

Cruel Cinema

THE FASCINATION IN THE
FACE OF *NATURAL BORN
KILLERS*' SPECTACLE OF
VIOLENCE

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DECLARATION

I declare that this research report is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

Reboillard

17th day of April, 1998.

To my parents, Pierre and Myra,
with thanks for their love and
support.

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INTRODUCTION

Through an examination of both the representation of, and discourse on, violence in the film, *Natural Born Killers*, this research report seeks to set up a discursive exchange with certain key texts and ideas within the canon of psychoanalytic film theory which have, to a certain extent, become reified. The report is aligned with Steven Shaviro's (1994) project in, *The Cinematic Body*, which seeks to challenge, rethink and ultimately dislodge the orthodoxy of the tenets of lack, castration and sadism within much psychoanalytic film theory and proposes, instead, a tactile cinema where pleasure is shaped by masochistic excitation.

In chapter one, I will show how *Natural Born Killers* embodies on both narrative and stylistic levels, an acerbic critique of a contemporary American media who portray violence as spectacle. I will argue that the film's critique is embodied by its use of parody and visual excess which work in tandem in the film to satirize the media's spectacular representations of violence. This critique is, however, predicated upon a conceit which troubles the film's political logic; *Natural Born Killers* critiques the spectacle that media representations make of violence through the staging of another violent spectacle. I will further argue that *Natural Born Killers* is grounded in excess and, as a result, becomes a cruel cinema which exceeds its own political intentionality, in spite of its inclusion of a coda that attempts to curtail the pleasures of the film's excess, on the one hand, and delimit its interpretive play towards its political telos, on the other.

Proceeding from chapter one, I will explore how the film's paradoxes, doublings and excesses produce an alternate politics which open up questions relating to cinema spectatorship and the political efficacy of cinema.

In chapter two, I will therefore be concerned with establishing how the aesthetic excess, borne of *Natural Born Killers*' spectacle of violence, both; reinscribes the fascination with violent spectacle which the film has attempted to repudiate, and exemplifies Shaviro's notion of tactile cinema.

Chapter three will focus on the unpleasure which, I will assert, lies at the heart of the pleasure and fascination in viewing cinematic spectacles of violence, and which further accounts for the appellation, cruel cinema. An explication of masochism will be central to the theoretical orientation of this chapter and I will make use of *Clover* (1992) and Shaviro's approaches to spectatorship because they share an investment in the logic of masochism albeit within divergent epistemologies

Chapter four will shift away from an analysis of the film per sé, and what the logic of the film asserts, to a more theoretical conception of the work of politics in film, particularly as it pertains to masochism and excess.

I would like to note that the report often moves towards but, for the purposes of space and coherence, has to step away from, questions of gender and in many ways the conclusions I make here could be further complicated by the film's gendering of masochism.

Chapter One

NATURAL BORN KILLERS:

PARODY AND EXCESS.

"NBK is the most excessive, the most exasperating, most...let's just say it's the most movie in quite some time."

Richard Corliss 1994(b)

NBK is director Oliver Stone's adaptation of Quentin Tarantino's original screenplay. With *NBK*, Stone revises the quintessential American "road-movie" by fusing its antecedents into what Hampton calls, an "avant-pulp" collage which follows the exploits of a pair of, quite literally, "love-sick" serial killers, Mickey and Mallory Knox. The couple take a satirical joyride through the American landscape leaving a trail of carnage in their wake. The film's at once comic and grotesque representations of violence, coupled with the remorselessness of its protagonists, proved to be predictably controversial.¹ *NBK* was produced in a context in which there was enormous concern with the potential of representations of graphic violence to spill over, beyond the cinema screen into society, by inducing those who viewed it to re-enact the violence.

The commonsense view of the relationship between events and their representation, within the broad parameters of the news/actuality genre, is that there is a fairly close

¹ For a discussion of the controversy which the film produced in Britain, see Mick Brownfield's (1995) article, "Violence" in *Sight and Sound*, June 1995, where he describes the critical response to the film within the British media as well as the distribution and certification difficulties it faced. For perspectives on *NBK*'s reception in the United States, see Michael Schnayerson's article in *Vanity Fair*, July, 1996 and Richard Corliss' (1994a) *Time* magazine article, "Murder Gets an R; Bad Language Gets NC-17".

correspondence between the two. However, television news is constructed ironically; on the one hand its discourse and mode of address constructs its verisimilitude and veneer of truthfulness, whilst on the other, it is presented within a continuum of programming produced for its audience's entertainment. This is a contradiction which *NBK* examines, most obviously, by the inclusion of a coda that comprises; a giddy montage of news footage clips of O.J. Simpson in court, Tonya Harding falling onto the ice during a skating practice, a tearful Eric Menendez offering testimony in court, scenes of the burning of David Koresh's compound in Waco and an interview with Rodney King in the wake of the Los Angeles riots. This footage is spliced together in an imitation of a channel - surfing viewer. By including this coda, the film strongly suggests that the media, by tailoring these events to fit into the discourse of the news genre and by reducing them all to spectacle, does violence to the real by effacing the differences between, and complexities within, these social dramas. In *Television Culture*, Fiske describes the functioning of television news as follows; "the first struggle of the news is to impose the order of culture upon the polymorphous nature of "the real." The news text is engaged in a constant struggle to contain the multifarious events and their polysemic potential within its own conventions [...] the type of stories, the forms that they will take, and the program (sic) structure into which they will be inserted are all determined long before any of the events of the day occur" (Fiske 1988:150). *NBK* both exemplifies and critiques this operation through the coda. The coda, as should now be clear, is central to the film's political and social critique, its importance within the film's

political logic will, however, be held in abeyance until the concluding chapter of the report

NBK's argument about the relationship between media representations of violence as spectacle is buttressed by a binary which is of the film's own imagining. The binary in question is between "real" violence, which the film assumes is not spectacular, and the spectacle which the media make out of their representations of violence. I want to suggest that, *NBK* is predicated upon a notion of an "originary" violence which is then made into spectacle by the media in the process of its representation. It is my contention that there is, within *NBK*, an a priori assumption of "real" violence, in other words a violence which is not mediated and I would argue that this is most strongly suggested by the film's coda. The referentialism which informs *NBK*'s coda; the separation of this material from the fictional world constructed by the film, implies its binary logic and suggests that the notion of "real" violence is the imaginary of the film.²

I will now move onto a more detailed discussion of *NBK*'s parodic critique of media representations of violence.

² I would like to note that the constraints placed on this report preclude a discussion of the debate surrounding notions of the "real" and the "imaginary". My omission of this debate should not be read as a disavowal of the importance of such questions in this context.

NATURAL BORN KILLERS AS PARODY

Linda Hutcheon (1989a) provides a definition of parody which constitutes a reworking of commonly held notions of parody as “ridiculing imitation”. Hutcheon detects limitations in prevailing explanations of textual appropriation within modern artistic practice. She therefore argues for a theory of parody which is broader and hence more adequate to modern art; because modern parody is remarkable in its panoply of intent, ranging from the ironic and playful to the scornful and ridiculing. Parody, in Hutcheon’s terms, is a “form of imitation, but imitation characterised by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text. [...] Parody is, in another formulation, repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity. In this it goes beyond mere allusive variation” (Hutcheon 1989(a):88).

Modern parody constitutes a productive-creative approach to tradition in its almost obsessive intertextuality, “quotation or borrowing like this is not meant to signal only similarity. It is not a matter of nostalgic imitation of past models; it is a stylistic confrontation, a modern recoding which establishes difference at the heart of similarity. No integration into a new context can avoid altering meaning, and perhaps even value” (Hutcheon 1989(a):90). Whether a given text is parodic, or not, is not solely determined by its similarity to, or repetition of, the coded discourse of the text to which it refers; it is principally determined by how the texts are *not* the same.

Modern parody, in its recuperation of difference, therefore acts as a formal refunctioning; “an ironic playing with multiple conventions and extended repetition with critical difference” (Hutcheon 1989(a):89). It is the ironic “trans-contextualisation” - the complex revision and inversion of texts - which separates parody from pastiche, in Hutcheon’s terms. For Hutcheon (ibid), whereas pastiche is an agglomeration of names, parody, when tied to postmodernism, becomes a renaming. Parody embodies both a copying of the name and alters it, in other words, it embodies both *mimesis* and *alterity* and could be a kind of simulacra.

A simulacra is a copy with an internalised difference which makes us question the very notion of a “copy” and an “original” in the first place.³ Michael Newman, in his discussion of parodic discourse, implicitly draws on this understanding of the simulacra and traces the distinctions between different modes of parodic discourse as the difference between “parody which maintains the authority and the originary status of the model or generic code; parody which questions the assumption of authority and origin, so that the

³ Newman (1990:47-48) summarises the place and significance of the simulacra within contemporary theories of simulation as follows: “The term simulation has entered the discourse around art and mass culture from the writings of French sociologist Jean Baudrillard. [...] rather than interpreting phenomena in terms of structuralism, i.e. abstracting a structure, Baudrillard sees the contemporary condition as one in which phenomena themselves as effects, are generated out of the structural code. This is what he means by simulation: Whereas representation tries to absorb simulation by interpreting it as false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation as itself a simulacrum. The representation of the real is replaced by simulation governed by the code. Gilles Deleuze in *Logique du Sens* (1969), describes the simulacra thus; “The simulacrum is not degraded copy, rather it contains a positive power which negates *both original and copy, both model and reproduction* [...] no model resists the vertigo of the simulacrum. And the privileged point of view has no more existence than does the object held in common by all points of view. There is no possible hierarchy [...] Similarity and resemblance now have as their essence only the condition of being simulated, that is, of expressing the operation of the simulacrum. selection is no longer possible [...] Simulation designates the power to produce and effect”.

parodic text enacts their displacement or decentering, and parody which begins with the assumption of the impossibility of authority, origin, full presence and so on” (Newman 1990:48). According to Newman, the latter is the discourse of postmodernism.

Newman’s definition of postmodern parody resonates with Hutcheon who wants to argue for: “calling [...] complex forms of trans-contextualisation and inversion by the name of parody. It is indeed a form of artistic recycling, but a very particular form with very complex textual intentionality [...] I want to retain the term parody for this structural and functional relationship of critical revision, partly because I feel that a word like quotation is too weak and carries (etymologically and historically) none of those parodic resonances of distance and difference that we have found to be present in modern art’s reference to its past” (Hutcheon 1989(a):97). If postmodern parody is repetition with a critical difference then, I now want to focus on what order of repetition and difference *NBK* achieves in terms of its parodic satire.⁴

NBK’s critique of the violence which media representations do to the real is realised through its sustained satire of the television media. The film’s satire is primarily achieved through its use of parody. Hutcheon marks the difference between parody and satire as the difference between a text whose target is another “form of coded discourse,” as is the case with parody, and satire, whose focus is both moral, social and ameliorative in its

⁴ I would like to note that, once again, given the constraints of the report, I will not enter into the “postmodernism” debate. At this point I am interested in Hutcheon and Newman’s notions of postmodern parody insofar as they open up the parodic in a way that helps us to think through non-literary parody and the tradition of parody, coming out of literary theory, that sees it as a rhetorical trope.

intention. She qualifies this distinction by stating that parody may be used for satirical purposes. This, I want to argue, is how *NBK*'s critique of the complicity between television spectator and spectacle functions with respect to the film's memorable metatext, a parody of the revered American situation comedy, *I Love Lucy*.⁵ *NBK*'s narrative is interrupted by a parody of the sitcom genre in the form of its own warped sitcom, *I Love Mallory*. This metatext is sealed off from the rest of the film by virtue of its opening title and closing credits. In its parody of the sitcom genre, *I Love Mallory* repeats the codes of the genre and then takes to a perverse extreme, the sitcom's construction of a patriarchal world.⁶

I Love Mallory focuses on a nuclear family, as is customary in the sitcom genre, but this is not *The Brady Bunch*. Ed, Mallory's monstrous father, is a corpulent and grotesque monster who sexually abuses his daughter and violently assaults his wife, whilst her mother, a caricature of a saccharine and docile sitcom-wife, turns a blind eye to his sexual abuse of Mallory. Edie McLurg, the actress who portrays Mallory's mother inverts the role she played in a sitcom called *The Hogan Family*⁷ by taking that character to the extreme. Her voice which was shiny and high-pitched in the "real" sitcom is now excessively so, and her hair is a hideous bouffant nest made out of a purple polyester-

⁵ *I Love Lucy*, is a much-loved American situation comedy which featured comedic icon, Lucille Ball.

⁶ Many, though not all, of the most influential American situation comedies are predicated upon a well-defined patriarchal order, even when the programme is ostensibly attempting to represent an alternative version of the mythological American family. eg. *Father Knows Best*, *The Cosby Show* and *My Two Dads*.

⁷ *The Hogan Family* was a long-running American situation comedy that featured another 'alternative' version of the American family; an airline pilot father whose children were minded by his sister after the death of his wife.

like substance. There is a double operation at work here, on the one hand the roles which the actors play are ludically repeated, but on the other hand, there is a simultaneous “emptying-out” of the code. Edie McLurg mimics a role she played in another fictional text and Woody Harrelson, the actor perhaps best known for his role as the naïve and hapless, Wood, in another venerated American sitcom, *Cheers*, assails the viewer’s expectations by now portraying psychotic Mickey Knox.

The irony of the perversion of the conventions of the sitcom genre is enhanced each time an inappropriate laughtrack accompanies an abusive remark Ed directs at his wife or daughter as though it were the punchline of a joke. For example, his comment to Mallory: “you’re not going out in that dress, you’ll end up peddling your ass you stupid bitch” is accompanied by wild and hysterical canned laughter. This is an ironic comment on the “unreality” of the staging of situation comedies in which the “audience” laughter is usually simulated. The ironies in this sequence are multiple; not only is this a perversion of the typically sacrosanct relationship between father and daughter within the confines of the sitcom universe, but the laughtrack, although appropriate to the genre, is an altogether inappropriate response to the remark it accompanies. Mallory’s disgust at her father’s utterance is intensified when he begins to massage her buttocks and she responds by recoiling from his touch. The world of the sitcom is recreated and then unceremoniously turned on its head as the viewer is presented with a perversion of the codes of an immediately identifiable genre.⁸ The perversion of the sitcom format are

⁸ Although I make use of both perversion and inversion in my discussion of the *I Love Mallory* sequence in *NBK*, I am not suggesting that either term necessarily equals subversion in this context.

intensified by the excesses of the actors hyperbolic performance style on the one hand and the visual excesses of the production design on the other. A frame of the type of living area characteristic of the genre is constructed and then saturated with a distorted, gaudy and kitsch production design.

I Love Mallory repeats one of situation comedy's generic tropes when Mallory defies her father by taking a joyride with the boyfriend she has been forbidden to see. In a "real" sitcom all would be happily resolved and the severity of the transgression would be underplayed in the interests of an amusing resolution to narrative disequilibrium. In *I Love Mallory*, however, the father immediately recognises Mickey and Mallory's transgression as a threat to the law of the father, he responds by dispatching the police - his surrogates - after the couple. Mickey is, consequently, punished by his imprisonment for theft and the patriarchal order appears to be restored.

This restoration is short-lived, however, because Mickey escapes from prison and returns with Mallory, to brutally murder both parents. Mallory's father is beaten with an iron bar and drowned in a fish tank, and her mother is burned alive in her bed. The parody of a familial comedy in *I Love Mallory* becomes an explicit and turbulent literalisation of the Oedipal drama, something which sitcoms are eager to repress.

In the *I Love Mallory* setpiece, the film's repetition of, and difference from, the codes of the sitcom genre is marked by aesthetic excess and a perversion of the sitcom world's

paradigm of patriarchal domesticity. I would add that the actor's performances, the set design and the cartoon-like violence are so hyperbolic that the film's miming of its quoted discourse is so distinct from *I Love Lucy*, for example, that in a strange way it is almost as though the code has not been repeated. What I want to suggest is that the difference that makes the difference, within *NBK*'s repetition of the sitcom's code, lies in its hyperbole and excess, rather than a more controlled repetition of the code in which things might slowly spin out of control.

I Love Mallory is immediately succeeded by an exceptionally rapid montage of visuals including those of a near catatonic television viewer and an excerpt from a Coca Cola advertisement. This series of images functions as a comment on what preceded it and links the parody of a particular television genre to the film's broader critique of the manner in which representation does violence to the real. This montage also implies that television produces torpid spectators who unthinkingly consume the spectacle which television provides. The virulence of *NBK*'s critique of what it presents as duped audiences and avaricious television producers, is evident in the film's representation of television spectators and producers. This element of the film's critique of media representations of violence as entertaining spectacle is evident in Wayne Gale's⁹ comment; "those nitwits out there in zombieland won't remember if we used that shot before! Its junkfood for the brains, you know filler, fodder!" The film's satire of tabloid

⁹ The Wayne Gale character is a thinly veiled satire of Geraldo Riviera, one of contemporary America's most notorious "tabloid" talk show hosts.

journalism is effected by its parody of tabloid “journalists” in the guise of the Wayne Gale character.

NBK's critique of the television audience who mindlessly valorise serial killers and the media who arouse their fascination is predicated upon an hypodermic model of television reception. The hypodermic model posits that television viewers are passive recipients of television programming and view television in a haze of false consciousness.

Further evidence of the film's conviction that television viewers are uncritical “zombies” may be located in its scathing satire of “Mickey and Mallory's frenzied “fans” - from London to Tokyo - who are presented as the “nitwit-like zombies” Wayne Gale refers to. Mickey and Mallory's fans make statements such as the following: “Mickey and Mallory are the best thing to happen to mass murder since Manson” and “I don't believe in mass murder and that shit, don't get us wrong yeah you know we respect human life and all, but if I would be a mass murderer I would be Mickey and Mallory.” This sequence foregrounds the film's criticism of how the television media's representation of violence and serial killers as an entertaining spectacle has as its consequence a dissonance between the assumed “reality” of violence and its representation as entertaining spectacle. This element of *NBK*'s critique is underscored in a scene in which Mickey and Mallory murder Ed. They disturb him while he watches a wrestling match on television. Ed is presented as the quintessential television “zombie” by virtue of his fanatical immersion in the spectacle of violence produced in the wrestling match. In a drunken outrage he shouts at the screen; “come on there's no action here what'r'n I

watching two fucking fags! Kill him! - Kill the fucking Inoian!” Ironically, no sooner has he uttered these words than Mickey arrives and kills him with the brutality he had found lacking in the television wrestler. This, of course, constitutes a kind of poetic justice meted out by the film; a viewer who delights in a violent spectacle on television is killed by a murderer who later becomes a media phenomenon himself. The irony is underlined because it is common knowledge that the violence in wrestling matches, such as the one which Ed is viewing, is staged. The violence is therefore simulated for the pleasure of the viewer. Here *NBK* performs an ironic inversion in the service of its satire of the televisual representation of violence as spectacle.

Through the Wayne Gale character and his programme, *American Maniacs*, *NBK* parodies the lurid “true-crime” documentary genre in the *America’s Most Wanted* and *Hard Copy* mould.¹⁰ In *NBK*’s diegesis the sensationalism and melodrama of that program’s raggedy dramatisations are repeated and, as with *I Love Mallory*, they are then taken to an almost hysterical extreme.

American Maniacs begins with a montage of images of notorious serial killers; Charles Manson, Richard Ramirez and Charles Whitman. The montage implicates programming of this nature in the construction of the mythology and cult of personality surrounding these figures, who are currently feature prominently within American popular culture.

¹⁰ *America’s Most Wanted* and *Hard Copy* are true-crime programmes which are immensely popular in the United States. They are disparagingly referred to as tabloid shows and have a reputation for engaging in questionable “news-gathering” practices. *NBK*’s, *American Maniacs*, is modelled on these two programmes.

Manson et al are the “stars” of *American Maniacs* and their celebrity status in the context of this type of programming is ridiculed by *NBK* when Mickey Knox calls Charles Manson “The King” in his interview with Gale.¹¹ Gale is portrayed as an egomaniac who, as the opening credits of *American Maniacs* illustrates, not only presents the program, but also writes, directs and produces it. This is a thinly veiled satire of Geraldo Riviera, the *ne plus ultra* of tabloid television, and Robin Leach, the Australian-born host of *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*.

American Maniacs' parody of the “true-life” crime television genre includes a satire of the machinations of its producers as evidenced in the following scene in the film: rows of television monitors reel through footage of Mickey and Mallory during one of their killing sprees. In one of the clips a cyclist is shot by Mickey and Mallory and then acrobatically cartwheels through the air. Gale and his editor view this piece of film but are concerned only with whether or not the footage will improve *American Maniacs*' ratings. The scene of the cyclist tumbling through the air is absurdly comical and in making it so, *NBK* points to its and the audience's complicity in the construction of scenes of violence as pleasurable spectacle. Gale may be crass, vainglorious and unscrupulous, but he knows how to get good ratings and that's all that counts in the television firmament. This hunger for high ratings is clearly signalled when he interviews

¹¹ This remark is made during Gale's prison interview with Mickey and is a direct reference to Geraldo Riviera's 1982 interview with Charles Manson.

Mickey after the "Superbowl" because that is the one evening when more Americans watch the same program - a violent spectacle of another order - than at any other time.¹²

In its parody of tabloid television "journalists" and programs such as *America's Most Wanted*, *NBK* presents a satirical commentary on the increasing profile of this kind of programming in the mainstream of contemporary American media. The film's coda reiterates this criticism in its reference to events such as the Tonya Harding/Nancy Kerrigan fracas and the Lorena Bobbitt trial. Here the distinctions between respected or "hard" news media and the so-called tabloid media were seemingly blurred, given that they paid equal attention to the same news stories and competed feverishly for the next most salacious detail or interview. Public discourse around the time these events were reported demonstrated a concern with the erosion of the traditional boundaries between these two strands of the media, because both branches of the media represented these events as a spectacle, not unlike a wrestling match; and, in so doing also created the frenzy which surrounded them.

NBK's coda critiques the manner in which the television media, in particular, exult the banal - the Tonya Harding incident - alongside more pressing social crises, such as the Rodney King beating. Events of disparate socio-political importance are therefore treated in the same fashion. While *NBK* states that the American public are complicit in the construction of these violent spectacles, it apports greater blame onto the media

¹² The Superbowl, is the moniker for the most important and highest "rated" televised football game in America.

because they do not simply reflect the public's fascination with these spectacles, rather, they produce it. I will pursue this line of argument in my concluding chapter when analysing the importance and function of the coda within *NBK*'s political trajectory.

The most sustained irony in *NBK* is, however, to be found in the film's title. Mickey and Mallory are not "Natural Born Killers", they are media-generated ones instead. Mickey and Mallory are pointedly aware of the performativity and spectacular effects of the murders they commit, it is as if they are executed with an audience in mind. The film, in its inclusion of footage from other violent films, such as *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Scarface*, strongly suggests that Mickey and Mallory are products of a world saturated with such imagery and, therefore, their murders need to exceed the dazzling spectacles of violence which figure prominently within the popular imagination. Mickey and Mallory have to out do *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Wild Bunch*, and this accounts for the film's excessive and hyperbolic representation of violence as well as its reclamation of avant-garde film techniques which, in turn, had been plundered by *MTV*.¹³ The excesses of *NBK*'s visuality have been described by Hampton as: "a phantasmagoria of aesthetic anarchy" (1994:10). This is exemplified by the film's opening scene in which a bullet stops in mid-air and whirls furiously before continuing its trajectory and exploding into the head of its human target.

¹³ E. Ann Kaplan has argued that "what is new about much recent popular culture - especially *MTV* - and what marks it as different from high modernism is the very intermingling of modernist/avant-garde and popular aesthetic modes" (Kaplan 1990:38). "Some videos on the channel use the new form in ways reminiscent of a transgressive/modernist mode. They use narrative in differing degrees and in various ways, much as did the great modernists, and they employ realist or non-realist strategies as befits a particular moment in a text" (ibid).

The film's aesthetic excesses are also a consequence of its constitution as a celluloid bricolage with its barrage of sound, frenzied jump cuts, multiple camera speeds, projected images, animation, overexposed and grainy footage, computer-image morphing stock documentary and found footage which are either projected alongside, or next to, characters in hallucinogenic montage sequences.¹⁴ Hampton, writing in *Film Comment*, posits that *NBK*'s trans-contextualisation is deliberately located within the realm of popular culture, a popular culture which has swallowed whole the avant-garde film techniques pioneered by the likes of Stan Brakhage: "She uses layers of association to comment back and forth on each other, but they aren't literary-theoretical, they're pop-mythic (Mickey and Mallory aren't the children of Marx and Coca Cola, but of Gary Gilmore and *MTV*)" (Hampton 1994:4).¹⁵

Mickey and Mallory insist on leaving one surviving witness who can "tell" the media about how they murdered their victims. These murders can then be simulated on television and the spectacle which they create is, thus, replayed for the titillation of the

¹⁴ Bricolage is a design technique "where fragments of already existing signs, objects and materials are combined in a single work. The *bricoleur* (artists/designer) draws from existing stocks not so much to make meaning of them as to show their unfixed or decentred state in the post-modern era. The anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss used the term decentred in his 1962 book *The Savage Mind* as a metaphor for mythical thought, but since the late 1970's it has come to mean the appropriation and quotation of images and fragments in all forms of the arts" (McDermott 1992:62).

¹⁵ Stan Brakhage is a prolific avant-garde filmmaker whose experimentation with the cinematic apparatus is geared towards a destabilization of our patterns of recognition. "Brakhage once summarised the malign mechanics of TV watching as "robbing any-every one of presence and/or the present as a gift, in his ongoing harangue, television is not only a replacement for direct visual apprehension of the world but a screen that warps as it inhibits the child's unfettered processes of imagination" (Arthur 1996:74).

television viewer. Because of the media, the films suggests, Mickey and Mallory are given an efficacy beyond their own means and with the help of the media they become global celebrity outlaws. This imbrication/confusion of the media with serial murderers and the sign with its referent is described by Freeland (1995:135) in her assessment of “Realist Horror” where she notes that both Ted Bundy and the Menendez brothers acquired “fan-clubs” in the course of their respective trials. In response to the argument that the only way in which to undo “the damaging myths of fascination with monstrous killers is to argue [...] that they are not extraordinarily monstrous” Freeland(ibid) asserts:

My response here is somewhat Baudrillardian or cynical: it seems simply too late or impossible to undo the kinds of mechanisms that currently exist for making such figures famous, for portraying Bundy for instance by the “sexiest man alive” as *People* magazine once dubbed Mark Harmon, or for instant hysterical recreations of disasters at Waco (ibid).¹⁶

NBK shares with Hutcheon’s definition of postmodern parody a critical attitude toward the coded discourses to which it refers, but I would argue that *NBK*’s critical attitude is bound up with morality. The film’s politics does not tally with the politics of postmodern parody, because the film is essentially satirical, and as Hutcheon has noted, satire is distinguished by its moral impulse. *NBK*’s politics is bound up with questions of morality and unlike Newman’s postmodern parody it does not make us question the notion of an original in the first place, given that a notion of originary violence haunts this film.

¹⁶ Mark Harmon portrayed Ted Bundy in a made-for-television film, *A Deliberate Stranger* and a film about David Koresh was flighted in the same week as the fire which ended his standoff with the law enforcement agencies who had besieged his compound in Waco.

NBK is therefore critical of media representations of violence as spectacle, but it is not sufficiently critical of the act of representation itself nor is it sufficiently aware of its own imbrication in the very circuit of media representations of violence from which it wishes, via the coda, to distance itself. *NBK*'s politics is therefore very much a politics of morality and not, I would argue, a postmodern rumination on representation.¹⁷ There is, therefore, an element of the postmodern parodic paradigm which *NBK* does not achieve and that element is outlined by Hutcheon as follows:

Postmodern parody is both deconstructively critical and constructively creative, paradoxically making us aware of both the limits and the powers of representation - in any medium" (Hutcheon 1989(b):98).

THE PARADOX OF *NBK*'S HEART

As mentioned earlier, *NBK*'s critique of spectacle through spectacle is fundamentally paradoxical and this contradiction points to the double-coded politics of parody. The underlying dictum of all parodic discourse, according to Hutcheon, is the "paradox of its authorised transgression of norms" (Hutcheon 1989(a):99). She makes an analogy between Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the world of the carnival with its social inversions and postmodern parody. The paradox of legalised subversion central to all postmodern parody is a consequence of the repetition and recognizability of the codes/conventions which parody subverts. "As a form of ironic representation, parody is doubly coded in

¹⁷ As already indicated, my discussion of *NBK*'s politics and the coda will be elaborated upon in the concluding chapter.

political terms; it both legitimises and subverts that which it parodies” (Hutcheon 1989(b):101).

The authorised transgression central to parody explains the paradox at the heart of *NBK* and accounts for its critique of spectacle through spectacle. Having selected parody as the vehicle for its satire of representations of violence as spectacle, *NBK* had to inevitably repeat the spectacle in order to invert it. In its parody of tabloid “news” programmes via the *American Maniacs* sequences *NBK* becomes part of, what I would term, a circuit of enhancement in which the connections between sign and referent are both complex and ramified. The intricacy of this circuit of enhancement is suggested by Freeland who provides the following examples;

Numerous film characters (like Henry)¹⁸ are based on real killers, and there are also docudrama films about real killers (like Ted Bundy), and re-created “reality TV” shows enacting deeds of real killers (like George Hennard). In addition, real killers in the news (like Jeffrey Dahmer) may be described in terms of fictional killers. John Hinckley Jr. committed his crime after obsessively identifying with film character Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver*. Bickle’s character was modelled on real attempted assassin Arthur Bremer, who was himself inspired by the film character Alex in *A Clockwork Orange*. Hinckley corresponded with serial killer Ted Bundy (before his execution) - subject of his own movie, *Deliberate Stranger* (1986) where he was played by *People* magazine’s “Sexiest Man Alive”, Mark Harmon” (Freeland 1995:134).¹⁹

¹⁸ Here Freeland refers to the film *Henry, Portrait of Serial Killer* which is based on the life of serial killer, Henry Lucas.

¹⁹ In chapter four I make more of *NBK*’s imbrication with the media’s making of celebrities out of serial murderers as well as the fact that it is part of the circuit outlined by Freeland here, given that it is implicated in a number of “real” homicides.

Victor Burgin's point about the complicity of contemporary aesthetic practice with the media would seem to augment Freeland's description of the interweaving of "fact and fiction" described above:

modernist pretensions to artistic independence have been [...] subverted by the demonstration of the necessarily intertextual nature of the production of meaning; we can no longer unproblematically assume that *Art* is somehow "outside" of the complex of other representational practices and institutions with which it is contemporary - particularly, today, those which constitute what we so problematically call the "mass media" (Burgin cited in Hutcheon 1989(b):100).

NBK wants to critique media spectacles of violence using satirical parody, but in order to do so, it has to enhance and make more spectacular its representations of violence in order to show up the spectacular effects of the news media's (whether tabloid or "hard news") representations of violence as spectacle. This operation is well illustrated by the *American Maniacs* sequences within the film.

There is an act of violence, within the fictional world of the film, which is first "reported" in both print and electronic news media as entertainment and spectacle. Then Wayne Gale and *American Maniacs* pick up on the story, but in order to put a "spin" on it and make their "reportage" even more entertaining than the "hard news" Wayne Gale decides that *American Maniacs* will recreate the murders. As is the case in all television programming which recreates or simulates an event, there is a simultaneous enhancement which occurs.²⁰ Therefore, in *American Maniacs*' recreation of Mickey and Mallory's

²⁰ Freeland elaborates on the operations of the realist horror narratives of "reality-based" television programming which *NBK*, through its *American Maniacs* sequences, parodies: "reality television shows [...] revel in the horrific spectacle for some minutes before offering up a(sic)

murder of a police officer, the actors who portray the fictional Mickey and Mallory are both more attractive. Mickey is portrayed by the apparently ubiquitous Mark Harmon, *People* magazine's "Sexiest Man Alive" and Mallory is now blonde, tanned and rather more muscular and curvaceous than the "real" Mallory.²¹ The process of "enhancement" does not stop here, in *American Maniacs* recreated scenes of Mickey and Mallory's murders are marked by their eroticisation; the camera virtually leers at "Mallory's" body: at one stage it is placed near her crotch while she rests a shotgun on her thigh, then the camera "caresses" her tanned body while she shoots a passing cyclist. The scene is accompanied by "up-tempo" music and its spectacular elements are enhanced even further, for example: when the cyclist is shot he somersaults through the air in such an exaggerated manner that it becomes grotesquely comical.

In order to parody the spectacular effects of the kind of programming to which *NBK* refers, it enhanced and took the spectacle to an even greater extreme. *NBK*'s parody in *American Maniacs* becomes so hyperbolic that it not only forms part of the circuit of enhancement just described, but in its excess it becomes what I will describe as cruel cinema in a following chapter. I would go so far as to say that *NBK* not only repeats the

happy resolution: the man who put a nail into his heart with a nailgun is saved by the hospital team; the Hawaiian radio broadcaster during the hurricane gets married over the air to provide everyone (with) a reason to celebrate after the disaster." (1995:138)

²¹ Freeland notices this very operation within filmic representations of "real" serial killers: "We have begun to take the spectacle to extreme forms [...] when we make the repulsive one-eyed short and dumpy Henry Lucas into the handsome Brandoesque Michael Rooker, or the cannibal Lecter into the fascinating genius played by Anthony Hopkins in an Oscar-winning performance. [...] *Henry Portrait of a Serial Killer*, glamorises and ertocizes its central figure at the same time that it raises for the audience real and disturbing issues about our fascination with him and with this spectacle." (1995:136)

aesthetic and generic codes of the media in their representation of violence as spectacle but in many instances actually perfects them. The film is enamoured with many of the representational practices and techniques it sets out to critique, as evidenced in the film's closing credits sequence which comprises a stunning display of editing: a myriad of images, from desert flowers to dragon's heads, form a montage that is accompanied by Leonard Cohen's song, "The Future".

The risk of any aesthetic transgression lies in the reiteration of the very codes which are being transgressed. Although parodic imitation is reliant upon ironic inversion and differentiation, it nevertheless is a repetition and thus reiteration, of established codes, conventions and norms. As I will show in the following chapters, *NBK's* parodic discourse ultimately does not, I believe, subvert that which it parodies but, by virtue of its excesses, intensifies the spectacle of, and fascination with, violence to such a degree that the film becomes a kind of cruel cinema which compels one to rethink established notions of the relationship between spectacles of violence and cinema spectators.

Chapter Two

FASCINATION IN THE FACE OF VIOLENT

SPECTACLE

"Natural Born Killers is like a slap in the face"
Roger Ebert. 1994

SPECTACLE AND THE FRENZY OF THE VISIBLE

In chapter one, I argued that *NBK* constructs a parody out of extravagant scenes of violence in order to critique the media's construction of entertaining spectacle in their representation of violence. I also argued that the film's use of excess and spectacle, in order to critique excess and spectacle, results in a contradiction which rests at the film's core. It has been argued that the consequence of this contradiction is, as Hal Hinson (1994) notes, that: "it degenerates into the very thing it criticizes."¹ In this chapter I will be concerned with exploring the consequences of this contradiction for cinema spectatorship.

Through the placement of the opening montage and the scene which follows directly thereafter, *NBK* stages the very "to-be-looked-at-ness" which constitutes cinematic spectacle - particularly violent spectacles - in a manner which foregrounds and literalises

¹ Hinson, H. (1994). "Natural Born Killers." [http. @ washingtonpost. com](http://www.washingtonpost.com).

the mechanics of cinematic spectacle as theorised by Laura Mulvey.² *NBK* halts the forward drive of the film's narrative in a manner which draws attention to the operation of spectacle as the locus of the pleasure in the visual, which is regarded as a substantial component of the pleasure in viewing cinema. Read in conjunction with the body of the film, the prologue makes clear that what is to ensue is a cogitation on the cultural image repertoire of violence in its most spectacular forms, hence, the film's constant use of the rear-projection of images from other seminal cinematic representations of violence most notably; *The Wild Bunch*, *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Scarface*.

NBK commences with a black and white image of a wild dog next to a country highway followed by a sequence of images - a train, a canyon and a snake - which have all been filmed through a red filtered lens. This is succeeded by a cut to a technicolour image of a dilapidated roadside-diner sign. The entire screen is then taken up by a vintage black and white television set with an excerpt from a quintessentially American television programme, *Leave it to Beaver*.³ A hand reaches into the frame, turns the television's dial

²The influence and importance of Mulvey's formulation of cinema spectatorship is summarised by Pam Cook as follows: "In an influential article [...] Laura Mulvey focused on the drive to look so important to visual pleasure in the cinema, but from a feminist perspective absent in Metz's work. Using a similar model of an uneasy and labile relationship between the forward drive of narrative and the potential of the static image to resist it, she proposed that in the classical Hollywood film these two functions were almost always gender specific, reflecting and perpetuating the values of a world ordered by sexual imbalance (Mulvey, L. 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' 1975). In other words, the narrative role of making things happen and controlling events usually fell to a male character, while the female star, often virtually peripheral to fictional events, remained more passively decorative. She functioned as the locus of masculine erotic desire, a spectacle to be looked at by both male characters and spectators" (1985:248). Mulvey's theorisation of spectacle and narrative has not only been revised by Mulvey herself, but has also been extended and challenged by theorists working within psychoanalytic film theory, as well as those from without: Tania Modleski (1988) would be one example of the former category and Steven Shaviro (1994) the latter.

³ *Leave it to Beaver*, is a well known American situation comedy which is often derided for its "wholesome" and some would say "unrealistic" representation of family life.

and then channel-surfs through a rapid series of images including an uncomfortable looking Richard Nixon. It ends with an image of a monstrous head, mouth wide-open and screaming. The camera zooms out and reveals that the television set is inside the roadside diner previously alluded to by the signpost along the highway. Mickey and Mallory Knox are sitting at the counter and place their orders with a waitress.

A choreographed exhibition of frenetic violence ensues when Mallory, having removed her jacket and inserted a coin in a jukebox, engages in a seductive dance which draws the attention of the diner's other patrons, who are all men. Mallory's dance is intercut with sustained close-up shots of the men in the diner who watch her lasciviously. As if to emphasize that the viewing of Mallory's performance is erotically charged, at one point the screen is filled with an extreme close-up of the transfixed eyes of one of the leering men.

One of the men sidles up to Mallory and dances next to her whilst positioning and manipulating his beer bottle in a manner which suggests an erect penis, she responds by asking coyly, "Are you flirting with me?" When no reply is forthcoming she changes the record on the jukebox and takes up a pugilist's stance before landing a number of teasing punches on his body and a vicious kick to his groin. She becomes increasingly aggressive and smashes the beer bottle in her unwelcome dance partner's face.

What follows is a series of rapid cuts between Mallory and Mickey. Whilst Mallory proceeds to beat the man to death by smashing his head into the walls and through the windows of the diner, Mickey guts one of the other patrons with a knife. There is a cut back to Mallory who, now clearly out of control, is jumping up and down on the lifeless body of her victim and screaming hysterically.

An overweight cook in an unflattering hairnet emerges from the kitchen and attempts to attack Mickey with a gigantic meat cleaver, her plan is foiled, however, when Mickey shoots her. A companion of the now dead men almost manages to escape, but he is literally stopped dead in his tracks when Mickey propels a buck knife through the air shattering the window of the diner before slicing the fleeing man's back open. The blade spins through the air in slow motion to the accompaniment of Puccini's *Madam Butterfly* and once it makes contact with the man's back, the film returns to normal speed. Mickey pauses to eat a piece of the key-lime pie, which he had ordered earlier, while the waitress makes an unsuccessful attempt to take advantage of this pause by sneaking out of the diner, but Mallory notices and yells, "No! There's no escaping here!"

After the chaos of the murders, Mickey and Mallory inform the two survivors, the waitress and the last of the diner's patrons that, as always, one of them will be left alive to bear testimony to their performance by telling the police and the media about what they have just witnessed. In order to decide who that will be, Mallory plays a teasing game of "eeney-meeneey-miney-mo". The waitress loses and she is killed by a bullet

which bores through the coffee pot she had held up as shield before it penetrates her forehead and splatters her brain all over the wall behind her.

La Vie en Rose strikes up on cue and the camera whirls around Mickey and Mallory who embrace and dance whilst a spectacular fireworks display is projected behind them. As the fireworks explode they are accompanied by a gunshot which halts the music and signals a transition to the opening credits. There is a simultaneous cut to a blue sky which momentarily takes up the entire screen before fake blood oozes from the top of the frame and forms the words of the film's title.

In *NBK's* opening scenes, the viewer is confronted with an aural and visual barrage of shots filmed from the point of view of bullets and knives whirling through the air, multiple camera speeds, disorienting camera angles, chaotic switches between black and white and colour film stock, sharp bursts of lime green in certain black and white shots, and wild juxtapositions of samples of music from *L7* to Puccini. The film repeats the codes of many of the media it aims to critique but there is a difference in its repetition. The quality of that difference lies in its excesses and extremes and the excess is central to the film's designation as cruel cinema.

The film's opening sequence immediately points to the manner in which *NBK* doubles back on itself through its construction of an elaborate cinematic spectacle of violence as a means to critiquing other media and cinematic spectacles of violence. The opening

montage is jarring and it violates the viewer's expectations of the conventions of the classical Hollywood film's narrative. This violation occurs on three axes; the first being on the level of narrative. The opening functions as a preamble to the first "action" of the film's narrative, and, as a result, *NBK*'s narrative is forestalled by this sequence of images before it has even begun. The placement of this visual prologue before the first "action" of the narrative is significant as it foregrounds the film's intended exploration of the continuum of spectacles of violence which the media produces. The film's opening is a mirroring of its ending which is also delayed by the addition of the coda. It is as though the prologue and the coda frame the film, and are meant to delimit the interpretive play put into operation by the rest of the film which is so chaotic and overdetermined.

A further violation occurs with respect to the contravention of the codes of the point-of-view shot in conventional Hollywood cinema. The point-of-view shot is usually employed when "the camera assumes the spatial position of one of the characters within the narrative in order to show us what s/he sees" (Cook 1985:244). In the case of *NBK*'s prologue, when shots are filmed from the point of view of whirling knives and bullets; this immediately violates the use of the conventions of the point of view shot within classical Hollywood cinema. This aesthetic operation contributes towards the excesses of *NBK*'s visuality.

An additional violation occurs in *NBK*'s opening scene when Mallory, who has clearly been constructed as the object of a male gaze within the film's diegesis and by extension the gaze of the spectator, pulls the rug from under our feet by quite literally punishing her audience when she kills the men who had been ogling her. This part of the opening scene emphasizes the film's concern with the act of looking at spectacle and as will be elaborated upon later, this pleasure in looking is often shot through with unpleasure.

In its quest to not only repeat, but in a sense take to the epistemological endpoint the excesses of the spectacles of violence which it sets out to critique, *NBK* inadvertently compels one to rethink the manner in which both cinematic spectacle and spectatorship have been theorised in much film theory. As a consequence of its tautological construction and the excesses of its representational idiom, *NBK* necessitates a retheorisation of some of the predominant ideas concerning the relationship between the film viewer and cinematic spectacle. What follows is my attempt at unraveling the complex imbrication of pleasure and unpleasure which constitutes visual fascination with the stylized spectacle of violence embodied by *NBK*.

Judith Mayne has described how the term spectacle has been put to use within film theory as a catch-all phrase which designates a number of divergent components of the cinema and that, as a consequence, it: "contains a number of competing sometimes contradictory meanings" (Mayne 1990:13). Mayne argues against what she describes as the overly "monolithic definition of cinematic spectacle" which posits "an exclusive

focus on [spectacle] as a relation between male subject and female object [which] obscures other functions of cinematic spectacle which do not lend themselves to such easy dichotomies” (Mayne 1990:14). In the formulation of subject/object relations which Mayne rejects, the object of the look is defined as being somehow possessed and controlled by the bearer of the look. *NBK*, I will show, augments the pleasure in spectacle and constructs an order of visual fascination which also demands an approach to the question of cinematic spectacle that is at odds with the designation of the relationship between spectator and image as one only of lack, disavowal and fetishism.⁴

According to Mayne, this definition of film as spectacle describes the relationship between spectator and screen as locatable within Guy Debord’s “society of the spectacle”. Mayne’s (ibid) reading of Baudrillard allows her to complicate the Debordian concept of spectacle by noting that

“the figure of the display window emerges in the writings of Baudrillard to suggest a fundamental incompatibility between the society of the spectacle (implying as it does the delineation between spectator and spectacle, and the possibility of a position - however illusory - of contemplation) and the postmodern culture of flow (implying the erosion of any possible boundary between spectator and spectacle) (Mayne 1990:15).

⁴ In one of the foundational documents of psychoanalytic feminist film theory, Laura Mulvey (1981), argued that women are objects of male voyeuristic impulses and that they exist to fulfill desires and express the anxieties of the men in the audience. In Mulvey’s original formulation the female body signified lack and connoted castration for the male spectator. This argument has subsequently been critiqued and revised, not least of all by Mulvey herself. See Mulvey (1981), Silverman (1988), Mayne (1990) and Rodowick (1991) for both critiques and extensions of the uses of these concepts within psychoanalytic film theory. I am not denying that these concepts are valid ways within which to understand film, it just seems to me that in thinking about a film that is so absolutely structured on excess that more recent thinking which constitutes a shift away from that approach is more useful.

The kind of flow to which Baudrillard refers is exemplified by *NBK* in its obsessive appropriation of images of “real” and simulated violence which constitute the film as an intertext of images of “real” and simulated violence so that, as was established in chapter one, it becomes part of a continuum of entertaining spectacles of violence.

Mayne is critical of Baudrillard’s resolute differentiation between a “society of the spectacle and a society of the simulacra - between contemplation and consumption of images and texts as discrete activities, versus the endless and continuous production of images so that any delineation of spectacle or spectator is impossible” (Mayne 1990:15). In filmic terms, Mayne (*ibid*) argues, this translates into a binarisation with classical narrative cinema on one side and postmodern cinema on the other. This binarism, as she points out, palliates the degree to which classical narrative cinema is “never so absolutely or exclusively caught up in the myths of narrative causality, and the postmodern never so completely detached from those myths” (*ibid*).

In spite of Mayne’s claims, however, it would appear to me that a curious dualism persists in most theories of cinematic spectacle. On the one hand, the cinema viewer is deemed to have mastery over the object of the spectacle - through the assumption of a gaze which is “male” and on the other hand, the spectator is also assigned a position of passivity in the face of spectacle.

In its compulsive construction of new spectacles of violence and recycling of found or already constructed images from other seminal representations of filmic violence, (the rear-projection of excerpts from *Scarface*, *Midnight Express* and *The Searchers* come to mind), interpenetrated with a fairly linear narrative, *NBK* exemplifies the problem of claiming an estimable separation between so called classical and postmodern film.

I am not interested in attempting to classify *NBK* as a postmodern film, what interests me here, is the assumption which underpins these comments: that spectacle is pure surface. If cinematic spectacle is something which is projected onto a screen, a surface, then it is something which is at a remove and which the spectator can have a degree of mastery over by virtue of the distance which separates the spectator from the surveyed object. This is a position which is rendered untenable in the case of *NBK* as we are presented with a film which confounds this neat separation of subject and object, if it ever existed in the first place.

In the film's paradox, or, doubling, the very "to-be-looked-at-ness" of cinema is performed in a manner which elicits visceral responses from its captive audience and thus helps one to understand cinematic spectacle and the viewer's fascination therewith, in terms which do not rely upon a strict partitioning of subject and object. Perhaps what *NBK* does in its opening sequence, with the visual prologue standing next to the beginnings of the film's narrative, is embody what Shaviro describes as Jean Baudrillard's proclamation of the "antagonistic and incompatible principles of the

postmodern world: simulation and dissimulation, the obscenity of complete, transparent vision on the one hand and the hidden play of seduction on the other” (Shaviro 1994:8).

Although Baudrillard differentiates between spectacle and simulacra, the term spectacle, as Mayne notes, has come to stand in for the manner in which film constitutes the consummate manifestation of the postmodern preoccupation with “pure surface, with the mixture of signifiers from radically different contexts, with moments of rupture and dislocation of conventional narrative and representational forms” (Mayne 1990:15).

The affiliation of spectacle with the postmodern is asserted by Dana Polan who states that:

what spectacle particularly aspires to is exactly that post-modern discrediting of significance for the sake of *signifiance*, in Kristéva’s sense of the term. Spectacle jettisons a need for narrative myths and opts for an attitude in which the only tenable position seems to be the reveling in the fictiveness of one’s own fictive acts” (Polan cited in Mayne 1990:15).

VISUAL FASCINATION AND VISIBLE FRENZIES

Through the excessive theatricality of its “staging” of violence, *NBK*’s ostentatious visuals saturate its narrative with a spectacle that does a kind of violence to the film’s spectator and, as I will show, this is central to understanding the pleasure in viewing

violence for the viewer.⁵ In its use of parody, *NBK* not only replicates the modes of representation which it aims to critique but it also takes a kind of giddy pleasure in its own construction of spectacles of violence. This is evident, for example in the “diner-scene” where shots are constructed from the point of view of whirling bullets and whizzing bowie knives. This feature of the film has also been noted by Roger Ebert(1994):

There’s an over the top exuberance to the intricate cross-cut editing [...] they’re throwing stuff at the screen by gleeful handfuls [Ebert 1994:2].

The film literally revels in the playfulness of its intertextuality and the excesses of its aestheticism. It is intoxicated and tinged by the very thing it wishes critique. On the one hand the film, through the coda, wishes to distance itself from the making of pleasurable spectacles of violence by the media (and other films) and, on the other, it constructs its own show of violence which becomes the cinematic equivalent of a spectacular fireworks display.

The excesses that are a consequence of *NBK*’s parody of media representations of violence as spectacle, result in the film being in excess of its own intentions and this excess, I want to suggest, compels one to rethink and retheorise the language of spectacle as it has been delimited within the mainstream of psychoanalytic film theory.

⁵ The notion that *NBK* somehow does violence to its audience is central to the theoretical orientation of this report, but an explication of this concept will be held in abeyance until further on in this chapter.

The film's failure to distance itself from media spectacles of violence is a consequence of its contamination by the codes of the discourse which it aims to critique. This contamination is ultimately productive because it mirrors the scopic regime produced by cinematic spectacles of violence and offers us a new way to approach some of the central questions within film theory. NBK therefore compels one to rethink and retheorise the language of spectacle as it has been outlined within the mainstream of psychoanalytic film theory. In *The Cinematic Body*, Steven Shaviro argues that "not all problems can be resolved by repeated references to, and ever more subtle close readings of the same few articles by Freud and Lacan" (Shaviro 1994:ix). Shaviro notes that a kind of stagnation has crept into areas of film theory concerned with spectatorship and therefore attempts to disturb and unsettle this stasis.

Shaviro is critical of what he perceives to be a "fear of images" in much psychoanalytic film theory. According to Shaviro, this translates into a blindspot at the heart of the language of spectacle, as it has been mapped within the mainstream of film theory, that renders psychoanalytically oriented readings of film incapable of coming to terms with the implications of the affect of the cinematic apparatus on the spectator:

Film theory is written out of the tension between a desire to reproduce and a desire to keep at a distance the voyeuristic excitations that are its object. The problem with paradigmatic film theory is that the latter, reactive side has all too completely gained control. This theory still tends to equate passion, fascination, and enjoyment with mystification; it opposes to these a knowledge that is disengaged from affect, and irreducible to images. [...] it manifests a barely contained panic at the prospect (or is it memory?) of being affected and moved by visual forms. It is as if there were something degrading and dangerous about giving way to images, and so easily falling

under their power. Theory thus seeks to ward off the cinema's dangerous allure, to refuse its hidden but intelligible structure (Shaviro 1994:15).

Shaviro criticizes the "scientificism" of psychoanalytic film theory which, he argues, in its founding texts, has endeavoured to distance itself from its object of study and in so doing has mirrored the disavowal of the male spectator's fear of images through "mastery and control" of the object of his gaze. A further problem with psychoanalytic approaches to film theory, according to Shaviro, is that they have given psychoanalytic readings of the cinematic apparatus, which deploy notions of lack, castration and so on, an ontological status:

The psychoanalytic theorist's need for control, his or her fear of giving way to the insidious blandishments of visual fascination, and his or her consequent construction of a theoretical edifice as a defense against a threatening pleasure - all this tends uncannily to resemble the very drama of trauma and disavowal that psychoanalytic film theory attributes to the normative male spectator [Shaviro 1994:13].

Images are regarded with suspicion due to their seeming impalpability and, for Shaviro, this suspicion has proved to be problematic as it has, until now, foreclosed on the possibility of thinking otherwise about film.

Semiotic and Psychoanalytic film theory is largely a phobic construct.

Images are kept at a distance, isolated like dangerous germs; sometimes,

they are even made the object of the theorist's sadistic fantasies of revenge. What is usually attacked is the emptiness and impotence of the image, its inability to support the articulations of discourse or to embody truth. Images are condemned because they are bodies without souls, or forms without bodies. They are flat and insubstantial, devoid of interiority and substance, unable to express anything beyond themselves. They are - frustratingly-static and evanescent at once, too massively present in their very impalpability. The fundamental characteristic of the cinematic image is therefore said to be *one of lack* [Shaviro 1994:15].

Shaviro holds that what theorists fear most is *not* the emptiness or impotence of cinematic images, but rather their peculiar voluminousness. It is this fear, he maintains, that is the central underpinning for psychoanalytic readings of spectacle and identification as grounded in lack. By tying the power of the image up with castration theory of psychoanalysis, the seductive power of cinema is tamed. Shaviro is thus less interested in reading film psychoanalytically and more interested in understanding how cinema and its images can be both impalpable and so manifestly present as evidenced in his claim that: "the image is not a symptom of lack, but an uncanny, excessive residue of being that subsists when all *should* be lacking" (Shaviro 1994:17). For Shaviro then, the cinematic image is not "the index of something that is missing", it is rather the "insistence of something that refuses to disappear" (ibid). In this model of cinematic spectacle, then, passivity and fascination are inextricably linked.

It is the apparent impalpability of the projected cinematic image which, in many respects, is central to all questions regarding cinematic spectacle and the pleasure which it structures. Shaviro, following Blanchot, provides us with a reorientation of the notion of the impalpability of the film image by virtue of his argument that, contrary to Silverman's⁶ theorisation of the image as representing a missing, or lost object, the film image seduces and fascinates us precisely because it has not disappeared completely:

the image is not a representational substitute for the object so much as it is - like a cadaver - the material trace or residue of the object's failure to vanish completely (Shaviro 1994:17).

Shaviro therefore imagines cinematic images as being cadaver-like, simultaneously powerful and impalpable and it is this very quality which accounts for the spectator's fascination with the visual in cinema.

In a different vein, Linda Williams (1989) also explores the agency of the image in, *Hard Core; Power, Pleasure and the Frenzy of the Visible*. Williams traces the development of "the pleasure in looking at human bodies in movement" (1989:ix) from the emergence of the optical inventions of the late nineteenth century. She argues that the "desire to see and know more of the human body [...] underlies the very invention of cinema" and that

⁶ Silverman asserts that: "Film theory has been haunted since its inception by the specter of a loss or absence at the centre of cinematic production, a loss which both threatens and secures the viewing subject. This lack is primarily one of the absent real and the foreclosed site of production though it is secondarily projected onto female bodies" (1989:15).

the construction of movement as a “visible mechanics” incorporated an “unanticipated pleasure attached to the visual spectacle of lifelike moving bodies” (Williams 1989:36-39).

In the very appearance of images of moving bodies on screen, pleasure announces itself as the “frenzy of the visible” - the pleasure produced in the “visual, hard-core-knowledge-pleasure produced by the *scientia sexualis*” (Williams 1989:36). The nature of this pleasure in the frenzy of the visible, of which cinematic spectacle is an example, is configured is what is under discussion in this project. The question is complicated by *NBK* because it not only constitutes the “frenzy of the visible” but, in its aestheticised and frenetic representations of violence, it also presents a succession of what I would call visible frenzies. With *NBK* the frenziedness of its visibility complicates the frenzy of the visible and this results in the spectator’s fascination with the film’s construction of violent spectacle.

When something fascinates, it bewitches and enslaves the faculties of the person who is being enchanted, “deprives its victim of the power of escape, or, resistance by a look or by being in sight.”⁷ Fascination with spectacles of violence is, therefore, characterized by the interpenetration of both terror and awe on the part of the spectator in the face of the violent spectacle. Film is viewed in a darkened theatre where the light sculptures it projects demand the viewer’s attention. The projected images, which make up each

⁷ Brown, L.(ed) (1993) *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford: Clarendon Press

second of film, rush by too quickly to allow for a kind of detached contemplation of the spectacle through the active mastery of the gaze.

Shaviro, therefore, protests against the view that cinematic fascination is dependent upon the spectator being in a position of active mastery of the gaze, as well as the notion of specular identification as theorised within the psychoanalytic paradigm. In its stead, he offers a phenomenology of visual fascination. Whereas the mainstream of film theory has imagined and theorised "the looking" of the spectator at the spectacle of cinema as a disembodied act, and whereas Williams recognizes a pleasure which is, to a certain extent, an embodied act, Shaviro extends this further by arguing for, the "Cinematic Body" of his book's title.⁸

Although Shaviro repudiates all of psychoanalytic film theory, particularly notions of spectator identification, and argues that the psychoanalytic paradigm assumes the

⁸ I should note that the idea of "the body" in this report and in Shaviro's work, is informed by the notion that the body is not just a "thing", to be reductive. Rather, this report acknowledges, as does Greig in his article, "The body isn't quite what it used to be" does, that: "Bodies are in flux. Traditional notions of the stable human body, or its reflections, are under siege" (1996:17). The body is increasingly imagined as a material object but also a set of relationships and even a theatre. Bearing this in mind I must note that Shaviro's describes his approach to cinema spectatorship as a "psychophysiology" but that I have not used his term here because of the biologism it invokes. I have opted for the terms materialist and phenomenological instead, and must acknowledge that in so doing I am doing a kind of violence to Shaviro's text, because his approach attempts to bypass purely phenomenological approaches to cinema spectatorship. For Shaviro: "the cinematic apparatus is a new mode of embodiment; it is a technology for containing and controlling bodies, but also for affirming, perpetuating, and multiplying them, by grasping them in the terrible, uncanny immediacy of their images. The cinematic body is then neither phenomenologically given nor fantastically constructed. It stands at the limits of both these categories, and it undoes them. This body is a necessary condition and support of the cinematic process; it makes that process possible, but also continually interrupts it, unlacing its sutures and swallowing up its meanings. Film theory should be less a theory of fantasy (psychoanalytic or otherwise) than a theory of the affects and transformations of bodies" (Shaviro 1994:257).

mastery of the gaze, I would have to disagree, because theorists -working within the psychoanalytic paradigm- such as Constance Penley and Judith Mayne, have acknowledged that the unconscious is so fraught with desire that the manner in which the gaze functions is inevitably more complex than a simple mastery of its object.⁹

Whilst I would concur with Shaviro's criticism of certain strains within psychoanalytic film theory that have depended on a somewhat monolithic understanding of how cinema works, I would hesitate to align myself with his view that one should abandon the paradigm in its entirety. Shaviro outlines an emphatic either/or scenario. I think a more fruitful approach would be to say that the viewer is held, quite literally, by the film as not only a look, or, an unconscious or complicated set of libidinal [and other] desires, but as all of those and a body. A body which is affected by, and experiences, what the eye sees. In order to understand how Shaviro reorients film theory with his notion of "the cinematic body" and the power of the image, it will be necessary to follow his trajectory. Counter the central tenets of the psychoanalytic paradigm, Shaviro opens up the possibility that cinematic pleasure might also be derived from the "destruction of identification and objectification" and the "undermining of subjective stability" (1994:44). He imagines a fascination with the visual that is dependent upon the exquisite passivity of the viewer in relation to the film, but this conception of passivity is different from notions of passivity as a kind of false consciousness when it comes to classical Hollywood cinema. For Shaviro, a consequence of the "exquisite passivity" to which he

⁹ See Penley(1989), Neale(1983), Williams(1989) and Mayne(1990).

refers is that: “film [...] tends toward the blinding ecstasy of Bataillean expenditure. [I.]t is grounded in the rhythms and delays of an ungraspable temporality, and in the materiality of the agitated flesh” (Shaviro 1994:44). For Shaviro, “the immediacy of cinema is always excessive [...] The world I see through the movie camera is one that violently impinges on me [...] in its disruptive play of immediacy and distance” (Shaviro 1994:45). Shaviro understands this disruptive play as akin to what Benjamin calls the “disintegration of the aura in the experience of shock” (ibid).

In accordance with this theory of film, it is the image which seeks and supports the gaze. The conditions under which film is normally viewed - in a darkened theatre - shapes the contours of a regime of looking in which the spectator, quite literally, cannot see anything else, and it is this delimitation which quite simply, and almost violently, demands the viewers attention. For Shaviro, this results in the passive positioning of the film viewer. Following Walter Benjamin, Shaviro argues that the film viewer’s own train of thought and process of association is continually disallowed and interrupted by the constant sudden change of images and that it is this which constitutes the “shock effect of film:”

But as I watch, I have no presence of mind: sight and hearing, anticipation and memory, are no longer my own. My responses are not internally motivated and are not spontaneous; they are forced upon me from beyond. Scopophilia is then the opposite of mastery: it is rather a forced, ecstatic abjection before the image [...] Voyeuristic behaviour is not willed or controlled by its subject: it is a form of captivation, in which passivity is pushed to the point of automatism. [...] when I watch a film, an alien interest is forced upon me, one from which I cannot escape (Shaviro 1994:49)

Borrowing from the work of Maurice Blanchot, Shaviro differentiates between the province of “subjective action and perception and the passive regime of the image” by noting that, on the one hand:

In “natural” perception, seeing is an initiative and a power of the subject. Seeing implies distance, the decision that causes separation, the power not to be in contact and to avoid the confusion of contact. by placing things (and other people at the proper distance from myself, I am able to constitute them *as* objects, and have them always ready and at my disposal (Shaviro 1994:48).

And on the other:

Blanchot [...] contradicts the usual psychoanalytic notion that scopophilia and voyeurism are “active” affects or perversions, for the overwhelming experience of visual fascination in the cinema, of what Blanchot calls the “passion for the image”, is one of radical passivity. I do not have power over what I see. I do not even have, strictly speaking, the power to see; it is more that I am powerless not to see (ibid).

In Shaviro’s view then, the compulsion to see, which makes up visual fascination, is formed in the nexus of the radical passivity of the spectator and the demand of the image. Interestingly enough, Shaviro’s point is pre-empted in Dario Argento’s film, *Terror at the Opera*, in which the heroine, Betty, is bound, gagged and forced to watch, a psychopath, Santini, murder his friends. Not only is Betty immobilized, but Santini tapes rows of needles above and below her eyes, so that if she should blink, or attempt to close her eyes, to shield herself from viewing the gruesome murders, her eyeballs would be lacerated. Linda Williams notes that in *Terror at the Opera*:

Her eyes bleed a little, the real violence comes from the fact that she cannot close them. Who is the focus of the violence is not clear, others are being killed, but Betty's violation is primary - she is made to watch, on penalty of losing her eyes themselves, which is worse than the deaths taking place before her (Williams 1994:16).¹⁰

In, *Shocking Entertainment*(1997), Hill describes and analyses the comments made by respondents who had participated in her research into viewer responses to contemporary films, including *NBK*, whose representations of violence which are deemed brutal and “shocking.” One of the participants commented that:

“It’s quite hard to watch something like your eyes being damaged. I think most of us have a fear of our eyes being hurt like that” (Hill. 1997:49).

This comment speaks of spectatorship in terms which coincide with Betty’s positioning in *Terror at the Opera*. There are resonances from *Terror at the Opera* in a scene from *NBK* in which Mickey and Mallory, well into their killing spree, decide to spend the night in a motel. Mickey had previously noticed a young woman with long blonde hair on the street as they were driving around looking for a place to overnight. Once installed in their motel room, he scolds Mallory for having taken her “wedding” ring off and becomes sexually violent with her. At this point Mallory asks, rather cryptically, why he is “not looking at her” before climbing off the bed and leaving the motel. Her question is cryptic, because only after Mallory has left the room does the camera pull back to reveal

¹⁰ This scene clearly resonates with the terrifying opening scene of Luis Bunuel’s *Un Chien Andalou*, in which an eyeball is sliced open.

that all the while the blonde woman, spotted by Mickey on the street earlier, had been cowering in the corner; she is bound, gagged and stripped to her underwear.

The terrified woman had, much like Betty in *Terror at the Opera*, been forced to watch Mickey and Mallory knowing that her life was in danger. In forcing this woman into a voyeuristic position, *NBK*, I would argue, reconstructs, within its diegesis, the position of the film viewer in relation to the sexual violence the two lead characters perform.¹¹

Mickey's victim is forced into a complicity with him from which she cannot extricate herself. In his analysis of Argento's film, Shaviri shows how passivity and demand collude to create the compulsion that is at the heart of cinematic fascination. However, looking, says Shaviri, while radically passive, "cannot entirely be reduced to a situation of being manipulated, enslaved, subjugated, or controlled." The opera singer in *Terror at the Opera* is "overtly appalled by the violence [she is] compelled to see, yet there's a latent - secretly desirable - erotic thrill in the way these gory spectacles are being produced for [her]" (1994:48). She does not "identify", says Shaviri, in any classic sense of filmic identification, she is rather "transformed, and even energized by [her] involuntary participation:

It is precisely to the extent that these scenarios are so blatantly prurient and pornographic that they resist being classified according to the conventional binary opposition of sadistic male violence and helpless female passivity. I am proposing them as a singular counterparadigm for film spectatorship on account of both their extremity and their subversive, complicitous, and irreducibly ambiguous blurring of traditional polarities between male and

¹¹ This scene in the film is complex and will be central to my argument in chapter three where I will elaborate on its implications for the film viewer's fascination with *NBK*'s violence

female, active and passive, aggressor and victim, and subject and object. They point not to Lacanian specular dynamics, but to a radically different economy/regime/articulation of vision (Shaviro 1994:49).

It is this radically different articulation of vision that Shaviro, via Blanchot, names the fascination of cinema:

But what happens when what you see, even though from a distance, seems to touch you with a grasping contact, when the matter of seeing is a sort of touch, when seeing is a contact at a distance? What happens when what is seen imposes itself on your gaze, as though the gaze had been seized, touched, put in contact with appearance? (Blanchot cited in Shaviro 1994:47)

The power of the ego is ruptured at the point of what Blanchot calls *fascination*.

Fascination is therefore bound up with the “strange passivity” of the viewer who is “bewitched” and compelled by the cinematic spectacle to look, even when looking is torturous. If we accept this model of looking in the cinema then the assumption that the subject/spectator can somehow “master” the object/spectacle of his/her gaze, regardless of the complexity of its formulation, becomes problematic. Shaviro complicates this relationship and in so doing defines the spectator’s gaze in the face of cinematic spectacle as one which has “lost it’s power of initiative” - if it ever had it to begin with:

The thing has dissolved into its image, and no longer offers me the prospect of reciprocity, or the hope of mastery by means of possession. Instead the image becomes an obsession, it *haunts* me (Shaviro 1994:48).

At first glance it would appear that some of the comments made by respondents in Annette Hill’s research project would contradict Shaviro’s notion that the eye/I has no

choice but to watch the images on the screen. Hill maintains that self-censorship is one of the key responses for viewers of violent film's. This self-censorship in response to scenes which might be unbearably violent for the spectator is exemplified by the comment made by one of Hill's respondents when describing his reaction to a scene in *Pulp Fiction*:

When the guy was doing the adrenaline thing you had the option to look away; it took so long for him to give the injection, it made you think what would go wrong, what if the needle broke off in her breast plate, oh my God how horrible that would be. I started to do this (acts out putting her hands in front of her face) just thinking about it (Participant 1 FG5) (Hill 1997:57).

What the comments betray, however, is the viewer's compulsion to remain in the theatre, to the point that they force themselves to watch scenes which they admit are distressing. It is this kind of compulsion to view which illustrates Shaviro's point about the fascination of the film viewer in the face of the spectacle that is cinema. I would add that this operation is pronounced in film's which contain graphic representations of violence and is akin to the phenomenon of spectators gathering around the scenes of gruesome car accidents and is also reflected in the comments which follow:

Perhaps there are some things that make me nauseous, but I would try to watch it, I wouldn't cover my eyes, I would say: "oh I've got to see this (participant 2 FG4) (Hill 1997:68).

You may find certain things distressing but you still watch the film (Participant 4 - FG1) (ibid).

I love the thrill of daring myself to watch a violent scene - that's a real kick. No, I'm not going to watch and then yeah, just do it, make yourself watch it (Participant 7 -FG2) (Hill 1997:73).

I can just feel a prickly sensation on my neck, feel the colour just draining out of you. I mean it's just awful. there is a slow, really obvious build-up to the film - you know what's going to happen, you just know you can't stop it. It's kind of fascinating (participant 4 - FG6) (Hill 1997:33).

The experience of watching violence on screen for Hill's respondents is characterized by a fascination which is bound up with their passivity. It is also described as a visceral "grasping contact" because the violence of the film induces a physical response on the part of the spectator. My use of the word experience here is pointed, because, for Shaviro, cinema is both a tactile and a material experience.

To Shaviro's claim, I would add that if the cinema is a tactile embodied *experience* for the viewer, then in the face of screen violence this tactility of cinema is intensified and literalised in a film such as *NBK*. Cinema's tactility is therefore enhanced in the face of screen violence. In Shaviro's understanding, the realm of fascination occurs on two axes and this, I will show, is exemplified by *NBK*: not only does the film represent violence within its diegesis, but in its excesses, the film as film, does a kind of violence to its viewers.

I now want to return to the concept, of the "cinematic body", as delineated by Shaviro, in order to understand how it is that fascination is tactile and why the cinematic image is violating in Shaviro's sense when he asserts that film viewing is grounded in the "materiality of agitated flesh" (Shaviro 1994:50).

TORTURED LOOKS: The Tactile Image/Eye of cinema.

The belief that film can have an affect on the film viewer by somehow reaching beyond the screen to ‘touch’ the spectator is not necessarily an unique or novel one, indeed, this is probably something that any filmgoer already knows. The importance which this idea is afforded in Shaviro’s work is distinct as it forms the foundation of his proposed reorientation of film theory. Shaviro’s “psychophysiology” of cinematic experience posits the embodiment of the cinematic spectator whereby - through agitations and affect - bodies are quite literally produced in the moment of viewing film. Furthermore, it is my contention that *NBK*, in its almost assaultive barrage of images and sound, invites the use of Shaviro’s materialist paradigm in order to come to terms with the violence it both stages and performs on both diegetic and extradiegetic levels.

The following comments made by respondents in Hill’s research project focus on the response of film viewer’s to violence in the cinema and exemplify Shaviro’s assertion that the experience of film is ultimately tactile:

If I see something really violent I start to feel ill, my stomach feels like its going to be sick. If it is really gory and horrible then I’ll feel quite dizzy. When you get that horrible dead-like feeling and your stomach just sinks, that’s what I feel (participant 2 FG3) (Hill 1997:32).

I get palpitations; it’s quite awful to admit but I often feel a sense of excitement when I watch violence. If I’m totally truthful it’s suppressed anger working its way out. When I go to see a violent film I often quite high after I’ve seen it...The films can breed excitement(Participant 4 - FG3) (Hill 1997:32).

Hill also indicates the range of physical and emotional responses which participants in her study recalled having whilst watching fictional representations of violence:¹²

participants note their heart beats faster; they feel hot and cold; tense; nauseous; angry, satisfied, fearful; excited. Group members may flinch; curl up in their seats; close their eyes; half cover their eyes with their hands; cover their mouths with their hands or bury their head in a coat (Hill 1997:32).

In the case of a film such as *NBK*, it is not only the “frenzy of the visible” - the epiphenomenon of the representation of moving bodies projected onto a cinema screen - that affects/excites spectators to the degree described above, but it is also the frenziedness of its visibility (the film’s hyperbolic spectacle of violence) which arouses such the extremes of viewer response. Put differently, *NBK*’s violence is not limited to the images of headless and blood-soaked bodies that flicker onto the screen, its violence is compounded by the stylistic features of the film.

NBK’s infamous prison riot scenes exemplify the “double” violence, or tactility, of the film.¹³ Prisoner’s watching Wayne Gale’s interview with Mickey, begin a riot in the fictional “Batongaville” prison. During a commercial break, Mickey grabs a shotgun from one of the prison wardens and begins shooting everyone in the room, with the

¹² Twitchell(1985) also describes “the extreme visceral responses that the horror film in particular excites in the viewer and Berenstein draws an analogy between riding a roller coaster and viewing an horror film: “ A roller coaster ride is filled with ups and downs, moments in which there is a lull in tension, others when riders are giddy with anticipation, disappointment, surprise, delight, and a desire for more are all states often experiences on a roller coaster; the emotions oscillate depending on where the rider is in the course of the ride” (Berenstein 1996:17).

¹³ This scene is one of the film’s most controversial, Stone had to exclude a shot in which Warden McKulsky (Tommy Lee Jones) is beheaded and his head is paraded around the prison on a stake, in order for the film to be certified.

exception of Gale and some of his crew. Each time Mickey fires a shot from his gun, the sound of the shot is amplified, and the audio effects in the scene are further exaggerated because they are overlaid onto the “external” diegetic soundtrack, “The Day the Niggaz Took Over”. The two soundtracks compete with one another and a cacophony ensues.

The almost deafening sound of each shot being fired and the staccato-like editing is accompanied by a simultaneous split-second shuttling of film stock from colour to black and white. The effect of the film’s visual and auditory operations is as follows: each time Mickey shoots and kills someone, the film, in turn, “attacks” the spectator by virtue of its sharp changes of film stock, chaotic editing and aural barrage. In this scene, then, each act of violence within *NBK*’s diegesis is intensified by the film’s concomitant assault on the spectator, hence the film’s “double” violence.

NBK’s stylistic features, with its break-neck editing, sharp colour contrasts, bursts of sound and jangly camera angles, exaggerate the film’s representation of the violence, and intensify and literalise the shock effect of film on two levels: with the kind of violence it shows and the manner in which the violence is represented. The violence within the narrative and the violence of the images themselves constitute the film’s visual and aural shocks which function like blows or lacerations to the retina. *NBK*’s filmic techniques then, extend to an almost extreme degree the tactile demand that, Shaviro says, all images bring.

In the face of *NBK*'s retinal assault, where the film's images make a painful imprint on the eye - much like a pinprick - Ray Guins' epithet, "tortured looks", is appropriate.

The only respite from the "torture" of the film is for viewers to shield their eyes: from the violent images and from the violence of the images themselves. Hill's research indicates that this is a strategy some viewers use, however, the same respondents also state that in spite of the "torture" they are compelled by a perverse pleasure to stay and continue watching.¹⁴

If, as Shaviro shows, all filmic "images literally assault the spectator" (1994:50) then violence is at work in all films. This violence, perpetrated against the eyes, with its physical and corporeal affects, is all the more acute in the case of violent images.

For Bataille this translates into a kind of "antivision" or blindness at the heart of sight where:

Perception is turned back upon the body of the perceiver, so that it affects and alters the body, instead of merely constituting a series of representations for the spectator to recognize (Bataille cited in Shaviro 1994:51).

With regard to violence, Clover's (1992) analysis of the horror film in, *Men Women and Chainsaws* strangely, both pre-empts and extends some of Shaviro's ideas although her book preceded Shaviro's.¹⁵ Clover argues, in a similar fashion to Shaviro, that the horror film itself horrifies/violates the viewer. For Clover, as for Shaviro (albeit in a different

¹⁴ This element of spectatorship will be pursued in the next chapter.

¹⁵ Shaviro acknowledges the influence of Clover's work on his arguments in *The Cinematic Body*.

framework), it is not only the monster that is horrifying, the film itself becomes a monstrous and horrifying violation (Clover, C. 1992:168). In Clover's view, the fascination of the horror film is multiply encoded and, interestingly enough, she also notes how the horror film, in a metacinematic move, privileges eyes:

It is not only the look-at-the-monster that is at issue here, but the look-at-the-movie. The horror movie is somehow more than the sum of its monsters it is itself monstrous (Clover 1992:168).

NBK shares this pre-occupation with "eyes watching the monstrous", the film is fixated with "eyes" watching the horrors of violent spectacle, witness the many occasions on which the film intercuts its scenes with close-up images of television viewers fixated by their television sets and the blood-soaked images they screen.

Clover is concerned with opening up the possibility for what she terms "feminine masochism" in the film viewing experience. For Clover, feminine masochism refers, not to actual women, but to masochistic perversion in men. She takes a psychoanalytic abstraction, which has been gendered, and denudes it of its gendering so as to understand film spectatorship more generally. The implications of Clover's use of masochism will be addressed more extensively in chapter three. For now, it is her assertion that horror films attack and thus affect their viewers which is pertinent (Clover 1992:215). Clover's analysis of the horror film, then, prefigures Shaviro's notion of the tactile eye of cinema:

Of course, horror films do attack their audiences. The attack is palpable; we take it in the eye. For just as the audience eye can be invited by the camera

to assault, so it can be physically assaulted by the projected image - by sudden flashes of light, violent movement (of images plunging outward, for example), fast-cut or exploded images. [...] Film after film blinds us with a flash of lightning or spotlight, or points a gun or camera at us and shoots, or has a snake-like alien or rat burst toward us (Clover 1992:203).

As is the case in the prison riot scene in *NBK*, Clover notices a doubled violence in the horror film. By way of her analysis of the shower scene from Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, the cruelty of horror films double "attack" on its audience is marked as "cruel cinema":

It is also no surprise that the narrative flow of images should burst into fragments at the most gruesome or shocking moments. The locus classicus, of course, is the shower scene of *Psycho*, which lasts forty seconds and is composed of as many shots: rapid-fire concatenation of images of the knife-wielding hand, parts of Marion, parts of the shower, and finally the bloody water as it swirls down the drain. It is a breathtaking piece of cinematic violence - and as much at the editorial as at the diegetic level. [...] These are calculated assaults on the part of the film; they are aimed at the audience, and they hurt in the most literal, physiological sense. Cruel cinema indeed (Clover 1992:203).

As the reader should now be aware, I have borrowed the title of this report from Clover. The term, "cruel cinema", I think, accounts for the multiple ways in which cinematic spectacles of violence attack and punish spectators and, as I will show in the next chapter, the term also points to the perverse and masochistic pleasure which the cruelty of cinema engenders.

Clover's work in *Men, Women and Chainsaws* is remarkable because it reverses the dominant view regarding the structuration of scopic relations in the cinema by displacing

sadism's dominance with her recovery of masochism as exemplified by her assertion that in horror:

it is not the eye that kills, it is the eye that is killed (Clover 1992:203).

Similarly for Shaviro, "in film, the old structure of aesthetic contemplation collapses. I am solicited and invested by what I see: perception becomes a kind of physical affliction, an intensification and disarticulation of bodily sensation. [...] Contemplation is replaced by tactile appropriation" (Shaviro 1994:51). Furthermore, he asserts that this "tactile appropriation" is marked by contagion. The audience is not only "touched" by what it sees, but, in a sense, is simultaneously tinged and infected by it. For Shaviro the way in which images touch is by a process of mimesis, or contagion, mimesis in this sense:

involves a participatory and tactile contact between what post-Cartesian thought calls the object and the subject, as in the rituals of sympathetic magic and the assaults of capitalist advertising. As Michael Taussig (1992) summarizes this aspect of Benjamin; "The connection with tactility is paramount, the optical dissolving, as it were, into touch and a certain thickness and density... mimesis implies *both* copy and substantial connection, *both* visual replication and material transfer (Taussig cited in Shaviro 1994:51).

In her discussion of Lamberto Bava's, *Demons* (1986), Clover describes how the film manifests the kind of contagion to which Shaviro refers. For Clover, *Demons* becomes the very embodiment of how looking at screens can become perilous for the film spectator:

A number of people are lured to a new movie theater to see a free “mystery” movie as part of the opening celebrations. A character hopes aloud that it won’t be horror, but it of course turns out to be just that (“Oh, shit, it *is* a horror movie”). As suspense mounts, members of the audience become sexually aroused, especially at the sight of a woman being stabbed repeatedly in close-up by an off-frame killer (all we see of him is his knife-holding hand). One audience member, a black prostitute, senses something on her cheek and reaches up to feel a strange boil emerging from a lesion - a development that precisely mirrors what is happening to the cheek of *one of the film-within-the-film* characters. (crosscutting establishes the connection between the black female in the audience and the white male on the screen.) The hooker goes off to the lavatory to investigate her face (in yet another mirror), but she is within minutes transformed into a crazed zombie and begins to roam the back corridors of the theater building. Meanwhile, in the auditorium, the audience is rapt: watching a second woman, the film-within-a-film’s heroine, about to fall to the killer’s knife. She is pleading and screaming, and the knife is on the verge of sinking in, when the screen onto which those images are projected is suddenly slashed and ripped from behind, and the zombie lunges through it onto the proscenium and down into the frantic audience. The zombie attacks and transforms others, who in turn attack and transform still others. As more audience members are infected, and those trying to escape discover that all exits are locked, mayhem reigns. “The movie is to blame for this!” someone shouts. In an effort to halt the unfolding horror, other members of the audience break into the projection room and, once they register the fact that there is no projectionist (the system is automatic), they smash the projector itself to bits. “Now the movie is not going to hurt us any more,” says one of the attackers. “It’s not the movie, it’s the theater,” someone answers (Clover 1992:194-195).

Clover’s description of *Demons* warrants extensive repetition here, because it demonstrates clearly how the film literally enacts the ways in which the ostensibly impalpable screen image might spill over beyond the screen’s borders so as to affect, and infect, the viewer:

the viewer is transfixed and transmogrified as a consequence of the infectious, visceral contact of images. Transformations of this sort are the explicit subjects of many recent horror films, most notably of George Romero’s “Living Dead” trilogy. The viewer of

these films does not identify with their active protagonists so much as he or she is touched by - drawn into complicitous communication with - the passive, horrific, and yet strangely attractive zombies (Shaviro 1994:53).

NBK enacts a similar contagion within its diegesis when Wayne Gale becomes an accomplice to the violence which he is ostensibly meant to “report” during Mickey and Mallory’s prison break. Gale is clearly invigorated and infected by the violent mayhem in which he finds himself. After a frenzied Gale picks up a gun and shoots a prison warden, shouting; “Die! you motherfucker!” Mickey asks: “How you doin’ Wayne? Got the feelin?”

Gale has most definitely “caught” the feeling, signalled even before he kills the warden by his bloody shirt and the tie which he has knotted around his forehead in an homage to John Rambo. Gale performs an hysterical literalisation of the contagion of the spectacle of violence, in this instance the spectacle is the anarchy of the prison riot, in which the prison is turned first, into a searing inferno - as suggested by the red glow of the film’s lighting and the smoke that fills the prison corridors - and then into a slaughterhouse, where carcass-like bodies hang from the ceiling and blood smears the walls.

Shaviro, following Bataille and Taussig radically retheorises psychoanalytic film theory’s notion of identification, because, for him, viewers are not granted subjectivity through their identifications, but rather, they are captivated in the process of sympathetic participation. This filmic subject, then, is not a stable entity since: “mimesis and

contagion tend to efface fixed identities and to blur the boundaries between inside and outside” (Shaviro 1994:53).

For Clover and Shaviro then, looking at screens, can be perilous for the spectator. In the case of *NBK*, I would argue that the blurring of inside and outside occurs via its visual attack of images, via the tactility and contagion of its double violence.

Shaviro’s work in *The Cinematic Body*, is remarkable, because he gives agency to the filmic image and, therefore, reinstates a materialist rather than a signifying semiotics. In many ways, Shaviro builds on Gilles Deleuze, who deployed Pierce’s theory of signs explicitly against, Metz’s notion that cinema is structured like a language, and against the psychoanalytic tenet of “lack”- of a radical gap, or opposition, between material processes and signifying ones.

Shaviro consequently takes issue with Silverman’s(1988:6) seemingly commonsensical claim that within cinema there are, of course, no tactile convergences, and the gap between viewer and spectator remains irreducible. On the contrary, says Shaviro, the allure and the danger of cinema are the direct consequences of its tactility and infectiousness (Shaviro 1994:53).

Film moves and affects the spectator precisely to the extent that it lures him, or her, into an excessive intimacy, one so extreme that it is also, immediately, a distance precluding identification. It dissolves the contours of the ego and transgresses the requirements of coherence and closure that govern “normal” experience (Shaviro 1994:54).

Here Shaviro's materialist semiotics counters, on the one hand, signifying semiotics and, on the other, notions of phantasmatic identification:

I am taking issue with the conservative, conformist assumption - shared by most film theorists - that our desires are primarily ones for possession, plenitude, stability, and reassurance. I am thereby also rejecting this assumption's complementary underside: the notion of the Oedipal structuration of a "split subject," which must assume the burdens of "lack" (alienation from the real), and of the exclusive, binary disjunction of gender, as the price for entering into society. I am suggesting, rather, that what film offers its viewers is something far more compelling and disturbing: a Batailleian ecstasy of expenditure, of automutilation and self-abandonment - neither Imaginary plenitude nor Symbolic articulation, but the blinding intoxication of contact with the Real (Shaviro 1994:54).

Once again, whilst I do not think it ideal to completely discard psychoanalytic approaches, Shaviro's reorientation does open up the possibility for understanding the cinematic experience otherwise. This is evident in his augmentation and extension of Clover's assertions about the perils film viewing.

Somewhere between compulsion and peril, however, there has to be a reason for people to return to the cinema again and again for the experience of peril, or cruelty, or torture, or however one might characterize that experience. The reason people keep coming back to the cinema for more of the same, is for Shaviro *not*, as psychoanalytic film theory would have it, for a momentary misrecognition of "lack" accompanied by the inevitable compensation for that "lack" in order to ensure the viewers identity. Shaviro prefers Bunuel's premise that: "the film's object is to provoke instinctive reactions of revulsion

and attraction in the spectator” where “all cinema tends toward the shattering dispossession of the spectator” (Bunuel cited in Shaviro 1994:55).

Fascination therefore offers its viewers what in psychoanalytic terms could be called the blinding intoxication of being in contact with the Real. The real here used in the sense of *jouissance*, in Slavoj Zizek’s formulation of excessive enjoyment beyond sense.¹⁶

RETHINKING PSYCHOANALYTIC FILM THEORY

Shaviro, despite his protestations against psychoanalysis and his own disavowal of the psychoanalytic framework as a useful way to understand film, nevertheless, reiterates the psychoanalytic focus on looking but with a phenomenological inflection. Shaviro’s re-ordering of fascination and his attempt to bypass psychoanalysis, I would argue, becomes an expansion of the psychoanalytic framework into new terrain. By giving agency to the filmic image Shaviro is still concerned with the regime of looking which cinema produces, he is still interested in understanding the relationship between screen image and viewer, but he inverts the regime and re-embodies the disembodied viewer and critic in a manner which repudiates their castration. He is not interested in undertaking generic or sociological analyses of film, as is the case with much psychoanalytic film theory, in fact he makes an attempt to bypass it in his formulation of masochism. However, *The*

¹⁶ See Zizek’s (1992) theorisation of the sublime in, *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*. New York & London: Routledge.

Cinematic Body embodies the perils of attempting to write outside the margins of psychoanalytic theory because his thinking coils back into the language of psychoanalysis and, as I will indicate in the next chapter, is structured by the psychoanalytic concept of masochism.

In his critique of psychoanalysis, Shaviro's materialist analysis of film reconfigures spectatorship by attempting to bypass psychoanalytic categories. Shaviro's notion of the tactile "eye/I" presupposes that spectatorship, whilst not based on identification, is tied into scopophilia and voyeurism in much the same way as his understanding of pleasure is not based on the reintegration of the subject in the wake of expenditure but is integrally linked to the psychoanalytic concept of masochism.

In this chapter I have argued that *NBK*, by virtue of its excesses, propels one into a new theoretical terrain. This is a terrain in which the film theory concerned with the spectatorial relations produced by cinematic violence has undergone a radical reorientation. What is at stake in this reorientation is a re-evaluation of the efficacy and continuing centrality of psychoanalysis as a means to investigating the primary questions within film theory regarding spectatorship and spectacle.

I want to suggest that Shaviro's materialist approach has the potential to offer us a way out of the impasse and stagnation within the mainstream of film theory hinted at by Annette Kuhn (1994:205) who notes that whilst the tears of the melodrama and the

women's picture [had] been explained,¹⁷ film theory had not made any significant, or sustained, attempt to account for the experience of cinema. She insisted that "certain questions trouble" the psychoanalytic paradigm which had gained currency in the mainstream of film theory and that this state of affairs necessitated an intervention into, and expansion of, film theory. Kuhn's questions for film theory, therefore, anticipated Shaviro's materialist approach and indicated, from within the psychoanalytic paradigm, that a reworking of its central tenets was necessary.

Kuhn also noted that: "feminist film theory needs to be developed further because metapsychologies of cinema have been thought exclusively in terms of very specific psychoanalytic models of the human subject" (ibid) For Kuhn, these privilege the "centrality of certain unconscious processes in the formation of cinematic subjectivity, along with the role of vision and looking" (ibid). A consequence of this centrality of "certain unconscious processes," according to Kuhn, is that "with the exception of a few critiques of the centrality in feminist film theory of paradigms of looking (Silverman 1988a) thought in relation to the Oedipus Complex (Silverman 1985), this particular metapsychology remains virtually unchallenged" (ibid).¹⁸ The centrality, within film

¹⁷ Here Kuhn was referring to the work of Christine Gledhill and Stephen Neale who had explained the "tears evoked by the he melodrama and the woman's picture in terms of the genre's characteristic modes of narration and textual address" (Kuhn 1994:205).

¹⁸ At the time of Kuhn's writing, Vivian Sobchack had already entered into this theoretical quagmire and had claimed that phenomenological film theory would endeavor to "describe and account for the origin and locus of cinematic signification and significance in the *experience* of vision as an embodied and meaningful existential activity" (Sobchack 1992:vxii). This is not to suggest that phenomenological approaches to film theory might constitute a panacea, as phenomenological philosophy has been reproved by feminist philosophers who have taken issue with what they perceive as its devaluation of gender (Kuhn 1994:205).

theory, of the particular metapsychology to which Kuhn refers, is challenged by Shaviro with *The Cinematic Body*.

Chapter Three

NATURAL BORN KILLERS, A CRUEL CINEMA.

"NATURAL BORN KILLERS is a sensuous maelstrom that you hate even as you desire it to engulf you. [...] It's brutal."
Dault, G. M. 1995

The key to understanding the pleasure in viewing violence is, I think, rests in an analysis of the 'unpleasure' and masochism. It is within the realm of masochism that we might best begin to understand the significance of the unpleasure within the pleasure that results from viewing spectacles of violence in the cinema, as well as, the viewer's compulsion to return to the "scene" in order to experience again, and again, a sublime nexus of terror and awe, pleasure and unpleasure.

In the case of *NBK* the pleasure in, and fascination with, the film's "double violence" is conditioned by unpleasure. I want to suggest that unpleasure lies at the heart of the pleasure which shapes the shuttling between attraction and repulsion, in Bunuel's experience, and in order to understand this phenomenon we need to turn to theories of masochism. Following Shaviro and Clover, this chapter will investigate the manner in which masochism is a productive way to understand how it is that the "attack" of *NBK* might be pleasurable for the film viewer. What I am proposing is that the multilayered spectacle and fascination with violence, detailed in the previous chapter, of cruel cinema in general and *NBK* more specifically, is augmented by unpleasure.

In the course of this chapter I will explore the viewer's fascination with the spectacle and experience of cinematic violence as an interpenetration of both terror and awe. Leo Bersani and Ulysse Du Toit's (1985) retheorisation of Freud's account of masochism will be central to my argument about the film spectator's experience of a perverse and "shattering" pleasure in the face of the *NBK*'s violence. The operations of this perverse masochistic pleasure are intensified for the spectator of *NBK* since this film's mode of representation is so excessive and hysterical that its "double" violence places the viewer in a perilous and "suffering" position. In the following section of the report I will delve into the etiology of masochism, and to a lesser degree sadism, in order to establish the theoretical framework for an analysis of the pleasures, which are at heart masochistic, of *NBK*'s "attack" specifically, and what I am calling cruel cinema more generally.

THE SHIFT FROM SADISM TO MASOCHISM

The notion, which has had academic valence for some time, that the scopic relations produced by the cinematic apparatus are governed by sadism where the spectator's voyeurism implies their separation from the screen image, is challenged by Shaviro (1994:10). Shaviro argues that the aforementioned approach to spectatorship is symptomatic of a larger problematic within film theory. For Shaviro, the centrality of sadism within the "founding texts" of psychoanalytic theories of film spectatorship is imbricated in the theorists own "disavowal and phobic rejection" of the perceived "insidious seductions of film"(ibid):

The psychoanalytic theorist's need for control, his or her, fear of giving way to the insidious blandishments of visual fascination, and his or her consequent construction of a theoretical edifice as a defense against a threatening pleasure - all [...] tends uncannily to resemble the very drama of trauma and disavowal that psychoanalytic film theory attributes to the normative male spectator (Shaviro 1994:13).¹

For Shaviro (1994:12), a consequence of this "fear of images" is that theory attempts to "assume as great a distance as possible from its object" with a view to, as in Mulvey's case, calling for "the destruction of cinematic pleasure [...] not in favour of a reconstructed new pleasure but only in the direction of an aesthetics of distance, dialectics and passionate detachment" (Mulvey cited in Shaviro 1994:13). Shaviro (1994:11) argues that Mulvey's approach to thinking and writing about film is ultimately problematic because it reveals a fear of, not only images, but of their attendant pleasures as well. In Shaviro's view, pre-eminent psychoanalytic film theorists, influenced by Mulvey and Metz, have not come to terms with the pleasures stimulated by the cinematic apparatus. Where theorists, working within the psychoanalytic paradigm, regard the pleasure of cinema as an elaborate stratagem, Shaviro (1994:56) asserts that, in the *jouissance* of the "exquisite passivity" of the experience of cinematic horror, violence and excitement, the self is shattered by an ecstatic excess of affect, rather than primordially split by the imposition of lack. He therefore offers a "masochistic, mimetic, tactile and corporeal" cinema where psychoanalytic film theory emphasizes "sadism and separation" (*ibid*).

¹ For Shaviro's discussion of this "phobic" element within psychoanalytic film theory refer to pages 10-13 where he discusses Metz and Mulvey in particular.

Shaviro's approach is essential for an inquiry into the pleasure which is to be experienced by the viewer of cinematic violence because he does not readily repudiate pleasure and he acknowledges the imbrication of his thinking and writing about film in the viewing experience. Rather than disavowing his pleasure in viewing film by attempting to create a correct and scientific distance between himself and the object of his analysis, Shaviro moves away from the scientificism inherent in the presupposition that one can ever remove oneself from the object of one's study. Shaviro therefore acknowledges that his theory is implicated in the pleasure of viewing film.

MASOCHISM: THE NEXUS OF PLEASURE AND PAIN

Borrowing from Shaviro and Bersani and Du Toit, I am proposing that the pleasure in viewing the spectacle of cinematic violence in *NBK* is fundamentally sexualised and masochistically figured. In order to discern how film might be analogous to sexual pleasure it will be necessary to outline Bersani and Du Toit's explication of masochism's imbrication with sexuality.

As a support to his argument about the masochistic pleasures of cinema, Shaviro turns to Bersani's deconstructive analysis of a number of Freud's key texts and concepts. Bersani makes the contentious assertion that all "sexuality is ontologically grounded in masochism" and that sexuality is ultimately "a tautology for masochism" (1986:39).

Bersani reads Freud against Bataille and in so doing holds that the “escalating process of sexual excitation undoes conventional oppositions between pleasure and pain”(ibid). In order to understand how it is that sexuality might be regarded as a tautology for masochism it will be necessary to explicate further Bersani and Du Toit’s reading of Freud’s theories of sexuality and masochism.

Psychoanalytic theories of masochism are manifold but they commonly focus on one of Freud’s most cryptic essays, “A Child Is Being Beaten”(1919/1963). However, it is in another essay, “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes”(1915), that Freud utilizes sadism and masochism to demonstrate mutations in the objects and aims of instincts.

In order to illustrate the aforementioned operation Freud first outlined a three-step process which he then modified when writing the following:

Our view of sadism is further prejudiced by the circumstance that this instinct, side by side with its general aim (or perhaps, rather, within it), seems to strive towards the accomplishment of a quite special aim - not only to humiliate and master, but in addition, to inflict pains. Psycho-analysis would appear to show that the infliction of pain plays no part among the original purposive actions of the instinct. A sadistic child takes no account of whether or not he inflicts pain, nor does he intend to do so. But once the transformation into masochism has taken place, the pains are very well fitted to provide a passive masochistic aim; for we have every reason to believe that sensations of pain, like other unpleasurable sensations, trench upon sexual excitation and produce a pleasurable condition, for the sake of which the subject will even willingly experience the unpleasure of pain. When feeling pains has become a masochistic aim, the sadistic aim of causing pains can arise also, retrogressively; for while these pains are being inflicted upon other people, they are enjoyed masochistically by the subject through his identification of himself with the suffering object. In both cases, of course, it is not the pain itself which is enjoyed, but the accompanying sexual excitation - so that this can be done especially conveniently from the sadistic position. The enjoyment of pain would thus be an aim which was originally masochistic, but which can only become an instinctual aim in

someone who was originally sadistic (Freud cited in Bersani and Du Toit 1985:31).²

This passage warrants substantial repetition here because it is a foundational text for all subsequent theories of sadism and masochism, and it also illustrates the degree to which masochism, for Freud, is assumed to be embedded in sadism. In Bersani and Du Toit's reading of Freud's theories of masochism he moves toward the "notion of specifically sexual masochism and sadism by suggesting that sexual pleasure may be a component of all sensations which go beyond a certain threshold of intensity" (Bersani and Du Toit 1985:32). They locate another manifestation of the aforementioned idea in, "*Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*" (1976), where Freud writes: "it may well be that nothing of considerable importance can occur in the organism without contributing some component to the excitation of the sexual instinct" (Freud cited in Bersani Du Toit 1985:32).

If one accepts Freud's premise then we might begin to understand how it is that sexuality is a tautology for masochism and how it is that the visceral and psychic agitations which are an affect of the violence of the cinematic experience - on both diegetic and extradiegetic levels - can ultimately be pleasurable. Shaviro argues that the tactility of

² "In the first step, which he calls sadism, the exercise of violence or power [is] upon some other person as object. In the second step, both the object and the aim change: the impulse to master is turned upon the self and its aim also changes from active to passive. In the concluding third step, the instinct returns to an object in the world, but since its aim has become passive, another person has to take over the role of the subject, that is the dominant role of step one " (Bersani and Du Toit 1985:31).

the cinema affects the spectator's body to the point of "expenditure" which, in Freud's terms, would be: "beyond a certain threshold of intensity" (ibid).

In view of Freud and Bersani's formulations of sexuality affect and visceral excitation of the body in cinema becomes, for Shaviro, a sexualised excitation. I would add that in *NBK*, the excitation and "attack" of the film's frenetic "double" violence is so excessive that the spectator is both viscerally and psychically agitated to the point that the excitation becomes a sexualised experience. This would be supported by Bersani and Du Toit who, via Freud, propose that:

pleasure and pain are both experienced as sexual pleasure when they are strong enough to shatter a certain stability or equilibrium of the self, [...] the pleasurable excitement of sexuality occurs when the body's normal range of sensation is exceeded and when the organization of the self is momentarily disturbed by sensations somehow "beyond" those compatible with psychic organization (Bersani and Du Toit 1985:32).

In accordance with Bersani and Du Toit's model of sexuality then; "sexuality would be that which is intolerable to the structured self" (Bersani and Du Toit 1985:33). They argue that the conclusion to which this points, is that "sexual excitement is a function of masochistic agitation" (ibid). Turning to Jean Laplanche, Bersani and Du Toit underscore that "sexual pleasure (in Freud's scheme) resides in the suffering position"(ibid). If one follows this logic, then sexual pleasure resides in the suffering position within which *NBK's* viewer's are located by virtue of the film's "attack" or double violence.

To further understand this model of sexual pleasure, it is necessary to comprehend the role that desire plays. Bersani and Du Toit note that :

In fantasy, an object of desire is introjected; the pleasant or the unpleasant effect which the individual wishes to have on that object is therefore felt by the desiring subject himself. Human desire is restless not only when the object of satisfaction is absent; it is restless also because it always includes, within itself, the disruptive effect on the other's equilibrium which is now an effect on an internalized other (ibid).³

To Bersani and Du Toit, this means that the crux of Laplanche's argument about the "reflexive pleasures of desire" is that "*desire produces sexuality*" (ibid):

Sexuality would be desire satisfied as a disruption or destabilization of the self. It would therefore not be originally an exchange of intensities between individuals, but rather a condition of broken negotiations with the world. The move to satisfy a need (the sadistic aim of inflicting pain, for example) becomes a desiring fantasy in which the structured self is more or less gravely shaken by an exceptional convergence between need and satisfaction. Perhaps the threshold of intensity which Freud speaks of is passed whenever this kind of *dédoublement* takes place. The *excess* intrinsic to sexuality would have to do with the excessive expenditure involved whenever the imagined effect of our appetites on the world is internalized (ibid).

Following Bersani and Du Toit, Shaviro claims that the *excess* produced in the moment of the "exquisite passivity" of film spectatorship is also intrinsic to the sexualised pleasure that is cinema spectatorship. This aspect of Shaviro's argument will be pursued further on in the report.

³ In a chapter entitled, "The Restlessness of Desire" Bersani and Du Toit (1985) demonstrate that it is a precondition for the functioning of desire that its object be endlessly absent.

Bersani and Du Toit suggest that sexuality can no longer be limited to purely describing a specific kind of rendezvous but is “definable in terms of the quantity of excitement (Freud) generated by the introjection of objects in desiring fantasy (Laplanche)” (ibid).⁴

In order to buttress their claims for this revised theory of sexuality they refer to Laplanche who states that “fantasy is in itself a sexual perturbation [*ébranlement*],” it is “intimately related, in its origin, to the emergence of the masochistic sexual drive” (ibid).

The operation of fantasy which is constitutive of human sexuality is, according to Laplanche, intrinsically an occurrence of “psychic pain” (ibid). For Bersani and Du Toit, then:

if we understand fantasy here as the imaginary expression and fulfillment of a desire, then the psychic disturbance produced by fantasy is an experience of pleasure *as* pain; that is, it is a masochistic sexual excitement, thus we might also understand how it is that sexuality - at least in the manner in which it is composed - might be thought of as a tautology for masochism (Bersani and Du Toit 1985:34).

Bersani and Du Toit posit that: the masochistic excitement which they argue is “inherent in desiring fantasy” might compose a “destructive instinct” - akin to Freud’s death instinct - in the subject and that this is a singular process comprising two, seemingly discrete moves : “the masochistic pleasure of desiring fantasy and the climactic pleasure of the end of desire” (ibid). The “nondesiring stillness of death” is said to be the “sexual climax” of masochistic fantasy as the agitation and restlessness of desire which threatens

⁴ There is an extant body of psychoanalytic film theory, influenced by the work of Jean Laplanche and Jean Bertrand Pontalis, which asserts that: just as sexuality is produced by desiring fantasy, so is the pleasure of film. This approach to cinema is exemplified by the collection of essays contained in *Fantasy and the Cinema*, (1989). I would like to note that given the parameters of this report a sustained discussion of theories of fantasy as it pertains to spectatorship, while relevant, is not feasible.

to shatter the equilibrium of the self is finally terminated (ibid). They further state that: “masochistic excitement helps to destroy the structures and centres which lock the individual within a few repeatable patterns and “in its violent projections toward the world, the self would therefore also be shattered by the fantasized pleasure of its own annihilation” (Bersani and Du Toit 1985:34). Following Bersani and Du Toit, Shaviro argues that: the violent arousal of the body and the disintegration of ego boundaries which are intrinsic to masochistic fantasy and excitement - but that could be said to designate sexual performance in general - are both desiring and threatening to the subject (Shaviro 1994:56).

It is important to note that Bersani and Du Toit counter Freud’s thesis that sadism and masochism are interchangeable, instead they hold that sadism and masochism are distinct psychic operations. This approach to masochism is echoed by Gilles Deleuze (1989) in *Masochism: An Interpretation of Coldness and Cruelty*, who also contends that sadism and masochism have discrete logics and aesthetics. However, most attempts to comprehend masochism commence with sadism as there appears to be a consensus within psychoanalytic theories of sadism as to its genesis that is: “in the trauma of a male child’s oedipal relation to his father” (Williams 1989:210).

Sadism is, this consensus holds, a consequence of the subject’s identification with the phallic father and, by “identifying with the power of the father and the”, the child is said to reject the “mother in himself, expel his ego, and over - invest in the superego” (ibid). For Deleuze, “the unconstrained superego runs wild and seeks external victims-victims

who represent the rejected ego” and this “punishment of the female aspect of the self” then yields sadistic fantasies of the obsessive and violent punishment of women who substitute for that rejected part” (Deleuze cited in Williams 1989:211).⁵ In response to Freud’s assumption that masochism is immanent to sadism - that it is a “deflection onto the self of a death instinct that in sadism is directed towards others” Deleuze offers an alternate theory in which masochism has its “genesis in the male child’s alliance with the powerful oral mother of the pregenital stage” (Deleuze cited in Williams 1989:211).

According to Deleuze, the masochist seeks a refusion with the pre-oedipal oral mother and a return to infantile sexuality, Williams elaborates thus: “here the child’s fear is that he will lose the nurturing all-powerful figure of his initial oral gratifications. Instead of expelling his ego, he splits it into narcissistic and ideal halves; he then expels the superego which will assume the role of the torturer” (ibid). As a consequence the male masochist repudiates “adult genital pleasure” and his own semblance of the father because possession of the phallus thwarts a return to “infantile sexuality” and a re-joining with the oral mother (ibid).⁶ Williams highlights that the male masochist, within Deleuze’s framework, disavows phallic power and as a consequence “suspends orgasmic gratification and conditions it with pain” (ibid).

⁵ It should be noted that Deleuze’s study of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, whose personal life gave masochism its name, did not address the question of female readers, “women figure in his theory of masochism only as objects to male subjects” (Williams 1989:210). Female masochism remained unexamined by Deleuze but this was subsequently corrected by Williams who, in her examination of how sadistic and masochistic impulses interrelate in pornography, sought a feminist understanding of female masochism.

⁶ See Gaylyn Studlar (1988:15-16).

Put simply, Masochism is the psychic operation in which pleasure is displaced into, and conditioned by, pain. The commonsensical opposition between pleasure and pain, or pleasure and unpleasure, is undone within the framework of theories of masochism posited by Freud, Deleuze, Shaviro and Bersani and Du Toit. Pleasure and unpleasure are imbricated in one another and are experienced as sexual pleasure when the human subject encounters stimulation and agitation which moves beyond a certain threshold which consequently disrupts the equilibrium of the self. It is my contention that cinema spectators experience precisely such stimulation and agitation when viewing films that contain representations of violence which are so excessive that they cross the threshold of the screen and “attack” the spectator in a manner which unsettles their psychic equilibrium. In the face of cinematic spectacles of violence this experience of agitation is sexualised and eroticised. This is in view of Bersani and Du Toit’s assertion that “sexuality is grounded in masochism” and is a “tautology for masochism”; hence the cinema viewer’s sexualised pleasure in the unpleasure of viewing spectacles of violence.

THE PLEASURES OF MASOCHISTIC IDENTIFICATION

NBK exemplifies the pleasures of masochistic excitation within the context of film viewing on two axes: the diegetic level in which masochistic fantasies might be engaged

on the part of the film's spectator and the masochistic excitation which is a consequence of the visceral stimulation and agitation that the film induces. In order to substantiate my argument about the embodiment of masochism through visceral excitation as well as fantastic identification I will make use of Clover's theorisation of female masochism, because she is alert to the significance of visceral excitation in film viewing, but she is also attentive to psychoanalytic notions of masochistic identification.⁷

Clover's approach to cinematic identification is located within the parameters of the psychoanalytic framework. Whereas Shaviro, whose retheorisation and repudiation of psychoanalytic approaches to film theory has informed much of my analysis of *NBK*, disavows the validity of psychoanalytic theories of cinematic identification, Clover remains committed to this model when attempting to account for the male viewer's pleasure and investment in their identification with what she terms, the "female victim-hero" of the horror film. My procedures here might admittedly be construed as contradictory, but this is unavoidable given my intention to read film as both, the *mise-en-scène* of desire in which the spectator's economy of desire is played out through masochistic fantasy, and as a tactile embodied experience. It is my contention that the tactility of cruel cinema induces a masochistic excitement on the part of the spectator which unsettles their equilibrium.

⁷ Clover and Shaviro's approaches to film theory would, at first glance, appear to be mutually exclusive, but this is not necessarily the case. For Shaviro (1994:62-63), Linda Williams and Clover take the first steps toward shattering the psychoanalytic paradigm which he believes has "dominated academic film theory for the past twenty years or so." Shaviro holds that Clover makes a "radical and genuine challenge to the psychoanalytic paradigm - even as she locates herself within and against the discourse she begins to dismantle the "psychoanalytic theory that ostensibly serves as the framework of her discussion" (Shaviro, S. 1994:62-63).

The character, "Carrie", in Brian de Palma's eponymous film, is Clover's template for the female "victim-hero" who becomes monstrous, in Barbara Creed's (1986) terms, by virtue of her excessive and hysterical revenge upon those who had victimized her for the film's duration.⁸ Clover (1992:3-20) explains how her inquiry into the horror film genre and its appeal to a largely male audience was prompted by her surprise in learning that *Carrie* (1976), in its fixation with menstruation and tampons and its protagonist whose power would appear to emanate from her female insides, has become somewhat of a must-see cult film for adolescent males.

Clover's central question for *Carrie*, and by extension all horror films populated by female victim/heroes, is: wherein lies the appeal of this genre for their primarily male audience? Clover's thesis is remarkable, because she steers clear of the ubiquitous "male sadism" argument, derived from Laura Mulvey, in favour of a comprehensive theory of male masochistic pleasure in her account of the male viewer's pleasure in identifying with the female victim-hero of the slasher film.⁹

⁸ Creed's (1986) designation of "monstrous femininity" is applicable to *Carrie*. See also Berenstein's point about the affinities of women and monsters, who both "exhibit a renegade sexuality within the context of the horror film and who are feared for the "power and potency of a different kind of sexuality" (1996:3).

⁹ Mulvey's, subsequently revised argument, could be summarised as follows: the gaze at the female in narrative cinema is male, the male spectator salves the unpleasure of the women who represents lack and castration by; either seeing her punished and taking a sadistic pleasure therein or by a fetishistic/ scopophilic look.

Turning to Stephen King's comments concerning the success of his story in both print and film, Clover finds affinities between Carrie's victimisation at school and its young male viewers who experience a similar victimisation. For Clover, the "thumb-rubbing" of spectacles and having one's gym shorts pulled over one's head in school hallways, which young males commonly experience, are: "oblique gestures, the one threatening sodomy or damage to the genitals or both, and the other threatening damage to the eyes - a castration of sorts" (Clover 1992:4). In Clover's view, the horror film unsettles the assumption that the male spectator's relationship to the female victim is only sadistically figured, her work has therefore become an important intervention into film theory, because as she notes, the pairing of male spectator to female victim/hero "has much to tell us about spectatorship in general, not to speak of the politics of representation, the politics of displacement, and the politics of criticism and theory" (Clover 1992:7).

As horror is undoubtedly more victim-identified than is widely believed, it raises questions regarding film theory's "conventional assumption that the cinematic apparatus is organized around the experience of a mastering voyeuristic gaze" (Clover 1992:9). Clover therefore concludes that this opens up the possibility that "male viewers are prepared to identify not just with screen females, but with screen females in fear and pain" and it is "that identification, the official denial of that identification and the larger implications of both those things" which are the focus of her analysis (ibid):

The willingness and even eagerness [...] of the male viewer to throw in his emotional lot, if only temporarily, with not only a woman but a woman in fear and pain, [...] would seem to suggest that he has a vicarious stake in that

fear and pain. If it is also the case that the act of horror spectatorship is itself registered as a feminine experience - that the shock effects induce in the viewer bodily sensations answering the fear and pain of the screen victim - the charge of masochism is underlined (Clover 1992:61).

Clover undertakes a critical interrogation of the conventional wisdom which asserts that, the horror film is the quintessence of sadistic misogyny. She correctly, I believe, contends that there is a substantial difference between the "wallowing in suffering of the horror film and the action genre which is characterized by extended frenzies of sadism of a sort exceptional in horror" (Clover 1992:14). This is not to say that Clover occludes the possibility for horror to offer sadistic spectatorial pleasures, indeed sadism and voyeurism are both on offer, but she deviates from other feminists who assert that "horror's satisfactions begin and end in sadism" by claiming that: sadism is not horror's "first cause" (1992:19).

In a substantial departure from the mainstream of feminist film theory, Clover announces her suspicion that "horror is not as concerned as dominant cinema with disavowing male lack; on the contrary [...] it seems almost to indulge it, to the point of reveling in it, [...] now, it is not so much the eye that kills but the eye that is killed" (Clover 1992:181).¹⁰

¹⁰ The theoretical assumption, derived from Mulvey and Metz, that cinematic pleasure is predicated upon a desire for voyeuristic mastery and that it presupposes a male spectator has, similarly been challenged and revised by, D.N. Rodowick, who is also situated within the psychoanalytic paradigm. Rodowick, challenged Mulvey for failing to consider the "masochistic potential for fetishistic scopophilia" in her concern to "construct a sadistic male subject" (1991:7). Rodowick holds the view that Mulvey "defines fetishistic scopophilia as an overvaluation of the object, a point which Freud would support" and further states that: "Freud would also add that this phenomenon is one of the fundamental sources of authority defined as passive submission to the object: in sum, masochism" (Rodowick 1991:7).

The eye that is killed in horror is, of course, a double eye, it is both the screen victim and the spectator's eye. As already discussed in the previous chapter, the spectator's "soft" eye is literally attacked, wounded and penetrated alongside the attack on the screen victim with whom the spectator is compelled to identify. The eye therefore becomes a "site for invasion" by the "taboo images which are projected" and the painful optics which accompany them, but the eye/I of the spectator is also "killed" by virtue of the viewer's masochistic identification with the screen victim.

PEEPING TOM : A RECONSIDERATION

By way of her analysis of *Peeping Tom* (1960), Clover detects, within the horror film in general, two distinct types of gaze; the assaultive gaze, which is allied with sadism, and the reactive gaze, which is affiliated with masochism. This distinction is key, as it is the pivot on which Clover's argument, about the male spectator's masochistic identification with the female victim, turns.

Susan Sontag's reading of *Peeping Tom* leads her to conclude that the film supported and confirmed her view that the act of taking a photograph is an aggressive one: "To photograph people is to violate them [...] to photograph someone is a sublimated murder [...] The act of taking pictures is a semblance of rape" (1977:14-24). Clover points out that another commentator, Elliot Stein, proposed that *Peeping Tom* equated not only

making films, but watching them as well, as a sexually violent act when equating watching films with killing and fucking (1992:174).

Clover critically contests theoretical claims, which hold that: “the eye [...] kills,” and that the “spectator’s perspective is constituted by the perspective of the assaultive camera and to which feminist film theory added that the perspective in question is paradigmatically male” (1992:177). The kind of theoretical claim of which Clover is critical is exemplified by Mulvey’s famous scenario of sadistic voyeurism in which it was presumed that “spectator and camera colluded in an act of phallic violence” toward the female whose body was “fixed as a deeply problematic object of sight.” (Clover 1992:177). The sadistic/voyeuristic specular regime which is held up as the *sine qua non* of the horror film is undone by *Peeping Tom* when the spectator, like the film’s protagonist, “Mark”, is positioned on both ends of the sado-masochistic spectrum, as either aggressor, or, victim (Clover 1992:178).

Peeping Tom is a metafilm which opens up: “the psychodynamics of specularity and fear” (Clover 1992:169). The film’s protagonist, Mark, survives the spectatorial cruelties to which he was subjected as a child by, on the one hand, using the camera, much like his father to kill and fuck; and on the other, to obsessively rescreen and, thus, re-experience the suffering position in which he was placed by virtue of his father’s obsession with recording his every movement. Mark effectively splits into two and continuously re-enacts the activities associated with both the positions previously outlined. Clover

contends that: "if the emotional project of the first gaze is to assault, the emotional project of the second is to be oneself assaulted - vicariously, through the process of projection in both senses" (Clover 1992:174). Borrowing from Laplanche and Pontalis, she, concludes that: "in that re-view of unpleasure there lies perverse pleasure, for the sight of pain inflicted on others is enjoyed masochistically by the subject through his identification of himself with the suffering object" (Clover 1992:174).¹¹

Kaja Silverman, in her analysis of *Peeping Tom* in *The Acoustic Mirror*, also pursues the film's metacinematic inclination which she asserts ultimately: "exposes the machinery whereby Hollywood promotes the imaginary coherence of the male subject by displacing onto women all signs of lack" (Silverman 1988:32-41). For Silverman, *Peeping Tom* "reveals voyeurism to be an exercise in fantasy, and not phallic mastery, as mastery of this order is ultimately, according to her reading of fantasy, unattainable" (ibid)". Clover, however, takes Silverman's analysis of *Peeping Tom* to task both for its failure to recognize the film's kinship with horror and for the fact that masochism appears to be a theoretical stopping point for her analysis. Clover, contra Silverman, views Mark not just as a failed voyeur, but as a "successful masochist" (Clover 1992:179). For Clover then:

Mark is fighting for voyeuristic distance from the victim he is, in his capacity as an horror spectator, not only failing to resist her embrace, but hurling himself into it. Uniting with the victim position seems to be the point of his spectatorial enterprise, the shameful fantasy his home-studio has been constructed to fulfill (Clover 1992:179).

¹¹ Williams (1989) states that: "what marks acts as perverse is not the extremity of the violence enacted for pleasure, but the manner in which violence and pain become vehicles for other things, [...] staging dramas that enhance or substitute for sexual acts". While for Silverman (1988) the "distinctive feature of perverse sexuality is the *not* ending in coitus - its lack of subordination to a genital goal of discharge or end pleasure".

Clover's analysis of masochism in *Peeping Tom* is extended Shaviro, who notes that:

Mark furtively watches the films he has made of his murder, motivated not by sadistic gratification but by a desperate need to experience, in himself, his victim's terminal fear. His murders are ultimately imperfect rehearsals for his own spectacular suicide, which (with the aid of the reflector) he simultaneously films and views. *Peeping Tom* thus amply indicates cinema's capacity to reproduce, or to serve as a relay for, traditional gender-coded patterns of murderous domination. But it also shows how this capacity is subverted by the very mechanisms that make it possible. The aggressive act of filming is only a detour en route to the passivity and self-abandonment of spectatorship [...] violence against the Other is finally just an inadequate substitute for the dispossession of oneself. The reflections, of masochistic spectacle create a space of superfluity, of violently heightened ambivalence, in which every exercise of power gets lost (Shaviro 1994:62).

Shaviro's account of Mark's masochistic pleasure in the experience of his "victim's terminal fear" matches Clover's explanation of the pleasure in the horror film for the spectator: "the job of horror - the job of movies people see in order to be scared - is to give the viewer as pure a dose [of masochistic spectatorship] as possible (1992:179). The pleasure of the horror text, Brophy writes: "is in fact, getting the shit scared out of you - and loving it; [it is] an exchange mediated by adrenalin" (Brophy cited in Clover 1992:179).

I now want to analyse a crucial sequence within *NBK*'s narrative in order to make clear the relevance of Clover's exploration of the machinations of the horror film for my argument about the intrinsically masochistic pleasure which *NBK*'s spectacle of violence produces. Before doing so, however, I would like to refer to Clover's claims for the

pertinence of her conclusions about the nature of horror film spectatorship for cinema more generally as it is an argument with which I clearly concur:

It may be objected that horror is qualitatively different from other genres (it is certainly one of the most insistently marked and segregated categories) and that its sensibility is *sui generis*. I would argue, however both on the basis of the two-way eye/camera implicit in the accounts of Mulvey and Metz (despite their attempts to keep it one way) and on the basis of the psychoanalytic theory of two-way aggression (sadism/masochism) that underpins it, that horror merely takes to an overt extreme an operation that is surely as endemic to the act of cinematic spectatorship as aggressive voyeurism is, even if it is less exploited, and/or less admitted, in higher forms (Clover 1992:230).

I now want to return to *NBK* and in more specific terms and using Clover's insights, outline the spaces which the film opens up for a specifically masochistic identification in a manner which distinguishes it from the more overtly and unabashedly sadistic pleasures of films whose stock in trade is also spectacular representations of violence.¹²

I want to suggest that *NBK* shares with the horror genre an investment in masochism to the extent that it privileges masochism over sadism. This is not to say that sadistic and voyeuristic pleasures and patterns of viewing are occluded; in fact I will argue that in the scene about to be discussed, sadism prefigures masochism and in effect establishes its conditions of possibility. However, sadism is not *NBK*'s "first cause," if you will, and this

¹² The repetition of brutal spectacles of violence in films such as *NBK*, *Reservoir Dogs* and *Henry Portrait of a Serial Killer*, for instance, trade on the same kind of erotogenic masochism as the horror film in spite of the fact that they are strictly speaking not classified as horror films. Although Freeland (1995) argues that *Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer*, is an exemplar of what she would call "realist horror."

differentiates it from contemporary action and thriller films that are also predicated upon excessive almost hysterical spectacles of violence.

Before continuing a further distinction needs to be made, Clover mentions that the horror film is not the sole cinematic genre to mine the “pleasure/pain” response, she stresses that “action movies and thrillers are obvious candidates, and the suggestion has been made that sentimental genres, and even early train-wreck movies” trade on this operation, but, she insists that horror is the quintessence of the masochistic aesthetic and it “tells on the movies” in a metacinematic move which is unparalleled by any other genre. This metacinematic element, I would argue, is also in evidence in the “motel room” scene in *NBK*.

In a crucial setpiece, *NBK* both stages and enables the kind of masochistic identification which, Clover has shown, is the horror film’s stock in trade. Mickey and Mallory are ensconced in a cheap motel, Mickey lies on the bed and “surfs” through the channels on the television set. A panoply of images flash onto the screen, including notorious scenes from *Scarface*, *Midnight Express* and the *Shining*, and via rear-screen projection the motel room’s window becomes a screen onto which more images, from westerns to documentary footage of the holocaust, are projected.

Mallory joins Mickey on the bed and coitus ensues. Before long, however, Mickey’s gaze drifts way from Mallory to some unseen (to the audience) object in the corner of the

room, and given the expression on his face it appears to be heightening his pleasure in having intercourse with Mallory. Mallory notices Mickey's distraction and angrily climbs off the bed after admonishing him by saying: "why are you looking at her?" Mallory leaves the room and Mickey's gaze is now fixed onto the still unseen "object" in the corner of the room. After a few seconds we see, from Mickey's point of view, what he was looking at: a terrified woman cowering in the corner; she has been bound and gagged and stripped to her underwear. What follows is a series of intercut footage between Mickey in the hotel room and Mallory driving around town and finally seducing and killing a petrol attendant at a "gas station". This sequence makes manifest the oscillation from sadism to masochism, as well as, the sexualised pleasure in masochism in the following manner;

During intercourse with Mallory, Mickey's pleasure is derived *not* from an "exchange of intensities" with Mallory but rather from the idea of the terrified woman bound up in the corner. This is signified by when she, not Mallory, becomes the focus of his attention, and by the fact that the idea of her being terrified and bound up is sexually exciting to him. When raping and then strangling his hostage Mickey's pleasure appears to be sadistically figured. But, I would argue that his pleasure, although framed by sadism, is ultimately experienced as masochism. This becomes clear when placed in the context of Bersani and Du Toit's argument that; even sadism is experienced masochistically because the pleasure lies in sharing and introjecting the victim's pain, which is then experienced as a sexual excitation. The film answers Mallory's question, "why do you

have to look at her?" by making clear that Mickey's sexuality, although ostensibly sadistically figured, is ultimately bound up with masochism: he needs to see his victim's pain in order to share and experience it as a sexualised excitement.

In the scene which is intercut with Mickey in the motel room, an angry Mallory stops at an all-night gas station and wanders across the lot to the workshop area whilst the attendant fills her car with petrol. At this point the scene is filmed from her point of view. While Mallory is watching the young attendant he morphs into "Mickey". Once finished attending to the car, "Mickey"/the attendant walks up to Mallory (now in a blonde wig and body-hugging dress) who in an exaggeration of the cinematic operation of "woman as spectacle" leans seductively against the car's bonnet. "Mickey" has now morphed back into the attendant and the film takes on his point of view.

The spectator, by being sutured to the petrol attendant's point of view, is also enticed to voyeuristically survey the spectacle of Mallory's body. This is signaled by the way in which he gives Mallory the "once-over" (the signpost of voyeuristic gazing within the filmic lexicon). Mallory, now taking on the dominant role, invites him to "touch" her, they kiss and lie down on the bonnet of the car. She then commands the awestruck attendant, who has now recognized her as "Mallory Knox", to "go down" on her. Mallory has a flashback to a time when she and Mickey had had intercourse previously, as well as to an occasion when her father had come into her room at night. The attendant meanwhile has become rather enthusiastic and, a rattled Mallory, pushes him off her,

pulls out a handgun and shoots him to death. Before leaving the scene of the murder she quips: “that was the worst head I’ve ever had in my life! Why’d you have to be so fucking eager?”

In the scopic regime put into play by this setpiece, sadism, although in evidence, ultimately gives way to masochism: the sadism of Mickey’s rape and murder (and the viewer’s identification with his point of view), and the voyeurism of the attendant/spectator is overtaken by masochism. When Mallory attacks and kills the petrol attendant she is also, in a sense attacking the viewer, who had been seduced into an identification with him. This is once again achieved through the film’s use of point-of-view shots.

The film, in the scenes just described, both stages, and makes manifest, the spectatorial oscillation between sadism and masochism previously alluded to. I would add that the masochism in this sequence is aggregated and manifold because Mallory, in killing the attendant - who is Mickey’s surrogate - is not only “punishing” the audience but Mickey for his behaviour in the motel room as well.

MASOCHISM: A CRUCIAL BLINDSPOT

Clover’s reading of the horror film, questions the notion of the male gaze and ruptures the assumptions of mastery which have steadfastly surrounded it. This stems from her

firm reproval of mainstream feminist theory's overinvestment in male sadism which, she believes, has resulted in a crucial blindspot concerning male masochism. For Clover, then, "the silence surrounding male masochism points to its importance, just as the horror film is the repressed of mainstream filmmaking, so Clover asserts, is male masochism the repressed of mainstream psychoanalytic film theory" (1992:225). Silverman notices how in his seminal text, *The Imaginary Signifier* (1982), Metz states that "because cinema is predicated on a distance between the spectator and the object of vision (a distance in time as well as space), the cinematic spectator is necessarily a voyeur, and voyeurism, with its drive to mastery, is by nature sadistic" (Metz 1982:58-65). Silverman queried Metz's assumption of the mastery of the viewer, by referring to Laplanche's assertion that:

in the scenario of the primal scene, (for Metz and others, the *ur*-movie) the seeing child is, at the level of identification, not master but victim of the situation. Far from controlling the sounds and images of parental sexuality, the child held captive within the crib is controlled - indeed, overwhelmed - by them. Adult sexuality invades him or her through the eyes and ears, puncturing those vital organs. The mastering, sadistic variety of voyeurism discussed by Metz can perhaps best be understood as a psychic formation calculated to reverse the power relations of the primal scene - as a compensatory drama whereby passivity yields to activity through an instinctual turning around and reversal (Silverman cited in Clover 1992:207).

Notwithstanding Silverman's quarrel with Metz's assumption of "the mastery of the film viewer", Clover notices that a crucial passage titled, "Identification and Mirror," has all but been ignored by film theory and argues that this oversight is telling. In the passage in question, Metz (1982:50-55) contends that vision comprises a "double movement" the first being "projective" and the second being "introjective." It is this second movement

that has been critically underappreciated. For Metz, introjective vision follows projective vision;

I have the impression at once that [...] I am casting my eyes on things, and that the latter, thus illuminated, come to be deposited within me (Metz 1982:50-51).

Metz himself neglects introjective gazing in favour of the sadism of projective gazing that occurs via the camera. This translates into a gap, regarding masochism, at the heart of his theory. To Clover's mind then, the absence of masochism in Metz's text demands attention "for while he emphatically identifies projective looking as sadistic, he does not, [...] proffer an equivalent analysis of introjective looking, his blindspot thus corresponds exactly to Mulvey's" (Clover 1992:209).

Clover's distinction between assaultive and reactive gazing within the horror film conforms to Metz's formulation of vision as an oscillation between projective and introjective gazes, but she extends Metz's hypothesis and this enables her to think and write through the silences surrounding masochism in both Metz and Mulvey's work in particular, and psychoanalytically oriented film theory, more generally:

It is in horror, I suggest, that Metz's (and Mulvey's) blank is filled in. For even more variously than it imagines ways that projective looking [...] can be sadistic, horror imagines ways that our sensitive surface can be intruded upon, that things can come to be deposited within us - that our eyes are soft (Clover, C. 1992:209).

In Clover's model, a further distinctive feature of the horror film is that assaultive gazing, which is phallically figured, is more often than not punished, thwarted, blinded and rendered fallible. Clover explains this phenomenon by way of Lacan's distinction between the gaze and the "eye" (look). In Lacan's equation, the look of the eye is to the gaze as the penis is to the phallus:

the gaze, [...] is the transcendental ideal - omniscient, omnipotent - which the look can never achieve but to which it ceaselessly aspires. So common is the theme of failed gazing in horror that I would venture as a rule of the genre that whenever a man imagines himself as a controlling voyeur - imagines, in Lacanian terms, that his look at women constitutes a gaze - some sort of humiliation is soon to follow, typically in the form of his being overwhelmed, in one form or another, by the sexuality of the very female he meant to master (Clover 1992:210).

The theme of "failed-gazing" which is compulsively re-enacted in horror film, is also staged and repeated on a number of occasions in *NBK* where the voyeurism of the spectator's gaze is punished and thwarted via their identification with voyeurs within the fictional world of the film. This is evidenced in the film's opening "diner" scene, in the scene in which Mallory murders the petrol attendant and when Mallory murders Jack Scagnetti, the "cop" who imprisons Mickey and Mallory.

It is interesting to note that on each of these occasions when the film constructs a voyeuristic gaze for the viewer to take up in relation to Mallory's body, she turns on the voyeurs and quite hysterically and even "monstrously" kills them. The implications of the film's construction of Mallory as both victim (of her father's abuse) and heroine (in

Clover's sense), for its enactment of gendered masochism is fascinating, however, as was made clear in the introduction, this line of inquiry will not be pursued in the report due to the limitations of space.

In view of horror's embracing of the introjective or suffering position which is crucially figured as both painful and feminine, the key question is whether, or not, the pattern of looks within the horror film's diegesis correspond to those between spectator and screen? (Clover 1992:211) In *NBK*, I would argue, there is a near perfect fit as the spectator is punished for gazing when the leering patrons of the diner, the petrol attendant and Jack Scagnetti are.

REPETITION AND COMPULSION

One of horror cinema's most conspicuous hallmarks is its almost obsessive repetition of the same narratives which are all shaped by the experience of fear.¹³ If the pleasure in

¹³ Clover notes that horror cinema is "probably the most convention bound of all popular genres" (1992:212). The archetypal character of horror is also highlighted by James Twitchell (1985) in *Dreadful Pleasures*.

viewing the horror film is, as Shaviro and Clover assert, a masochistic one, what then is the viewer's pleasure in returning again and again to experience the pleasure/unpleasure?

Clover says that, “-scary stories endlessly repeated-, stand as a narrative manifestation of the syndrome of repetition and compulsion (*Wiederholungszwang*)” (1992:213) which Laplanche and Pontalis, in turn, characterize as an: “ungovernable process originating in the unconscious” in which the subject “deliberately places himself in distressing situations, thereby repeating an old (but unremembered) experience” (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973:78).

What is crucial here is that the syndrome of repetition and compulsion, according to this model, is located in unpleasure. Clover's account of the viewer's pleasure in continually returning to view the same kind of film, with the knowledge of its concomitant “attack” or unpleasure, is attested to by the comments made by respondents in Hill's (1997) study. Hill's respondents all declare a proclivity for watching and enjoying violent film's in spite of the unpleasure which attends the genre. It is as though the anticipation of violence is a key to the pleasure.¹⁴

Although the exact nature of repetition and compulsion are not entirely clear, what is indisputable is that “where there is *Wiederholungszwang* there is historical suffering - suffering that has been more or less sexualized as erotogenic masochism” (Clover

¹⁴ For respondents comments see Hill(1997:51-74).

1992:213).¹⁵ This notion of “erotogenic masochism, in which suffering is sexualized, resonates with Bersani and Du Toit’s (1985:33) contention, following Freud and Laplanche, that “sexual pleasure resides in the suffering position.” In Clover’s estimation, the “very repetitiousness of fear-inducing scenarios in horror cinema is *prima facie* evidence of horror’s central investment in pain (Clover 1992:213).

“FEMININE MASOCHISM”

In spite of Freud’s about-face, between “A Child Is Being Beaten”(1919) and “The Economic Problem of Masochism”(1924), regarding the:

place of masochism within the psychic economy (in particular its role vis-à-vis the pleasure principle and the death instinct), he retained his observation

¹⁵ “Erotogenic masochism accompanies the libido through all its developmental phases and derives from them changing psychical coatings. the fear of being eaten up by the totem animal (the father) originates from the primitive oral organization; the wish to be beaten by the father comes from the sadistic-anal phase which follows it; castration, although it is later disavowed, enter into the content of masochistic phantasies as a precipitate of the phallic stage of organization; and from the final genital organization there arise, of course, the situations of being copulated with and of giving birth, which are characteristic of femaleness.” [Freud cited in Clover 1992:214] It must be noted that the precise mechanisms whereby unpleasant experiences are converted into pleasant rehearsals is in dispute.

that the perversion took as its programmatic form the feminine position. If one has an opportunity of studying cases in which the masochistic phantasies have been especially richly elaborated, one quickly discovers that they place the subject in a characteristically female situation; they signify, that is, being castrated, or copulated with, or giving birth to a baby. For this reason I have called this form of masochism, *a potiori* as it were, [...] the feminine form, although so many of its features point to infantile life (Clover 1992:214).

Freud designates the position where one is bound or subjected to an excruciating beating, a fundamentally feminine one. In his essay, "The Economic Problem of Masochism", however, all the cases he records are male. In this regard Clover notes that the inference to be drawn is that, "although masochism is a centrally structuring element in both male and female subjectivity, it is only in the female that it is accepted as natural and thus only in the male that it is considered perverse or pathological" (Clover 1992:214-215).¹⁶ Therefore, whilst the girl's fantasy, in "A Child is Being Beaten", is regarded as "straight" (in Freud's view), for the boy it entails a "gender complication" because for the boy to enjoy being beaten by his father he needs to adopt a position which Freud has designated as feminine (ibid).

In this formulation, feminine masochism refers not to masochism in female subjects, but rather to masochistic perversion in men. It should be clear how Freud's account of masochism could be vulnerable to the criticism that it is reliant upon and indeed produces the binary masculine/feminine, however, as Clover has stated: "it opened the gate to more current formulations, including the idea that one's sex/gender/sexuality has

¹⁶ Silverman contests Freud's notion" by arguing that girl's fantasy may be even more perverse than Freud recognized" (1988:215).

no existence outside the acts or performances that constitute it" (Clover, C. 1992:215-216).¹⁷

Notwithstanding criticism of the term "feminine masochism", Clover makes a compelling argument for the pertinence of this particular locution for her analysis of male pleasure in the horror film. She does so by arguing that the benefit of the classification is that it simply might accurately describe the manner in which men who have such fantasies might perceive them:

If that understanding is on the one hand mixed up with a sense of degradation, it on the other contemplates the female body - a specifically female body - as a site of intense sexual feeling [...] in this connection Freud's declaration, in "Analysis and Interminable", that the most deeply embedded male anxiety has not to do with castration in any blanket or straightforward sense, but the fear of standing in a passive or feminine relation to another man and the particular sort of castration that might proceed from that (Clover 1992:216).

But what of the relevance of Clover's designation of "feminine masochism" - in order to account for the relationship between a film genre which presents its audience of primarily male viewers with narratives and images of female characters in various states of abject terror - for my investigation of the pleasure in the unpleasure of viewing

¹⁷The term, "feminine masochism," has been criticized by Theodor Reik (1981), in particular, see his *Masochism in Modern Man*. New York: Grove Press. Clover is nevertheless aware of the need to: "distinguish between femininity as it manifests itself in female sexuality and femininity as it manifests itself in male fantasy" (1992:215). She notices that, for Freud "fantasies of penetration, giving birth, and feelings of debasement act as a psychic camouflage to mask the homosexual taboo which hovers around these fantasies" (ibid). Clover stresses that "it should be remembered that men have testified to having fantasized about receptive copulation et al in both pleasant and unpleasant terms" (ibid).

spectacles of violence? Insofar as one is in a feminine position then it should be evident that being on the receiving end of images of violence and the retinal assault of a film such as *NBK* means that one is in a "suffering position" which is ultimately masochistic and feminine, "regardless of the particularity of the spectator's body" (Clover 1992:217).

The horror genre, for Clover, disintegrates the boundaries between male and female to such an extent that they become one sex. Her claims for the notion of gender as a "permeable membrane" are supported by Williams who also makes the point that "horror [...] represents gender as a slippery element of identity" (1983:83-99).¹⁸ The ambiguity of gender in horror is echoed in Freud's interpretation of the male form of the "beating fantasy" where the male masochist's desire to be beaten by his father "stands very close to the other wish, to have a passive (feminine) sexual relation to him, and is only a regressive distortion of it" (Freud cited in Clover 1992:217).

Drawing on one of Theodor Reik's case studies, Clover underscores the importance of the expectation and anticipation of pain/suffering to the pleasure which the fantasist/spectator takes from masochistic fantasies/films. What is striking is that "the patient himself is not 'in' the story in the first person" instead he "operates through a

¹⁸ Berenstein (1996) is critical of the "one-sex" element of Clover's theory which follows Thomas Lacquer's genealogy of notions surrounding the body. Berenstein, who is also concerned with the machinations of the horror film as it pertains to gender and spectatorship, objects to Clover's "one-sex" theory because she believes that Clover elides the genre's ability to: "send ripples through contemporary thought by unsettling the presumption, through the figure of the monster, that sexual difference is based on the tabula rasa of the body" (Berenstein 1996:27-30). For Berenstein, our notion of the biological body itself, and not only gender, is therefore called into question, by the horror film: "in a sense therefore, classic horror overtly represents what theorists such as Butler, Lacquer and Stephen Heath have noted recently- namely, designations of biological sex, like gender behaviours, are human constructs" (ibid).

third - person surrogate. In another of Reik's patients Silverman notices that the "fantast is bound to the scenario through a complex imaginary network. His immediate point of insertion occurs via the young man who will next fall victim [...] but that figure himself identifies closely with the victim presently suffering that mutilation" (Silverman cited in Clover 1992: 220).

The aforementioned scenario resonates with Bersani and Du Toit's (1985:33) point, made earlier, about the manner in which the "unpleasant effect which the individual wishes to have [on the object of desire] is felt by the desiring subject himself." This would tend to support my argument that the mechanism for the gratification which the cinema viewer might experience in the wake of the "sensuous maelstrom" that is *NBK*, is via a fantastic identification with the next screen victim. The spectator, like Reik's patient:

shares every intensive affect of this victim, feels his terror and anxiety with all the physical sensations since he imagines that he will himself experience the same fate in a few moments. I want to suggest that the correspondence is a function of masochistic fantasy: that people who make movies sense the iterative "my-turn-is-coming-soon" quality of victimization fantasies that they consciously exploit the proved willingness of the viewer (proved because he keeps paying for it) to imagine himself as a next victim; and that the screen functions as a kind of anticipatory mirror intended not so much to instruct as to heighten the effect (Clover 1992:220).

I want to stress again that it is in my acknowledgment of the element of a fantastic identification that my argument deviates from Shaviro's most strongly. In my view, the

spectator's pleasure in viewing *NBK's* spectacles of violence lies in a masochistic identification, which is then augmented by the masochistic excitement induced by the film's viscerally felt "attack". The shattering of the subject's equilibrium occurs via the viewer's masochistic identification with the screen victim and this masochistic suffering is then intensified by the film's "double" violence which is felt viscerally.

Embodied *and* fantastic masochism work in tandem via the film's violence and this is well illustrated by the scene, in which Mallory first seduces, and then kills, Jack Scagnetti. Through the film's use of point-of-view shots in this scene, the viewer is invited to take up Scagnetti's point of view/ his gaze¹⁹ producing an economy of looking in which, Scagnetti, and by extension the viewer, would seem to have a controlling voyeuristic gaze. By focusing, in close-up, on Mallory's mouth and her body, the film entices the viewer to take up Scagnetti's voyeuristic gaze in which Mallory is figured as an eternally absent object of desire.²⁰

¹⁹ First there is a shot of Scagnetti entering Mallory's prison cell and then the camera turns to Mallory sitting on her bed, the look at Mallory therefore becomes the spectator's via Scagnetti's point of view.

²⁰ Scagnetti figures as Mickey Knox's doppelgänger within *NBK's* diegesis. This is suggested by Scagnetti's obsession with "capturing" Mickey and Mallory. Not only does Scagnetti want to capture them, he wants to become Mickey and he wants to achieve that by standing in relation to Mallory as Mickey does, in other words, he wants to "have" Mallory, in a sexual sense. This is first signaled when Scagnetti picks up and sniffs Mallory's underwear and then says, "she's my kind of girl (the underwear had been left at the scene of the petrol attendant's murder) and then literalised when Scagnetti "copies" Mickey's rape and strangulation of the hostage in the motel room. Scagnetti replicates Mickey's murder of the hostage right down to the manner in which she is assaulted and bound. The film makes clear, given Scagnetti's ecstasy at the moment of strangling his victim, that his pleasure is derived from his proximity to Mickey when repeating his crime.

This identification in which Scagnetti/the viewer initially has mastery ultimately becomes masochistic when Mallory, after kissing Scagnetti, begins to bite and kick him and eventually shoots and kills him. The masochism of this identification is intensified, when the film crosses the threshold of the screen and touches the viewer with a brutal contact, because of the excessive manner in which Scagnetti is attacked and killed and the film's excessive, almost hysterical, representation of that attack. The camera once again is unhinged, the scene is edited frenetically and even the music is assaultive.

Furthermore, the pleasure in this masochism is as much in the anticipation of the pain of the attack, as it is in the enjoyment of the abjection of the pain of itself. The viewer takes up Scagnetti's gaze knowing and anticipating that Mallory is coiled and ready to lash out at Scagnetti/themselves. This element of pleasure in the anticipation of pain is even hinted at within the narrative. Scagnetti answers Mallory's question, "what do you want me to do?" by replying, "I want you to kiss me and squeeze my nipples" to which Mallory replies, "you like a little bit of pain?" Sexual pleasure is writ large on Scagnetti's face at this moment, the moment just before the violence of Mallory's ultimately fatal attack. Sexuality, here, is clearly bound up with masochism. This would tend to support Shaviro's claim that the *raison d'être* of the cinema spectator is "a passion for that very loss of control, that abjection, fragmentation, and subversion of self-identity that psychoanalytic theory so dubiously classifies under the rubrics of lack and castration" (Shaviro 1994:57).

This loss of control is of the same order as Clover's feminine masochist's abjection in the face of images and narratives in which the male abdicates the position of voyeuristic control and mastery assigned to him by numerous theorists, and actively seeks an identification with a feminine screen character whose bodily integrity is violated when "they" are assaulted, taunted and penetrated. Clover refers to Kirby's remarks about the positioning of the spectator of early train films to support her contention that masochism is about the loss of control, "the fantasies of being run over and assaulted, penetrated, produce a certain pleasure of pain - beyond the pleasure principle and in the realm of repetition compulsion - which is [...] about will-to-submission, to loss of mastery" (Kirby cited in Clover 1992:223). But what are the implications of our pleasure in this loss of mastery in this masochistic excitation? In the concluding chapter I will turn my attention to this very question through my discussion of the debate surrounding the politics of masochism.

Chapter Four

THE POLITICS OF MASOCHISM

“The sensations and reactions of the body precede, and never cease to subtend, the categorical demands of the symbolic order, of conscience and the superego. The ambivalent pleasures of the masochistic body provide a rich field for contesting, evading, or eroding phallic power and the global binarization of gender.”

Steven Shaviro 1994:59

In the previous chapter I argued that the pleasure which is produced for the viewer of the kind of excessive screen violence embodied by *NBK* is ultimately a masochistic one.

What then are the implications of Clover and Shaviro’s formulations of spectator pleasure in the face of cinematic violence and what of their political consequentiality?

The questions which I pose here will be considered with particular reference to *NBK*.

The film has an overt political thrust, yet it engages the spectator in the intensity of cinematic pleasures in a manner which opens up a politics alternate to its ostensible political trajectory and which demands the kind of questioning I propose here.

Kaja Silverman, in *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (1992), explores the overlapped questions of pleasure and politics. Her work is, however, largely an exploration of male masochism.¹ Silverman hints at the possibility that there is a political efficacy to masochism. Whilst Shaviro, who picks up on this political efficacy, shows the policing action she performs in and around her discussion of male masochism principally when she “seek[s] to contain the theorization of masochism within the boundaries of Oedipal

¹ Silverman pursues the political implications of male masochism, particularly its potential to threaten patriarchal order given that for Freud male masochism “constitutes a veritable hermeneutic scandal” (1992:210).

structuration.” This containment, Shaviro argues, ultimately circumscribes masochism’s subversive potentiality. For Shaviro then, Silverman’s disavowal is a consequence of her compulsion to contain masochism within the borders of the Oedipal framework, a containment, he asserts, that disallows trajectories other than the familiar phallogocentric one [Shaviro 1994:57].²

Shaviro’s challenge to the orthodoxy of psychoanalytic film theory can be seen in his attempt to open up “lines of flight” from the ways in which this theory tends to situate itself within the Oedipal economy, an economy in which the symbolic order appears to be immutable and is founded on lack and castration. Shaviro helps us to imagine “symbolic order” not as an ontological quantity, but as a matrix of discourses which are susceptible to rupture in the face of the internal contradictions engendered by masochism. It is in rupture, so Shaviro says, that political intervention can happen.

Following Gaylyn Studlar, who attempts to pry spectatorial pleasure away from notions of castration, the sadistic urge to control the object of one’s gaze and female lack, Shaviro locates spectatorial response in prereflective affect (the primordial experience of

² Shaviro is alert to Silverman’s circumscription of masochism’s subversive potentiality as is evidenced in her attempt to discredit Gilles Deleuze and Gayle Rubin for being “utopian” and Gaylyn Studlar for being “determinedly apolitical” (1992:211& 417). Silverman’s containment of masochism within the confines of an Oedipal economy is problematic for Shaviro because “she makes what Nietzsche (1968) denounced long ago as *the error of mistaking cause for consequence*” (1994:47). According to Silverman’s logic then, the “symbolic order” is the “transcendental cause of gender and sexual oppressions” (ibid). The problem with this, Shaviro asserts, is that the “symbolic order” then appears to be immutable rather than a “contingent” and malleable “effect and instrument of practices of oppression” (Shaviro 1994:58).

pain) rather than in the cognitive terms of the Oedipal law.³ Studlar refutes Silverman's Lacanian approach in which masochism is figured simply as a safeguard from castration anxiety and the exigencies borne of the Symbolic order, she focuses instead on pre-oedipal forms of merger in making the case for masochism as a "defense against the more primal fears (associated with the mother, not the father) of separation, abandonment and oral frustration" (Shaviro 1994:59). Shaviro takes Studlar's work on board to the extent that it ballasts his claims for the latent political efficacy of masochism.

In her critique of Studlar, Silverman contends that Studlar's work is saturated with an "essentialism" and "apoliticism" that verges on fixing "[masochism] in biology" (1992:417). Shaviro asserts, however, that it is Studlar who "reminds us that the opposition between the biological and the cultural is a false one, for the pre-Oedipal, pre-Symbolic, infantile body is already steeped in and invested by culture" whereas Silverman makes the "implicit metaphysical assumption that the body is somehow prior to history, outside politics" (Shaviro 1994:59).

Studlar's project serves as the impulse for Shaviro's work, but he ultimately deviates from her model, firstly, because it is firmly located within "psychoanalytic notions of fantasy" and, secondly, because she views masochism as a defense mechanism.

³ In, *Masochism and the Perverse Pleasures of the Cinema*, (1985) and later in, *In the Realm of Pleasure* (1988), Studlar argues for the masochistic pleasures of cinema. Studlar's work, located within the psychoanalytic paradigm, is informed by object relations theory rather than Lacan and she is aligned with Deleuze's argument that masochism and sadism are distinct psychic operations

Both Studlar and Silverman conceptualise masochism as a defense mechanism and this proves to be problematic for Shaviro, because they regard masochism “only as a secondary, reactive phenomenon, connected to compensatory fantasy, the disavowal of difference and the struggle to preserve an imaginary state of plenitude” (ibid). Silverman compounds her containment of masochism by bestowing limitations on its ambiguity.⁴ For Shaviro, “change can take place only at the strange and ambiguous boundary between inside and outside, between complicity and resistance; the very ambivalence that a masochistic aesthetic so beautifully heightens and intensifies is a necessary condition for any political intervention” (Shaviro 1994:58).

Shaviro counters both Studlar and Silverman and proposes instead an active and affirmative reading of the “masochism of cinematic experience” which will yield an alternative notion of politics, a politics which understands the power of masochism as leading not to equilibrium and recuperation, but to ambiguity and rupture:

Bersani’s ontologically primordial masochism and Bataille’s notion of expenditure are active expressions of force in a Nietzschean sense. They are affirmative passions rather than defensive or recuperative ones. The drives and enjoyments of the body cannot be equated with the safety and stability of the ego. [...] The masochism of the cinematic body is rather a passion of *disequilibrium* and disappropriation. It is dangerous to, and cannot remain the property of, a fixed self. The agitated body multiplies its affects and excitations to the point of sensory overload, pushing itself to its limits *it desires its own extremity, its own transmutation* (Shaviro 1994:60).

⁴ The primary ambiguity is that “masochism in all its guises is as much a product of the existing symbolic order as a reaction against it” (Silverman 1992:210).

In this formulation of masochism then, Shaviro counters the notion that “possession and appropriation” are the ego’s “defense mechanisms” with his argument that they are rather “countereffects, secondary and partial recuperations” of masochistic excess:

Men assure their own subsistence or avoid suffering, not because these functions themselves lead to a sufficient result, but in order to accede to the insubordinate function of free expenditure (Bataille cited in Shaviro 1994:60).

It is “passivity and expenditure,” says Shaviro, which are the matrix for “both a materialist aesthetics and a radical politics of the cinema” and by “affirming the primacy of involuntary fascination, of free-floating anxiety, over the reactive movements by which the ego seeks to master and regulate that anxiety that we can best approach the politics of gender in film” (Shaviro 1994:64).

In support of his argument Shaviro states that *Terror at the Opera* and *Peeping Tom*, for example, are not simply “misogynistic and vengeful patriarchal fantasies” because they “destabilize any fixed relations of power” when the protagonist and spectator’s mutual fright “(blend) into a kind of ecstatic complicity at the convulsive point of danger and violence” (Shaviro 1994:61).

Shaviro’s conception of the “masochism of the cinematic body as a passion for disequilibrium” raises a number of questions for film theory as a whole, but I would like to consider his argument with specific reference to *NBK* because I think that the theoretical conundrum which his premise produces is well illustrated by the film’s final

moments. *NBK*'s concluding moments constitute a kind of coda, and it is the uneasy relationship between this section of *NBK* and the rest of the film, that produces its political trajectory. I want to suggest that the film has a kind of schizophrenic political character, in other words, there is a clear political discourse in terms of the film's own logic, but what is interesting is that there is another politics, borne of the film's excess and in line with Shaviro's notion of the politics of masochistic excitement; or what I have called cruel cinema. *NBK* intrigues because whilst it has such a clear political trajectory I want to argue that this politics is complicated by the film's excesses and pleasures.

In chapter one I made brief reference to the coda and its location within the film's political trajectory, I now want to unpack what the film's political trajectory is, where the coda fits in and how it functions.

NATURAL BORN KILLERS' POLITICAL TRAJECTORY

NBK's opening minutes immediately make clear the film's assumption of the imbrication of Mickey and Mallory's violence with media spectacle. The film's first scene, in which Mickey and Mallory murder five people in a diner, is bookended by a frenetic collage of spectacular media imagery. On one end, a television screen flickers with images of popular situation comedies, monsters and Richard Nixon, and on the other, Mickey and Mallory "drive" through a *mise en scène* entirely composed of projections of fabricated newspaper headlines detailing their feats. The newspaper headlines are intercut with clips

of even more monsters including one of the film's leitmotifs, a five-headed dragon. In framing the film's first scene with violent and disturbing media imagery, *NBK* strongly suggests that Mickey and Mallory are the hydrophobic offspring of a dystopic world which is saturated by garish spectacles of media violence.

The fact of Mickey and Mallory's complicity with the media machinery is further underscored by their mantra, "tell everyone that Mickey and Mallory Knox did it!" In Mickey and Mallory's decision to always leave a witness alive who then will narrate the details of their murders to the media, the film implies that they are in fact the media's progeny. Their *raison d'être* appears to be the celebrity they achieve, as indicated by the fabricated magazine covers on which they appear as well as the "fans" and reporters who follow their every move. If it were not for the media attention, the film suggests, they would not be bothered. This is made apparent when a "drugstore" clerk pleads for his life, reasoning that there will be no witness if Mickey kills him because he is the only one working in the store to which Mickey replies: "You keep forgetting something, if I don't kill you what's there to talk about?"

According to the film's internal logic it is the media's desire for the raw material which constitute the substance of the spectacles they produce which spawn Mickey and Mallory, they truly are the media's progeny, hence the irony put into play by the film's title. Mickey and Mallory are not "natural born killers," as the film shows, they are instead, the quintessential media construct, both in terms of the film's diegesis and even

more ironically perhaps, without. The cult of celebrity which surrounds Mickey and Mallory, within *NBK*, has overflowed beyond the world of the film. It has been argued, by Schnayerson, that Mickey and Mallory function as mythic serial killers in much the same way that Charles Manson does, that is, by “inspiring” others to commit similar crimes.⁵

Mickey and Mallory’s efficacy as “celebrity serial killers” is, perhaps, even more disturbing than Manson’s in view of the fact that they exist only as fabrications within a fictional world, which in turn, attempts to satirize and thus intervene politically into the American media’s production of mythic figures out of serial killers.⁶ The “efficacy” to which I refer is evident in the phenomenon of “copycat” murders, whereby, a serial

⁵ *Natural Born Killers* has been implicated in a number of homicides, in a 1996 article in *Vanity Fair* magazine, Schnayerson refers to all of them, but describes one in particular, “Sarah Edmondson stands accused of walking into a convenience store in nearby Ponchatoula at about 11:50 p.m. on March, 8, 1995 and shooting the sole clerk on duty, paralyzing her for life. Sarah and her boyfriend, Ben Darras, arrested as the getaway driver, are also implicated in the killing of a man the previous day in Hernando, Mississippi. Before their grisly road trip, according to Sarah, the two ingested copious amounts of hallucinogenic drugs. they also watched the movie *Natural Born Killers* again, and again, and again” (Schnayerson, M. July 1996 *Vanity Fair*). The other “copycat” murders, allegedly “inspired” by *NBK*, took place in Texas, Utah, Georgia, Massachusetts and Paris respectively, the accused in these cases are between 14 and 22 years of age. In one instance the victim, who was gunned down in a fast food store, was a friend of the popular author, John Grisham. Grisham, together with the victim’s family, has filed a civil action law suit against Oliver Stone claiming that as the director of *NBK* he bears some responsibility for the incident.

⁶ *NBK*’s satire of the kind of pseudo-documentary exemplified by *America’s Most Wanted* that produces hagiographies of serial killers who quite literally are the “stars of the show” is evident in the *American Maniacs* sequences in which an overcoiffed Wayne Gale is seen breaking down doors in the opening sequence that is intercut with black and white photographs of “the two Charlies”, Whitman and Manson. The fact that Charles Manson was motivated by a desire for celebrity and recognition is well documented in *Helter Skelter* and was underscored by his selection of Sharon Tate, a well known film actress, as one of his victims. The irony is of course that, in her death, Tate has arguably achieved a more enduring fame due to the media attention surrounding Manson than would otherwise have been the case.

killer becomes perversely fascinated and “inspired by” the murders committed by other famed serial killers.⁷

NBK establishes that Mickey and Mallory are media products in every sense of the term, their homicidal exploits are staged for, and enhanced, mythologised and commodified by, a rapacious media for a spellbound public. This element of the film’s logic is clearly signaled by the inclusion of “behind-the-scenes” footage in the *American Maniacs* sequences where Wayne Gale comments that his ratings for the Mickey prison interview have to overtake Geraldo Riviera’s ratings for his Superbowl interview with Charles Manson. By interrupting the film’s narrative with extracts of a *Coca-Cola* commercial, featuring polar bears watching their own spectacle - the Northern Lights - *NBK* affirms that the ever more spectacular representations of violence in the media are necessitated by competition for advertising revenue.

In a telling moment within *NBK*’s political trajectory, Mickey and Mallory take refuge with a shaman. Upon entering his home the words “demon” and “too much TV” are projected across their chests. This moment underlines the film’s claim that television is the demon, it is the five-headed dragon. Mickey and Mallory are demonic because there

⁷ This is a phenomenon which the recent film, *Copycat*, enacts. The serial killer in this film re-stages, to the last detail, the murders of “celebrated” American mass murderers, such as “the Hillside Strangler” and Jeffrey Dahmer, in order to capture the imagination of both the public, via the media of course, as well as the fictional criminologist, portrayed by Sigourney Weaver. Weaver’s character specializes in and publishes psychoanalytic accounts of the motivations of the aforementioned serial killers. *Copycat* advances that the killer, as in *NBK*, is the product of the media’s propensity for making celebrities out of serial killers. It is through “Sigourney Weaver’s” analysis of the killer’s motivations that the audience is led to believe that he kills in order to compensate for his sense of “unimportance” and “invisibility”, knowing full well that his exploits will become the media phenomenon which the film makes of his murders.

is “too much TV”, or more to the point, because there is too much violent TV. The film’s political logic proposes that: television is the demon and Mickey and Mallory are its progeny. In its critique of the media, *NBK* would seem to concur with Wayne Gale’s assessment of the *American Maniacs* audience as “nit-wits” who live in “zombie-land”. The film, however, also points a finger at “the audience” when apportioning blame for what it perceives as the ubiquity of violent spectacle, this element of the film’s satire is indicated by the following scenes in the film;

- Mallory’s father watches a televised wrestling match, he becomes so “inflamed” by the violence on television that when Mickey bursts into his living room with a crow-bar he mistakenly believes that he can, take “[Mickey’s] eye out and show it to [him].”
- Mickey harangues the *American Maniacs*-watching clerk in the “Drugzone” pharmacy when he is slow to respond for his request for “rattlesnake-bite antidote” with the comment: “How’z about you ungluing your fat ass from that tube”.
- During the “Superbowl interview”, the film imitates “real” television by cutting to an advertisement, a *Coca-Cola* commercial featuring computer-generated Polar Bears sitting on ice watching the Northern Lights and, of course, sharing a bottle of “ice-cold” *Coca-Cola*. As the advertisement ends there is a cut to black and white stock footage of a typical domestic scene from what appears to be the 1950’s. A family are filmed sitting inches away from their television their television screens the Mickey and Wayne Gale Superbowl interview.

- The film also intermittently flashes a recurrent image of a male television viewer who gives new meaning to the oft-heard phrase “glued to the TV”.

These are only a few of the instances in which the film presents “audiences” whether they be for television, newspaper or film as mere passive consumers of media products, or as Gale puts it, unthinking “zombies”. By virtue of its representation of television viewers, in particular, the film would seem to align itself with the kind of cultural criticism exemplified by Neil Postman in his influential book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Postman’s bailiwick is contemporary America’s fascination with media spectacle, his point of departure is well illustrated in the following excerpt from his book:

Today we must look to the city of Las Vegas, Nevada, as a metaphor of our national character and aspiration, its symbol a thirty-foot-high cardboard picture of a slot machine and a chorus girl. For Las Vegas is a city entirely devoted to the idea of entertainment, and as such proclaims the spirit of a culture in which all public discourse increasingly takes the form of entertainment. Our politics, religion, news, athletics, education and commerce have been transformed into congenial adjuncts of show business, largely without protest or even much popular notice. The result is that we are a people on the verge of amusing ourselves to death (Postman 1985:4).

Postman’s analysis of the influence of media entertainment on the American public is informed by the assumption that audience’s unthinkingly and passively consume the entertainment they watch or, as it happens, read. I would argue that this is the same position taken by *NBK*, the film makes no allowance for the possibility that viewers might be critical of the spectacles of violence which saturate their television sets.

Inasmuch as the film suggests that this is at all possible it is only by default, in other

words, the film largely represents characters who are stereotypes of working class Americans; “rednecks” or “trailer-park trash”. The film suggests that it is this segment of the American population who make up the “nit-wits” in “zombie-land” and not the better educated or “professional” classes.⁸

By virtue of the film’s tendency toward apportioning “blame” and marking certain characters as demonic, *NBK*’s political trajectory is, I would argue, shot through with a strong moral impulse. This element of the film’s politics has also been noted by Desson Howe (1994) who notes: “It’s an impressive spectacle, but behind the pyrotechnics is a trite pseudo-admonishment about America’s couch-potato conspiracy. *Natural Born Killers* wags the finger at everybody: the media, the government and TV audiences.”⁹

The final scene within the film’s narrative underscores its moral condemnation of the saturation of the media with violent spectacle as the film’s narrative concludes with patricide: Wayne Gale, who functions as a surrogate for all media, is murdered by Mickey and Mallory, the media’s offspring. Wayne Gale is beyond the pale, he is the film’s most venal character as indicated when Mickey says: “You’re scum Wayne! You did it for ratings! Killing you and what you represent is a statement.”

Therefore, within the scale of moral turpitude applied by the film, Wayne Gale is more nefarious than serial killer, Mickey Knox. With an almost biblical symmetry, *NBK*

⁸ *NBK*’s representation of class is problematic, however, this report preclude an investigation of this feature of the film.

⁹ Howe, D. 1994 “*Natural Born Killers*.” [washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com)

condemns and punishes the media - via Wayne Gale's death - for what it views as their voracious and base appetite for producing ever-increasingly graphic spectacles of violence and hence the monstrous Mickey and Mallory in their quest for better "ratings".

Within the moral universe implied by the film, the media are ultimately held responsible for Mickey and Mallory's actions. As is the case in many biblical narratives, poetic justice is meted out when Wayne's own camera becomes the witness to his death. He has, in effect, died by his own hand: the camera and his progeny, Mickey and Mallory. The camera proves to be Wayne Gale's undoing, if he did not have one, he would be spared as the survivor who could narrate the details of Mickey and Mallory's "performance" to the media. The double-headed hydra that is "Mickey and Mallory" serves as the film's moral warning: the monsters which the media spawn will swallow us whole. This admonition is emphasized by Mickey's comment to Wayne Gale just before he kills him: "Frankenstein killed Dr. Frankenstein"

THE CODA

In chapter one I made brief reference to the coda, I will now reflect on its importance and function within *NBK*'s political trajectory. The coda follows immediately after Wayne Gale's murder - the final scene within the film's narrative - and acts as a punctuation mark at the limit of the film's political teleology. In many ways, the coda is what lies at the heart of *NBK*, it is meant to function as a frame which delimits the film's interpretive

play towards its political telos. By the same token, the rest of the film is a lens through which the events referred to by the coda are to be read and judged.

The coda is a defining moment within the film's argument about America's twin addictions; violence and the media. It underscores the film's critique of both the media's tendency to make spectacles out of their representation of violence and the public's fascination with those spectacles. The film, through the coda, argues that the media in their zeal to "get the story" and outdo their competitors in the ratings wars, create the frenzy which surround events such as the O.J. Simpson trial, and that this, in turn, produces our collective fascination with violent spectacle.

NBK's sudden collapse into referentiality, in the coda, speaks to the film's moral impulse because the coda clearly confirms the film's unequivocal association of the media, who made a spectacle out of the O.J. Simpson trial, with its fictional representation of a demonic and morally bankrupt media. This association is cemented by the film's camera operations in its final moments. *NBK*'s argument, for the equivalence of the media within the fictional world of the film to its referent, is consolidated by the film's segueway from the scene in which Wayne Gale is murdered to the coda: after Mickey and Mallory kill Wayne Gale, his camera - which had recorded his murder - is left to run for a few seconds before the film cuts to the montage of news footage which constitutes the coda. Gale's camera becomes the conduit for the film's movement into the coda with the

consequence that any sense of a gap between the fictional *American Maniacs* and the news footage contained within the coda is eroded.

The coda, in its frenetic juxtaposition of news footage which mines the more sensational news stories of contemporary America and in its intercutting this footage with images of bloody and monstrous heads, indicates how the film's political and social critique is bound up with a kind of biblical morality and suggests that the film is to be read as a modern-day parable.

The coda, then, is meant to function as a politically charged interventionist moment within the film's political trajectory. This inference may be drawn from the coda which is in a sense "tacked" onto, and thus severed from, the rest of the film. By virtue of their referentiality, the images contained within the coda are immediately set up as "other", or different from, the rest of the film. The footage of Rodney King and Waco would instantly register with a media-literate spectator as being different from the fictional images contained within the remainder of the film.

The coda strongly suggests that there is a flattening out that happens in the reporting as a consequence of the media focusing on and exaggerating the violence common to these rather different events. In focusing on the spectacle, the film suggests, there is little room to critically evaluate the disparate importance and

significance of each of these distinct events. For *NBK*, this translates into the exultation of the banal and the reduction of consequential social dramas into mere entertainment.

Through the inclusion of the coda, the film tries to create a distance between its use of violent spectacle as political satire and the media's representation of violence as spectacle. This aspect of the film's political strategy is undone, not only in terms of the film's paradoxical operations, discussed extensively in chapter one, but also because the coda is subsumed by, cannot compete with, and in fact collapses back into, the excesses and frenzy of the film's visibility. The coda really "isn't one" because the film cannot resist its own fascination with the visual. Directly after the final image within the coda's montage the film adds another coda, this time to the film's narrative - Mickey and a pregnant Mallory are seen riding across America in a camper with their two other children - the film then concludes with what could be construed as music video. *NBK*'s closing credits are projected over an extended montage of images which are accompanied by a Leonard Cohen song.

If one reason for the undoing of the film's political critique lies in its tautological structure, then another, more intractable complication, rests in the film's reinscription of a fascination with violence. This, I want to suggest, occurs via the operation of an inescapably masochistic "sympathetic projection". In order for me to explain this

operation it will be necessary to return to Bersani and Du Toit, and Shaviro, and repeat some of the theoretical moves which they make in some detail.

“HOW WILL THE VIOLENCE OF *NBK* MOVE US?”

Returning now to Shaviro’s claims for the potential political intervention of a cinema of masochistic excitation, I would argue that the masochistic excitation of *NBK* heightens the film’s ambiguity and that this ambivalence, together with the film’s excesses and complicity with the object of its critique, opens up an alternate politics in line with Shaviro’s politics of masochism.¹⁰ It is *NBK*’s paradoxical character, detailed in chapter one, that leads to the film spinning beyond its own control; it becomes so excessive that it exceeds its own political intentionality. Having established that the film, in its excess, produces a polymorphously perverse masochistic pleasure, the question remains: what is the political efficacy of cruel cinema, or, what is the political efficacy of the excess, excitation and expenditure?

I want to propose that the contradictions which trouble *NBK*’s internal political logic inadvertently open up an alternate political consequentiality for the film. I will now assess the film’s dual political character and argue that the film’s political consequentiality lies, not so much in its own avowed political discourse, but in the questions which arise from its paradoxes and excesses.

¹⁰ Alternate here means, a politics which is not of the film’s internal political teleology.

Shaviro's (1994) claim that it is in the *jouissance* of the exquisite passivity of cinema's masochistic excitement that the equilibrium of the self is shattered by the ecstatic excess which is excitation's consequence, begs the question, but to what end? For Shaviro, the seductions of cinematic horror, violence and excitement and the impetus for the viewer's constant "coming back for more" has little to do with ends or with the limits of the frenzy which they induce. The compulsive behaviour of the horror film enthusiast or the "action film junkie", to return again and again for "sequel upon sequel" is explained by Shaviro as follows:

And I do not try merely to defend myself against slipping into this delicious passivity, this uncontainable agitation; I compulsively, passionately seek it out. Anxiety over the disruption of identity is concomitant with, and perhaps necessary to, the very intensity of sensual gratification (Shaviro 1994:57).

How, then, does this speak to Bersani and Du Toit's (1985) reflection on the destructive instinct, akin to Freud's death instinct, which they argue is a component of the masochistic excitement inherent to desiring fantasy? For Bersani and Du Toit (1985:34), the termination of the restlessness of desire, or "the nondesiring stillness of death" is held up as the "sexual climax of masochistic fantasy." This model, alongside that of Shaviro, counters the notion that the sexualized fascination with violence which animates the cinematic spectator is in the service of a "desire for self-identity, wholeness, security and recognition", in other words, recuperation" (Shaviro 1994:56-65).¹¹

¹¹ I should clarify that there are nuances between Shaviro and Bersani and Du Toit's assertions. Shaviro, argues that the subject/spectator wants to prolong the frenzy to point of shattering and then revel in that shattering. For Bersani and Du Toit, the ultimate goal is the evacuation of

In their quest to account for the manner in which the violence represented in the famous Assyrian Palace Reliefs, housed in the British Museum, “might move us,” Bersani and Du Toit explore a number of scenarios around the fascination with violence and the forms that representations of violence take. However, it is their final scenario which interests me most as it “provides the basis for esthetic (sic) and moral speculations at odds with the dominant esthetic and ethic of mimesis in our culture” (Bersani and Du Toit 1985:37). Bersani and Du Toit outline Freud’s suggestions regarding “sympathetic projection, contained in his essay, “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes”, as follows:

the pleasure of sadism is inconceivable except as a phenomenon of sympathetic projection. The only psychologically intelligible explanation of the sadist’s enjoyment of the suffering of others is this: that he is precisely enjoying that suffering. He has introjected the self projected into the suffering position of the other. But the fantasy - identifications outlined by Freud may be crucial to all sympathetic responses to suffering (Bersani and Du Toit 1985:38).

Bersani and Du Toit (1985:38) make the point that the aforementioned sympathetic projections/responses are generally assumed to be of value because they inform our “capacity for moral behaviour” via our responses to art. Their response is rather to reflect on Laplanche’s reading of Freud, in order to suggest that: “sympathy always includes a

excitement. However, it is the frenzy/excitement which either shatters the self (Shaviro), or disturbs the equilibrium(Bersani) that is the key in both theories (1985:34-38). The main difference is that for Bersani, the climax of the frenzy induced disequilibrium is the termination of desire, in other words, the “non desiring stillness of death.” Bersani characterizes the dual impulses of desiring fantasy - on the one hand, the irritation of desire, and on the other, the working to wholeness - as a “double freakishness”. Shaviro focuses exclusively on the shattering of the self and rejects the fantastic model by focusing on Bataille’s notion of “expenditure” which, in turn, is a refutation of Freud’s notion of the death drive, or instinct (1994:50-65).

trace of sexual pleasure, and that this pleasure is, inescapably masochistic” (Bersani and Du Toit 1985:38).

The implications of Bersani and Du Toit’s argument here - which draws on the works of the Marquis de Sade- is central to my assessment of *NBK*’s attempt to construct a critique of our fascination with spectacles of violence on the back of yet further spectacles of violence. If one accepts Bersani and Du Toit’s formulation of “sympathetic projection”, as this report does, then *NBK*’s “sympathetic” attempt to offer a moral argument against our fascination with media spectacles of violence through its own spectacle of violence, without reinscribing that fascination, is untenable.

If “sympathetic projection” is “inescapably masochistic, then, for Bersani and Du Toit:

there is a certain risk in all sympathetic projections: the pleasure which accompanies them promotes a secret attachment to scenes of suffering and violence. We are not it should be stated, arguing (absurdly) “against” sympathy. Rather, we wish to suggest that the psychic mechanism which allows for what would rightly be called humane or morally liberal responses to scenes of suffering or violence is, intrinsically, somewhat dysfunctional. The very operation of sympathy partially undermines the moral solidarity which we like to think of as its primary effect. Our views of the human capacity for empathetic representations of the world should therefore take into account the possibility that a mimetic relation of violence necessarily includes a sexually induced fascination with violence (ibid) .

Bersani and Du Toit’s, reading of *The 120 Days of Sodom* therefore becomes a corollary to Sade’s work:

In Sade, sexual excitement is a shared commotion. Sade suggests that we do not have sex with others *because* they excite us; excitement is the consequence of sex rather than its motive. And this is because it is

essentially a replay in the libertine of the agitation he produces on the other's body (ibid).¹²

The conclusion which Bersani and Du Toit draw from Sade's summary of the Duke's ideas in *The 120 Days of Sodom*, is that "physical violence is the necessary consequence of this view of sexuality in Sade" and that "if erotic stimulation depends on the perceived or fantasized commotion of others, it becomes reasonable to put others into a state of maximal commotion. The libertine's erection-provoking vibrations increase in direct proportion to the visible intensification of his victim's suffering" (ibid).

I would argue, that this resonates with the kinds of sympathetic introjection, or contagion, cinematic violence effects. The pleasure in spectacles of violence and horror, which I have argued is intrinsically masochistic, follows the same pattern described here and alluded to by Clover earlier. The spectator, through a process of contagion, in Shaviro's terms, or sympathetic introjection, in Freud's, experiences viscerally, through identification the commotion/agitation, induced by the suffering of the screen victim, or more deliciously perhaps, the next screen victim. I want to suggest that whether the identification is ostensibly sadistic, or masochistic, the "sympathy" always incorporates a vestige of sexual pleasure which is inescapably masochistic, because the point of that identification/sympathy, whether sadistically or masochistically figured, is to share in, and experience, the victim's suffering and commotion through the "vibrations" - here the

¹² Bersani and Du Toit describe how Sade "noticed that a violent commotion inflicted upon any kind of an adversary is answered by a vibrant thrill in our own nervous system; the effect of this vibration, arousing the animal spirits which flow within these nerve's concavities, obliges them to exert pressure on the erector nerves and to produce in accordance with this perturbation what is termed a lubricious sensation" (1985:38).

grasping touch of *NBK* - whether directly, as is the case in masochism, or less so, as is the case in Sadean sadism.

In spite of his dispute with psychoanalytic theory there is a startling resemblance between Shaviro's call for a paradigm of film theory whose starting point is that film is "masochistic, tactile and mimetic" and the aforementioned operations, but I must emphasize that there remains a critical tension between Shaviro's preference for Bataille's notion of psychic expenditure and Freud's argument that, psychically, we tend to recuperate ourselves in the wake of expenditure:

The masochist seeks not to reach a final consummation, but to hold it off, to prolong the frenzy, for as long as possible. Cinema induces its viewers by mimetically exacerbating tension, in an orgy of unproductive expenditure. Visual fascination is a direct consequence of this masochistic heightening, rather than of any secondary movements of suturing and satiation (Shaviro 1994:57).

Following Bataille, Shaviro claims that the masochistic excitement and contagion that is cinematic violence's effect, culminates in a rejection of "moral goods", this, I would argue, is akin to Sade's rebuke of the "assumed theories of benevolence" which are understood to be the consequence of the "mechanism of sympathetic projection." In their reading of Sade, Bersani and Du Toit, posit that "virtue is irrelevant to the agitation induced by the suffering of others [...] such introjections make us "vibrate"; they destroy psychic inertia and shatter psychic equilibrium" (Bersani and Du Toit 1985:39).

It is worth juxtaposing Bataille and Bersani and Du Toit's comments as they speak of psychic disequilibrium in similar terms;

In their intensified form, the states of excitation, which are comparable to toxic states, can be defined as the illogical and irresistible impulse to reject material and moral goods that it would have been possible to utilize rationally (in conformity with the balancing accounts) (Bataille cited in Shaviro 1994:57).

To Shaviro's claims here I would like to add that the cinema spectator's desire to "actively seek out" the perverse seductions of the frenzy of the visible and to engage in behaviour which in a sense mimics the operations of repetition compulsion, gestures toward autoeroticism. With *NBK*, this is made manifest in the shared eroticised commotion which is in direct proportion to the visible commotion of the screen victim, as is the case in the scene in which Mallory attacks and kills Jack Scagnetti and by extension the film viewer. The sexualised excitement produced in the moment of masochistic identification, on the part of the spectator, is done with the memory of a previous sexualised response which resulted from a similar identification. The viewer identifies masochistically knowing and anticipating what sensation is to follow, it is the ecstasy in the experience of the pleasure/pain nexus produced in the moment of masochistic identification.

In terms of expenditure and Shaviro's notion of the disequilibrium of the self in the face of the ecstatic excess of affect, I think that with *NBK*'s inclusion of the coda there is ultimately a gathering up of the self, a kind of recuperation, because the coda, although

not entirely successful in terms of the film's internal politics, does interrupt the film's excess and masochistic excitation and constitutes a definitive moment within the film's moral framework.

Shaviro holds that the exquisite passivity of masochistic excitation in the cinema gives rise to expenditure and a disequilibrium of the self, which, in turn, results in a "rejection of moral goods." *NBK*'s appeal to the "moral good", I would argue, interrupts the excitation and disequilibrium engendered by the film's masochistic pleasures and as a consequence the expenditure and disequilibrium does not achieve a "shattering". In a strange way it is as though there is not enough excess in *NBK*, it stops short in the coda.

NBK is ultimately not entirely successful in terms of its avowed political logic, it reinscribes a fascination with violent spectacle and it falls short of Shaviro's promise of the potential for cruel cinema to affect a "radical" political critique. For all the unpleasure, the film ultimately leaves us with the pleasure of the image, because, although the coda does slip back into the visual excess of the film, the unpleasure of the masochistic excitement dissipates with the coda and the "tame" montage of images which constitute the film's final moments.

Where *NBK* is most successful in terms of its critique of the saturation of the media with spectacles of violence is, I think, when it is at its most complicit and excessive.

It is when the film, through its excess and hysterical miming, is in absolute “sympathy” with the “object” of its critique that it threatens to shatter violent spectacle under the weight of its hysterical embodiment. But the threat never materializes. *NBK*, instead of completely reveling in its complicity with the object of its critique, unsuccessfully attempts, via the coda, to create a “correct and proper” distance between itself and the object of its critique.

NBK functions as a metatext of the pleasure of images and, although the film asks more of itself than it achieves in terms of a cruel cinema, it is an astonishing instance of the pleasure/ecstasy in imaging. Ultimately the film succeeds on the remarkable level of combining visceral and fantastic masochism and by asking the old question of political efficacy in a new way.

THE POLITICS OF MASOCHISM

Shaviro’s (1994) ultimate political objective is to “violently displace the psychoanalytic paradigm” in order to propose a Deleuze-Gauntarian perspective in its stead. Shaviro contends that a “traditional psychoanalytic reading” of films such as *Terror at the Opera* or Clover’s slasher films, both “regulates” and “disarms or disavows their subversive potential for gender fluidity precisely to the extent that it imprisons [...] bodies within the

categorical grid of Symbolic figuration” (Shaviro 1994:63).¹³ Shaviro’s challenge to the orthodoxy of psychoanalytic film theory is embodied by his attempt to open up a “line of flight” from formulations of lack and castration which underpin its epistemic logic. According to Shaviro, the psychoanalytic paradigm “reinforces the very order of oppression that it claims [...] to comprehend and critique” (Shaviro 1994:63).

In a somewhat similar vein Clover takes up the conspicuous lacuna in Metz’s work - his failure to develop his own delineation of “introjective gazing”- because it resonates with the “failure of gender-interested critics/theorists to come to grips with Metz’s blind spot” (Clover 1992:226).

[Clover] cannot help suspecting that the [...] reason Metz and Mulvey neglected to fill out the fourth space in their fourfold charts and that so many subsequent commentators have turned a blind eye on those empty fourth spaces: [is] because to do otherwise would be to take on one of the most entrenched, politically useful (in its time), and status-quo-supportive clichés of modern cultural criticism (ibid).¹⁴

¹³ Shaviro claims that “practical filmmaking is far more radical, in its subversive explorations of gender ambiguity, than is the theory that claims to recognize its accomplishments and to criticize its defects” (1994:64). This tallies with Clover’s point, mentioned earlier, about the metacinematic character of the seemingly “low-brow” horror film - see her comparative analysis of the low-budget *I Spit on Your Grave* and the mainstream, *The Accused* which shares the same thematic concerns and narrative structure.

¹⁴ The “cliché” to which Clover refers is, of course, male sadism. Clover’s theorisation of the masochistic positioning of the male spectator of the horror film emanates from her chief political concern that “at the critical/theoretical level the strongest argument for the possibility that there is something subversive about the masochistic experience-base of cinematic spectatorship may be an argument *e silentio*. I am referring to the repeated denial or avoidance of that possibility in both critical and theoretical writings - in contrast to the wealth of attention lavished on male sadism” (Clover 1992:225). Deleuze also notes that the work of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch “has suffered from unfair neglect when we consider for example, that Sade has been the object of such penetrating studies both in the field of literary criticism and in that psychoanalytic interpretation, to the benefit of both” (Deleuze 1971:133).

Clover recognizes that the identification and narration of male sadism, “especially toward women, [which] hold[s] men, at least theoretically culpable for such acts as rape, wife beating and child abuse are major achievements of modern feminism” (ibid).¹⁵ However, Clover (1992:226), together with Tania Modleski, is both curious as to the “politics that underlie such extended iterations of male sadism” and apprehensive about such texts (irrespective of the writer’s sex) because:

although the practice of remarking male sadism in a film (like the practice of *showing* male sadism in a film) may be intended to align the remarker with feminism, [...] it also works to naturalize sadistic violence as a fixture of masculinity - one of the few fixtures of masculinity remaining in a world that has seen the steady erosion of such. It is a gesture [...] that ends up confirming what it deplors. Appalling though it may be (the unstated logic goes), the capacity for sadistic violence is what finally distinguishes male from female (ibid).

Clover asserts that most dissertations on male sadism, paradoxically, work to “hold the bottom line of gender” (1992:227). Her interest in the horror film is then to ascertain the “extent to which film theoretical and horror film criticism and practice may denaturalize, as discourses, [...] received categories of sexual difference” (Clover 1992:225). For Clover, the slasher film “has very little to do with femaleness and very much to do with phallogentrism” (1992:53). In a literal sense the slasher film “re-represents the hero as an anatomical female so that at least one of the traditional marks of heroism, triumphant self-rescue, is no longer strictly gendered masculine”, thus for Clover, the horror film

¹⁵ For example; Susan Brownmiller's *Against Our Will*, Klaus Theweleit's *Male Fantasies* and Anthony Wilden's *Man and Woman, War and Peace*.

constitutes a performative model of gender which is contiguous with Judith Butler's notion of "gender as performance" (Clover 1992:60).¹⁶

As is the case in most narratives, gender inheres in the narratological function. The mobile heroic function in which boundaries are crossed and closed spaces penetrated is designated, masculine, with the feminine constituted by an immobile being who personifies dank, dark, uterine-like spaces and obstacles which are to be overcome. In the horror genre gender is fungible and "sex proceeds from gender rather than the other way around" (Clover 1992:15). Ironically, it is Clover who, notwithstanding her situation within the psychoanalytic paradigm, is compelled by the machinations of horror's gendering, to begin an internal intervention into psychoanalytic discourse on sexuality.

The horror film's operations, as described by Clover above, resonate with the kind of "a-Freudian" rethinking of sexuality and gender which, Shaviro notes, Deleuze and Guattari achieved in *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus* whilst carefully sidestepping "outmoded pre-critical discourses of behaviourism, sexology and clinical psychology" (Shaviro 1994:67).¹⁷

In Shaviro's view, it is critical that "theories of sexuality" circumvent Freud because psychoanalytic discourse in its perpetual arguments over "the phallus, the castration complex, and the problematic of sexual representation does nothing but reinscribe a (sic)

¹⁶ See Butler, J. (1990) *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge.

¹⁷ Shaviro notes that in spite of their "a-Freudianism", Deleuze and Guattari do not deny the importance of Freud's work especially his formulation of desire (1994:67-68).

universal history of lack and oppression” even when, Shaviro advances, it is: “at its ostensibly most critical” (Shaviro 1994: 67). For Shaviro, the value of Deleuze and Guattari’s work rests precisely in how they enable a “rethinking of sexuality” which is crucial because:

We cannot really oppose the dominant male-heterosexual order when our only language is the code that defines and ratifies precisely that order (ibid) .

Following Teresa de Lauretis, Linda Williams (1989) also opens up a trajectory for cinema spectatorship which envisions the fluidity of both male and female identifications as sometimes cross-gender and sometimes bisexual:

the fact that activity and passivity have been too rigorously assigned to separate gendered positions with little examination of either the active elements of the feminine position or the mutability of male and female spectator’s adoption of one or the other subject position and participation in the (perverse) pleasures of both (Williams 1992:205).

In light of her reconfiguration of spectator identification and pleasure, Williams, like Clover, explores and acknowledges the potentiality of masochism to lay bare the essentialised connection of male spectators to sadism, articulated in a great deal of feminist film theory.

Williams is invested in the recovery of masochistic pleasure inasmuch as it opens up the possibility for an alternative understanding of spectatorship particularly with regard to the “female subject’s” stake in masochism. She is, however, critical of Deleuze’s

theorization of masochism in, *Coldness and Cruelty*, in so far as it “avoids the question of both female readers and [the] female victim-hero” (Williams 1989:210). This same avoidance is evident in Shaviro’s text.

The quarrel I would have with Shaviro’s approach to masochism in *The Cinematic Body*, is that even within an “a-Freudian” rethinking of sexuality, one has to recognize, as Williams does, “where ultimate power lies [...] since masochism is such a “norm” for female behaviour under patriarchy, it would seem that the utopian component [of escape from the usual constraints of power and pleasure] - would be less in evidence for women than men” (Williams 1989:217).¹⁸ Williams is wary of a blanket recovery of masochism, because she does not see the possibility of perceiving masochism as ungendered in a patriarchal world. Williams’ questions for the political efficacy of a polymorphously perverse spectatorial masochism, together with the way in which politics and pleasures are engendered in *NBK*, would therefore be a productive place to extend Shaviro’s formulation of “the cinematic body” in terms of gender.

¹⁸ Williams does not believe that female subjects are excluded from enjoying masochistic pleasures as a rule. In fact she theorizes, contra Andrea Dworkin’s “concentration camp” orgasm, the possibility for the female subject to enjoy masochistic pleasure.

Filmography

Bonnie and Clyde, Arthur Penn (1967)

Demons, Lamberto Bava (1980)

Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer, John McNaughton (1986)

Midnight Express, Alan Parker (1978)

Natural Born Killers, Oliver Stone (1994)

Peeping Tom, Michael Powell (1960)

Pulp Fiction, Quentin Tarantino (1994)

Reservoir Dogs, Quentin Tarantino (1991)

Scarface, Brian de Palma (1983)

The Searchers, John Ford (1956)

Taxi Driver, Martin Scorsese (1976)

Terror at the Opera, Dario Argento (1987)

The Wild Bunch, Sam Peckinpah (1969)

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