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Introduction

This book began its life under the title “Illicit Images.” Having recently written a study of the interrelation between violence and aesthetics in American cinema, I next wanted to study (mostly) European art cinema and the particular strand within it that gravitated toward highly controversial, even extreme, representations of the body, of violence and of sexuality. In my mind, the term “illicit” suggested itself as an evocative phrase for the kind of subject matter that I was interested in; that is, until a colleague rather helpfully pointed out that the relevant films were all actually “licit.” It was not as if I was under any delusion that copies of, say, *Baise-moi* or *Anatomy of Hell* could only be obtained on the black market, like snuff items; so what could possibly account for my thinking of such films in terms of the illicit? First of all, I realized that it was, to some extent, a case of domain conflation; there had been some leakage from the realm of the depicted onto the realm of the depiction. Clearly, some of the acts found in my corpus of films would be defined as illicit had they occurred in real life. But that was not the whole story. Notable, also, was the sense in which some of these films’ images made their violent disruptions experientially palpable as sensorial and cognitive assaults. One could perhaps be forgiven for misconstruing something that was capable of eliciting so much distress as forbidden wares. The films felt more aggressively intrusive than anything that had come before, and in the context of art cinema they seemed to herald something authentically new. I realized that these cinematic expressions affected me, both as a scholar and a viewer, in a way very different from the film violence I had studied previously. Unpleasant as it may have been to sit through the bizarre trip that was *A Clockwork Orange* (Stanley Kubrick, 1971), the horrible rape scene in *Straw Dogs* (Sam Peckinpah, 1971), the blood-soaked sociopathy of *Reservoir Dogs* (Quentin Tarantino, 1992) or

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the ferocious self-destructiveness of *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999), the experience was nonetheless defined by a certain sense of textual confinement. The violence, while grisly in itself, may have been staged *for* the viewers but it was never directed *at* them. Even taking into account historical shifts in the perception of screen violence and its shock value, the early twenty-first century wave of offensive art cinema seems to mark a striking departure. In the earlier tradition, the unpleasant and the provocative were carefully contained within the fictional universe, within impregnable diegetic barricades, so to speak; but in the new controversial film epidemic it is as if their violent energy has burst through the membrane of the work to target the spectators themselves. Accordingly, these films appear to be about the spectator and the act of looking as much as anything else. Their moments of discomfort do not necessarily involve acts of gruesome carnage, but would also consist of other events and situations that were equally disturbing. But whatever the source of the unpleasant might be, it usually concerns the corporeal sphere. From film violence my research was about to turn toward films' violence. I became increasingly interested in questions pertaining to spectatorial affect as well as in the interaction between cinematic corporeality and embodied spectatorship. As David MacDougall reminds us, we "see with our bodies" and "[c]orporeal images are not just the images of other bodies; they are also images of the body behind the camera and its relations with the word."¹ While MacDougall's subject is mainly ethnographic film, his words seem applicable to film images in general, and I began to ponder the implications—critical, moral and aesthetic—of something that would perhaps be akin to an ethnography or ecology of cinematic transgression.

Illicit or not, what I and surely others started to think of as the new confrontational cinema was different from the films I had worked on earlier in other ways too. The forms of violence in Peckinpah, Kubrick, Tarantino and others, I somewhat guiltily concluded, made for aesthetically satisfying viewing experiences, and a great deal of theorizing went into exploring the ethical ramifications of what that awareness meant. Thinking through this problem in *Transfigurations*, my previous book, made me reconsider the notion of cinematic pleasure, an intellectual process rendered only more acute by the new films that began to appear and that I watched with equal amounts of curiosity and ambivalence—Lars Von Trier's *The Idiots* (1998), Gaspar Noé's *Seul contre tous* (1998) and later *Irréversible* (2002), Catherine Breillat's *Romance* (1999), *À ma soeur!* (2001) and *Anatomie de l'enfer* (2004), Virginie Despentes and Coralie's *Baise-moi* (2000), Michael Haneke's *La Pianiste* (2001), and Claire

Denis's *Trouble Every Day* (2001), to name just a few. Each and every one of these films appeared to pose some kind of challenge to the viewer, although it was difficult at first to determine what exactly it was all about. Sure, there was this pronounced sense of each work wanting to test our endurance. But it extended beyond that somewhat puerile objective. This wave of transgressive cinema altered the landscape of contemporary art cinema. It brought a new kind of viscosity to the form, a physicality more readily associated with mainstream movies and with pornography. It put the body—more often that not in states of agony, ecstasy or abjection—center stage, and it seemed mischievously intent on triggering scandals. It became clear that these films represented a uniquely fertile ground for considering the ethical life of aesthetic images, and in immersing myself ever more deeply in this corpus I was reminded of Wayne Booth's notion of "the company we keep" and his thesis that "[e]ach work of art or artifice . . . determines to some degree *how at least this one moment will be lived*. The quality of life in the moment of our 'listening' is not what it would have been if we had not listened. We can even say that our proffered work shows us how our moments *should* be lived."² The affective and in fact slightly normative aspects that Booth extrapolates from the work would at first seem rather perverse in the context of films like *Baise-moi*, *Irréversible* or *Trouble Every Day*. How *will* the moments that they allow be lived? What is the "quality of life" during these moments? How are we as spectators transformed by what the films show? And finally, how, according to the films, should our moments be lived? In other words, how might we rearticulate, theoretically or critically, the particular ethical visions afforded by these films?

There was no shortage of "unacceptable images" in my unofficial and swiftly growing canon of transgressive cinema. I came across scenes in which an infected lover feasted on her partner's flesh during intercourse, scenes where characters were drinking menstrual blood or inhaling the odors of semen-drenched tissues. Other images graphically showed characters' faces being beaten to pulp by a fire extinguisher, or porn stars having sex with their unconscious or possibly dead partner. There were scenes of massacres in Parisian sex clubs, of a patron taking a bullet point-blank up his bottom. Several films featured long and horrifying rape scenes, while others contained equally shocking images of genital mutilation. The list goes on. I realize that such a description only bring to mind the acts themselves, not their specific formal rendering or sensibility, which is often overwhelmingly unpleasant in itself. It seemed to me that these films, especially when considered together, had violated

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a tacit set of scopic norms. Some of these images made me think of Buñuel's infamous eyeball, in that their essential gesture seemed to be conceptually the same. The representational aporia pointed out by André Bazin long ago might have been shaken if not altogether crushed: "To grant the novel the privilege of evoking everything, and yet to deny the cinema, which is so similar, the right of showing everything, is a critical contradiction which I note without resolving."³ In light of this, screening the unwatchable implies not only a presentation of images that are intolerable or impossible to watch, but may also be interpreted as a presentation of the previously unscreenable.

But what does this freedom to evoke "everything" really mean? Is the privilege Bazin mentions exempt from ethical constraints and contextualization? The relation between artistic artifacts and ethics has been a mainstay in Western philosophy and culture at least since Plato banished the poets from the Republic, and while it may have been dormant in criticism for a long time now, its troublesome implications reasserted themselves forcefully in the context of the present project. A vexed irreconcilability seems to define the ethics-aesthetics nexus, right down to the specific enunciations concerning the matter made by the artists themselves. According to Picasso, for instance, artists should feel compelled to "create unacceptable images."⁴ "All good art is an indiscretion," opined Tennessee Williams. And in the sermon chapter in *Moby Dick*, the preacher recounting the story of Jonah exclaims "[w]oe to him who seeks to please rather than to appal!" a sentiment that could just as well have been the catchphrase of the iconoclastic modernist aesthete. On the other hand, we have Bazin's critical contradiction—the cinema may say but not show everything—as well as Roland Barthes's acknowledgement that "[t]he most painful wounds are inflicted more often by what one sees than by what one knows." Consider also Jean Renoir's maxim that "[i]f it doesn't show the glory of man, don't do it." This tension between two seemingly incompatible ethical imperatives—on the one hand the commitment to show everything (and perhaps particularly that which offends us), and, on the other, art's obligation to generate socially and spiritually nourishing representations and experiences—remains at the center of my study, sometimes explicitly, always implicitly. Even if this conflict ultimately proves to be unsolvable, our efforts may at the very least be enabled by the critically fertile ramifications of poet Joseph Brodsky's insight that "[e]very new aesthetic reality makes man's ethical reality more precise."

As the work on this project moved forward, patterns and relations that I did not notice at the outset gradually began to unfold, consolidating the

impression of a set of films that, however disparate, somehow belonged together. The volatile and emotionally distraught couples in *Twentynine Palms* and *Antichrist* would seem to mirror one another, not only in the way in which eros and violence disturbingly intersect but also in the nature of their respective intimacies. In fact, the topic of dysfunctional relationships or forms of sociality flows through most of the films I have elected to examine; the book is thus in a certain sense also about relational aesthetics. Many of the films also problematize new modes of social existence, and share in common an apprehension of a deepening rupture, existential and moral, between society and the individual, participation and isolation, politics and aesthetics. What grow out of this disillusioned malaise, in some cases, are myopic forms of subjectivity and the relentless pursuit of hedonistic pleasure. But there are more crisscrossing patterns. In both *The Piano Teacher* and *Ma Mère*, Isabella Huppert plays the female lead. Both *Trouble Every Day* and *Intimacy* begins with a Tindersticks song. Considerable chunks of *Vendredi Soir*, *The Brown Bunny*, and *Twentynine Palms* take place inside an automobile. Both *Trouble Every Day* and *Twentynine Palms* incorporate traits from the horror genre. The landscape of the desert constitutes a prominent topos in the latter two and in the short *Death Valley*. The names of several directors reoccur throughout, their work considered in more than one chapter: Lars von Trier, Claire Denis, Michael Haneke and Gaspar Noé. Unlike the deliberate conceptual juxtapositions that configure the discussion of individual films into discrete thematic chapters, these were fortuitous concurrences. On yet another level, the sum of the films considered below is greater than any one film; taken together these works form a particular moral and aesthetic configuration that may not be fully present in each individual instance. The legacies of some of the landmark films in the history of controversial art cinema also seem to reverberate in “the new wave” films; *Straw Dogs* in *Irreversible*, *Last Tango in Paris* in *9 Songs* and *Intimacy*, *The Night Porter* in *La Pianiste*, *Romance* and *Antichrist*, and *In the Realm of the Senses* in *Twentynine Palms*. Anthony Julius has evoked Wittgenstein’s idea of family resemblance in order to capture the elusive quality—“a determinate aesthetic”—that controversial works have in common, and the concept may also serve to describe the kind of relation that pertains to unwatchable films.⁵

The history of film has generally and implicitly concerned the production of aesthetic pleasure in its multiple and various forms.⁶ But nested within this history is a parallel and minor tradition, going back at least to the first avant-garde movements, whose crucial project has been to problematize, withhold and sometimes overturn the cinematic pleasure

principle. This book is concerned with the rise and increasing cultural visibility of this tradition and its renewed influence on contemporary art films. Too long neglected by scholarship in the discipline of film studies, the tradition of transgressive films is an important part of the history of the medium and crucial for a deeper understanding of the effects of cinema and the ontology of looking. *Screening the Unwatchable* charts the growth of a poetics and politics of the disturbing film image and explores the diverse manifestations of this poetics through close readings and analyses of key films such as *Irréversible*, *Twentynine Palms*, *Anatomie de l'enfer*, *Destriated*, *The Wayward Cloud*, *Caché* and many more.

Throughout the book's six chapters I trace the confrontational sensibility of a cinematic tradition that aims sometimes to question, other times to destroy the sensation of visual pleasure and even to violate the moral or emotional consciousness of the viewer. From Luis Buñuel to Pier Paolo Pasolini, Lars Von Trier and Gaspar Noé, the acts of provocation that the images from this tradition perpetrate can be conceptualized as instances of what I metaphorically call *razorblade gestures*, the emotional, psychic, and ethical slicing open of the gaze of the spectator. Unlike the images that tend to inflame the religious or political iconoclast, those that appear to enact violence against the viewer do not usually trigger acts of retaliation. Even while redrawing the boundaries for what can be visually imagined and put on display, these offensive images seem impervious to iconoclastic censure. Their taboo breaking is of a different order. They challenge the moral integrity of the spectators and put their subjectivity at risk. While representations of violence may be among the images that traumatize the viewer, there is a difference between disturbing images and images that disturb. The latter, to evoke a phrase from *Transfigurations*, "hone our ethical proficiency in that they implement a liturgy of looking which tests our moral experience by transgressing or enlarging it."⁷ This in turn invites a host of questions: What does it mean to have an ethical experience of disturbing or traumatizing images? What kind of ethical proposition does an image mobilize? What values does the spectator bring to the image? Is ethical insight a way of looking which summons a particular kind of moral awareness? These are merely some of the questions that are explored further in the book, questions that ultimately entail a new methodological approach—a different interpretive optics—in order adequately to answer.

It is usually assumed that concepts such as shock and transgression inevitably implicate the twin phenomena of sex and violence.⁸ While these remain significant and occasionally even formative vectors for the post-millennial cinema of controversy, the idea of transgression cannot

be restricted to that domain alone. Provocation comes in multiple forms. There is, for instance, transgression of aesthetic boundaries. There are assaults on taste. There is moral transgression, and transgression of the self and its social, cultural and psychological boundaries. There are art crimes, as well as crimes against art. And then there is generic or stylistic transgression, the amalgamation of elements that do not belong together, which is Julia Kristeva's definition of the abject and perhaps the most unspeakable transgression of all. This book aims, firstly, to examine the anatomy of contemporary screen transgression⁹—the multifaceted modalities by which the transgressive is embodied (that is, the sex-and-violence combination should be considered as only one of several technologies with which to enact provocations)—and, secondly, to show how the “new cinematic extremism” of the last decade always extends to and involves other areas of experience. Here, my interpretive approach draws upon the critique of filmic transparency and the theory of figurality presented in my previous work.¹⁰ As Lesley Stern has noted, our approaches to the fictional in cinema tend sooner or later to brush up against a set of problems pertaining to the ontology of the moving image itself, “its referentiality, its visibility, its explicitness.”¹¹ In *Transfigurations*, I argue that film fiction is *amimetic*, that is, opposed to, or at best unconcerned with, representation understood as something which imitates objects and events that—whatever else their status might be—preceded the work temporally and ontologically. The film image is never a transparent surface onto something else, which it merely reflects, but is in fact marked by a distinctive opacity; its content is already an act of (visual) “writing” before we as viewers start to interpret what we see. It might seem counter-intuitive to employ the notion of opacity as a metaphor for the workings of this medium of light, but I do not intend it in a literal sense. A fiction film is opaque in a philosophical sense precisely because it is neither a mimetic object nor a window onto a representation but rather something analogous to a discourse, an argument, a supposition or interpretation. Regardless of the realism of any given film, which is always a stylistic or aesthetic effect, its images are no more transparent than the words on a page.¹² The film is a construction, not a reflection. My application of the notion of representation here is close to that of Paul de Man, who has pointed out that mimesis is just “one trope among others.”¹³ I would however like to shift the terms of that discussion slightly to suggest that tropes, conceived as blocks of figurality, constitute the discursive substance of the filmic work. Even the most naturalistic-looking films, therefore, have little to do with the real in the sense of “standing in for” it, although they might certainly be *about* the

real. This is in no way a theory designed to squeeze the vivaciousness out of the film in order to reconstitute it as a kind of abstract philosophical discourse; on the contrary, the concepts of the amimetic, opacity and tropology are intended, among other things, to release film from the reductionism of the representational paradigm, which all too often diminish the work to a matter of narrative synopsis. The theory of the amimetic is not the focus in this book, but I wanted briefly to bring it up here as it still undergirds my approach to the topic of transgressive cinema. In what follows I will also make references to recent theoretical work that could be seen as providing compelling alternatives to mimetic and semiotic conceptualizations of film fiction. Laura Marks's writing on tactility in relation to cinema is one example; another is Martine Beugnet's emphasis on sensational and affective rather than representational problems in film. The latter is drawn toward moments in which "the material presence of the image competes with, and often supersedes, its representational power."¹⁴ Thus, I would like to propose that the concept of the amimetic is readily adaptable to the methodological implications of the larger-scale theoretical shift that has occurred during the last two decades or so from representation to presentation and from meaning/interpretation to encounter.¹⁵ Another corollary of this shift is the increasingly widespread idea, derived in part from Gilles Deleuze,¹⁶ that images represent a form of thought. Increasingly, this notion seems to take root in individual film critical projects, for instance that of Martine Beugnet.¹⁷

But if images can think for themselves, if they do in fact constitute a mode of thought (Deleuze), a theoretical process (Mitchell's), a method for productive looking (Kaja Silverman), a theoretical object (Bal), and—finally—a figuration of meaning (D. N. Rodowick)¹⁸—why do we need academic reflections devoted to the analysis of the visual? Why all the meticulous explications of the image? In short, of what use are the critical discourses on our shared image culture if the images themselves do the job for us? The first answer is that, evidently, they do not. That images might be capable of theoretical reflection—or that they perform a function that can be conceptualized as the equivalent of that activity—does not entail that they produce a form of theory that can be immediately accessed by the viewer. Visual discourse, while in no way inferior to writing, may nonetheless require the accommodating ventriloquism of a linguistically based communication in order to render its ideas manifestly legible. But more importantly, images may also be conceived as active agents rather than as mere objects waiting to be deciphered by a perceptive subject, the critic. Rather, the viewers

and all those images exist materially and phenomenologically within the same ecological space, and thus their relation is defined by a state of permanent co-habitation as well as a process of constant interaction. Only with extreme difficulty can we determine where the world of the image ends and we begin. The thresholds of the image are nothing if not permeable. An awareness of this state of affairs is particularly relevant when we are dealing with constellations of images that are “transgressive” and that may appear to want to harm us in some way. Hence, if we follow Mitchell’s advice and embrace a delicately poised visual hermeneutics that allows us to strike images “with just enough force to make them resonate, but not so much as to smash them”¹⁹—if we write “with” the image as opposed to either being overwhelmed by it or overwriting it—we should also keep in mind that as viewers and critics we are part of the same ecological continuum as “the company we keep.”

In addressing the issue of screen transgression, I wish to tie the new film extremism to the broader historiography of transgression in the visual arts. The emergence of the “illicit” in turn-of-millennium art cinema reveals a thematic continuity with earlier traditions within the realms of art history, literature and cinema itself. The desire to upset the audience and generate an experience of shock has materialized as an aesthetic strategy in contexts as different as the many avant-garde movements in twentieth-century art (Surrealism in particular, which considered film an eminent medium for subversive practices), the Soviet montage film, the experimental cinemas of the 1960s and 1970s, the international novel of the 1990s and 2000s (Jay McInerney, Bret Easton Ellis, Michel Houellebecq), and finally this New Wave of Excess that is the subject of this book. Including films such as *The Idiots* (Von Trier, 1998), *Romance* (Breillat, 1999), *Baise-Moi* (Despentes & Coralie, 2000), *Trouble Every Day* (Denis, 2001), *La Pianiste* (Haneke, 2001), *Irréversible* (Noé, 2002), *Twentynine Palms* (Dumont, 2003), *Caché* (Haneke, 2005), *Battle in Heaven* (Reygadas, 2005), *The Wayward Cloud* (Ming-liang, 2005) and *Import/Export* (Seidl, 2007), this extreme cinema may not exhibit the formal or cultural unity of a movement, but it has certainly become more than just a tendency. It could be argued that the existence of a global (although mostly middle- and southern-European) post-millennial transgressive art cinema proves Anthony Julius wrong when he asserts that “the last *body* of transgressive artworks was made by the Surrealists. New transgressive art does not contribute to any collective art endeavor.”²⁰

If there is one common denominator for a cinema with such disparate components, it is a mischievous appetite for the unwatchable. To confuse this proclivity with a prosaic desire to shock the viewers, however, would

be to miss the point. The unwatchability of these films resides not so much on an experiential level as on a philosophical one. Above all, the work appears to be motivated by a need to introduce other ways of seeing and to transcend the threshold of the visible world. The attraction of the illicit for these filmmakers amounts to an exploratory expansion of the domain of aesthetics, a stretching of the limits of filmicity that would welcome visual displeasure. It is my contention that most, if not all, of the films previously alluded to are really preoccupied with deeply humanist issues even as they at times seem ostensibly misanthropic. Rather than being stigmatized as representatives of an over-hyped “shock cinema,” I suggest that the films in question more usefully be regarded as an antidote to the numbing complacencies and stock humanity of much mainstream cinema. Where the latter can be found increasingly to promote a leveling of the representations of the human that is mildly disquieting, to say the least, the former defy the processes of representational homogenization and allow more complex, disenfranchised, and marginalized subjectivities to become images also.

On one level, then, the “unwatchable” in this book’s title may refer to images and filmic segments so shocking, painful, or simply tedious as to be almost impossible to watch. On another level, the concept becomes shorthand for the desire on part of a particular kind of cinema to trounce visual pleasure and shake the spectators into a deeper awareness of things of a political, ethical, cultural, aesthetic of epistemological nature. On a third level, the “unwatchable” denotes something closer, although not entirely tantamount, to that which is (or traditionally has been) beyond the pale of the artistic imagination, to that which hegemonic aesthetic discourses have rendered invisible or unrepresentable. Finally, my use of the term also draws inspiration from the text I consider to be its source, a line spoken by Amira Casar’s character in Catherine Breillat’s *Anatomie de l’enfer* (in turn adapted from the director’s novel *Pornocratie*). “Watch me where I’m unwatchable,” she demands of the man (Rocco Siffredi) who has been paid to watch her. I read her requisition not in terms of an encouragement of voyeurism or objectification, but rather as an attempt to elicit from her partner (as well as the spectator) a different modality of looking. The place where she is unwatchable is obviously meant to refer to her genitals, and by explicitly connecting the female sex to the concept of the unwatchable, Breillat conveys a profoundly de-pornofied poetics of looking. To watch Casar where she is unwatchable would really mean to watch her as if for the first time, with a new gaze capable of overcoming or at least allaying its desire to objectify. While the notion of the unwatchable forms the thematic matrix of my

discussion, it is also interrelated with a set of key theoretical concepts that will be introduced in the following chapters. Significant for the analysis of individual groups of films as well as for the book's overarching arguments, they include terms such as *the unwatchable*, *razorblade gestures*, *entropic cinema*, *scopic entelechy*, *the metapornographic*, and *slow modes of seeing*.

Chapter 1 engages with one of the illustrious early cases of the new extremism, Lars von Trier's *The Idiots* (1998), as well as with Ulrich Seidl's *Dog Days* (2001). Observing that the notion of "spassing" introduced in *The Idiots* may be taken as an apposite description of the conceptual gesture that informs most of the films in the transgressive tradition, this chapter opens up a reflection on the meaning of sensibility as it pertains to spectatorship and ethics. *The Idiots* is explicitly preoccupied with the problematization of behavioral norms and rules of conduct, and the experiment in social terrorism that the film enacts has a shattering effect on the spectator. Ultimately, because it does not flinch from dramatizing the complicity of the audience, *The Idiots* lays bare the complexity of the kind of ethical experience that the notion of the unwatchable enables. I also consider the continued critical relevance of an Adornian poetics of negation in light of the unstoppable processes of commodification in the field of culture and aesthetics. Asking if there might be an artistic space beyond the utopia of traditional models of aesthetic resistance on the one hand and the apathy of textual consumption on the other, the chapter attempts to rehabilitate Amos Vogel's notion of film as a subversive art.

In Chapter 2, I examine some of the hyperviolent films that are at the center of the new brutalist movement, Gaspar Noé's *Irréversible* (2002) and Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* (2009) in particular—and introduce the concept of entropic cinema to interpret the self-destructive narratives and the narratives of self-destruction that characterize these films. Taking as its point of departure Siegfried Kracauer's thesis that "nothing could be more legitimate than [the cinema's] lack of inhibitions in picturing spectacles that upset the mind,"²¹ this chapter explores the peculiar scopic psychology that underlies the notion of an unwatchable cinema. The impossibly violent films under discussion assault their own audience and negate that scopophilic pleasure considered intrinsic to film as an art form. Uncompromising and anti-voyeuristic, they enact a reversal of the relation between film and spectator that historically has defined the cinematic situation—these films compel us to look away. What, then, is the nature of the ethical contract inscribed into this distorted relation? Are some images unwatchable? And, if yes, when

and under what circumstances? Does the unwatchable have a set of recurring formal characteristics? Finally, is there an aesthetics of the unwatchable?

The trope of the unwatchable remains in focus in Chapter 3, which turns to a different but overlapping set of films within the new transgressive cinema configuration. A particular interest in this section is the depiction of graphic sexual acts performed in empty spaces such as deserts and motel rooms. While the films are ostensibly about the violation of norms of sexual decorum, their main objective is the absence of, or quest for, emotional intimacy. Perhaps no less confrontational or offensive than the work of a Noé or a Haneke, the architecture of monotony and the lethargy of desire in *Intimacy* (Chéreau, 2001), *Vendredi Soir* (Denis, 2002), *Twenty-nine Palms* (Dumont, 2003), *The Brown Bunny* (Gallo, 2003), *9 Songs* (Winterbottom, 2004), and *Battle in Heaven* (2005) project a different negative poetics, which, as this chapter demonstrates, labors to supplant the orthodoxies of a literary, plot-driven cinema with a cinema of gestures, bodies and landscapes. Approaching the landscape as a body and the body as a landscape, these films provoke a hypnotic, slow mode of seeing that contrasts forcefully with the frenzied visuality of the films considered in the previous chapter.

Chapter 4 is concerned with a group of seminal feminist films that probe the limits of conventional representation. If the image that has osmotically structured our way of seeing can be conceived in terms of a membrane, a threshold of some sort, then the thrust of a transgressive cinema is the rupturing of this surface and the opening up onto view of that which is on the other side. In showing us things, images also occlude our vision, as they constantly get in the way of other images. Whether good or bad, they usurp space—socially, psychically and semiotically. When images of a particular kind have become sufficiently paradigmatic, or omnipresent, they tend to congeal into a mode of perception, which makes it even harder to see through them. Transgressive visual forms work to penetrate the skin of representation, in a manner of speaking, to go beyond the boundary of what could possibly be depicted. This gesture of figuring anew is not about inversion, carnival, or estrangement. It is about making room for new and transformative ways of seeing, about the rejuvenation of the look. Michael Haneke's *La Pianiste* (2001), Jane Campion's *In the Cut* (2003), Breillat's *Anatomy of Hell* (2004), Christophe Honoré's *Ma mère* (2004), and Claire Denis's *Trouble Every Day* (2003) all articulate this other sense of the transgressive and form a consummate cinematic quintet of lust and its complex transactions. The five films all explore the infrastructure of female desire as

well as the experientially productive acts of looking which both trigger and are triggered by this desire. This chapter moreover argues that the films should be approached as staunchly self-reflexive, humanist works which draw upon techniques of repulsion in order to generate new ways of seeing and of conceptualizing the body. Placing the films within the context of the new cinema of transgression that has been the subject of the preceding chapters, my analysis suggests that the chief objective of these films is an enactment of the unwatchable that serves to liberate desire from its colonization by reductive forms of visibility such as pornography and spectacle.

In order to grasp the renewed transgressive potential of current screen practices, we must also take into account, and critically assess, the plural pornographies of contemporary visual culture, as well as the paradigmatic shift in the cultural transaction with images that Linda Williams has referred to as *on/scenity*. The visual imagination of the present mediascape, I argue, may best be described as *metapornographic*; the formal conventions and gestural repertoire of pornography are not only routinely, knowingly and intertextually re-appropriated and inserted into mainstream and avant-garde practices alike, but the structures of seeing that they generate have been absorbed by the scopic life of the culture at large. While media scholar Brian McNair has addressed the pervasive sexualization of the social sphere in his work on “striptease culture” and “the democratization of desire,”²² it also seems pertinent to resist the impoverished epistemologies of the body that the wholesale importation of pornographic tropes into the mainstream entails. As I show in Chapter 5, there are economies of pleasure as well as corporeal experiences that this striptease culture cannot capture, and the particular kind of art cinema that is the subject of this book provides a creative laboratory for the exploration of these other and often abject desires.

Throughout, I develop the concept of the metapornographic through a close analysis of films that in various ways are about pornography or the making of pornographic images. As a visual genre, porn represents art cinema’s institutional “other” both in the sense of being part of popular culture rather than high culture and in the sense of being about the body rather than about cerebral matters. How do movies such as *Hole in My Heart* (Lukas Moodysson, 2004), *The Wayward Cloud* (Tsai Ming-liang, 2005), and *Destricted* (multiple directors, 2006) make sense of this form of filmmaking? Why do so many recent feature films take an interest in it? What are the aesthetic ramifications of this fusion of porn and art cinema, and what ethical purpose does this recontextualization of pornography serve? This chapter confronts these

and related issues in an attempt to elucidate the rhetorical features of a metapornographic culture.

If there is a contemporary filmmaker whose work appears to be premised upon the rigorously entrenched modernist legacy of negative poetics, it must be Michael Haneke. The sixth and closing chapter appraises the politics of confrontation in one of his key films, *Caché* (2005). Made by a director who has self-consciously adopted the catharsis theory as a kind of meta-psychological framework for a cinema that,²³ by his own admission, aims to “unsettle the viewer” and “take away any consolation,”²⁴ Haneke’s films might seem essentially to be about the punishing and victimization of the audience. His overall project, as some critics have pointed out, appears to be the reinvestment of shock value in the image. In its troubled but timely reflection on the enigmatic images that make up our shared visual culture, this film is found to negotiate an ethical space within the film world, in which the audience is confronted not only with historical events that they would rather forget, but also with their own complicity in the more contemporary injustices of which the subaltern is victim. With a view toward understanding the complex rhetoric of the film’s images of confrontation, the chapter suggests that the director’s iconoclastic project derives much of its psychological and emotional force from the narrative deployment of the figure of intrusion. In *Caché*, the specter of the culturally repressed returns in the form of mute, unrelenting images that seem to demand something of the protagonists in the film. It seems conceptually appropriate to conclude this analysis of cinema and the unwatchable with the work of such a self-proclaimed provocateur as Haneke.

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