



Kiva Reardon

## Subject Slaughter

*Ideally, these should be read simultaneously. Though just as we cannot live being both consciously aware of our interiority and exteriority—that is, aware of the material functionality of our bodies while perceptually inhabiting and understanding the world—the best approach is to read the texts as closely together as possible, paragraph by paragraph, as neither comes before the other. The texts coexist, and the aim is to enfold the text itself, to create the conditions in which “the inclusion (or occlusion, inoclusive invagination) is interminable” (Derrida 70).*

*The reading process will not be fluid, nor should it be. The awareness of the limits of the text—the “edges” (63) and “coiling” (68)—should invoke a plunge into the text’s three-dimensionality, a space that our material bodies inhabit. This depth, however, is not comforting. The tension between the texts, the penetration and loss of their boundaries in moving from one to the other, should, as when we become aware of our material bodies in their involuntary and uncanny palpitations, cause moments of rupture. In these bursts there lingers a sense of the erotic and desire: the intertwined texts are at play with each other as the end point remains elusive.*

*Returning to Derrida, here we will turn his impulse on its head. Where he asked: “What will I ask of La Folie du jour?” (66), here we ask: “What will Inside asks of us?” There can only be one answer, which comes from Georges Bataille: “Clearly, consciousness is the only issue. This book [The Tears of Eros], for its author, has only one meaning: it opens up consciousness of the self!” (142)*

In “The Expanded Gaze in Contracted Space” Vivian Sobchack notes that despite the fact that “we are thrown into the material world . . . we are surprised again and again by the radical contingency and vulnerability of our flesh” (86). Given this, we “would like to forget this fact of existence” (ibid) and therein forget our bodies—in other words, repress them. Though the common conception of the unconscious is to hold it as immaterial in the Freudian sense, we may also think of our lived bodies as such, in that we become conscious of them in slips (with the pain of a fall or an involuntary twitch). Thus, just as Freud claimed we repress our desires in order to participate in (and indeed propagate) civilization, we repress the materiality of our bodies in order to function and maintain a sense of unified self.

These implications create what Sobchack argues is a fractured gaze (and most importantly for the paper at hand, what can also be considered a fractured subject), where “logical contingency” (the materially vulnerable body) is at play with the “emotional turbulence” of the subject “thrown by their material existence” (ibid). Our gaze is then split between the “irrational effects” of living—the physical

We start inside. A space with no form.

In.

Within.

Contained by.

Surrounded by.

How to understand the formless space that engulfs us other than by deferring to words to give shape to the unknown?

“I have for some time now already been noting down the words that I would suggest to you,” wrote Bataille (*Tears* 10). Yet the words themselves give no sense of spatial orientation, meaning or shape of what is around us.

It is here where *À l’intérieur* (Alexandre Bustillo and Julien Maury 2007) begins. Credits roll over red fluids, over indeterminate surfaces, which are at once familiar and strange: Muscles? Organs? The opening places us in a liminal space,



vulnerability of our bodies—and the “irrational affects” of realizing we exist in an unstable world (ibid). This is, for Sobchack, “the specificity of human existence” (ibid) and, additionally, “essentially humanist” (108). Yet, while Sobchack holds irrational affect and emotional turbulence as “two sides of the same existential coin” (87) we might also see such an understanding of subjectivity as one that fundamentally challenges, and destroys, the very root of humanism and existentialism: the subject itself.

To build on the analogy of the existential coin, while Sobchack sees it endlessly flipping in space, ceaselessly rotating between the two sides, we might ask what would happen if the coin landed “irrational effects” side up: what happens to the subject when repeatedly faced with the realization that life is predicated upon a materially fragile and flawed body, rupturing a unified sense of self? Such a proposition turns us away from Sobchack and towards Georges Bataille, whose essays not only posed this very question but whose novels sought to effect such reactions. Writing on a radical notion of the material subject in the “The Big Toe,” he notes humanity’s “hatred of the still painfully perceptible frenzy of the bloody palpitations of the body [as] [m]an willingly imagines himself to be like the God Neptune” (22). The moments when our bodies assert themselves through these involuntary palpitations become, as it were, material Freudian slips as we become conscious of our lived bodies. For Bataille, it is this knowledge gained through experience rather than rational thought that foregrounds his notion of “base materialism.” A radical reconceptualization of materiality, base materialism not only shatters hierarchical notions of the material (Noyes 499), but also the fantasy of the unified subject. It is this (productive) crisis that is at the heart—pardon the bodily evocation—of *À l’intérieur*.

*À l’intérieur* overflows with moments of the abject (from vomit and blood to literally rendering the interior exterior) and abuses the most vulnerable of bodies: a pregnant woman and a fetus. It should be noted that this paper, and indeed the film, takes this to be a body and not a spirit or child. Indeed, the choice in *À l’intérieur* to push the limits and the borders of bodies themselves, as well as to examine the effects of this on the subject, is central to its aim in examining new extremities. In considering Julia Kristeva’s work on the abject and Bataille’s “base materialism” it shall be argued the film enacts a form of subject slaughter, based on encountering the abject material body. Moreover, in a manner that further dovetails with Kristeva’s work, the film doubles this anxiety in evoking the abject in not only its expelled material forms (blood, vomit) but in further exploring the maternal body as the locus of the abject. The

recalling the very presence of our material bodies and at the same time our paradoxical distance from them. What does my liver look like? My intestines? My heart? The body is reduced to a tool, part of labour, as we repress its materiality to not become consumed in its endless and perpetual functioning. To think of the body’s materiality is to be trapped in an endless present.

Just as we stumble over an unknown word, tripping the flow of a sentence, disorienting our understanding of

t-i-m-e[s-p-a-c-e]a-n-d[s-p-a-c-e]  
s-p-a-c-e[s-p-a-c-e]t-h-e[s-p-a-c-e]  
b-o-d-y’s[s-p-a-c-e]m-a-t-e-r-i-a-  
l-i-t-y[s-p-a-c-e]b-r-e-a-k-s[s-p-a-  
c-e]o-u-r[s-p-a-c-e]c-o-m-m-o-n[s-p-  
a-c-e]e-x-p-e-r-i-e-n-c-e[s-p-a-c-e]  
o-f[s-p-a-c-e]r-e-a-l-i-t-y[p-e-r-i-  
o-d]

Instead of: “I see” the relationship becomes: “How do I see?” The object before us no longer matters or exists in our register of consciousness as we become fixated on understanding the rapid darts of the eye muscles, the processing of light on the retina, the inner workings of a body. It is at these moments when we understand the vast gap between the body and ourselves. We wander and spiral in the formless present . . .

What does the inside of an eye look like?  
What does it feel like?

How can I know what I cannot touch?  
How can I know what I cannot see?

There is no part of the body that cannot be broken, maimed,  
torn, penetrated, or violated.

The body is not only the place of pleasure but also of pain.  
Though you can punch a shoulder, you can also massage it;  
you can stomp on a foot but also tickle it.

The body’s nervous system is a two-directional highway be-  
tween pleasure and pain, but this does not apply to the eye.

The eye cannot be caressed, held, or stroked.

film’s final act—The Woman (Beatrice Dalle) cutting the fetus from Sarah’s (Alysson Paradis) womb with a pair of scissors—defies logic not only in its sheer horror but also in its refusal to acknowledge birth, and more specifically, birth as a process that respects the body’s borders. In *À l’intérieur* the subject is not born but *torn* from the womb. In watching this process the coin lands irrational effects side up; like Bataille before the image of a big toe we face our material existence, and are torn as well.

In a 2004 essay for *ArtForum* James Quandt coined the term “New French Extremity” discussing “the growing vogue for shock tactics in French cinema over the past decade” (n. pag.). Giving an overview of the films to date, Quandt’s argument (or rather lament) centres on the perceived fall of Bruno Dumont into NFE, a class of film that “proliferates in the high-art environs of a national cinema whose provocations have historically been formal, political, or philosophical . . . or, at their most immoderate . . . at least assimilable as emanations of an artistic movement (Surrealism mostly)” (ibid). Despite noting the similarities that NFE shares with figures and films from the Surrealist movement (such as Bataille and *Le Sang des bêtes*), Quandt is adamantly opposed to seeing these relationships with NFE as anything more than superficial, summarizing them as “aggressiveness that is really a grandiose form of passivity” (ibid). For him this is rooted in the fact that “the recent provocateurs are too disparate in purpose and vision to be classified as a movement” (ibid). Instead, NFE is reduced to a trend, a lowly term that suggests superficiality and a fleeting impact. The result of this is that the films are then often treated as subpar, released on genre distribution labels (such is the case with *À l’intérieur* on Dimension Extreme), and, when they are addressed, require prefaces such as this as they are considered to be succumbing “to the elemental—and the elementary” (ibid). While Quandt is correct in noting the disparate forms NFE has taken, this need not be considered a fault. Indeed, it may be incredibly liberat-

ing as it presumes no essential idea of either Surrealism or NFE and allows for analysis of specific texts rather than arguing all must be “assimilable.” This paper will thus work within a Bataillian form of Surrealism to suggest a generative discussion of subject-hood is at play, a credit that, while Quandt may not agree, it fundamentally deserves. Our establishing shot is inside the body: a fetus floating in amniotic fluid. Suddenly the fetus jerks violently, slamming (against what?) as blood obscures the screen, our vision. We are wrenched out of the body, into the world, dislocated at the site of an accident: two cars, blood, bodies. Where am I? Faces obscured by blood; who is that? Cutting inside the car the camera pans down over a woman stroking her pregnant belly. It is in this gesture that we find ourselves again. There I was thus  
there I am.  
Relocated.

The eye’s pleasure possibility is not found in physical contact as the eye’s surface, unlike the rest of the body, always recoils from touch.

As we spiral we lose a sense of form, both of the tactile world and language. Eye becomes e-y-e, without linear cohesive meaning as we focus on its task (“Formless” 27)—to see—which locates us in the panicked formless present.

“To declare, on the contrary, that the universe is not like anything, and is simply formless, is tantamount to saying the universe is something like a spider of spittle” (ibid).

We lose sense of the form of our bodies and grasp them to reveal that our insides are predicated on at the very least pain, at the very worst death.

But we start inside.

We start inside another’s body, growing into a being in a place that we never know yet once inhabited: a place we will never see, never know. The place that as living beings we remain tied to—the biological point of origin—but that remains perpetually elusive. We bear the mark of this connection on our bodies (the belly button) but have no memory of it as it is a place before memory, before the brain, before formation of the subject.

What was it like to be born? The universally shared experience that no one recalls. Exists beyond it. Like death.

This is the fascination with the maternal body in that it is both elemental and elementary:

I want to know where  
and what I once was.  
But cannot.

This relocation, however, is less  
 than reassuring for it returns us to the uncanny place  
 of the womb. Located in a place that we do not know. Relocation in  
 the text is thus yet another layer of disorientation.  
*I cannot know where I am.*

It is this question of location—“*Where* am I?” instead of “*Who* am I?” (Kristeva 8)—around which we may frame Julia Kristeva’s notion of the abject. The abject is not merely an object but “is radically excluded and draws [us] towards the place where meaning collapses” (2). It is thus a *spatially* disorienting *affect* that is “never *one* nor homogenous, nor totalizing, but essentially divisible, foldable and catastrophic” (8). This is first enacted in the credit sequence of *À l’intérieur*: bloody, fluid surfaces that suddenly become a mass (evoking a surprising and disorienting *depth*) of undulating tissue-like substance. It is familiar, but a familiarity that is never tactilely known as we cannot look inside our own bodies (at least not without consequences). We cannot know the womb: a space that for one gender is a part of us, and for both genders once contained us. This is central to Freud’s notion of the uncanny, as the place of no return and “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (220); however, our bodies’ interiority (and especially the womb) function differently in that they are never tactilely known but at the same time are materially present and physically a part of us. For this reason, *À l’intérieur* approaches something closer to Kristeva’s work on the abject: “Essentially different from ‘uncanniness,’ more violent, too, abjection is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin; nothing is familiar, not even a shadow of a memory” (5). Our interiors may then be “a deep well of memory” (6) but it is memory without content that threatens the fantasy that we have mastery over ourselves.

Rupturing this fantasy is what is at stake in “The Big Toe,” through which notions of “base materialism” shall be expounded. In claiming “the big toe is the most human part of the human body” (20), Bataille forces us to recall “the bellowing waves of the viscera, in more or less incessant inflation and upheaval [which] brusquely put an end to [our] dignity” (22). The abject and base materialism then rely not only on a sense of violence, or at the very least turbulence, but they both produce *spatially disorienting* affects predicated on material encounters, a point that shall be returned to in regard to *À l’intérieur*’s conclusion.

It is the loss of the self at the intersection of the base and erotic that Bataille’s novels, such as *The Story of the Eye*, evoke in pornographic prose. In his final work, *The Tears*

Located in a place that I do not know. My relocation in  
 the text is another layer of disorientation.

This is the first horror.

The horror of the inside.

I realize I am positioned with a nonentity, a being becoming. Here I am located within a process of formation, of a being not entered into a world of language, into the Name of the Father, not unified. My identification here places me outside of these constructions as well. The realization of finding oneself outside of language that is one of both radical freedom and vulnerability.

This is the second horror.

The horror of formless space.

It is here the film shifts, or rather begins.

We are sutured into the text through narrative exposition, as we learn the body that we were inside of is Sarah’s. At nine months pregnant, if she does not go into labour in the next 24 hours it will be medically induced the following day, Christmas. Here we begin to understand Sarah’s body from the outside. At her ultrasound the cold jelly applied to her distended belly (impossibly swollen with her child and [un]naturally grotesque) sends fissions across our own skin. This we can understand, this we can touch.

Sarah’s body at first seems comprehensible, if only in that it is formed and complete. Hers is a body located in material space, formed, narrativized. And yet, her body is one that remains uncanny, always reminding us of the inside. The visual presence of her belly constantly indexes something *within*. We cannot escape the inside.

Sarah’s is a body that is neither menstrual nor maternal. The pregnant body neither bleeds nor is it yet maternal, for the maternal body relies on the process of birth, of

rupture  
 expulsion  
 formation

of *Eros*, however, the relationship is explicitly explored in his writing on encountering images of the erotic and death. As J.M. Lo Duca notes in the introduction, Bataille’s interest centres on “the last instant in which one must shatter the powers of eternity” (4). These moments are found in images of torture, both for the victim *and* for those who willingly gaze upon the body being destroyed before them (5). This relationship is often thought of in terms of sadism (Bataille himself cites Marquis de Sade) and the erotic economy of the gaze, but here we may focus the question on the body itself when considering the “last instant.” The last instant is not only a threshold point (a new extremity) but also the point where the fantasy of mastery over our bodies becomes a reality in the rush and then final cessation of those “bloody palpitations” with death. In observing the last instant then, the fantasy and desire of control is finally shattered in the realization that to wish for this is to desire death. The closest we come to this in lived experience is encountering the material body under duress, where the eternity of pain stretches out beyond time and space, testing thresholds. This pain, however, is never far from titillation as we move from “sensuous pleasure, from madness, to a horror without limits” (*Tears* 20).

Thus, it is a body that marks not sensuous desire and eroticism but work, and no longer “the moment of sexual union [which when] first came to be related to conscious desire by human beings, the end sought was pleasure; it was the intensity, the violence of pleasure” (*Tears* 44). The pregnant body then becomes the signifier of civilization and propagation, the continual deferment of death as the end result of the sexual union was not “little death” (*Tears* 45) but continued life, the creation of a new subject with birth. Lying prone on the stairs, Sarah begins to give birth, aided by The Woman who looms over her. When the fetus becomes stuck in the birth canal The Woman takes a pair of scissors, cutting away the bloodied cloth of Sarah’s nightgown, layer by layer, until finally exposing her stomach. After rubbing it gently, she inserts the scissors into Sarah’s belly button and begins to cut. This is not the first moment of penetration.

Earlier in the film The Woman traces the same scissors over Sarah’s stomach as she sleeps, until it catches on the edge of her belly button. Lingering for a second she then raises her arm in the air, plunging the scissors into Sarah’s body. This second penetration, however, functions differently in that it is not only clearly “torture that obviously could have no other outcome than death” (*Tears* 185), but further revels in Sarah’s orgasm-like screams. She is coming; the baby is coming; we are coming; all are lost.

*I associate the moon with the  
 vaginal blood of mothers, sisters,  
 that is, the menstrual with their  
 sickening stench . . .*  
 (*Story of the Eye* 49)

The body within becoming the *bodies* without.

Sarah’s stomach is both a visual bump and a logical one. As we stare at her distended body on the doctor’s table the cues are those which start an involuntary chain of signifiers from

belly>baby>sex>vagina.

Sarah’s body becomes a bearer of semiotic meaning that conflates contradictory impulses and associations as we move from thinking of sensual sex, to reproductive sex, the pleurably penetrated vagina to the productive one, ripped and torn during birth. Labour is and as labour. For the pregnant body is one that has already been penetrated to-

wards an end: a child. Thus, it is a body that marks not sensuous desire and eroticism but work, and no longer “the moment of sexual union [which when] first came to be related to conscious desire by human beings, the end sought was pleasure; it was the intensity, the violence of pleasure” (*Tears* 44). The pregnant body then becomes the signifier of civilization and propagation, the continual deferment of death as the end result of the sexual union was not “little death” (*Tears* 45) but continued life, the creation of a new subject with birth. Lying prone on the stairs, Sarah begins to give birth, aided by The Woman who looms over her. When the fetus becomes stuck in the birth canal The Woman takes a pair of scissors, cutting away the bloodied cloth of Sarah’s nightgown, layer by layer, until finally exposing her stomach. After rubbing it gently, she inserts the scissors into Sarah’s belly button and begins to cut. This is not the first moment of penetration.

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Unlike other images of torture throughout the film, this moment approaches what Bataille reads upon the face of Fou-Tchou-Li, who after being convicted of murder is sentenced to execution via torture, cut to pieces while still alive: “the ecstatic appearance of the victim’s expression” an “image of pain, at once ecstatic(?) and intolerable” (*Tears* 204, 206). In this image Bataille encounters a last instant, the threshold about to be crossed, which is similarly found in Sarah’s screams. These encounters, however, create a tear—both a forcible rupturing and the watery ocular fluid—in the question of the erotic. The moment of cutting the fetus from the stomach is one that is lost in excess, frenzy, and the melding of both life and death. If, as Bataille claims, “eroticism is by all accounts linked to birth, to a reproduction that endlessly repairs the ravages of death” (*Tears* 33), here we encounter this very fact: the dying maternal erotic body. Thus, while Kristeva reads the abject as ecstatic in an “attempt [by the subject] at stopping the hemorrhage” (55), here we are confronted with that which is closer to what Bataille calls giving over to the “the blind instincts of the organs” (*Tears* 45). Our organs, our base materialism, are rooted in “a calculation the self, beyond an ethos of work *l’intérieur* releases the repressed through violation it renders birth for The Woman this pleasure is us, it is in the pleasure of watching, cated by dread if we consider that cease looking . . . for the desirable murderous, fascinating and ab- (Kristeva 54). Given this, the erot- we never cease looking, but rather the maternal body we do not look death—the climax, frenzied mo- language. Should we hold language structures all of **t-i-m-e**[a- dislocated. We realize devotees to Thus here we tear (rip apart) and take that pulls away from a tight face as she rocks the crying baby in a dislocated, dark space. Much like located in a place that is at once room) but still unknown. More- formless place, like the womb, which resists spatial orientation and lacks atmosphere, both of which are necessary for narra- tive. While the lack of form has already been discussed, here atmosphere (both in its scientific and figurative sense) becomes important. The womb literally lacks atmosphere in that it is a space not surrounded by a gaseous envelop, as per scientific definition. Figuratively, atmosphere is predicated on a sense of environs that gives over to a mood, which may be then ex- pressed with language. Most importantly, however, atmosphere is predicated on a sense of penetration and fluid boundaries. Relationships between two or more spaces interpenetrate and are further altered by the subject’s interplay and entry into them (as is said: the atmosphere of the room changed when she entered it). The atmosphereless space, by contrast, does not interact with another. It is the space of fixed boundaries and in being sealed from the world around it escapes language. This has radical implications if we consider Ludwig Wittgenstein: “To imagine a language means to imagine a form of life” (qtd. in Jameson 8) or Bataille: “Indeed, for the academics to be happy, the universe would have to take on form” (“Formless” 27). By extension, the atmosphereless space, such as the womb, defies both language and conceptualization. The paradox here is that the womb is what brings us to life. The rupture of this sealed space (birth) is what brings us into subject-hood via en- counters with structuring space outside of the body. In *À l’intérieur* this is negated, as the violated birth does not give way to a sense of location; rather, the closing image suggests that in opening the womb The Woman, and indeed we, have retreated back into it. It is thus not a birth into language and order but a (re)birth into the abject, structureless space without subject. This is a birth thatr does not escape or break from the body, but rather one that enters back into it. Faced with Sarah’s torn maternal body and the dislocated shot of The Woman, we drown in the blood that pours over the staircase from Sarah’s body, carried away and beyond the very frame of the film itself to an unknown space within ourselves: inside. And yet this loss of the subject is not nihilistic. Indeed, reading Bataille as such is simplistic as he says: “I can live in the hope of a better

earlier on there was a moment of sinking dread as The Woman picked up the scissors and walked into the bedroom since then the scissors have haunted the film hovering in the background of every scene waiting to reappear they do again puncturing her hand pinning it to the wall but so far the tools have not been used for their real purpose to make spaces holes gaps where there are none where there should be none this time they are wielded as they are meant to be held properly the first cut is the worst into the belly button the perma- nent maker of maternal connection a mark of connection and rupture here it is punctured again then there is the cut the methodical up and down of the scissors as they work through the flesh as it gets thicker away from the centre deeper cuts now we see it don’t cut away let me see what it looks like inside as it opens make space where there should be none let me see

of pleasure” (ibid), motivated for or production. In this moment *À* Eros of the pregnant body, as “a calculation of pleasure” (ibid): located in her vengeance, and for Our pleasure, however, is compli- “devotees of the abject . . . do not and terrifying, nourishing and ject inside of the maternal body” ic desire in *À l’intérieur* is not that that when faced with the inside of away. This is the moment of little ment—which is located outside of in the Lacanian sense to be what **n-d]s-p-a-c-e** we are then the abject are not *them* but *us*. Me. tear (cry). The final shot, a single frame on The Woman’s disfigured her arms, reveals her to be sitting in the opening sequence, we are again familiar (it must be Sarah’s living over, we are once again located in a

future. But I can still project this future into another world. A world into which I can be introduced only by death” (*Tears* 19). *À l’intérieur* is this “other world” where birth becomes not merely productive labour but an affirmation of life through violation and negation of atmosphere, narrative and subject: it is birth into material consciousness. For in the final instant when we are caught between the erotic and death we encounter “horror without limits” and “the end of reason” (20). Here, in these new extremities, we encounter life. Here the body and subject are not predicated on boundaries but rather a radical union. We become enfolded into ourselves, an invaginated subject, having given over to the realization that we have not relinquished control over ourselves but accepted that we never had control to begin with. We are left “screaming, opening eyes wide” (“The Big Toe” 23) asking:

Where am I?

Alive.

**Author’s Note:** *The motivation for this paper was twofold. First, as the final paper for a seminar on French surrealism, the aim was to address content through form, an experiment in working outside of the traditional structure of academic writ- ing. (On this note, I must thank Professor James Cahill at the University of Toronto, who encouraged me to take such a risk.) Second, the piece straddles the academic and the poetic; it at- tempts to grapple with that which cannot be rationalized, and questions the place of affective reactions to cinema in critical thought. One half of the paper is a theoretical approach to À l’intérieur, while the other is a free-form attempt at capturing an experience of watching the film. By joining the two, the hope was to find a means for addressing affect and bodily ex- perience in critical thought, especially in French new extremist films, which seek to incite such reactions.*

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