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‘Reframing Bataille: On Tacky Spectatorship in the New European Extremism’

The promotional poster of Christophe Honoré’s *Ma Mère* features a soft focus, slightly blurry image of Isabelle Huppert, an actress known for her portrayal of sexually perverse, murderous, or otherwise pathological characters. She is wearing a provocatively cut dress, and seems to gesture seductively to the viewer with an outstretched hand. Louis Garrel – equally associated with the sexual-transgression-with-a-hint-of-incest formula via his role in Bertolucci’s *The Dreamers* (Italy, 2003) – appears in the background with his back to Huppert. He is shown stepping over a door’s threshold into an obscure space beyond. At the top of the poster, the marketing tagline boldly announces, ‘There are no boundaries to desire’. The poster clearly serves to market the idea of transgression, but it also conceals something of an irony: in the UK and French promotional material for this film, this image has been airbrushed to remove Huppert’s cigarette, a detail which certainly calls into question the boundaryless nature of the kind of desire advertised here. What the poster amply foregrounds, then, is the contradictory status of transgression in our era of global consumer capitalism. For while the poster serves to advertise – and to endorse as truly subversive the film’s shocking and ‘taboo-busting’ portrayal of mother-son incest, sadomasochism, and necrophilia – it does so in terms that are in keeping with market values, and promotes such transgression to an already carefully identified and differentiated target audience.

In the case of Honoré’s film and other films that have been associated with the new extremism in Europe, this audience might be exemplified by the kind of spectator who is willing to pay for the vicarious thrills of such shocking content, so long as they

are packaged in the reassuring context of an auteur-driven, European cinema with its high art credentials intact. In his article entitled 'Every Cannes Needs its Scandal', Hampus Hagman (2007) considers how the films of the new extremism rely on the marketability of the controversies that such films generate on the international film festival circuit – reports of catcalls and mass walkouts, or of people fainting and vomiting in the aisles help to consolidate and to market the experience of watching these films as inherently transgressive and profoundly – even uncontrollably – visceral. Of course, Cannes also carries connotations of cultural respectability and intellectual refinement, and these terms, no less than the reports of scandal help to construct and market such films to global cinema audiences. Together, these terms help to define the new extremism as a distinctive experience of spectatorship that negotiates between the intellectual and the visceral. In the case of *Ma Mère*, both the cultural imprint of Georges Bataille and the star presence of Isabelle Huppert also lend legitimacy to the sensational subject matter by situating it within what Nick Rees-Roberts calls the 'much lauded cultural package of transcendence through perverse sexuality that is now a staple ingredient of the high French philosophical and literary canon' (2008: 97).

Scholarship on the new extremism in French and European cinema has foregrounded the critical legacy of Georges Bataille as a key influence on the depiction of explicit sex and violence in the work of Catherine Breillat, Gaspar Noé, Lars von Trier, Michael Haneke, and others (McNair 2002; Best & Crowley 2007; Beugnet 2007; Vincendeau 2007; Lawrence 2010; Angelo 2010). Bataille's elaboration of a base materialism, with its emphasis on the subversive potential of erotic transgression, and the sovereign character of violence and torture, would seem to provide a relevant critical framework for a cinema of explicit and perverse sex and graphic violence. And yet, as Victoria Best and Martin Crowley have argued, one of the defining features of

such extreme filmmaking in France is the awkward relationship it establishes with genre norms and with literary and intellectual culture more generally. They note that the emphasis on explicit sexuality in these films ‘often fits with difficulty into the progressive political and aesthetic narratives – including this tradition of sexuality as supposedly “subversive” – by which the culture is largely, if uncertainly sustained’ (2007: 6).

Such difficulties of harnessing sex to radical political aims today are well documented, and spring from the context of what Linda Williams has called the ‘discursive explosion’ of sex since the period of countercultural and sexual revolution in the 1960s and 1970s (1999: 283). Where Bataille’s literary and philosophical writings emphasised the transgressive, sovereign potential of eroticism, the ubiquity of pornographic reference in today’s era of global consumer capitalism can hardly be seen as anything other than the ‘triumph of niche marketing’ (Shaviro 2006). Williams’ notion of ‘on/scenity’ is relevant here – a term which ‘marks both the controversy and scandal of sexual representation *and* the fact that its details have become unprecedentedly available to the public at large’ (1999: 282). This discursive explosion of sexuality does not, as Williams argues, lay bare the ‘truth’ of sexuality so much as it works to create a persistent compulsion for ‘telling all, showing all, seeing all’ that is just as likely to sustain the interests of global consumer capitalism and dominant ideological norms as it is to disrupt them (ibid.: 283). As Steven Shaviro points out, those discourses of ‘sex and transgression’ once championed by Bataille and other avant-garde cultural dissidents are now central to the functioning of the global capitalist marketplace, where they hold out the ‘shiny allure of transgression and taboo’ but only ‘stimulate consumer demand for porn-as-commodity, and sex-as-commodity’ (Shaviro 2006). As a result, he notes, ‘transgression has lost its sting’, and

as Shaviro concludes, ‘it’s hard to know what sense [Bataille’s taste for the luridly pornographic] can have for us today’ (Shaviro 2005).

Christophe Honoré’s 2004 adaptation of Bataille’s posthumously published pornographic novella *Ma Mère* takes up this challenge. Found amongst the author’s papers upon his death in 1962, Bataille’s novel tells the story of the sexual initiation of 17-year-old Pierre under the guidance of his mother Hélène, through the relay of his mother’s lovers Réa and Hansi. Although unfinished at the time of Bataille’s death, the novella culminates in the suggested consummation of their incestuous bond, followed by the mother’s suicide. Honoré’s adaptation remains faithful to the structure of the novella, but introduces several notable alterations, including changing the lesbian sex-slave character Loulou into a man, making the suggested sexual contact between mother and son shockingly explicit, and adding on an entirely new ending. Crucially, Honoré also re-imagines the backdrop against which Bataille’s story of incestuous desire unfolds, transposing it from early twentieth-century Paris to the Canary Islands in the present day. As Honoré acknowledges in interviews given for this film, his intention was to consider whether Bataille’s ideas still resonate today, and to ‘take stock of the state of sexuality through the cinema’ (Honoré 2004). The Canary Islands setting, he says, offers a way of thinking about how contemporary society ‘manages its relationship to the body, to sexuality, and to the other’ (ibid.). However, like many of the films associated with the new extremism, *Ma Mère* does not harness its images of explicit sexuality to a transparent political agenda. In this respect, the film is not simply nostalgic for a time when transgression really seemed to mean something; it doesn’t simply look back at Bataille’s legacy, but brings it – for better or worse – into close and often jarring contact with the ‘real’ of modern sexual tourism and its watered-down transgressions. Largely written off in the US and the UK for the

awkward ways that it weaves together these two contexts, I will argue that Honoré's film is interesting precisely for the ways in which it both draws from, and troubles, the by now culturally institutionalised and endlessly marketed notion of 'transcendence through perverse sexuality' that remains a kind of easy shorthand for Bataille's extensive and challenging philosophical and literary output (Rees-Roberts 2008: 97). This chapter will consider some of the ways in which Honoré's film both foregrounds and subverts this cultural legacy, and will argue that the film ultimately reframes its Bataillean intertext in much more challenging and uncomfortable ways than have hitherto been acknowledged.

In making this argument, I will draw from Martin Crowley's claim in an article called 'Bataille's Tacky Touch', that the appeal of Bataille today springs from his 'tackiness', understood at once as the risible, cringingly formulaic, or even embarrassing aspects of his writing *and* the kind of sticky, contagious contact that is effected by his work as a result (Crowley 2004). I will argue that the subversive force of Honoré's film springs from something similarly tacky – from its sense of jarring incongruity, and from the aspects of the film that seem most hopelessly out of step, pompous, or even eye-rollingly embarrassing – what we might call the 'oh, please!' effect – rather than from the presentation of sex as inherently transgressive. The critical and aesthetic interest of the film, this chapter will argue, does not hinge on the question of its representational fidelity to the 'taboo-busting' world of explicit sex depicted in Bataille's novel, but is derived from the grating encounters that the film stages between a literary-philosophical Bataillean elsewhere and the 'real' of global sexual tourism. To the extent precisely that these encounters grate, they produce an affective excess that may work to pervert, and hence to subvert, the more culturally-endorsed legacy of Bataillean transgression which has proven all-too-compliant with

logic of the global sexual marketplace. The larger aim of the chapter, then, will be to consider how we can adapt Crowley's notion of tackiness and the kind of 'sticky subjectivity' it implies as a model for thinking about a distinctive – but less commonly theorized – type of spectatorship associated with the new extremism in European cinema.¹ Whereas much of the scholarly work on the new extremism has focused on the experiences of shock, outrage, or bodily upheaval solicited by these films, the notion of 'tacky spectatorship' I develop here describes a more ambivalent response that, I argue, is less readily recuperated by discourses that would market the idea of the new French and European extremism as a saleable commodity.

Given its exorbitant and taboo subject matter, Christophe Honoré's second feature film *Ma Mère* was destined from the start to stir up controversy, and like other films of the new extremism, critical opinion on the film was decidedly mixed. However, unlike some of those films, the media furore surrounding *Ma Mère* did not tend to focus on its troublingly explicit portrayals of sex and violence. Instead, much of the critical backlash levelled at the film focused on the incongruities generated as a result of Honoré's transposition of Bataille's philosophical musings to the Canary Islands setting, or on its soaring pretentiousness, or both. In his review for *The Guardian*, Peter Bradshaw castigates the film for its 'persistent and inescapable [...] absurdity' (2005), while *New York Times* columnist Stephen Holden writes in more measured terms, '[a]vid sensation-seeking in *Ma Mère* is such a grim affair that after a short while, the spectacle of its aimless characters bending themselves out of shape for the sake of alleged pleasure mutates from titillating to pathetic to laughable' (2005). Kevin Thomas of the *LA Times* dismisses the film as 'pretentious Eurotrash' (2005). Finally, Nick Rees-Roberts argues that 'even distanced by 1980s pop music, the overwrought Catholic interjections are alienating for the (assumed secular) twenty-first

century audience, who might easily find such overtones outdated or irrelevant', adding that 'Bataille's religious preoccupations are incongruous in the context of mass tourism and sexual consumption' (2007: 98). Many of these critics dismiss *Ma Mère* on the basis of what they take to be Honoré's naïve approach to his subject matter, with the implicit assumption that those 'outdated' and 'irrelevant' overtones are simply misjudged moments. In interviews, however, Honoré suggests that the effect of incongruity generated in his film is more carefully calculated than it may appear. He notes that his intention was to cultivate what he calls an 'aesthetic of impurity', of mixing things that don't go together, and allowing for a modicum of experimentation that might take French cinema outside of its 'hermetic' and highly regulated enclave (Honoré 2004).²

Honoré's aesthetic of impurity is amply demonstrated in this film's promiscuous mixing of settings, its jarring use of music, in its ubiquitous, oddly out of place zooms, and, perhaps most notably, its uncomfortable amalgamation of documentary and fictional registers. The early sequences of the film, set in the hilltop villa overlooking the ocean, or those set amidst seemingly endless sand dunes, conjure a mythic placelessness that seems in keeping with the idea of transcendence – as if the characters' sexual transgressions were enough to remove them from the tedium of needing to belong anywhere in particular. The casting of Huppert helps to underscore this: her star image evokes a similar ethereal timelessness that helps to differentiate these characters and their relationship to sex. Huppert is also given most of the novel's dialogue, delivered with such characteristic cold distance that it sometimes seems as though she has walked into the film directly from the pages of Bataille's novel. The sequences where she and Pierre deliver Bataille's lines draw most closely from the atmosphere and from the 'philosophical porn' sensibility of the novella, and although

in keeping with the mythic settings, there is something very odd and incompatible about hearing Bataille's dialogue spoken in this way; something in the transition from page to screen, and from an early twentieth century Parisian bourgeois milieu to our own that has the effect of transforming Bataille's philosophical eloquence into so much 'highfalutin verbiage' (Holden 2005).

Indeed, part of the challenge of adapting Bataille involves the question of how to render his elusive, heavily metaphoric prose in visual terms without simply catering to on/scenity's compulsion 'to show all, tell all, see all' (Williams 1999: 283). As Honoré notes:

[T]he problem of Bataille's book is that he says a lot that [the characters] do "the worst things that can be done". [...] But in cinema, what does this mean, "the worst things that can be done"? That depends on one's sexuality, on what a person esteems to be acceptable or not. Very quickly I realized that this was slippery ground and not very interesting' (Honoré 2007).

Rather than try to film bodies in a radically new or extreme way, Honoré shifts the focus away from the spectacle of sex as the primary conduit through which transgression might operate. Though he does suggest that he wanted the film to provoke an 'inner experience' for the spectator, he maintains that this is not to be found in the spectacle of the erotic encounter; the sex is a decoy that leads the spectator somewhere else (ibid.). Honoré develops a clinical style that results in a series of sexual episodes that are oddly flat, distanced, and abstracted. Even those scenes that are most patently shocking in terms of their violation of sexual taboo are clearly not presented in order to titillate, even if they are meant to gesture towards the

shattering experience of self-loss and transcendence that Bataille located in the erotic encounter.

In one pivotal scene, for instance, Pierre and his mother return home at dawn with an entourage of lovers, including Réa and Hansi. Although the suggested orgy that ensues is elided, the sequence that follows it pictures a panoply of naked or scantily clad bodies strewn about a white room with a large bed at its centre. The mood is one of languorous, post-coital exhaustion, until eventually Pierre enters Réa from behind to have sex with her. As he does so, he is shown looking out of frame in the direction of his mother, whose feet and legs are visible in the shot. As he continues having sex with Réa, Pierre creeps over toward his mother, licking and passionately kissing her leg. She visibly recoils, and props herself upright on her elbow. This shot, held for some considerable time, shows Huppert framed in a statuesque pose, turned away from Pierre and framed by gauzy white billowing curtains and wearing a pink negligee, staring off into an unseen distance. These details transmit something of the ethereal placelessness that seems in keeping with the atmosphere of Bataille's novel. However, like the other erotic encounters in this film, the approach to filming sex is neither unprecedentedly explicit, driven by the urge to show everything, nor aestheticised in the manner of more mainstream representations of sex. Rather, it is very descriptive, matter-of-fact, and plain in its presentation of sex as 'what happens next'. After this initial encounter between Pierre and his mother, the sequence cuts to a shot of Réa and Hélène curled up next to one another on the bed; Réa is naked, and Hélène gently caresses her stomach and thigh. Pierre, meanwhile, is on the edge of the bed, and watches the pair with an air of slight confusion or disturbance. Hélène turns toward Pierre, then turns away; the camera comes in tighter, and we see her lift up her negligee to reveal her naked body to Pierre (but not to us) as she strokes her own skin

lightly. We hear the faint sound of rain in the background. Meanwhile, Hansi, who has been watching all of this from the edge of the room, rises and walks toward Pierre, covering his eyes with her hands. Narratively, this is an important sequence, because it depicts the moment at which the mother's sexual initiation of Pierre crosses the line, and in the aftermath of this encounter, Pierre's mother decides to leave, telling him that 'what happened between us can never happen again.' Honoré maintains that he wanted to develop sex scenes that would convey plot details and characterisation rather than scenes that would act as privileged moments of spectacle. This scene's matter-of-fact approach to sex inverts the distinction between narrative and spectacle that is central to pornographic representation. As a result, although the sexual encounters are central to the way that Bataille's text characterises transgression and brings it into play for his readers, the sex scenes in Honoré's film are not charged with the role of enacting that inner experience for spectators. The sex is too bound up with narration, too oddly flat and distanced to produce much of a fuss.

These settings contrast visually and stylistically with the scenes in the Canary Island nightclub locations, where Honoré films his characters in 'real' settings, interacting with 'real' tourists. In one such sequence, Pierre and Réa wander into the Yumbo shopping complex, wandering past its strange amalgamation of cafés, children's amusement areas, nightclubs, and other venues whose reputation on the sexual tourism circuit are well known. In contrast to the earlier settings, this world of global sexual tourism is much more fully realised. Honoré develops a shooting style that borrows from documentary techniques, which makes this milieu seem like some kind of sex theme park, an x-rated Disneyland – a global capitalist non-place that is similarly bracketed off from 'normal' daily life, and yet deeply marked by the immediacy of the contemporary setting. In contrast to Bataille's characters, who exist

literally and metaphorically above the marketplace, these sex tourists are undeniably part of the immediate reality (or hyper-reality) of global consumption, marked by a cloying contact with the mundane textures, sounds, and atmospherics of the contemporary world of capital. The contrasting sonic registers employed here are also key to this effect: while the world of sexual tourism is encapsulated by the crowd's raucous murmur, the clinking of glasses, and the throbs and pulses of techno music coming from the nightclubs, Pierre and Réa's experience of it is filtered through, and distanced by, the faint strains of Samuel Barber's 'Adagio for Strings', which is just audible on the soundtrack. Once again, this technique has the effect of differentiating these characters and their relationship to the world of sexual tourism that is on display so palpably here. This sequence brings these two worlds into contact, and insists on their relationship as one of discrepancy and discordance.

On the surface of things, these sequences seem to reproduce some fairly obvious and troubling visual and ontological contrasts between Bataille's world of 'authentic' sexual transgression and our own degraded and demeaning context of sex-as-commodity. Critic Ginette Vincendeau takes issue with what she sees as the 'facile snobbery' of these shots and the film's 'contempt for "ordinary" tourists' (2005: 3). Similarly, Nick Rees-Roberts points out that there is something ethically dubious about juxtaposing 'an elegant established star, an up-and-coming leading man and an underground fashion icon' with 'documentary shots of supposedly less real, less physically appealing tourists', arguing that these shots are designed to 'expose the perceived tackiness of the ambient mass tourism' (2008: 99). While I agree that we should approach these images with some degree of ethical unease, I wonder whether the division between the 'real' characters of Bataille's fiction and the 'less real' tourists in the documentary sequences are as facile and clear-cut as Vincendeau or

Rees-Roberts take them to be. What I think these sequences foreground, rather, is the spectator's place within that economy of images, and hence also within the sexual economy designated by these shots. In the aforementioned Yumbo sequence, the handheld camera positions us firmly in the thick of things, using subjective shots that figure the spectator unambiguously as part of this world of mass sexual tourism. The camera pauses to disclose images that are striking for their banality and familiarity: children jumping on bungee trampolines, rows of shops and restaurants with crowds milling past, waitresses busy clearing off tables. The immediacy and contemporaneity of these shots implicate the spectator to a much higher degree, and dispel any illusions that the spectator might have about the possibility of bracketing sexuality off into a literary-philosophical Bataillean 'elsewhere', where sex retains its transcendent allure. These shots insist, rather, on the queasy but ineluctable creep of mundanity into that legacy of transgression, effecting a mutual, and indeed tacky, contamination of both registers.

This affective contamination works, I think, largely because of the sudden collapse of mediating distance that we get in these documentary-style sequences, and I want to relate this to an argument that Frances Ferguson makes in her work on literary pornography. In *Pornography, the Theory*, Ferguson considers works of literature that have been decried for their excesses, including the work of Sade, Flaubert, and Lawrence. She is interested in the shift that happens in the period between when those works are considered scandalously violent or pornographic, and when they are upheld as works of art. In her afterword, she considers the case of Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*, and argues that while *American Psycho* undoubtedly engages with shockingly violent material, what was most shocking about it is not what is represented, but 'the feeling of intense contemporaneity it temporarily establishes – its

making us feel as though we share the time and place of its represented world to such a degree that our detachment is compromised' (2006: 119).³ This affective response – the confounding of reading (or viewing) subject and text in a moment of compromising closeness – is central to the classification and rejection of certain texts as pornographic. Ferguson notes: 'the things we treat as pornography represent a genre not simply because of their content – their sexual explicitness or their sadism – but also because they feel closer to us than other texts or images' (ibid.).

I think such questions of distance and proximity are also helpful in thinking about what's at stake in Honoré's technique of juxtaposing this abstracted Bataillean elsewhere with the cloyingly present world of sex-as-commodity. Much depends on the question of whether the film pitches one against the other ultimately as part of an 'elitist project', and more significantly, the extent to which it asks contemporary audiences to find Bataille's libertine characters more believable, more authentic and desirable in their transgressions (Vincendeau 2005: 3). I'm not so sure that it does. Rather, I am interested in the way that Honoré seeks to foreground, juxtapose and hold in tension, both the clichéd tackiness of sex-as-transgression and the clichéd tackiness of sex-as-commodity. The formal oppositions between the tourists and the libertines, between the now of global tourism and the elsewhere of Bataillean transgression may also perform a mutual critique, exposing both as ultimately vacuous, hollow, or irrelevant. The film's unsettling contemporaneity – and the handheld, quasi-documentary shooting style is key here – sits awkwardly next to the neatly abstracted and remote cultural legacy of Bataille, and this sense of incongruity means that we can't find protection and reassurance in either register. By holding them in tension, the film might be said to pervert both registers, but, like *American Psycho*, it does so with a level of indifference that seems to foreclose any kind of critical commentary. It

brings them into jarring contact, but in my opinion doesn't propose Bataillean transcendence as a nifty way out. If the film isn't trying to salvage something from Bataille's 'much lauded cultural package' that equates sex with transgression, but only exposing it equally as a sham, then what are spectators left with (Rees-Roberts 2008: 97)? What's the point? Following Crowley, I would argue that what matters here 'is not interpretation but contact' (2004: 778). This is to say that the critical, ethical, and aesthetic value of the film consists in its appeal to affect over and above interpretation or analysis. It is in its creation of an affective residue generated, as I have attempted to demonstrate, through the grating contact between the elsewhere and the now, the encounter between the film and the spectator, that the film's critical interest might lie.

If the film insists throughout on dissonance, disjunction and disparity in its adaptation of Bataille's novel, the final sequence of the film ratchets these strategies up to a new level of intensity. Whereas Bataille's text ends with a suggested sexual liaison between mother and son, and with a monologue in which the mother explains to Pierre why she must die, the film version pictures both the erotic encounter and the mother's auto-mutilation (using a Stanley knife) in a chiaroscuro style that nevertheless leaves very little to the imagination. Following this scene, Honoré adds a brief coda in which Pierre is asked to identify his mother's body. In this sequence, Pierre is shown first weeping uncontrollably, and then masturbating furiously over his mother's dead corpse. The whole sequence is set to the Turtles' 'Happy Together' – a song that seems cinematically destined to underscore such moments of aching arch anomie – before an abrupt cut to a vacant and silent white screen. This sequence offers a particularly exaggerated example of Honoré's aesthetic of impurity which, I would argue, leaves us reeling less from the shock of the range of taboos transgressed as from the preposterousness of the entire setup. Why, we might ask, does Honoré decide to end

the film in this way? Is Bataille's incestuous tale no longer shocking enough in itself? And what is the point of setting this scene to a song that wears its mocking, postmodern intentions on its sleeve? Can Honoré really be serious? Is he poking fun at the world of sexual tourism here, or at Bataille's enduring legacy, or at us – our desire to participate in the latter while distancing ourselves from the former? Whatever the case may be, the cumulative affective impact of this sequence is, I think, as difficult to shake off as it is to take seriously as an 'authentic' account of Bataillean transgression. And this is precisely the point: in Crowley's terms, such moments are doubly tacky, 'sticking to us', but also 'embarrassing, inadmissible' (2004: 776). The mark of this contact, as Crowley sees it, is precisely our 'exasperation' at the tackiness, the 'quasi-pornographic' encounter that leaves us with 'precious little to say' (ibid.: 775). I have been describing this 'precious little' in terms of what I have teasingly called the 'oh, please! effect': it is ultimately this 'contact with no content', the affective force of being left with nothing more to say than 'oh, please!' that might most effectively undermine the contemporary presentation of sex-as-commodity (ibid.). And as Crowley notes, it is through precisely this 'channel opened up that the real sticks to the text [...] the real as the unlocatable touch of Bataillean communication' (ibid.: 776). At stake in what I have been calling 'tacky spectatorship' is a type of contact that is effective precisely to the extent that its sticky but uncertain touch is something *other* than what we expect of it, something antithetical to the fantasy of immediacy offered up by the discourses that have been able to market the idea of the new French extremism as an uncontrollably visceral, and ultimately cathartic or desirable experience of transgression.

This preoccupation with the real, with touch, and affect, meanwhile, is in keeping with the 'affective' or 'bodily turn' in recent film theory, and theorists such as

Steven Shaviro and Martine Beugnet have drawn from the work of Bataille to theorize spectatorship in terms of an intimate, contagious contact between film and viewer. In *The Cinematic Body*, for instance, Shaviro contends that film, by its very nature, offers viewers ‘a Bataillean ecstasy of expenditure, of automutilation and self-abandonment’ leading to the ‘blinding intoxication of contact with the real’ (1993: 54). And, as he goes on to argue, it is precisely that ‘very loss of control, that abjection, and subversion of self-identity’ (ibid.: 57), that animates the spectator’s desire for certain types of cinematic experience. As Beugnet has demonstrated, the films of the new extremism, renowned for their emphasis on the visceral and affective, and for their problematic refusal of the kind of distance that might allow for easy critical evaluation, would appear to offer such an opening onto Bataillean expenditure. However, I think it’s important to note a qualitative distinction at work here, between the type of ‘blinding intoxication’ that Shaviro writes about, and the more risible, eye-rolling, and ultimately less desirable response that I have attempted to account for through the notion of ‘tacky spectatorship’. Such an experience sits much less comfortably both with the alluring cultural legacy of Bataillean transgression, and with the ways in which the films of the new extremism are increasingly marketed. As I have argued in this chapter, if Bataille remains, it is certainly not in the reassuring places we’d expect to find him; not in the treatment of sex and violence as inherently transgressive, and not in the critically endorsed notion of transcendence through transgression, but in the grating distance between *this* revered Bataille and the embarrassing, awkward, or inadmissible one who insists on the value of communication, and hence spectatorship, as a sully, embarrassing, and ultimately vacuous contact. Ultimately, then, if we can reclaim something of Bataille’s legacy in the films of the new extremism, it may be

that Crowley is right in saying ‘we have no other option [but] to embrace the tackiness’ (2004: 779).

Notes:

1. Although it is outside of the scope of this chapter to explore them here, the spectatorial response I develop in relation to *Ma Mère* can be attributed to other films associated with the new extremism, such as Lars von Trier’s *Antichrist*, widely scoffed at for its Tarkovskian ambitions, its talking fox, and its ‘ludicrous excesses’ (Williams 2009). Similarly, Bruno Dumont’s *L’Humanité*, which Jonathan Romney describes as comic for its ‘overwhelming portentousness’, seems to elicit similar responses; in his review of the film, Romney takes issue with the film’s overt ‘metaphysical ambitions’, claiming that they create an effect of comedy that ‘feels [so] embarrassing’ that ‘sniggering seems the only healthy response’ (Romney 2000: 24-25).
2. Notably, these comments come in the context of the question of whether Christophe Honoré feels that he is part of a ‘new wave of extreme French cinema’ (Honoré 2004). In his response, he says that he sees a shared affinity between his work and that of filmmakers such as Bruno Dumont, Philippe Grandrieux, Gael Morel and Catherine Breillat, and describes this common ground in terms of a shared willingness to ‘dismantle’ French cinema, and to return it to a state of adolescence (ibid.).
3. It is worth noting that Honoré cites Bret Easton Ellis, Dennis Cooper, and Sarah Kane as influences for this film. Similarly, Crowley and Best note that *American Psycho* is a key influence on the new French extremism (Honoré in Amour Fou 2007; Best and Crowley 2007: 13).

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