, which on the surface celebrates individual free will, is portrayed as an era of sharply defined rules and regimes pertaining to the corporeal form: the free will of the individual is confronted with an (un)achievable body image. If the previous characters represent enslavement to bodily needs, Lajos manages to break free from his urges: he transforms his corporeality into an object which defies its own materiality and mortality.

Whilst acting as certain embodiments of political eras, the bodies of the first two protagonists are turned into the sites of resistance against the oppressions of the regime. Strausz asserts that,

> while for the grandfather resistance meant the creation of a sexual fantasy-world, a site for remembering and identity performance where the quotidian and the festival overlapped, the father revolted against the fakeness of 'existing socialism' via literally turning his body into a food container. ("Archeology of Flesh")

Figure 95: *Taxidermia* (2006), dir. György Pálfi.

The son, on the other hand, takes the capitalist obsession with the surface to the ultimate extreme in his quest to achieve the ideal body of his era. For Strausz, "in his [Lajos'] final performance, the body is still used to express his ideological resistance, or conversely, the lack thereof" ("Back to the Past"). Rather than rebelling against the system, Lajos acquiesces by responding to demands that consider biology excessive to body image.

In *Taxidermia,* the bodily forms and bodily obsessions mirror the specificity of each of the three eras. On the one hand, the film presents the bodies of the individuals: the grandfather, a sexually frustrated soldier; the father indulging in competitive gluttony, and the son rejecting the biological needs of the body in search of an ideal bodily form. On the other hand, these bodies are metaphorical incarnations of the national experience of a particular political regime. The biology of the body and its material form become comments on Nazism (escapist fantasies, solitary masturbation and violent death), Communism (overindulgence in consumption linked with surface excess) and capitalism (almost impossible discipline towards the body and the rejection of its own organic nature). While the film presents certain allegories, it is the body that remains in the centre.

Skin / viscera

Shaviro remarks that "allegory implies too great an aesthetic distance; the opposite of the excessive nearness of body genres" ("Body Horror" 11). A body installed within a metaphorical context - such as the politicised body discussed in the previous

section - that is, a body as a representation of a character at a certain point of history - is positioned in contrast to the presentation of its very materiality. *Taxidermia* moves between the allegorical and the visceral. This section investigates the film's preoccupation with the physical nature of the human body, its exterior and its interior.

First, I consider the film's focus on skin and thus return to the arguments of the previous chapter (Sokurov's family trilogy). I examine *Taxidermia* in the light of haptic theories pertaining to cinema (Marks): the body's exterior is investigated as a site of sensations, both pleasant and disagreeable, the film alludes to smell, touch and also registers various temperatures and pleasures. Skin is here considered as a border and a receptor of stimuli from the outside world, but also investigated as a surface, with its own unique texture. In *Taxidermia,* which is in this respect similar to *Mother and Son, Father and Son,* and *Alexandra,* close-ups of the surface of the body invite tactile perception.

Subsequently, my argument moves on to an exploration of viscera. Barker suggests that "both pleasure and horror arise from the skin's function as boundary – as something that keeps the carnality within us concealed and the carnality of the world at bay – but also as something that brings us into contact with the things in us and around us at the same time" (55). If in the first part of *Taxidermia* skin is perceived as a surface for interaction with the outside, in the last act it is a vessel for the inside of the body disguising a carnal within. *Taxidermia* plays on the terror and disgust typically associated with the exposed body interior, but turns the sublime into the beautiful. Here, I am interested in examining Pálfi's feature in the light of Burke's aesthetic theories.

Skin – celebrating the sensual

Taxidermia opens with two scenes that introduce its first protagonist, Vendel Morosgoványi, in contrasting settings. Immediately after the initial credits, he is presented in a candle-lit room, where the interior feels small and cosy. The film amplifies the confined nature of the space through the extensive use of close-ups.

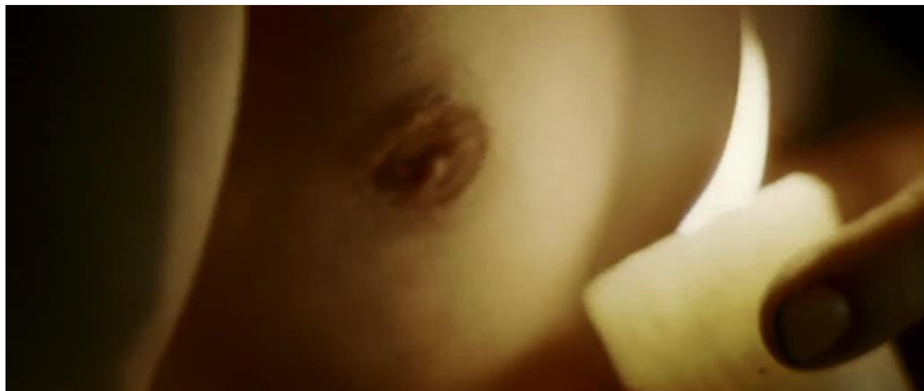

Figure 96: ***Taxidermia*** **(2006), dir. György Pálfi.**

This device is also employed to imply an intimate proximity to the character. The camera explores different parts of Vendel's body in a series of quick close-ups imitating physical contact: his fingers holding a candle, his lips playing with the flame, his cheeks, his ear, bellybutton, nipples, eyes and toes. The man undresses so that the warmth of the flame can reach him, the heat provides pleasure but leads to pain when it becomes too intense. With a candle serving as a masturbatory prop (and imitating the warmth of another body), Vendel enjoys the activity, which is revealed as an act of solitary sex. In this scene, *Taxidermia* appeals to our imagination by invoking senses other than the vision and hearing to which cinema primarily refers to. In this, it is an illustration of Marks's haptic expression. The image of a candle evokes associations with the sense of warmth felt by the character. The sense of touch is alluded to in the moment when we observe Vendel's self-stimulation. These sensations of skin are linked with the erotic dimension.

Taxidermia explores skin not only as the site of sensuality, but also as "a haptically charged surface" (Elsaesser and Hagener 124). Vendel is portrayed through a succession of rapid close-ups, with the camera quickly changing angles. Extreme close-ups, which pull a viewer closer to an object, necessarily involve engaging with texture and, metaphorically, involve us in the tactile experience. The film meditates on the landscapes created by the exterior of the character's body illuminated by the candle: its texture, fine lines, pores and hair. This particular fragment is an exploration of the translucence of the skin and the play of the soft light of the candle reflected on the surface of the body. What is more, the light produced by the flame limits the close-up, resulting in a vignette effect and increasing off-screen space, thus the sense of focus is made even more intense.

Taxidermia's tactile involvement with the trace of the material body is emphasised through foregrounding breath, which, usually inaudible and invisible in cinema is, here, clearly heard and seen: by breathing in and out, Vendel makes the flame move. The proximity of the camera is emphasised not only by visual, but also by audio-close ups. The sound of breathing features explicitly in the character's expressions of erotic pleasure: his sudden and sharp intakes of air and loud giggling. When discussing the tactility of breath Quinlivan considers "the flow of breath itself

and its passage from the outside to the inside of our bodies as a form of touching oneself as well as the air 'touching' us in a way that fleshes out our interior, corporeal subjectivity" (94). In the opening scene of *Taxidermia,* breath resonates with embodied pleasure, intimacy of touch and erotic experience.

Following the depiction of a warm and cosy interior, *Taxidermia* moves to a snowy landscape. After a few seconds of contemplating dense white fog, the film shows a silhouette in the distance that becomes slowly distinguishable: it is Vendel again, this time in a soldier's uniform. He undresses in front of a water barrel, breaks the ice on top of it and washes. Here, the character is exposed to bright light and cold, in a stark contrast with the darkness and warmth of the previous scene. Additionally, the impenetrable whiteness of the fog, which makes perception difficult, creates an impression of expansivity, again providing an opposite to the confined space of the preceding sequence. In this way, through its cinematography, *Taxidermia* increases the distance from the body. Furthermore, the camera remains static and focused firmly on the silhouette of the character framed in middle shot, rather than the body fragmented in the close-ups. This shattered proximity introduces both emotional and spatial detachment.

In the snowy exterior, *Taxidermia* invites its audience to (metaphorically) participate in the sensations of the character, especially his exposure to the cold temperature and bright light. This setting contrasts with the warmth of a small, semi-dark interior in the previous sequence. Towards the end of the scene, the focus

Figure 97: ***Taxidermia*** **(2006), dir. György Pálfi.**

moves to the figure and allows for identification of Vendel as a soldier during the Second World War (through his uniform) at a desolate post (the setting). From the haptic mode of visuality (images presented in visual and audio close-ups that require certain meditation on the image and pausing the narrative), the film proceeds to the identification of the character as a representative of a certain occupation in a particular point of time.

Vendel's activity is interrupted by the commanding officer who orders him to recite his weekly schedule. The lieutenant first appears as a disembodied voice uttering Vendel's name. While listening to the description of the private's routine - presented to cinematic viewers as a succession of quickly flashing images - the lieutenant points to sizes, times and the order of things, indicating the precision and thoroughness of the oppressive timetable. In the exterior scene, Vendel is presented within a panopticon of discipline; he is constantly observed and supervised. Such inscription of institutional relations of power onto bodies by the all-seeing gaze of the panopticon carries with it negative connotations (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*). To be the object of the gaze is to be disempowered, to be oppressed. The private's life is organised by those of a higher rank, his place within the hierarchy is the lowest one, with the power to command and punish exercised over him.

From the lesson on discipline given to Vendel in the snow, *Taxidermia* moves again to a scene of bodily pleasure. The opening image is that of female buttocks filling the screen, as two young women undress in preparation for a bath. Meanwhile, Vendel, chopping wood under the supervision of the lieutenant, attempts to peek at the naked women and catch a glimpse of the forbidden. Here, the film contrasts enjoyment (investigated in the scene with a candle) and discipline (explored in the sequence set in a snowy landscape) by intercutting the romanticised image of the giggling girls in the bath with the routine work of Vendel. The juxtaposition of the amorphous domain of pleasure and the ordered world of discipline produces another set of contrasts, between those who are allowed to indulge in bodily pleasures and those who are prohibited from doing so.

The motif of Vendel trying to glance at the forbidden sights of pleasure is repeated in this part of the film. Comfort and enjoyment are rarely his own and are

limited to lonely and compulsive masturbation. Vendel's autoerotic indulgence echoes Tuck's observation that solitary sex which "on the one hand appears self-determining while on the other seems isolating and alienating" (86). The character's envelopment of "the potential for masturbation to offer and reveal our shared capacity for simple embodied pleasure" (Tuck 91) constitutes an act of liberation from (or the rebellion against) the oppressive military life. At the same time, it indexes the impossibility of engaging in partnered sex. Lonely and hidden, masturbation is here the bodily pleasure of the excluded, linked with fantasy rather than reality.

Back in the domain of pleasure, the bodies of the bathing women are explored in a succession of extreme close-ups reminiscent of the beginning of the film (Vendel playing with a candle). We are able to distinguish their nipples, necks and hips. This time it is the examination of wet skin (as contrasted with the surface of the body reflecting the flame); water changes its texture inviting a different tactile exploration. By employing close ups, the camera mimics the gaze of the aroused character who occasionally manages to catch a glimpse of the bathing girls, seeking stimulation to elicit autoerotic capacities. His (and the spectator's) vision lingers on the surface of the female bodies - the gaze "moves along the surface of the object" (Marks, *Skin of the Film* xiii). For Marks, "the vision itself can be tactile, as though one were touching a film with one's eyes" (*Skin of the Film* xi). In this sequence, *Taxidermia* provides an illustration of Marks's metaphor for the tactile vision or voyeuristic touch.

Figure 98: ***Taxidermia*** **(2006), dir. György Pálfi.**

The first act of *Taxidermia* features not only forbidden sights, but also forbidden smells. After the girls have finished their bath, Vendel walks into the now empty room and immerses himself in olfactory pleasures. He approaches the source of the odour (a wooden tub with water left by the girls) and closes his eyes in order to concentrate on the act of smelling. According to Marks, odours can be conveyed in cinema through depictions of a character engaged in the act of smelling or a close-up of a fragrant object (as discussed in my chapter on Sokurov's family trilogy); she suggests that "it can elicit an identification with the object itself, as much as with the person smelling it" (*Touch* 117). Apart from offering the images and sounds of the character indulging in his olfactory experience (Vendel sniffing), this scene further evokes the sense of smell through the presence of a scented prop: a bar of soap on the side of the tub.

Vendel's attempts to glance at the bathing girls juxtaposed with his subsequent enjoyment of the smell left by their bodies marks fragrance as a part of erotic experience. Sexual desirability is displaced from the visual to the olfactory. He inhales the odour emitted from the surface of the body - the trace of the embodied presence preserved in water and steam - which emphasises the importance of olfactory experience in the sensual world of the character. In Drobnick's view, "often, in the literature on the erotic, smell is considered to be just an aphrodisiac prelude, essential to the stages of seduction or foreplay but never an end in itself " ("Scentsuality" 258). Vendel, much like the protagonist of Süskind's 1985 *Perfume* (and Tykwer's 2006 adaptation) who steals the fragrances of female bodies, is

Figure 99: ***Taxidermia*** **(2006), dir. György Pálfi.**

conscious of the power of smell as a disembodied carrier of the imaginary. By seeking sexual stimulation wherever he can, Vendel searches for the traces of something unattainable.

This scene is followed by an illustration of the history of the object (a wooden tub) preserved in its smell. The date engraved on the wood, "1901", points to approximately four decades of the history of its odours. The most immediate smell for Vendel is the scent left behind by the bathing girls. The odour of female skin merges with that of the wooden tub and triggers a sequence pointing to former users and uses of the container. Smell-induced flashbacks portray a bathing woman, Vendel sleeping in his uniform, a dead soldier, a new-born baby, women doing laundry, a woman kneading dough, the carcass of a pig, and, again, bathing girls. These images evoke a different set of olfactory associations. All of the persistent odours, layered beneath the most immediate one, constitute components of the smell Vendel inhales. This constitutes another way in which smell can be (figuratively) evoked in cinema, that is through the appreciation of olfactory images, which appeal both to the sense of smell and of vision (Marks, *Touch*).

The scent-infused tube recalls Marks' reading of Deleuze's recollection-image[38]; in her *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* she suggests:

> When we succeed in activating the memory encoded in a recollection-image, the image comes to generate a narrative. This is why, strictly speaking, an orange peel or our lover's shirt can be considered a kind of movie. Smelling it, we create a story. (123)

In her earlier work, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses,* Marks discusses "films and video that excavate memories from objects" and proposes that "these images are all a particular kind of recollection-image, which I term the recollection object: an irreducibly material object that encodes collective memory" (77). The wooden tub in *Taxidermia* is precisely such "a recollection-object [that is] is severed from the narrative in order to emphasize its witnessing

[38] Marks refers to Deleuze's discussion of recollection-image (see *Cinema 2*, ch. 3).

qualities" (Marks, *Skin of the Film* 82). The sequence unlocked by its smell pauses the narrative of the film and introduces the material history of an object.

Taxidermia explores human skin through an investigation of opposing sensations. The opening scenes introduce strong contrasts in terms of temperatures and light Vendel is subjected to: from the candle-lit interior the film moves to a bright daylight exterior, and dim light is juxtaposed with the whiteness of snow and fog. While according to Tuan, "the pleasure of being alive and our deepest sense of wellbeing depend on cutaneous rewards" (74), for Classen, "controlling touch is an essential means of establishing and maintaining an orderly world" (259). *Taxidermia* investigates both pleasure and discipline with regards to tactile experience. If pleasure in the film is linked with warmth, touch and erotic gratification, then discipline is marked by coldness and distance. The film's focus on the surface of the body is explored through dichotomies: hot and cold, dark and light, pleasure and orderliness. Watching these pairings heightens the extremes of bodily sensations. Such juxtaposed opposites - a motif we see repeated throughout the whole film - are particularly strong in the first act.

As Montagu emphasises, "the surface area of skin has an enormous number of sensory receptors receiving stimuli of heat, cold, touch, pressure, and pain" (*Touching* 4). *Taxidermia* investigates the skin as a surface that receives and conveys impulses from the outside world. The film presents the character touching himself and invites us to engage with the texture of his skin through multiple close-ups (those depicting Vendel playing with a candle and those portraying the girls taking a bath). Moreover, the human body is presented as endowed with its own scent in order to heighten the illusion of the physical presence. Additionally, in these fragments, breathing is alluded to visually and acoustically. According to Quinlivan, filmic sound and the image of breathing "offers a profound sense of the palpability of [a] body" (139).

Viscera – the beauty of the body interior

While the first part of *Taxidermia* investigates the surface of the body as the site of sensations, in its final fragments, the film travels to the visceral depths of the body. Pálfi subverts the conventions of presenting viscera as repulsing and eliciting horror; instead, he emphasises particular aesthetics of the inside of the body. The suicide scene elicits the notion of beauty instead of the sublime. In doing so, it recalls Cronenberg's comment on the allure of the inside of the body[39]:

> It's not disgust. It's fascination, but it's also a willingness to look at what is really there without flinching, and to say *this* is what we're made of, as strange and as disgusting as it might seem at times. I'm really saying that the inside of the body must have a completely different aesthetics . . . I could conceive of a beauty contest for the inside of human body. (in Billson 5)

The scene that investigates the viscera is that of Lajos' suicide. After discovering his father dead, Lajos, the main character of the last part and a taxidermist by trade, decides to preserve the corpse by turning it into a monument to his parent's achievements as a speed-eater. With little purpose left in his life, Lajos sets about transforming his own body into the ideal form of his time, and simultaneously, ending his own life. Ultimately, he arrests the biology of his body through a complicated operation and transforms himself into a lifeless, taxidermied form.

The scene of Lajos' sophisticated suicide, which involves the removal of the viscera, comprises of a series of extreme close-ups (a cinematic technique akin to that employed in the opening sequence of the film focusing on the skin of his grandfather, Vendel). In the sequences examining the body exterior (Vendel's

[39] Such transformation of the sublime into beautiful is also present in the paintings of Francis Bacon and his frequent juxtaposition of human figure and meat. Deleuze in his discussion of works of Bacon, particularly his portrayals of flesh/meat, states: "it manifests such convulsive pain and vulnerability, but also such delightful invention, colour and acrobatics" (*Logic of Sensation* 17). Bacon, in turn, comments: "when I go into a butcher's shop and see how beautiful meat can be" (qtd. in Sylvester, *Brutality of Fact* 48). Boyne points to the painter's "treatment of flesh and bone was not distracted by social epiphenomena" (113), particularly in such works as *Figure with Meat* (1954), *Painting* (1946), *Three Studies for a Crucifixion* (1962), or *Carcass of Meat and Bird of Prey* (1980).

Figure 100: *Taxidermia* (2006), dir. György Pálfi.

masturbation with a candle and his peeking at the bathing girls), the camera explores the skin in the rapid succession of close-ups. These mimic the feverish gaze of the aroused character in an attempt to (re-)produce his erotic experience. By contrast, the suicide scene investigates the corporeal depths in a series of slowly revealed close-ups. Such measured pace invites contemplation of the inside of the human body.

The scene begins with a slow tracking shot of a vast empty basement beneath the taxidermist's shop. The camera reveals a space submerged in semi-darkness, a spotlight is directed onto the naked body of Lajos trapped in a mysterious, terror-inspiring machine. The character is observed in throbbing silence from behind the columns. Here, *Taxidermia* bears the hallmarks of a torture horror film: the elements cueing the scene (cinematography, darkness, the torture machine in the spotlight, threatening silence) conjure expectations of fright and graphic violence (as seen in *The Hills Have Eyes,* 1977; *Saw,* 2004 and *Hostel,* 2005). The clear suggestion of off-screen space strengthens the anticipation of a violent unknown; there may be something the implied victim does not know about.

However, this sequence does not depict suffering or torture. Rather, it recalls Burke's definition of the sublime, which balances between horror and delight, pain and pleasure (53-79). In this scene, *Taxidermia*'s evocation of the sublime - the notion defined by privation, vastness, obscurity and danger - depends not on the characters and the story, but rather the non-narrative aspects of the film. The space itself (a vast cavern with areas hidden from view by massive columns), the camera work (a

lingering tracking shot presenting the space), strong contrasts between dark and light (the dim underground space and the body harnessed to the machine under a spotlight) and sound (ominous silence broken by the dull hum of machinery), work in unison to recall Burke's theory. Moreover, as Lyotard observes on the notion of the sublime: "for this terror to mingle with pleasure and with it to produce the feeling of the sublime, it is also necessary that the terror-causing threat be suspended, kept at bay, held back" (35). In *Taxidermia,* we watch the suicide scene from a distance and from behind the pillars.

In order to accomplish the meticulously prepared suicide Lajos employs a complex self-made machine (another of *Taxidermia*'s references to the genre of horror), which is revealed before the central scene depicting his death. The machine recalls a torture device, although it ultimately dismembers the body without inflicting pain (the operation is facilitated by sedatives and painkillers). It also bears similarities to the appliance displayed earlier in the fitness club that Lajos visits. There, a female voice explains how sauna, solarium and exercise equipment can help the protagonist in his efforts to achieve the perfect outer form of his era. The next cut shows Lajos repeating sets of exercises on the machine in the gym, his face showing determination and suffering. By comparing the two devices - that of the gym and that of the suicide - *Taxidermia* comments on different ways of sculpting (and oppressing) the body. This observation recalls Baudrillard's figure of a jogger about whom the French philosopher writes:

> He is the brother in mortification of those who conscientiously exhaust themselves in the body-building studios on complicated machines with chrome pulleys and on terrifying medical contraptions. There is a direct line that runs from the medieval instruments of torture, via the industrial movements of production-line work, to the techniques of schooling the body by using mechanical apparatuses. (*America* 38)

Figure 101: ***Taxidermia*** **(2006), dir. György Pálfi.**

Both the machine in the fitness club and the suicide apparatus are “terrifying medical contraptions” designed to facilitate the shaping and schooling of the body. By employing either, Lajos is at the same time both the sculptor and the sculptured. Before the taxidermist’s body emerges as its own sculpture - the result of training sessions in the gym and later removal of organs superfluous to achieving physical perfection - the film arrests the process of creation of this unique work of art in a prolonged suicide scene, which is portrayed as an aestheticised experience.

From the presentation of the underground space and the body in a suicide machine, the film moves to the close-up of a needle inserted into the flesh. The syringe is followed by a scalpel that also cuts into the skin, and the camera begins an exploration of the inside of the body as it is subjected to a pseudo-medical operation. This scene is comprised of a series of extreme close-ups of body parts and medical instruments displayed against the background noises of bubbling

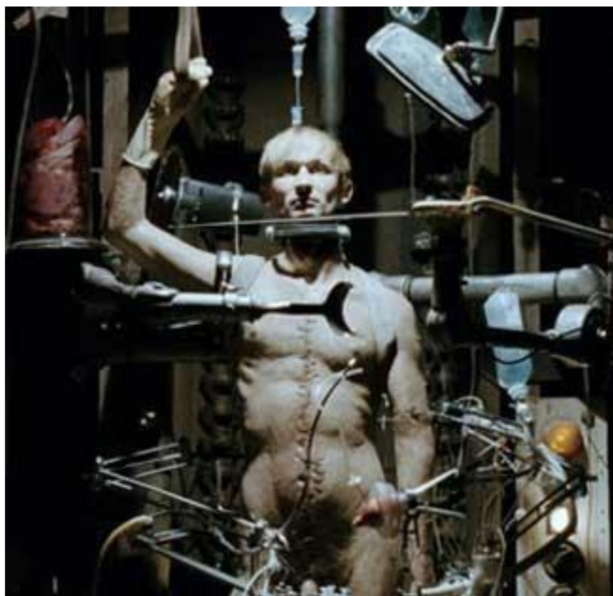

Figure 102: ***Taxidermia*** **(2006), dir. György Pálfi.**

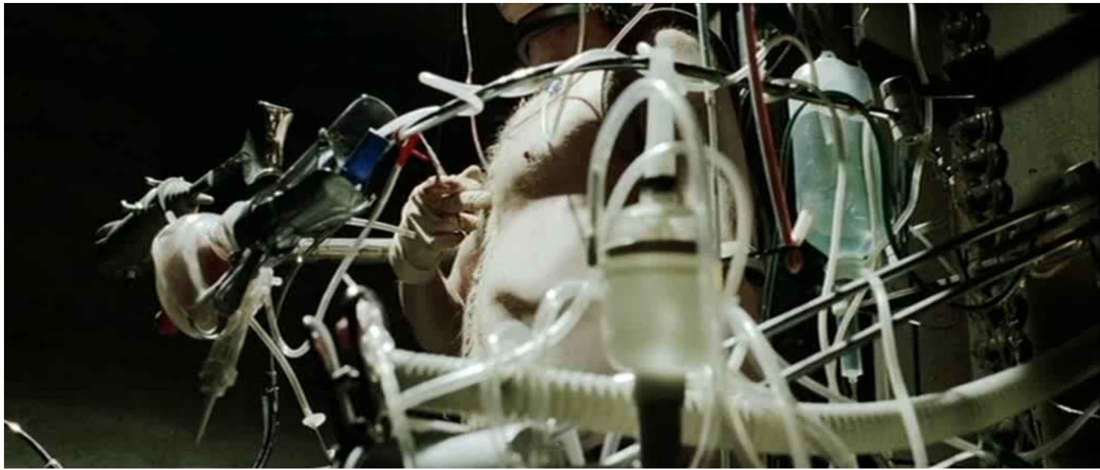

Figure 103: ***Taxidermia*** **(2006), dir. György Pálfi.**

fluids and beeping machines. The tools used by Lajos during his operation are similar to those employed in surgery: numerous syringes and tubes with various liquids, scalpels opening the surface of the skin and clamps stopping the flow of blood. Further emphasising the medical associations, Lajos wears white surgical gloves and supervises the operation performed on his own body with the aid of numerous mirrors.

Here, *Taxidermia* comments on the ambiguous powers of medicine: healing (it can treat human bodies) and killing (it can provide equipment for torture). Thus, the film illustrates van Dijck's statement that, "to this very day, the medical specialty has a morbid public image, associated as it is with the smell of decay and aura of death" (119), explored in such films as Franju's *Eyes without a Face* (1960)*,* or the numerous Cronenberg productions mentioned in the previous chapter. Furthermore, medicine presents itself as opposed to taxidermy; they both concentrate on the physicality of the body, but while the goal of the first is to preserve life, the latter focuses on the exterior and re-creating a life-like shape.

The doubleness is continued when *Taxidermia* refers to the aesthetic value of medical tools, emphasising their beauty rather than function (this recalls the presentation of scientific devices as works of art in, for example, Cronenberg's *Dead Ringers,* 1988). Medical tools are here lustrous, endowed with colour and shown in bright light. Such an exposition highlights the contrasts of the film: the look of the instruments and their form is juxtaposed with their practical application, just as the

clean, sterile presentation of the viscera stands in contrast with their bloody mass during the actual opening of the body.

Another set of opposites explored in this sequence is that of the flesh and the machine. On the one hand, we watch the cold exactness of the medical apparatuses, deliberate and regulated. A precise rhythm created by visual editing and soundtrack heightens the mechanical associations. On the other hand, *Taxidermia* presents the chaotic inside of the body: fleshy interior organs and bodily fluids. The measured is contrasted with the amorphous. Additionally, a human element - Lajos controlling the machine and his tools in order to operate on his own body - is superimposed on both the flesh and the machine. Lajos' hand is shown in close-up as he hurriedly searches for the right instruments, introducing an element of human panic. Eventually, the camera focuses on Lajos' eyes in the moment of his death.

The suicide scene begins with the images recalling Burke's sublime (the ominous setting and the anticipations linked with it), but progresses to the representation of its opposite: the notion of the beautiful. The expectations of terror are turned into an experience of beauty when the camera is placed intimately close to the body. As the sequence progresses, *Taxidermia* reveals a landscape of the body interior: white flesh, coiled intestines, a membrane moving to and fro, and an empty tunnel formed by the ribs. Whereas the body's entrails are ordinarily perceived as terrifying and evoking disgust, in this sequence, the internal organs floating in liquid and the inside of the body are intended to elicit aesthetic pleasure. Slow editing lets us meditate on the interior of the body; these are textures and colours that are placed in focus. This contemplation is facilitated by a lack of distracting sounds: the act is nearly silent, with only the quiet beeping of machinery and the bubbling of the pumped fluids.

Such images of the viscera resonate with Burke's description of the notion of the beautiful. The objects are presented in close-ups: body parts and medical instruments with colours "which seem most appropriated to beauty, are the milder of every sort; light greens; soft blues; weak whites; pink reds; and violets" (Burke 106). The internal organs appear delicate and smooth, endowed with a certain gracefulness. Subtly varying in colour and light pattern, they are "presented with no sudden

Figure 104: ***Taxidermia*** **(2006), dir. György Pálfi.**

protuberance throughout the whole, and yet the whole is continually changing" (Burke 104). The measured editing of this sequence (as opposed to the quick montage which opens the film) invites "agreeable relaxation" (Burke 140) and an aesthetic appreciation that elicits the type of pleasure "which arises to the mind upon contemplating any thing beautiful" (Burke 83).

Taxidermia's shift from the sublime to the beautiful is made possible primarily through the defamiliarisation of the human form by fragmenting and aestheticising the inside of the body. These techniques empty out the terror of the viscera. In the suicide scene, we watch the body fragmented, both figuratively (by the eye of the camera in close-ups) and in the literal sense (removed organs and limbs). Such abstracted human bodies can be considered outside of their social frame of reference, so beyond the classifications of gender, sexuality, race, age or class. In *Taxidermia,* the fragmented corporeal form is objectified and to some extent separate from the subject. The camera focuses on disembodied organs, rather than the figure of Lajos in his full dimension. Here, the identification is denied and it is the very physical form of the body that takes over; the notion of the character is pushed into the background.

The display of internal organs in the suicide scene (separated from the whole through close-ups) diminishes the horror and repulsion ordinarily evoked by exposed viscera. It has a similar function to the presentation of Merrick's body only visible as a shadow behind a doctor's curtain in *Elephant Man*; it obscures our view of the horrific. Such fragmentation of the body creates the distance necessary for aesthetic appreciation.

The suicide scene contains elements that recall the conventions of the horror film: the ominous setting draws on the anticipation of terror, a potential torture machine, the ambiguous presence of medical tools, and, primarily, exposed viscera. Images of open bodies are ordinarily reserved for the medical domain; considered outside this context, they evoke disgust and fear. The display of viscera is usually associated with dangerous and pathological situations implying threat to life: their exposition can occur in violent accidents or in surgery. For Elkins, torn bodies in

news coverage or fake wounds in horror films are "marginal not only because they are painful to watch but also because the inside of the body is a powerful sign of death" (109); our flesh is a reminder of our material basis and mortality, this is the part of a human being that is sure to be destroyed and turned into a lifeless form.

Further strengthening associations with the horror genre, *Taxidermia* compares a pig butchered for a feast in the first part of the film, with Lajos' body in the suicide sequence. The scene depicting the slaughtering of the pig and the sequence of Lajos' suicide both bring attention to the very process of dismembering the body by presenting the coiled intestines and ribcage, as well as a similar cutting of the skin[40]. Exposed viscera (both human and animal) conjure associations with meat, which Deleuze equates with a de-subjectified body "a zone of indiscernibility or undecidability between man and animal" (*Logic of Sensation* 22). Correspondingly, White points to the fact that meat "threatens far too many primary dyadic oppositions - dead/alive, eater/eaten, inside/outside, body/food, animal/human" (169). Meat reconfigures the polarity of subject and object, challenging the relationship between live flesh and dead meat. Through a visual echo

[40] Inevitably controversial, artists employing meat open a discourse on the biology of our bodies, its materiality and mortality as well as communality with animals. The examples include Francis Bacon in the field of the painting; Simone Racheli, Betty Hirst, or Dimitri Tsykalov working within the area of sculpture; Carole Schneemann and her M*eat Joy* (1964), an ecstatic celebration of the human body and meat. Particularly thought-provoking instances here are flesh dresses worn by feminist activists such as Ann Simonton protesting against beauty pageants in the eighties, Linder Sterling dressed in meat outfit during her 1982 performance in Manchester and throwing raw meat wrapped in pornographic magazines at the audience, or a singer Lady Gaga posing in a meat bikini or a meat dress. An interesting example is Jana Sterbak's 1987 *Vanitas: Flesh Dress of an Albino Anorectic* made of fifty pounds of raw meat which dried to the shape of a dress and was exhibited as sculpture, a work which invites contrasting interpretations. Sterbak's flesh dress acts primarily as a powerful *memento mori*. It points to the contrast between vanity (of a dress) and decay (of the material it is made of); it has also been interpreted as reflection on ageing: as the meat passes from raw to cured state, over the span of the exhibition the appearance of the work drastically changes. The term *Vanitas* invoked in the title originally described the seventeeth century Dutch still-life compositions intended as meditations on the fleeting nature of life and the inevitability of death. Nemiroff further expands on this: "*Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic* (1987), is situated at a point of convergence between medieval and modern attitudes to the bodily identity, as the title, beginning with Vanitas and ending with 'anorectic', suggests. A profoundly ambivalent object, it is both body and garment, interior and exterior, human and animal, eternal horrifying metaphor and decaying fleshly presence" (29). Flesh dresses juxtapose living flesh and dead meat by putting meat (the inside) on the skin (the outside), merging human flesh with that of an animal. Unlike the cured animal skin of leather or suede, the use of raw flesh as a garment fabric consciously evokes disgust typically associated with an abattoir; it is only raw meat dress that is seen as horrifying.

- the exposed viscera of the pig and the open body of Lajos – *Taxidermia* points to the horrific commonality of humans and animals with regards to flesh/meat. However, the slow presentation of bodily organs in the suicide scene turns the sublime (terror and awe-inspiring) into beautiful. In this sequence, the inside of the body is aestheticised. This is not flesh/meat that evokes disgust; on the contrary, the display of the interior of the body invites new levels of aesthetic appreciation.

The inside of our bodies, both familiar and mysterious, becomes alien and frightening when exposed. This echoes Freud's analysis of the word *heimlich*: on the one hand, the body interior "belongs to the house" (it is what we are made of, something intimate), but on the other, is elicits fear and horror when exposed. Freud's term *the uncanny* "is that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar" (124) and "was meant to remain secret and hidden and has come into the open" (132). Just as the concept of the uncanny is associated with death, so are our viscera: the exposed interior is a powerful reminder of our mortality. Freeland notes when comparing the uncanny and the sublime that "the two notions are similar in that both the sublime and the uncanny are described as resulting from intense internal psychological conflicts" (236). With the sublime, this conflict is caused by awe and terror, which constructs an uplifting experience. As Freeland continues, "by contrast, the forces of the uncanny dwarf us in a way that simply threatens a dissolution of the self, meaning, and morality" (241).

The suicide scene in *Taxidermia* subverts two central elements of the horror film as suggested by Nickel: "(1) an appearance of the evil supernatural of the monstrous; and (2) the intentional elicitation of dread, visceral disgust, fear, or startlement in the spectator or reader" (15). In the film the terrifying - the inside of the body - is aestheticised and portrayed as agreeable and beautiful. Such a depiction invites appreciating spectatorship and is not "predicated on raising the affect of horror in audiences" (Carroll 15). This added aesthetic value reverses the disgust and horror ordinarily evoked by the sight of an open body. Additionally, *Taxidermia* does not present a nightmarish vision: there is no pain or suffering. Shown in a slow succession of close-ups, the corporeal depths produce a visually pleasing spectacle. Moreover, while the violence inflicted to the body is graphically displayed, it is

presented with a certain detachment brought about by the aestheticised context, clear medical references and the precise mechanical nature of machine's action. In this way, the film inverts conventional depictions of viscera in horror films.

From the sublime to the beautiful

Pálfi remarks that "in *Taxidermia,* the question was precisely this: what is beauty? Is the body ugly on the inside? No, it's beautiful, it's a whole universe of flesh and blood" (in Hoeij). The film investigates the aesthetics of both the corporeal exterior and interior. In its opening scenes, it identifies skin as a site of contrasting sensations (hot/cold, pleasure/discipline, light/dark) and as pure texture. In this, it refers to cinema's capacity to evoke haptic perception (Marks). The exploration of the sensuous in the first part contrasts sharply with the film's journey into viscera in the last segment. Abstracted and fragmented, the images of bodily depths subvert their anticipated reception as terrifying and repulsive, and instead, the film signals a shift from Burke's notion of the sublime to his idea of the beautiful.

Bakhtin and Baudrillard in *Taxidermia*

The first and the second part of *Taxidermia* (set during the Second World War and in post-war communist times, respectively) revolve around aesthetics that is reminiscent of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnival. A period specific ritual revolving around the grotesque body, the carnival (as Bakhtin conceives of it), invites immersion in carnal pleasures, particularly those of gluttony (Bakhtin, ch.4) and lust (Bakhtin 323-341). As Bakhtin observes, grotesque forms are understood in contemporary times as crude: "images of bodily life, such as eating, drinking, copulation, defecation, almost entirely lost their regenerating power and were turned into 'vulgarities'" (39). In the final act of the film, Bakhtin's notion of grotesque corporeality has been replaced by Baudrillard's body as the finest of consumed objects (*The Consumer Society* 131). In this section, I suggest reading *Taxidermia* as the film juxtaposing Bakhtin's and Baudrillard's theories pertaining to the body.

Bakhtin’s grotesque body and *Taxidermia*

In *Rabelais and his World,* Mikhail Bakhtin explores the concept of the carnival with reference to *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. When discussing the carnival, Bakhtin refers primarily to a specific period of time preceding Catholic lent, but also includes popular fairs, markets and folk festivals. In a wider sense, he sees it as the metaphor for ideological and cultural transformations and revolts. Bakhtin stresses the transgressive nature of this period, as the time of the temporary suspension of prevailing norms and established orders. The carnivalesque tends to reverse the official ideology, rules and structures. It comments on the dominant culture in the language of the marketplace and subverts social conventions.

Bakhtin places folk humour and the aesthetics of popular fairs (as well as literary texts which grew out of marketplaces) in opposition to the court culture and learned languages of the Middle Ages. As Stallybrass and White argue, such contrasts between the “high” and “low”, result here in merging the seemingly fixed points of antithesis. The carnivalesque designates the dialogic interrelation of different discourses (9). As White observes: “it is precisely the purity of this binary distinction which is transgressed. The low invades the high, blurring the hierarchical imposition of order; creating, not simply the triumph of one aesthetic over another, but those impure and hybrid forms of the ‘grotesque’” (8). Likewise, the carnivalesque infracts other binary structures: “birth-death, young - age, top - bottom, face -

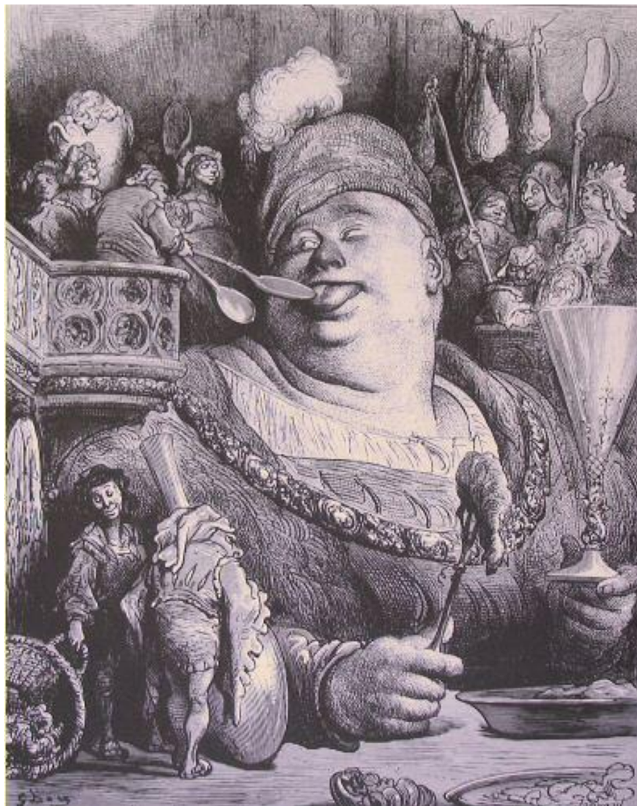

Figure 105: Gustave Doré, *Gargantua* (1873).

lower bodily stratum, praise - abuse" (Bakhtin, 238). It is based on the thematic oppositions of carnival and Lent, of indulgence and restraint, of popular celebration and official prohibitions.

The carnivalesque celebrates fertility, feasting and death (linked with rebirth). It is precisely the corporeality and its urges that are situated at the heart of the carnival. The grotesque body of the carnivalesque "enjoys food and sex; it is always eating, drinking, defecating, or copulating, either literally or figuratively" (LaCapra 299). Continually growing and regenerating, it celebrates its own materiality and immerses itself in the abundant pleasures of gluttony and lust. The carnival with its logic of excess is the joyful affirmation of the material and the sensuous.

Correspondingly, Strausz proposes that the first and second parts of *Taxidermia* revive the Bakhtinian idea of the carnival ("Archeology of Flesh"). In the first segment, the festive events are created mostly in Vendel's mind. Controlled by oppressive war regime, the character creates the imaginary world of uncurbed immersion in sexual pleasures. The fantastical nature of his illusions is heightened by the introduction of film techniques that stand out in *Taxidermia*, such as animation (the scene depicting Vendel's pre-masturbatory fantasy about Andersen's *The Little Match Girl*) or visual tricks (Vendel's ejaculation turned into a starry sky). In the

Figure 106: ***Taxidermia*** **(2006), dir. György Pálfi.**

second act, the official system (the communist party) regulates the carnival activities, here in the international sports competition. This “fake carnivalesque festival” (Strausz, “Archeology of Flesh”) is a staged event with a carefully constructed mise-en-scène, cheering crowds, and national heroes (Kálmán as a sports star). Expanding on Strausz’s suggestion, I consider how *Taxidermia* resurrects some of the tropes particular to the carnivalesque: its subversive humour and the genres of the marketplace, as well as the central position of the pig (presented both literally and as a metaphor for lust and gluttony) and depictions of feasts. I interpret the first two segments of the film as celebrating the carnival body discussed by Bakhtin.

Carnival humour

A subversive sense of humour is present in *Taxidermia* in the form of allegorical comments on official ideologies and norms, as demonstrated in the section of this chapter devoted to the politicised body. The exaggerated images of the bodily forms and obsessions - the caricatures of the dominant political systems - are both comic and repulsive. The film abounds in what Strausz calls “tongue-in-cheek obscenities” (“Archeology of Flesh”). He suggests that “on one hand, the monstrous scenes and their monstrous logic are supposed to gross out the viewer, but on the other hand it is hard not to notice the director’s intentions to criticize the represented via the ironic, hyperrealistic mode of representation” (“Archeology of Flesh”). Contemporary systems are criticised through mockery and references to human biology with low invading high (the body and its urges as representing political and social systems), echoing the Bakhtinian carnivalesque.

A scene clearly referring to carnival humour is that featuring the bathing girls (interpreted in the section of this chapter devoted to skin), a rare instance when the film explores the beauty of the female body. Here, the visual praise of the decorous, idealised female form paired with verbal abuses uttered by the lieutenant recalls the aesthetics and humour of Bakhtinian carnivalesque. The parallel editing juxtaposes the portrait of girls filmed through soft lenses with Vendel and lieutenant’s chat in the wintry outside: “What true is true. The poet was right. Is there anything better

than a woman's cunt?" asks the lieutenant, and continues a monologue about the nature of desire and female genitals. As a response to this question, the girls' nipples appear in close up and we can hear their giggling as a certain audio illustration. The camera cuts back and forth between the romanticised scene depicting the beauty of a female body and the vulgar monologue of the lieutenant. The officer appreciates the subtle ways of discussing female corporeality: he describes female genitals as a lily, a rosebud, or a love chalice, and mentions the presence of such associations in poetry and song, he concludes, however, that "what they really mean to say is 'cunt'".

The coarse language and the imagery of the fair and the marketplace have formed the basis of the repertoire of carnivalesque forms excluded from official discourse, such as parodies, curses and profanities (Bakhtin 153-68, 410-436). Carnival abuses assume the ambivalent role: they debase their object, but at the same time they celebrate its down-to-earth, material nature. This degradation through mockery is based on the power of carnival laughter which, as Bakhtin observes: "liberates not only from external censorship but first of all from the great interior censorship; it liberates from the fear that developed in man during thousands of years: fear of the sacred, of prohibitions, of the past, of power" (94). Mockery is a way of defeating the horror of the body and the anxieties surrounding the corporeality. Such laughter assumes a similar function in the discussed scene of *Taxidermia*: it collapses the dichotomies that can be the cause of anxiety (here gender difference) and engaging with the forbidden (sexual pleasure).

The pig

The pig - the animal that assumes the symbolic central position within the fair - appears in *Taxidermia* both figuratively and literally. Associated with "low", popular discourses and festivals, it typically represents the less glamorous side of humanity[41].

[41] Stallybrass and White point to the ambivalent position of the pig not only within the carnival but also different ages: within Christian discourse the pig has been perceived as an unclean animal emblematic of sin. If we move to the discussion of the bourgeoisie, the pig became associated with the offences against rules of good behaviour. Cherished and abused for its appetites as well as mixing faeces and food, it disturbingly confuses the animal and the human habitat (living in human household), animal and human diet (fed on the leftovers from the table), human skin and animal hide

In the film, the pig functions as a metaphor for carnal desires and urges, particularly obscene sex (associated in the film with Vendel) and excessive eating (linked with Kálmán).

In the first act of *Taxidermia,* the pig is present in the flesh. It is at first entrusted to Vendel's care, just to be later butchered and served during a festive feast. Here, the film recalls *disznóölés*, the pig killing ceremony practices in rural Hungary (Brown, "Extraordinary Career" 285-6). The reflection on food calls attention mainly to the processes that occur before and after the actual consumption: the preparation of the meal (the killing of the pig is shown in bloody detail) and its subsequent effects (a visit to the lavatory). The festive event introduces a break from the military discipline, however, it is only glimpsed at by Vendel who is not invited to participate in the celebrations.

The first act of *Taxidermia* is predominantly preoccupied with erotic pleasures, as signalled by the opening sequence presenting masturbating Vendel. Later in this segment, after a pork-based feast, Vendel wanders into a shed where unconsumed meat is stored. Lit by a candle, a pig's carcass suggestively recalls female body parts (particularly genitals). Immediately, it reminds him of the lieutenant's obese wife, Irma, or perhaps it *is* her lying on the remains of the animal. While Vendel passionately makes love to (an imagined?) Irma, the events of the day (the slaughter and the feast) merge with the character's

Figure 107: ***Taxidermia*** **(2006), dir. György Pálfi.**

(the pig reminds of naked human flesh) (45-59). In contemporary language the word "pig" and its associations are used to denote the bestial or excessive behaviour. Pigs are synonymous with overindulgence of gluttony, overeating greedily and messily ("pigging out", "making a pig of oneself") and the excess of lust ("porking" as engaging in sexual activity). "The pig" describes immoral, repulsive characters (immoral women, chauvinistic males), or parts of society treated by some other social groups with disdain and irony (common usage of "pigs" to describe police officers).

sexual obsessions. The camera presents the joined bodies in a series of graphic close-ups mimicking the frenzied gaze of the aroused character. Williams' "meat shots" (*Hardcore* 83) are here literal, and are juxtaposed with images showing a pig carcass. The sight of meat and the images of the female body change before the eyes of the obsessed man, whilst ecstatic screams and seductive voice of the woman are paired with the grunting of the pig, further suggesting the resemblance between the woman and the animal.

The pig is also evoked in the second act of the film set in the communist era. Its main character, Kálmán (suitably, born with a pig tail), is defined by his gluttony. Just like his father, he is introduced through his greatest obsession; we meet him during a speed-eating competition.[42] In this segment of the film, the devouring of less than appealing dishes of food at great speed is portrayed as a sport of international importance. Vomiting is a part of the competition, we are also exposed to the sight of chewed food, which echoes Stallybrass and White's suggestion that the pig has been cherished and abused for its appetites as well as mixing faeces and food (45).

Taxidermia resurrects the pig's carnival associations. The animal is literally present in the first part of the film evoking festive activities of pig-slaughter and celebrations following the event. In both parts, the pig stands as a metaphor for the abundant pleasures of excessive sex and eating that define the main characters. *Taxidermia* portrays the less glamorous aspects of human physiology: excretion (the lieutenant's family after the feast), sweating (Kálmán during the championships) and regurgitation (Kálmán after speed-eating contest). Both lust and gluttony are rejected in the third section, yet a pig is still present: in the suicide scene, the body of Lajos cut open is likened to the pig's carcass in the first act.

42 Speed-eating is considered in present times a competitive sport. It has its own techniques, rules and governing bodies, such as Major League Eating or All Eating Promotions.

Grotesque body in *Taxidermia*

Taxidermia resurrects Baktinian carnival aesthetics, celebrating the material nature of the body and subverting the seemingly established categories of "high" and "low". Just like in Bakhtin's grotesque carnival, the characters in the first and second segments of the film indulge in lust and gluttony. The film offers exaggerated images of the body and its urges with focus placed on its lower stratum: Vendel is associated with genitals and Kálmán with the belly and buttocks. Activities connected with the body play a major role here: sexual acts in case of Vendel and eating in case of Kálmán. Additionally, in the first and second act the carnivalesque is resurrected through the introduction of the carnival humour and references to the figure of a pig. In the third part, however, the carnival is subverted, as its joyful, down-to-earth festivity is replaced by the solemn, sterile atmosphere of an art gallery.

Baudrillard's body as the finest of consumed objects

Taxidermia introduces its final protagonist, Lajos Balatony, as the camera enters the taxidermist's shop. Lajos appears alongside his father, now a retired speed-eating champion immobilised in a flat by his monstrous obesity. Skinny and pale, Lajos is a representative of what Baudrillard calls "anorexic culture", that is "a culture of disgust, of repulsion, of anthropoemia, of rejection" (*America* 39). Kálmán's obesity evokes repulsion; his grotesque figure makes him look like a statue to the gluttony that defines his story. The father and son are placed in stark contrast to one another,

Figure 108: *Taxidermia* (2006), dir. György Pálfi.

not only with regards to the physicality of their bodies, but also the approach to bodily needs: the father overindulges, the son

restrains. The body of the father is here symbolic of the previous political era (Communism), but also reminiscent of the Bakhtinian grotesque forms now rendered vulgar.

Lajos is introduced at work mounting a bear; his profession is crucial to understanding the third part of the film. The word *taxidermy* is an umbrella term for various methods of creating life-like representations of animals for study or as decorative hunting trophies. Eastoe remarks that "the technical definition of the word taxidermy means to arrange a skin. It derives from the Greek roots *taxis* meaning arrangement, and *derma*, meaning skin" (10). A taxidermist works with dead bodies, immortalising them in a simulation of life through a combination of craft skills and artistic talents. By freezing the biology of the body and turning it into a cleansed model, taxidermy allows a corpse to escape the process of decay. The internal organs are removed and the focus is solely on the surface, as it is "in the skin, in the 'dermis' of taxidermy, [that] lies its authenticating ingredient" (Desmond 161). It is the skin, "the raw material of taxidermy" (Eastoe 150), that forms the basis of an artwork.

Figure 109: *Taxidermia* (2006), dir. György Pálfi.

In its final section, *Taxidermia*, moves to Hungarian 1980s/1990s, the time when, as Baudrillard asserts, the body is perceived the finest of "physically possessed, manipulated and consumed objects" (*The Consumer Society* 131). The French philosopher describes the era of the consumer society as the moment of triumph for the object and the simulation of real experience, particularly with regards to the corporeal form. The visual representations that proliferate in consumer society (especially photography, film, and television) reproduce the body as a glossy smooth

surface. This introduces a disparity between the hegemonic social construct (regulated mainly through images), and the individual, biological body that attempts to live up to the requirements of consumer society. The strict aesthetic norms demanded by the consumer society - centering on bodies regulated by diets, cosmetic surgery and body-building - dictate a split "between the subject and the objectivised body as threatening double" (Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society* 131). The body as a physical thing, a "threatening double" is in conflict with both the self and the demands of the group.

The domination of images determining bodily norms is illustrated in *Taxidermia* by the presence of posters of pop culture icons: Arnold Schwarzenegger and Michael Jackson. In the gym, we encounter a poster of Schwarzenegger, the action film icon immortalised in his roles as a cyborg, a commando and a barbarian. His heavily sculpted body allowed him to pursue a career as a body builder and a model, as well as earn him the titles of Mister Universe and Mister Olympia (Wright, *Arnold Schwarzenegger* 29-31). Lingis contrasts the "virile and virtuous" musculature gained at work or sports (for example, that of a manual labourer or an athlete), with the excessive "play musculature" gained in one's leisure time, in a gym in front of the mirror (41-42). As a body builder, Schwarzenegger operates within empty references; his strength is not projected outwards, his "baroque muscles" are "largely non-functional decoration" (Huxley 96). His fame, earning him a place in the stage footlight or the glossy photograph, is a direct result of the physique itself, rather than feats that that physique might allow him to achieve through strength, bravery or victory in a fight.

Figure 110: *Taxidermia* (2006), dir. György Pálfi.

In the taxidermy shop we find a poster of Michael Jackson, another iconic body of the 1980s, whose fame, according to Van Hoesen, "is based as much on his image as on his music" (81). Jackson, as evoked in *Taxidermia*, represents a different kind of manufactured body, that is one carefully constructed through diets, plastic surgery, chemical changes to skin colour and make-up (Brown, *Michael Jackson* 88). For Scott, Jackson's controversial image blurs the seemingly fixed categories of race, gender and age thus "compelling us to face the fragility of the identity categories on which we base our own personal and cultural identities" ("Cultural anxieties" 169). Such body-styling produces a corporeality that is later commodified as a spectacle and constantly reproduced in contemporary visual culture (Van Hoesen).

Figure 111: ***Taxidermia*** **(2006), dir. György Pálfi.**

Body-building and body-styling are linked with training and discipline which can turn corporealities into "self-created works of art, constantly worked over and redefined" (Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies* 9). They are manifestations of both control and restrain with regards to the body (diets, exercises), as well as particular excess (muscles). Constructed and manipulated, such bodies constitute an achievement in taming human biology. What Baudrillard observed of fashion models also resonates in these figures: "it is no longer a synthesis of gestures, even if fashion photography puts all its artistry into re-creating gesture and naturalness by a process of simulation. It is no longer, strictly speaking, a body, but a shape" (*Seduction* 33).

The images of Michael Jackson and Arnold Schwarzenegger are placed in opposition to the grotesque bodies of the first and second segments (those of Vendel and Kálmán), as bodies that celebrate their material nature. While in the previous acts of the film, the biology and bodily urges dominate the lives of the characters, in the last act of *Taxidermia,* they are firmly placed under control. In posters,

TV/cinema screens, and photographs, the bodies of Jackson and Schwarzenegger seem frozen in time, and are now displayed on the walls as decorative items. The focus is solely on skin (with its texture obliterated in the image) and the shape of the body (with all its imperfections corrected), recalling Lajos' own art of taxidermy.

Baudrillard – immortal bodies

The contrast between the two domains interpreted through the discourses of Bakhtin and Baudrillard is further emphasised in a scene where the film moves from the underground of the taxidermist's shop (the site of Lajos' suicide) to an art gallery, a place of high culture, which imposes a certain intellectual prestige on its objects. After Lajos' suicide, his manipulated body is found by one of his customers, Dr. Andor Regõczy (Géza Hegedüs). Interested in an unusual object (he returns to the shop to collect his order – a taxidermied foetus in a glass ball) and preoccupied with art, Dr. Regõczy transfers the bodies of Lajos and his father to the art gallery, where they assume the status of art objects.

For Ventura, "Lajos' occupation (to strip once-living being of their pith) and his final act (a mounting of his own corpse) represent rebukes of both body and a legacy of enslavement to its needs. Pálfi posits that the end product of that abnegation is - or at least can be - art". While essentially rendered a corpse, the remains of the taxidermist are transformed into an object that defies its organic nature; the final act of petrifying the body moves it away from its biology. In *Taxidermia,* the body of Lajos, having been subjected to the kind of functional

Figure 112: ***Taxidermia*** **(2006), dir. György Pálfi.**

violence comparable to that of an abattoir, is placed in an art gallery, a space "suggesting longevity if not immortality" (Hannah 292). By the body emerging as a sculpture, Lajos has effectively eternalised himself as both artist and object of art. Pálfi comments: "his [Lajos'] profane project – attempting to imitate the work of God, creating a "perfect piece of art" – makes him immortal not only as artist but as body. The body – which nature makes perfect though it is condemned to decay – becomes here a display for exhibition halls" (in "Director's Statement").

After the camera travels through the gallery and encounters the mounted figure of the father, it finally comes to rest on the torso of Lajos. His corpse is fixed in a pose that recalls a classical sculpture, the depiction of antique gods and heroes in a form known today from museums and galleries (that is, partially destroyed by time). Just as taxidermy developed conventional poses in which the specimens are presented, Lajos chooses classic art to model his masterpiece on. He removes that which identifies himself (the face, a marker of individuality) and leaves only an ideal shape. The sculpture of Lajos recalls both the statues of armless Venus de Milo and Michaelangelo's David, the representations of generic ideals of, respectively, the feminine and the masculine. According to Meninghouse, "the classical body conforms both to the rules of today's dieticians and our own ideal of slenderness" (70-71); its proportions and symmetry correspond with contemporary perfect bodies. The classical body with its sealed surfaces is here opposed to the grotesque corporealities in the first and second parts.

Figure 113: *Taxidermia* (2006), dir. György Pálfi.

By placing a taxidermy specimen that was also a body subjected to a violent death in the white space of the art gallery, *Taxidermia* recalls Hollier's juxtaposition of Bataille's definitions of an abattoir and a museum. As Bataille asserts, in the past an abattoir was linked to religion in the same way as a temple; it was the locus for animal sacrifice. In the present day, it has lost its link with sacrificial offerings and has been turned into the site of automatic, dispassionate killing (illustrated, for example by Franju's poetic documentary *Blood of the Beasts*, 1949). Associated with the carnal, the material and death, abattoirs have been pushed to the margins of cities and, at the same time, to the margins of the public discourse. A museum, as contrasted with an abattoir, is a space of meditation, a setting moved away from everyday concerns. Described by Bataille as "the most grandiose spectacle of a humanity freed from material cares and dedicated to contemplation" (64), this sanitised environment transports the spectator into the domain of the ideal. The inside of the art gallery in *Taxidermia* - white and sterile - appeals to the contemporary desire for cleanliness and hygiene. The audience gathered at this space is a group of people dressed in white sophisticated clothes marking them as those who are culturally equipped to recognise the significance of art. This scene juxtaposed with the preceding sequence in the taxidermist shop (pointing to its similarity to an abattoir) contrasts the material (the body) and the ideal (art).

Similar conflation of the carnal and the aestheticised, this time in the context of anatomy, is present in Gunther von Hagens' *Body Worlds*. Von Hagens' purpose is to impart medical knowledge**,** provide factual information and present human biology in an approachable form. Sewell sees von Hagens as "a scientist demystifying and democratising science", while Bedinghaus suggests that he is "redrawing the boundary between the specialized knowledge of medicine and general knowledge" (61). Focused particularly the inside of the body, the exhibition renders death and materiality more palatable for a lay audience[43]. The plasticised

[43] Bedinghaus notes: "its [*Body* World's] immense popularity demonstrates that people today, just like those who crowded the dissecting theatres of the Renaissance, still have a strong human desire to transgress the boundary of the skin and to see what's inside the body, with all its weirdness and beauty" (61). Contemporary audience is still driven by the same guilty fascination combined with a genuine scientific curiosity that drew spectators to the public displays of human corporeality. The main attraction of both kinds of exhibition is the idea of staring at the bodies which are under certain

corpses presented in *Body Worlds* - sterile, dry and without smell, in other words showing "death without the burden of cruelty" (Jeffries) - intentionally retreat from presenting sensually accessible signs of decay and thus, effectively, (mis)represent the immortality of flesh. In *Body Worlds,* the objectification of the body combined with aesthetic re-configuration[44] constitute an integral feature of exhibits: the bodies are often posed, fragmented or arranged in new compositions which marks "the transformation of corpses into signed artworks" (Burns).

Figure 114: Gunther von Hagens, *Skin Man.* Body Worlds.

In Von Hagens' exhibition and the last scenes of *Taxidermia* (the suicide scene and the sequence in the gallery), art disguises that which is usually perceived as repulsive (that is human biology and viscera). Both von Hagens' bodies and the statues created by Lajos escape the process of decay and refer to the motif of eternally persistent corporeal remains. Frozen in time, cleansed and sanitised, the corpse/exhibit might be interpreted as a metaphor for the perception of the mortality and corporeality in the era of the present-day capitalism. Plasticised or taxidermied, the bodies preserved in such an everlasting form succeed in placing the biology under control, taming the "threatening double" (Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society* 131). By emerging as their own sculptures, they transcend the body and enslavement to its needs.

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social and cultural restrictions; just as in a freak show, we are encouraged to stare at different bodies, in *Body Worlds,* we are encouraged to stare at dead bodies. And just as the Victorian freak shows did, *Body Worlds* promotes these voyeuristic pleasures under the guise of science and education. Such exhibitions provide an opportunity to peek behind the doctor's curtain and gain access to a restricted domain.

[44] Von Hagens' exhibits, early anatomical models (esp. wax figures), anatomical drawings (dressed in metaphors sketches of Vesalius or Valverde), anatomical theatres (placed somewhere between the surgical and the theatrical), but also freak shows and cabinets of curiosities discussed in the first chapter do not belong exclusively to the scientific domain. They evoke disparate spheres of discourse situated on the border of the scientific and the artistic. Elkins comments on elegant and eroticised open bodies and depictions of sensual beauty of women: "a live model, displaying its own viscera, is the paradox of choice in much of older medical illustration as well as medical sculpture" (132).

Between Bakhtin and Baudrillard

Bakhtin's discussion of the carnivalesque points to a celebration of the material nature of bodies. Carnival aesthetics of open orifices and "that which leads beyond the body's limited space or into the body's depths" (Bakhtin 318), is diametrically opposed to the classical ideals of beauty (that correspond to the perfect corporeal form of modern times) explored in the final segment of the film. The closing scene of *Taxidermia* set in an art gallery comments on contemporary culture's corporeal standards, the "closed, smooth and impenetrable surface of the body" (Bakhtin 318), and its attempts to "leave the meat behind" (Bell 560). Ultimately, the body, as presented at the end of the film, is transformed into a cleansed object: the "threatening double" (Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society* 131) - flesh/meat - has been banished.

Taxidermia's journey through the body

> *Taxidermia* performs its task of cognitive estrangement through a series of violent contrasts. The film is both viscerally charged and icily allegorical; intimately physical in its exploration of masculine desire and bodily disgust, and sardonically distanced in its satirical portrayal of social and political rituals. (Shaviro, "Body Horror" 11)

In terms of binary opposites, *Taxidermia* lends itself to multiple readings. In this chapter, I have suggested three possible interpretations of the film with regards to the presentation of the body: that of political and social systems juxtaposed with biology, that of an investigation of skin and viscera, and, finally, that of Bakhtin's and Baudrillard's readings of corporeal form.

Fundamentally, *Taxidermia* engages directly with the body in its literal sense, by investigating its exterior and interior, and in doing so, intensifies on-screen traces of its material presence. The film begins in darkness with Vendel hidden from the gaze indulging in the pleasures of the body, and ends in bright light with Lajos presented to a crowd in an art gallery. In order to emphasise the carnality of the body

explored in the first and second parts of the film, Lajos' body ultimately emerges as its own pristine sculpture, a fixed form on display cut away from its biological nature. By evoking bodily sensations, smells and textures, as well as the very act of touching or breathing, *Taxidermia* in its initial scenes centres on both the experience of the world through the surface of the body and the very materiality of skin. To provide an "'as-if-real' sensual experience" (Sobchack 73) is to attempt to come close to the body and to intensify the "as-if-realness" of the material presence. Instead of being inscribed within a symbolic representation, the human body caught in haptic perception draws attention primarily to its materiality, or rather its trace presented on the screen. Through such engagement in the "search the image for a trace of the originary, physical event" (Marks, *Touch* xi), *Taxidermia* is a celebration of embodiment and sensuality. By contrast, its final scenes investigating the interior of the body mark the transition from an excess of stimuli to an absence of sensations, even those such as extreme pain (Lajos commits suicide with the use of sedatives). The film closes with an image of an abstracted and aestheticised body, presented with nearly medical sterility.

On a figurative level, *Taxidermia* investigates the intersection of the body with politics, by considering human biology and bodily form as a representation of abstract political and social ideas. The succession of contrasting bodies acts as a metaphor for, or an ironic comment on, the historical circumstances the characters live in, and yet, it is still the body that remains at the centre. The film also moves between the Bakhtinian interpretation of the body and that suggested by Baudrillard. If the first two parts of *Taxidermia* resurrect the carnival convention and celebrate the material, then the third part of the film describes an era that seeks abstract spiritual mastery over bodies and renounces its biological and physical nature. While the body in carnival made a spectacle out of its own material nature and offered up its depths and cavities, the modern body is focused on an exhibition of its sealed surfaces and closed fleshy frontiers. Whereas in the carnivalesque fear of the materiality and mortality of the body is defeated with laughter, in contemporary culture the organic body is perceived as "the threatening double" (Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society* 131). Such a presentation of corporeality (illustrated by the pin-up posters of Arnold Schwarzenegger and Michael Jackson, as well as Kálmán and

Lajos emerging as their own sculptures) makes the titular craft of taxidermy emblematic of the modern perception of the body with its focus on *dermis* (skin). The body in *Taxidermia* calls the attention of spectators to its own materiality and becomes an object on display exhibiting its material properties.

CONCLUSION

The main goal of *Visceral Material: Cinematic Bodies on Screen* was to rethink and review the place of the body in film. Through my examination of *The Elephant Man, Crash, Attenberg*, Sokurov's family trilogy and *Taxidermia* with regards to thematic and aesthetic concerns, I have established the significance of their engagement with intense and visceral depictions of the body. In doing so, I have recognized the importance of the body considered as a physical form, "the material, the corporeal, the guts and goo" (Holliday and Hassard 1). Although the term *body genres* can aptly describe the films in focus – as they place the body in their very centre – the phrase is more pertinent to the discussions of pornography and horror. The films under discussion, as I have shown, invite a more meditative approach to the corporeal form, a quiet contemplation rather than over-emphasis of "sensational body" (Williams, "Film Bodies" 4).

The present research emerges as a counterpoint to Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson's description of classical Hollywood films as motivated by goal-driven characters (13-14). I have suggested readings that are body-centred, that is, they acknowledged the materiality, sensuality and biology of the body, now recorded as the trace of the physical presence. Such a perception of the corporeal form is to a large degree divorced from the concerns of "occupation, age, gender, and ethnic identity" (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 14). My attempt has been to shift the focus of traditional film-watching, not supplant it. In other words, I see my theory as a supplement, not a replacement for more conventional studies of film.

My thesis has demonstrated how *The Elephant Man, Crash, Attenberg,* Sokurov's family trilogy and *Taxidermia* regard the body not only as a vessel for a character. Rather, these films draw attention to the corporeal form presented on screen - its biology, materiality, sensuality and mortality - and simultaneously intensify the illusion of the physical presence. Collectively, they highlight the physicality of the body in a multiplicity of ways. To put it diffently, they offer a visceral encounter with the materiality of on-screen bodies.

The Elephant Man, Crash, and *Attenber*g, discussed in the second and third chapters, reflect on a split between the self and the body – a certain alienation from the body itself - and make the corporeal form appear to consciousness. These films underscore the manufactured nature of cinematic bodies as a vehicle, or a prop for a character. Such an approach subverts representation and reveals the body as common to both the actor and the character. Simultaneously, it makes viewers aware of their own bodies, introducing a self-reflexive mode in the spectator.

The dichotomy between the body and self that emerged through my analysis of Lynch's, Cronenberg's and Tsangari's films was re-examined in the light of Sokurov's family trilogy and *Taxidermia*. These films, which form the focus of, respectively, the fourth and fifth chapters, engage with the body more directly, by exploring its interior and exterior. Considered together, *Mother and Son, Father and Son* and *Alexandra* engage in multiple discourses on skin. In contrast, *Taxidermia* in its final fragments travels to the bodily interior meditating on the beauty of viscera. Apart from involving the body in a more symbolic discourse (that is, as a representation of age, occupation or gender in Sokurov's family trilogy; and as inscribed within the discourse of Bakhtin and Baudrillard as well as the politics in *Taxidermia*), these films open the narrative to moments of visual excess with regards to the body (scenes exploring bodily surfaces or depths in close-ups), thus prioritizing style over story. These instances do not provide motivation for the plot nor move it forward. Instead, they, in a sense, pause the narrative and situate themselves to a large extent outside it, thereby inviting a certain meditation on the material. I have described these instances by borrowing a term from Gaudreault who discusses early cinema as "attractions, usually brief items of visual interest" (19).

I accept that the body, in general, cannot be detached from the issues of gender, race, age, class, sexuality and nationality. To a certain extent, my argument is still concerned with the level of a character: Merrick in *The Elephant Man*, Catherine, James, Gabrielle and Vaughan in *Crash*, Marina and Spyros in *Attenberg*, mother and son, father and Alexei, Alexandra and Denis in Sokurov's family trilogy, as well as Vendel, Kálmán and Lajos in *Taxidermia*. However, I have posited that the body - often involved in metaphorical discourses - is central to these films and, at

times, assumes a higher significance than the characters themselves. While I propose only a few of many ways of interpreting these films, on the whole, the body cannot be considered as separate from the character.

Visceral Material: Cinematic Bodies on Screen makes a contribution to a growing discourse around the body in cinema and the wider field of visual studies. I consider the ideas presented here as a tentative first step towards establishing a particular method of understanding spectatorship and criticism as focused on a trace of the physical body presented on screen. My original addition to the topic is in addressing the intersection of the haptic and the medical. I have contrasted and compared the discussions of Marks and Sobchack - which have been crucial to my synthesis of haptic and sensuous theory - with Foucault's discourse on the clinical gaze. Such a juxtaposition has set the stage for an appreciation of that kind of cinema which draws attention to physical properties of the body – from a close, sensuous perspective (the haptic) or from a detached and objectifying one (the medical). Moreover, while the haptic form of expression – through its metaphorical appeal to multiple senses – refers to the memory of physical presence, the medicalised body considered in cinema emerges as an attempt to tame the fear of death and the malfunctioning body.

This thesis has opened numerous possibilities for further research. The films discussed here do not exhaust all examples that could illustrate the topic. A similar approach could be taken with regards to other directors (e.g. Gaspar Noé, Ulrich Seidl, or Steve McQueen), cinemas (for instance, discussions of the body are still a majorly underexplored subject in Eastern European cinema) or specific films (such as Spike Jonze's *Her*, 2013, or Jonathan Glazer's *Under my Skin*, 2013, both meditating on the necessity (or its lack) of possessing a body).

Moreover, my argument suggested that the on-screen body can be viewed as an object that calls attention to its own material properties. Implicit in such an approach is the objectification of the body (on this subject, I drew on the studies of Nussbaum and Langton) which is here considered outside of its negative associations (that is, not as an exercise in power). Rather, as I have demonstrated, it opens up new avenues for aesthetic appreciation. Further research could continue the discussion of

objectification in cinema – so far considered primarily within feminist discourse – in an attempt to expand the connotations of the term.

Another aspect mentioned only briefly in the present study (with regards to the spectacular bodies considered in *Crash*) which would benefit from more extended discussion is the investigation of the bodies of film stars (or on-screen bodies in general) as inscribed within the framework of Kantorowicz's concept of the king's two bodies. In the context of medical politics, Kantorowicz discusses the dichotomy between the king's corporeal form in its biological and individual dimension, and his incarnation as a political representative of divine power. A similar binary divide can be demonstrated with reference to the physical body of the film icon and his or her constructed appearance and, more generally, between the ideal and the material on screen.

Positioned within the framework of Cartesian dualism, my argument inverted the perception of the body as subordinate to the mind and looked beyond the statement that "in the absence of the mind, body loses its value" (Hallam, Hockey, and Howarth 70). I have demonstrated that both acute awareness of the body (as discussed by Leder and Scarry) and its objectification (as considered by Nussbaum and Langton) are not necessarily negative notions. In the context of the films under discussion, the bodies are positioned as material rather than ideal. I regarded these bodies as objects that evoke aesthetic appreciation or inquisitive interest.

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