Cinema and the Politics of Force: the Psychopath and the Child

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With the influx of semiotics into the methods and approaches of film theory and criticism in the 1970s, film scholars rejected the idea that political effects in the cinema were simply based on the content of the image. The critique of classical cinema, prompted by the combination of Marxism and psychoanalysis in theories of the cinematic apparatus, gave rise to what Peter Wollen, in his seminal article on Godard, called a "counter-cinema."[1] Inspired by the idea of the image as a signifier whose meaning derives from a field of structural relations with other images, a vacillation between presence and absence, the politics of form was born.

Following Brian Massumi's lead in his *Politics of Affect,*[2] and my own ongoing interest in affect,[3] my contribution to the debate on cinema and affect aims to expand, rather than abandon, the politics of form. Such expansion entails the acknowledgement that forms are never in isolation from the forces or affects that animate them and move them into constant, impactful change. If content submits us to a referential, indexical ontology far too wedded to realistic representation to be adequate to the manifold creative possibilities of cinema, and form refers us to the semantic operations that arrange content into meaningful structures (turning film images and sounds into textual signifiers), force would function like a third dimension touching on the affective quality that surpasses representation and unhinges forms from their center.[4] Force/affect would involve the relations of becoming/time, whereby forms continually become other than themselves. Although we cannot see forces, we sense them in the modulations and changes of forms. Such a leap from form to force in the consideration of a politics in cinema, I would argue, is long overdue. Not only has affect become a central concept in helping us understand the cinema of the twenty-first century, but the political today is more thoroughly imbued by affective flows and considerations than it is by logical or rational imperatives.[5]

I would thus like to propose an aesthetic politics of cinema that looks at forms (identifiable and meaningful images or sounds) through the prism of the forces/affects that give rise to positive difference in the dynamic relations of forms. In the film that documents his life as an artist/musician, *20,000 Days on Earth*[6] (2014), Nick Cave says, "[i]n art everything is about counterpoint. Put together a psychopath and a child in the same room, and see what happens. You may end up having to subtract one." I would like to use Cave's words as a point of departure for this discussion. Two ideas

here are directly pertinent to cinema and the politics of force: the force in art depends upon unexpected, and unruly, contrast or counterpoint. Such a contrast owes nothing to cultural or moral dictates that prescribe what constitutes proper or improper mixtures of materials, bodies, or properties. And second, art is a test of forces: it is fundamentally experimental in the ways it composes, arranges and orchestrates its materials. Thus, art's business is to "see what happens," as it never knows anything in advance of its own eventful unevenness.

In a kind of cinema where forces and movements of becoming are at stake, everything is political, no matter the content of a film's images. As Massumi puts it, "creative variation is the only real constant of politics."[7] Thus, one may certainly draw attention to the politics of forces/affects in a film like Michael Haneke's *Code Unknown* (2003), [8] where power relations and encounters are overtly tied in with the racial, ethnic, class and gender positions inflecting the increasingly fraught dynamics between European nation states and flows of immigration.[9] But one may alternatively consider the politics of forces/affects in a film like Claire Denis' *Trouble Every Day* (2001), where sociabilities and communities—populations of bodies—follow a molecular rather than a more traditionally political molar logic.[10] It is this film that I wish to consider here precisely for its less obvious, yet equally forceful, political dimension. I will offer a brief analysis of *Trouble Every Day* as an example of a politics of force in the cinema that reaches beyond our normative understanding of the political. While *Code Unknown* holds affect as a force that resists the segregated and segregating forces of nationalistic defensiveness and paranoia embedded in biopower, *Trouble Every Day* explores the diseased affects released by a viral infection. These vampiric, cannibalistic affects give rise to encounters between bodies that may indirectly evoke figures of social disease, which would certainly include the corporate uses of science subtending the film's story.[11] And additionally, at the level of the relation between the cinema and its audience, these devouring affects may achieve a wholesale disorganization of clichéd cinematic forms representing gender roles, erotic encounters and the unsurpassable line between vitality and death.

In *Trouble Every Day*, the former partner in each of two different couples, Coré (Béatrice Dalle) and Léo (Alex Descas), and Shane (Vincent Gallo) and June (Tricia Vessey), has been infected with a virus that compels them to engage in a cannibalistic/carnivorous form of sexuality, whereby desire is performed as a literal consumption and destruction of the other. The film intimates that Coré and Shane, the vampiric bodies, were attracted to each other in the past, but we never know exactly how they contracted their disease. We are also given to understand that Léo, Coré's partner, undertook some experiments with humans in Guyana, and Shane, driven by greed, stole Léo's work. Yet, although the story seems to correlate Shane and Coré's sick bodies with a kind of egotistic, narcissistic professional ambition, *Trouble Every*

Day does not offer a moralistic tale indicting human frailties and passing judgment on them. The film's desire lies entirely elsewhere. Returning to the experimental encounter between the "psychopath and the child" proposed by Cave, we may say that Denis brings together these two figures across several contrasting series in her film: the sick, bloodthirsty Coré and the differently sick, sex-crazed, yet unsuspecting young male assailants; the also infected, American newly-wed Shane, and his child-like, virginal-looking wife; and Shane and the equally unsuspecting hotel maid, who develops an intense attraction to him.

In a more abstract, less narrativized sense, *Trouble Every Day* experiments with the possibility of approximating, rather than segregating, the becoming-animal of the killer about to kill and devour its prey with the becoming-animal unleashed in all sexual encounters. Especially in the sexual acts precipitated by Coré's and Shane's respective urges, *Trouble Every Day* also compromises the line between desiring and agonizing bodies, throbbing desire and extinction, the film's languorous music and its liquid images, and between the pungent smell of blood and the stifling physicality of a violated, decomposing body. I would argue that the prolonged scene of Coré's seduction and annihilation of her young male aspiring rapist constitutes the most intense instance in the film of the qualities that come together to produce a politics of force, and therefore this scene deserves some closer attention.
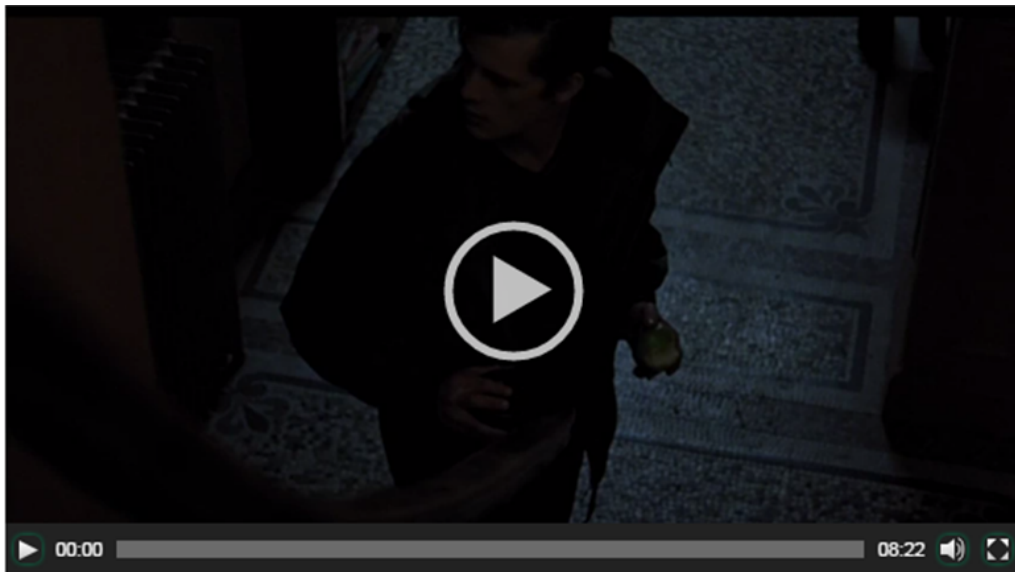
Coré's cannibalistic desire in *Trouble Every Day* (Claire Denis, 2001), via criticalcommons.org

Léo is fully aware of Coré's sickness and tries to minimize her encounters with men by keeping her locked in their home after he leaves for work each day. But Coré's urges cannot be stopped by any manner of barred doors or windows. Her imprisoned state exacerbates her desire to consume human flesh, just as it ignites the desire of the two neighboring young men who have been waiting for the right moment to break in and fuck her. Coré spends hours looking out her window like a lioness in a cage. The glaring irony here is that Coré is no doubt dangerous and murderous, yet men get close to her, and fall into her trap, precisely because of their own sadistic, raping tendencies and their intractable views of what women are or are not capable of doing. Although the coming together of a psychopath and a child, as in Cave's aesthetic method, would in itself be sufficient to create intense affect in a situation, it seems that the fluidity and reversibility of the lines between one and the other in Denis' film magnify the film's affective potential. If, on one hand, both Coré and her purported assailant exhibit psychopathic tendencies, on the other hand they both embody a certain vulnerability that approximates them to the figure of the child (i.e. the boy's ignorance of Coré's infected state no less than Coré's helplessness in the face of her own viral infection).

When the scene in question begins, the line between predator and prey is indiscernible, as both Coré and the young man might occupy both positions. Yet, the boy's more vulnerable position begins to emerge with a low-angle shot distinctly targeting his open neck and face as he walks up the stairs leading to Coré's room. A few moments later, like two animals in heat, Coré and the boy stand face to face, separated only by some loose boards on the doorway that allow for their gazes and their bodies to fully take in and share the intense affects that possess them. Once Coré and the boy lie down together, the camera reveals dermal and hairy landscapes in all their haptic detail, moving across the bodies and lingering on their surfaces to indulge for a while longer Coré's pleasure of anticipation and the boy's "innocent" abandonment. As the music starts to play on the soundtrack, Coré's devouring hunger is unleashed. And as the boy's cries of pain become louder, the music becomes more melancholy—a contrast which certainly compounds the horrific sense of the encounter and its escalating intensity. Even as the boy is bordering death, Coré continues to kiss him and consume his flesh, emitting animal cries of pleasure, her face drenched in the boy's blood. A few minutes later, after a short scene where Shane is trying to track Léo's whereabouts, we return to Coré in the aftermath of her cannibalistic consumption. She is pacing back and forth in front of a previously white wall now turned into a blood mural, in which we can distinguish several large semi-circular shapes resembling the head of a tombstone and even a cross.

The blood mural in *Trouble Every Day* (Claire Denis, 2001), via criticalcommons.org

We never see Coré in the act of painting this wall with the boy's blood, and I think such a visual gap is intimately tied in with Denis' bold affective politics. It is my understanding that Denis wishes to transform this personal act of Coré's into something that stands in the closest proximity to the film's aesthetic forces in all of their impersonality and virtuality, something that stands as far away as possible from psychological justifications or moral judgments. It is vital for a politics of affects/forces for the incongruity of the encounter to remain open, for the unevenness of forces to remain unplugged, unjustified, and unresolved.

Paraphrasing Massumi, an aesthetic politics is irresolute. Maintaining intensity becomes more important than finding a resolution.[12] This is the opposite of mainstream cinema's methods of portraying aggression, where the positions of psychopath and child never cross over and are never in question, where a violent gesture is always countered by another more violent one designed to settle the accounts, and where forces are always contained by either moral indictment or approval and therefore cancelled out. Judgment, justification or explanation for Coré's vampiric desire would amount to a pacifying resolution. Instead, *Trouble Every Day* produces affect as an irrecoverable leak that cannot be plugged or stopped by any other force in the context where it emerges, and instead is given free reign in the most unlikely of manifestations—a mural that combines the materiality of the flesh with pure abstraction. Not even Coré´s own death can bring this affective line to an end. The affect remains open, firstly, because it survives the death of her body (Coré's death is not inflicted by a counter-force that would annul it, but by the same force living in another body, Shane's, as he strangles her after she seems to become lethally aggressive toward him). And secondly, as suggested by the vague, irresolute

exchange between Shane and June in the film's closing moments, the affect remains open past the film's end, as, we assume, Shane's body will carry on this force of carnivorous desire into further encounters.

In *Trouble Every Day*, Coré's blood mural figures as an image that captures the main impulse in the film's politics of forces/affects. The blood mural is a materialization of excorporation—Coré's body and the boy's body ecstatically placed outside their own physical boundaries, on a surface where their fluids mingle and become experimental event. The blood-drawn shapes make "what was mutually exclusive *compossible*"—death is transmuted into art, erotic exhaustion gives way to erotic vitality, and a film about diseased affects brings about a renewal of forces, by confronting us with an "affective thinking-feeling" that destabilizes our knowledge of sexuality, our perception of bodies and their desires and capacities.[13] No doubt the experience of watching the film may be nauseating and hyperbolically in bad taste, but hardly gratuitous. The blood mural mobilizes a cruel aesthetics that doesn't allow the viewer to enjoy violence in the usual amnesic ways. In so doing, the politics of force in Denis' film no longer aim to oppose contradictory forces (i.e. female/child opposing and defeating male/psychopath to repair patriarchal domination), but to stage a general disarray of forces/affects that does violence to our protective barriers—the endless series of normalized oppositions. In sum, *Trouble Every Day* constitutes a wild example of how cinema may succeed at freeing forces from their seduction and captivation by forms.

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Notes

[1] Peter Wollen, "Godard and Counter Cinema: *Vent d'Est,*" *Afterimage* 4 (Autumn 1972): 6-17.

[2] Brian Massumi, *Politics of Affect* (Malden: MA, Polity Press, 2015).

[3] Elena del Río, *Deleuze and the Cinemas of Performance: Powers of Affection* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008); and *The Grace of Destruction: A Vital Ethology of Extreme Cinemas* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2016).

[4] I am following Antonin Artaud's distinction between form and force in *The Theatre and Its Double,* as implied in his statement: "form only exists to seduce and captivate a force." Trans. Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 16.

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[5] Massumi discusses the affective inflection of contemporary politics in his *Politics of Affect*: "Increasingly, power functions by manipulating that affective dimension rather than dictating proper or normal behaviour [sic] from on high. So power is no longer fundamentally normative, like it was in its disciplinary forms, it's affective," 30-31. And later: "Direct affect modulation takes the place of old-style ideology," 32.

[6] *Nick Cave: 20,000 Days on Earth*, Bluray Disc, directed by Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard (2014).

[7] Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 81.

[8] *Code Unknown*, DVD Video, directed by Michael Haneke (2000, 2002).

[9] My reading of *Code Unknown* in *The Grace of Destruction* offers such an analysis of the affects that arise in conjunction with biopolitics.

[10] In Deleuze's philosophy, molar entities are well defined in terms of their system and organization—whether this concerns the grounding of identity or subjectivity in a personal ego, or the grounding of political bodies in institutions and governing apparatuses. Molecular entities, on the other hand, are open and dispersed micro-entities that destabilize ego-centered cognition and perception, and maximize the potential for sensation and experimentation.

[11] Science in *Trouble Every Day* is aligned with the corporate commodification of life and its inability to understand or cope with the unscripted force of living affects.

[12] Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 68.

[13] Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, 99; 94.