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Benjamin Laurence Salvant Crais April 10 2016

Philippe Grandrieux: A Belief in Life

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An abstract of
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
of Emory University in partial fulfillment
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Bachelor of Arts with Honors

Film and Media Studies

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Abstract

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This thesis is a series of three interlocking essays concerning the relationship between the first two feature films of Philippe Grandrieux, *Sombre* and *La Vie Nouvelle*, and the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze. The chief concern of the project is to account for the remarkable vitality of Grandrieux's cinema. This is approached from three directions: Deleuze's critique of representation and ontological grounding of difference, his conception of art as a rendering sensible of forces, and finally his conception of *a* life separate from any actual subject that incarnates it.

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Acknowledgements

For Philippe Grandrieux and Gilles Deleuze, who gave me the world.

First and foremost I would like to thank my readers, Karla Oeler, Daniel Reynolds and Dalia Judovitz. Each of them has been a pivotal figure in my undergraduate studies and I am lucky to have had their support and feedback for this final project of my time at Emory. This thesis would not exist without Dr. Oeler, who devoted a summer to reading Deleuze with me—often allocating more time than originally planned so that we could explore a book in greater depth. I am deeply grateful for the amount of time and energy that she has invested in me this past year. Dr. Reynolds agreed, without hesitation, to step in as my thesis advisor midway through the project. For that—and much more—I owe him great thanks. His attentive feedback, willingness to meet at the early hours of the day, and good humor has made this process considerably less stressful than it otherwise might have been. Dr. Judovitz has remained a deeply encouraging presence since this thesis' earliest days. Every time we speak I walk away feeling invigorated, full of enthusiasm to learn and think. My biggest regret of this whole process is that I did not seek her counsel more often.

I would also like to thank Matthew Bernstein, who nurtured my interest in cinema in its earliest days. Your generosity and support have meant the world to me.

Lastly, I owe huge thanks yous to: Sima Kokotovic—the third figure, next to Deleuze and Grandrieux, who opened me up to life—Dasha Vzorov—I have no other interlocutor with whom conversation is such an adventure of discovery—Alexa Cucopulos—whose companionship throughout college and this writing process cannot be overstated—Rhett Henry—the last living mystic—Natasha Wilson—the only person who likes *Sombre* as much as I do—Alishan Gezgin—who appears, unnamed, more than once in these pages—Harrison Farina—who taught me tenderness—Jamison Murphy—who read every draft, following me through this whole process with great insight and encouragement—Greta Goldbart—whose faith in others is a joy to behold—Hussein Al-Naser—who, two years ago, gifted me his personal copy of *Anti-Oedipus* and started me on this journey—Sonam Vashi—for putting up with me through all this—and finally Sarika Joglekar—with whom I am discovering love and cinema anew.

I will not try to put my gratitude for my family into words, but I hope they know what an immense source of strength they are for me every day.

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INTRODUCTION

This project developed as the result of an encounter between two figures: Philippe Grandrieux, a contemporary French filmmaker, and Gilles Deleuze, philosopher of difference, immanence, and creativity. It developed transversally as a continual back and forth movement between the two. I can remember the first moment. Watching *Sombre,* projected on the wall of my dorm room, I felt as if I had—through the film's images—come to an intuitive understanding of immanence. I had heard the term bandied around—in essays, among friends, in classrooms—but it was only in viewing Grandrieux's film that I received all of a sudden, like a revelation, comprehension. The serial killer and his potential victim, two bobbing heads in a vast, shimmering lake. A woman's hair, trembling in the wind, that emerges and forms itself out of what had seconds ago been plant matter, static, bubbles. In these moments and more, I felt imbued with what Deleuze calls "a direct understanding of philosophy that doesn't depend on philosophical understanding,"[1] a sensation that, although without the words to accompany it, forms a second side of the philosophical concept.

From this experience I was pushed—out of a desire to account for my experience, to understand why this film had so powerfully affected to me—towards philosophy to uncover the other side of this sensation, to articulate the concepts that formed the irreducible second half of the film's affects. It became a continual back and forth movement between Grandrieux's cinema and Deleuze's philosophy. A film would transmit a sensation and I would look in Deleuze for its other side, the concept that accompanied it. Reading Deleuze would then elucidate new aspects of Grandrieux's work, opening each film up and amplifying its sensuousness. It was not a matter of "understanding" the films—freezing them in an interpretative frame through which I could

[1] Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 164.

feel comfortable—but multiplying their mysteries. I would subsequently uncover a new aspect of Grandrieux's work that would send me right back to Deleuze; a constant movement of mutual discovery, each developing and uncovering the other. And so on and so on until the deadline came around the corner.

Why Gilles Deleuze? Surely there were other avenues—De Sade, Bataille, Agamben, etc.—that could have been equally rewarding to follow. The project started from an almost blank slate (i.e. I had only the vaguest knowledge of Deleuze, not to mention philosophy in general). What was it about Deleuze's philosophy that formed a secret link in my mind with Grandrieux's cinema, such that there could be no question of pairing the two, of reading the one through the other and vice versa?

The two films discussed in this project—Grandrieux's first features, *Sombre* (1998) and *La Vie Nouvelle* (2002)—concern serial killing and sex trafficking respectively. The former follows Jean (Marc Barbé) who, throughout the course of the film, obsessively assaults and murders a string of women. The narrative, to the extent that there is one, begins when he meets two sisters, Claire (Elina Löwensohn) and Christine (Géraldine Voillat). An uncertain attraction arises between Claire and Jean, each confronted with their desire for the other. *La Vie Nouvelle*, even more elliptical in its narrative, centers around Seymour (Zachary Knighton), a young American in war-torn Eastern Europe who becomes obsessed with a prostitute, Mélania (Anna Mouglalis), sold by his friend (a slave-trader) to a local gangster, and endeavors to claim her for himself.

In each film, Grandrieux dives into the most troubled, murky aspects of the world: the inscrutable bond between violence and sex, the sense of impossibility that haunts the 21st century, the infinite opacity of the other. They are, as one might infer, quite bleak. *Sombre* and

La Vie Nouvelle, replete with either violence or the threat of violence, proceed towards denouements in which every character is left either dead or alone—Jean fleeing from Claire, Seymour screaming futilely after the death of his friend and the disappearance of Mélania. Grandrieux, in both his films and interviews, maintains a staunch refusal to moralize or proselytize in regards to this content. Neither film offers a character or perspective that one could identify with, that might offer the spectator a frame through which to understand the messy, violent worlds of *Sombre* or *La Vie Nouvelle.* The worst violence in his films—rape, slavery, murder—is never condemned (nor celebrated for that matter); we are always inside it, without distance or mediation.

As to be expected, this aspect of Grandrieux's work has earned him much criticism. Aaron Cutler, writing for *Slant Magazine*, states that "At worst Grandrieux is coating a slick religious sheen over violence…At best he's offering a fairly banal statement on the traumas of war."[2] James Quandt, in a well-known essay for *Artforum,* accuses Grandrieux of placing a "philosophical gloss" over timeworn themes of "man as id or animal" and arrogating "political, social, and historical horror for a fashionista vision of the apocalypse."[3] In either review, the charge is that Grandrieux's films appropriate real violence (for Cutler violence against women, while Quandt appears more concerned with Grandrieux's evocation of ethnic-cleansing in *La Vie Nouvelle*) and aestheticize it, rendering it *chic* without any hint of condemnation.

Gilles Deleuze's project, as anyone who has read him knows, is a philosophy of creation.[4] Throughout his many books, Deleuze works to widen the possibilities of existence by forging a link between humans and what he sees as the fundamentally creative nature of

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[2] "Film Comment Selects 2010: Philippe Grandrieux Films", Aaron Cutler, accessed March 28, 2016, http://www.slantmagazine.com/house/article/film-comment-selects-2010-philippe-grandrieux-films

[3] James Quandt, "Flesh and Blood: Sex and Violence in Recent French Cinema," in *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe,* ed. Tanya Horeck & Tina Kendall (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 22.

[4] See: Hallward (2006).

existence (equating being with creativity, becoming, and difference[5]). Why, then, is Deleuze here coupled with a filmmaker whose work Quandt describes as "bleary," "abhorrent," and "deadening"?[6]

The simple answer is that Quandt's reaction—especially as represented in those three adjectives—was the polar opposite of my own. Every time I watched *Sombre* and *La Vie Nouvelle*, I left with a deep sense of joy. This is not to say I felt happy or found pleasure in Grandrieux's frequently violent scenarios. Rather, as I finished either film—and as I lived with them, revisiting them frequently for the past year—I felt, as Deleuze writes of Baruch Spinoza's joyful passions, my "power of acting"[7] increased. Grandrieux's films were not "deadening," but invigorating; I felt a renewed sense of life and possibility, a new belief in the world's "possibilities of movements and intensities."[8] Deleuze, with his professed vitalism, appeared as the only philosopher who could illuminate this powerful and enduring feeling.

My adherence to Deleuze throughout this project certainly comes at the expense of other aspects of Grandrieux's work, many of which have been explored in great detail by Jenny Charmarette and Martine Beugnet. It does not pretend to be an exhaustive study of Grandrieux's cinema—indeed, I only focus on his first two narrative films, *Sombre* and *La Vie Nouvelle*, selected from his filmography solely by the amount of enthusiasm I feel towards them. Rather, it is an attempt to account—through the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze—for this feeling of joy and vitality that Grandrieux's films have and continue to transmit to me.

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[5] Peter Hallward, *Out of this World: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Creation* (London; New York: Verso Books, 2006), 1.
[6] Quandt, "Flesh and Blood," 22.
[7] Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1988), 28.
[8] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 74.

Michel Foucault, in the Preface to Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, summarizes what he sees as the book's essential principles. One of them provides a lens through which Grandrieux's work, with its politically troubling aspects, can be understood:

> Do not think that one has to be sad in order to be a militant, even though the thing one is fighting is abominable. It is the connection of desire to reality (and not its retreat into the forms of representation) that possesses revolutionary force.[9]

Foucault's formulation of Deleuze and Guattari's ideas locates the impetus for political action in "reality," understood by Deleuze as an intensive, creative *movement* of differentiation. It is through connecting one's desire to the virtual nature of reality—rather than arresting and effacing it through representation—that the possibility for new modes of existence can emerge. As Foucault implies, this process is fundamentally a matter of joy: a gesture of affirmation that says "yes" to the world, even if what one is fighting is abominable.

It is my contention that a similar necessity animates Grandrieux's cinema. For his documentary on the radical leftist filmmaker Masao Adachi, Grandrieux selects a phrase from Adachi's *Prisoner/Terrorist* (2007) to title his film: "It may be that beauty has reinforced our resolve." These words, spoken in Adachi's film by a guerilla fighting for the liberation of Palestine, are like Grandrieux's response to Foucault's Preface. Beauty, Grandrieux says in an interview,

> is a political decision in a way. It's to be alive with your own self, strongly alive. I mean not under submissions. Beauty is the possibility to feel 'la force', the strength of things, the reality and the real…it's not at all about beautiful pictures.[10]

Grandrieux's cinema gives the world back to us, without distance or mediation (even by morality). *Sombre* and *La Vie Nouvelle* do not coat violence in an aesthetic "sheen," but rather,

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[9] Michel Foucault, "Preface" in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), xiii-xiv.
[10] "Interview with Philippe Grandrieux," Amos Borchert and Dennis Vetter, accessed March 29, 2016, http://www.negativ-film.de/interview-with-philippe-grandrieux/

through the beauty of their images, restore our connection to the world in its innocence and becoming. His films take up the mission Deleuze set for cinema three decades ago: to film "belief in this world, as it is…before or beyond words."[11] What follows are three essays that explore how Grandrieux's cinema connects us to reality, or in Deleuzian terms, to the impersonal, creative force of the virtual.

Chapter I looks to how *Sombre* and *La Vie Nouvelle* envision the world as a continual process of creative becoming. Representation is fundamentally static; it presents its object as a transcendent and self-identical form. Grandrieux's cinema, I argue, moves past representation in order to reach the world as a continual movement of differentiation behind which lies no higher principle or identity. In articulating this aspect of Grandrieux's cinema, I oppose readings of *Sombre* and *La Vie Nouvelle* that identify a destructive or violent relationship between image and figure. Grandrieux's images, I argue, are not animated by a pull towards annihilation or undifferentiation, but rather an affirmation of creative differing.

Chapter II deepens the concerns of Chapter I to describe how Grandrieux's images are experienced through the body. Following from the conclusions of the preceding chapter, it looks to articulate a non-representational, non-qualified account of sensation that can elucidate the sense of vitality and vigor created by *Sombre* and *La Vie Nouvelle.* If Chapter I illustrates how Grandrieux's films render visible the impersonal movement of becoming, Chapter II details how this creative movement does not remain confined to the image, but rather impacts the spectator's nervous system, opening their body onto the virtual.

While the previous two chapters discuss Grandrieux's aesthetics of life and becoming in a broad sense, Chapter III stages these concerns with regards to one film: *La Vie Nouvelle.* Playing on the word "life" (*vie*) in the film's title, I address the relationship between *the* new life

[11] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 172.

that Grandrieux's film presents at the turn of the millennium—a barren, hopeless world characterized by violence and exploitation—and life as Deleuze understands it: as an indeterminate, creative force, "neutral, beyond good and evil."[12] In doing so, I answer the accusations of immorality that often accompany Grandrieux's work, arguing that the image of life presented by *La Vie Nouvelle*—although it does not "offset" or redeem the film's horrors—renders visible the force through which the creation of a "new life" can emerge.

In his first letter, Friedrich Schiller reflects that "in order to seize the fleeting appearance [of Nature] he must bind it in the fetters of rule, dissect its fair body into abstract notions and preserve its living spirit in a sorry skeleton of words."[13] I hope that, at the very least, I manage to preserve something of the spirit of Grandrieux's immense and vital cinema in the words below.

[12] Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence: Essays on A Life,* by Gilles Deleuze (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 29.
[13] Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (Mineola, Dover Publications, 2004), 24.

CHAPTER I

The future of cinema is to be free and great and strong, to transmit some of that "windy chaos" *that we tend to protect ourselves from, as if we desperately wanted to believe that the world is ordered, reasonable, possible, when it's exactly the opposite...* -- **Philippe Grandrieux**[14]

[Art's] struggle against chaos *does not take place without an affinity for the enemy, because another struggle develops and takes on more importance—the struggle* against opinion, *which claims to protect us from chaos itself.* **– Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari**[15]

Two moments.

Sombre (1999). The back of a woman's head as she gazes out of a car window at the passing landscape. Her blonde hair ripples in the wind. Her sister sits in the backseat, quiet and watchful, observing their driver. He stares ahead with a blank expression. We have already seen him kill several women and will see him kill several more. The passing landscape: a blur of road, passing cars, houses and trees. Suddenly, although not surprisingly, the image dissolves into a flux of plant-matter that rushes past like an over-busy *Mothlight.* The plants metamorphose into bubbles, static; a whole molecular material that unceasingly transforms itself at each moment. Finally, we arrive back at a woman's hair blowing in the wind, which appears only as another mode of this infinitesimal substance.

La Vie Nouvelle (2002). A woman—a sex slave in post-conflict Sarajevo—dances with her pimp. He moves around her, directing her with his hands like an orchestra conductor or puppet master, gesturing rapidly, leading her in a rapid series of pirouettes. He raises her hand above them both and spins her in an increasingly fast motion. In this last pirouette, the woman suddenly becomes unhinged from all coordinates. Her face vacillates rapidly against the black, tending away from recognition. The techno music drops out; only the sound of a body cutting

[14] "About the "insane horizon" of cinema," Philippe Grandrieux, accessed March 27, 2016. http://www.diagonalthoughts.com/?p=1423
[15] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?,* 203.

through the air is audible. For a few moments, her face is only the flickering of a match in the wind.

Grandrieux's vision.

Philippe Grandrieux begins his text "About the 'insane horizon' of cinema", published in *Cahiers du cinema* in 2000, by declaring that the future of cinema is to "transmit some of that 'windy chaos' that we tend to protect ourselves from." Grandrieux's essay—which rapturously sketches a history of image-making from "the first traces of hands…impressed in rock" to Degas, Artaud, and finally Grandrieux himself—gives a singular vision of cinema. Grandrieux declares

> the future of cinema is in its childhood, its brilliance, its brutality, the world that begins again, it's an image that is larger than life, in front of which we placed ourselves one day, this vibrating, silent image, for the *"infans"* is the one who doesn't speak, who stands aside from all social conventions, in front of the chaos, outside of language, of sense, without distance…

What we must note, first of all, is Grandrieux's association between "the future of cinema" and "its childhood." His essay projects his vision of cinema into the future, but this vision is closely coupled with a conception of "its essence." He thus situates his own filmmaking practice—we should understand this essay as a kind of manifesto—as a development towards a horizon that cinema has inscribed within its essence, as an attempt to realize a destiny that lies at the very heart of the medium.

Here, as in many interviews, Grandrieux describes cinema as an attempt to touch the Real: to access the world without the mediation of language, convention, and representation. Cinema must "stand, unfailingly, before the world", "carry the weight of reality, its gushing

hallucinatory vibration." Through sensation, cinema must "convey a fraction of the passing world."[16] This chapter looks to develop how Grandrieux's films work towards this horizon.

Chaos and the Destruction of Figurative Givens.

The two moments that opened this chapter are among the clearest expressions of Grandrieux's desire to transmit a "windy chaos" that opposes our belief that the world is ordered and reasonable. In the moment from *Sombre*, the image decomposes from stable, recognizable forms (the characters, the landscape of rural France, etc.) into a flux of particles that rush by at great speed. Although we can occasionally glance certain forms—grass, flowers, bubbles, etc.—they have already vanished by the time we identify them. Chaos irrupts into the image, decomposing forms into a material at once unrecognizable and, in this case, varying at an extreme speed. It appears as a disaster for what Deleuze, in his book on Francis Bacon, calls "figurative givens", introducing the "asignifying" and "non-representative" into the image. We are no longer sure what we are looking at; it "is like the emergence of another world"[17] into the film which disarticulates a relatively comprehensible image into an ungraspable flux of matter. Importantly, from the first shot of the passing landscape to the concluding one of Claire's hair, there are no obviously apparent cuts. Rather, we see the image compose and decompose itself in one continual, modulating flow, passing from the countryside into a whole flux of particles only to recompose as hair blowing in the wind. Chaos appears through a decomposition of the original image; it does not stand by itself, but emerges from and then composes itself into what we might call more "figurative" images.

Perhaps to some this might appear a strange place to begin a discussion of Grandrieux's work. The two moments described above, although not the *only* moments of chaos in *Sombre*

[16] "About the 'insane horizon' of cinema."
[17] Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 82.

and *La Vie Nouvelle*, are certainly exceptional ones. Rarely do Grandrieux's images near complete chaos. More often they resemble the final image of the aforementioned sequence in *Sombre*: that of Claire's hair blowing in the wind. The shot—close-up, out of focus—ripples and blurs, yet retains enough consistency to offer itself to our recognition. Trembling, the image threatens to dissolve and continue its chaotic metamorphoses, yet it does not. Grandrieux's images "often [hover] on [this] border between the figurative and the abstract"[18]—blurring, quivering, or submerged in darkness such that the boundaries between forms become indiscernible, yet do not entirely dissipate.

Martine Beugnet, in her book *Cinema and Sensation* (which, at this moment, contains the most extensive English-language scholarship on Grandrieux), approaches the chaos and figurative dissolution in Grandrieux's cinema primarily through Georges Bataille's concept of *l'informe* (or "formlessness")[19]. In moments such as those that opened the chapter, in which recognizable forms dissolve and near indiscernibility, Beugnet identifies a "pull of the 'formless.'" She characterizes formlessness as "a radical attack on subjectivity and the beholding of chaos, the pull of the senseless…the irreducible and most powerful threat to the constitution of the subject."[20] In formlessness the "subjective body appears to melt into matter,"[21] dissolved into a state of undifferentiation. One can see why Bataille's *l'informe* resonates with Grandrieux's filmmaking, especially in moments that are moodier and less animated than the two moments that begun this chapter. In moments where the threat of physical violence and violation looms, the temptation is certainly there to turn to a nihilistic understanding of the horizon of chaos that

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[18] Martine Beugnet, *Cinema and Sensation: French Film and the Art of Transgression* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2007), 116.
[19] Beugnet invokes Deleuze's conception of immanence—which I will heavily draw on later—but does not develop it besides noting its "positive" character. As such, I feel comfortable posing that Beugnet approaches Grandrieux's films more through the idea of formlessness.
[20] Beugnet, *Cinema and Sensation,* 69.
[21] Beugnet, 65.

animates Grandrieux's work: just as bodies are beaten, violated, and enslaved in the narratives of *Sombre* and *La Vie Nouvelle*, the image threatens to dissolve its figures into a senseless blur.

Beugnet proposes that Grandrieux's films need not be necessarily understood as nihilistic because "the creative dynamics at work in the films offset the destructive pull that threatens to annihilate the human figures who inhabit his worlds."[22] This is an inadequate and unnecessary distinction. Can Grandrieux's work really be described as animated by a "destructive pull" or a "pull of the senseless"? To invoke a *pull* towards chaos is to make unidirectional what is really more of a dance between form and chaos, a continual transversal between two planes rather than a terrifying precipice. As the car scene in *Sombre* shows, something always emerges from the chaos of formlessness and not at all in the same form as it entered. It is true that the world is "pulled" into the senseless. Everything is in flux; we lose all coordinates to identify what we are exactly seeing. We have gone from a world of recognizable forms to a chaotic flux of constantly morphing particles. Yet (and here is the essential point), this sequence culminates in the image of Claire's hair blowing in the wind. There is no discernable cut between the "chaos" and Claire's hair—rather, fluttering rapidly, it emerges almost imperceptibly from the rapidly fluctuating matter. It's not an entirely stable image: it's blurry, close-up, seemingly ready to dissolve at any moment. However, it does not and the film continues on.

What can we say about this wonderful moment in Grandrieux's work, this brief image of hair wavering in the wind that, emerging out of chaos, appears to us like a revelation? An image that encapsulates so powerfully the singularity of Grandrieux's images which, as Beugnet writes, "are fluid and changing, often hovering in the border between the figurative and the abstract"[23]? We should take this moment as exemplary of the fact that we need not understand the

[22] Beugnet, 117.
[23] Beugnet, 116.

formlessness that Grandrieux's images continually flirt with as the pull of the void, as the impending annihilation of his figures. That is why Deleuze and Guattari appear more helpful to us than Bataille. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, they certainly present chaos as a very real danger, cautioning that destratification can "end in chaos, the void and destruction." This potential outcome certainly resonates with Beugnet's formlessness as the threat of destruction. However, the existence of chaos is necessarily also that which makes creative change possible. It posits that the world is not fixed and stable, but rather characterized by a ceaseless play of forces that subtend what we recognize as stable forms and continually ensure their deformation. One must only ensure that their "undertaking of destratification" does not "end in chaos,"[24] but rather harnesses it for creative ends.

The first lines of Grandrieux's essay—"The future of cinema is to be free and great and strong, to transmit some of that "*windy chaos*" that we tend to protect ourselves from. . ."—cite a passage from the conclusion of Deleuze and Guattari's *What is Philosophy* in which the philosophers describe art's relationship to chaos. In their conceptual schema, Deleuze and Guattari oppose chaos to opinion and cliché (which for them are one and the same thing). Chaos in their account, with its infinite speed and variation, disallows all stable or consistent thought. In chaos all things form and deform in one and the same moment, providing no ground to stand on. In order to protect ourselves from chaos, we form opinions—stable, relatively fixed ideas that serve to organize a world that is, in Grandrieux's words "chaotic, delirious [and] untenable."[25] These clichés are transcendent and representational: they remove phenomena from the flow of the world and represent them within categories so that they can be contained and ordered. Here, Deleuze and Guattari describe opinions as "umbrellas" which protect one from the storm of

[24] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 503.
[25] "About the 'insane horizon' of cinema."

chaos. Art, for Deleuze and Guattari, (like philosophy and science, the other two components of their tripartite schema), struggles against chaos. Yet, Deleuze and Guattari write, art struggles against chaos only "to borrow weapons from it that it turns against opinion." Art struggles with chaos, moves through it perhaps (as in *Sombre*), but in order to harness its power and turn it against opinion and representation to yield a "vision or sensation. . .a composed chaos—neither foreseen nor preconceived."[26] Art is a "composition of chaos," never chaos itself. In this moment from *Sombre*, culminating in the image of Claire's hair, we witness Grandrieux compose chaos. From a formless and continually varying matter, Grandrieux sculpts a woman's hair, illuminated by a faint sunlight, quivering in the wind. Beugnet's distinction between the "destructive pull" of Grandrieux's images and the "creative dynamics of the films" is entirely unnecessary. Grandrieux's images are not *pulled* towards chaos; they harness chaos, compose with it. Chaos, in Deleuze's words, is "not sufficient [in itself], but must be "utilized"…[it marks] out possibilities of fact."[27]

The Screen as Plane of Composition

The image is no longer given as a reflection, discourse, or the currency of whatever absolute value; it works to invest immanence, using every type of sensation, drive and affect. – **Nicole Brenez[28]**

My dream is to create a completely 'Spinoza-ist' film… -- **Philippe Grandrieux[29]**

What "possibilities of fact" does chaos introduce in Grandrieux's work? So far, we have written about what chaos is opposed to, how it dissolves recognizable forms into a blur, into a zone of indiscernibility. But what does it make us see; what does it make possible? In the conclusion of *A Thousand Plateaus,* Deleuze and Guattari write that beneath strata (codes,

[26] Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?,* 204.
[27] Deleuze, *Francis Bacon,* 83.
[28] Nicole Brenez, "The Body's Night: An Interview with Philippe Grandrieux," *Rouge 1* (2003). Accessed March 27, 2016. http://www.rouge.com.au/1/grandrieux.html
[29] Philippe Grandrieux qtd. in "The Body's Night."

organizations, forms) "there exists a submolecular, unformed Matter…How could unformed matter…be anything but chaos pure and simple?" This unformed matter appears, they stress, through disarticulation and destratification, when we "no longer have forms or substances, organization or development."[30] What is the world's dissolution into a chaotic flux in *Sombre* if not a disarticulation that gestures towards this unformed matter? The image disarticulates the passing landscape into an infinitely fluctuating substance that rushes past, its barely-perceptible forms undergoing a continual involution in which they incessantly dissolve into yet other forms until, finally, composing that last trembling image of hair in the wind. Crucially, we must keep in mind that when Grandrieux renders this matter visible, it is not *homogeneous* (i.e. we are not confronted with a purely grey screen). Each mode of this matter is in itself somewhat recognizable (plant matter, bubbles, branches, etc.) but is in the constant process of differentiating into something else. That is, Grandrieux does not present what Deleuze and Guattari elsewhere call a hylomorphic model, which posits a static matter that is then *given* form. Rather, this intensive, "unformed" substance is only visible insofar as it is continually varying, "perceived at the same time as that which it composes or renders,"[31] not restricted to the articulation of any one form.

Chaos, in Grandrieux's work, does not always approach the speed of this moment in *Sombre.* Often it is reached (or gestured towards) through a blurring of the image, a darkness that renders the boundaries between forms indiscernible, or a congruence of color that dissolves the figure into the landscape. In the opening of *La Vie Nouvelle*, we see a man, held in close-up, pitch his head back in a long, drawn-out scream. The image is slightly blurry; behind the man's head is a blank, dreary grey. As his head moves farther away from us, it becomes increasingly

[30] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus,* 503.
[31] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus,* 281.

indiscernible from that of an animal: the nose becomes a snout, the teeth becoming like those of a rodent. Pitching back into the grey, the head becomes fuzzy and indistinct, occupying less and less of the screen. The image changes. The same grey predominates, but now an entirely blurred, black figure moves in the center of the image. At times it resembles a man, running across a landscape, arms flailing, but it's more like an abstract, moving blot, a patch of black against a grey surface. The image changes again. Now, frantically and shakily, it follows a dog as it rushes back and forth, presumably tethered to some pole. The ground is a greyish brown, not unlike the dog. Its rapid movements, matched by the camera, combined with the blurriness of the focus, make it such that the dog becomes temporarily indiscernible from the blur of grey and brown that dominates the nervous image. This sequence presents three different images, without any discernable narrative or spatial relationship between them. However on a plastic level, the three each appear to be molded out of the same genetic material: greys and blacks through which each form appears out from and dissolves back into. Deleuze writes of how the black screen takes on a genetic value in Philippe Garrel's films, how "with its variations and tonalities, it acquires the power of a constitution of bodies", a genesis in terms of "a white, or a black or a grey (or even in terms of colours)."[32] In this example, the formlessness or chaos which each image tends towards in its own way (the head that pulls away into a blur; the dark shape twisting across the grey screen; the frantic dog that eludes the camera), reveals an unformed matter (bare colors: grey, black, brown) out of which each form appears to be constituted from.

The presence of chaos—the moments in Grandrieux's films in which forms appear to dissolve into an undifferentiated matter—transforms the screen into what Deleuze and Guattari call a "plane of immanence" or "plane of composition." In *A Thousand Plateaus*, they posit

[32] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, 200-201.

> a pure plane of immanence, univocality, composition, upon which everything is given, upon which unformed elements and materials dance that are distinguished from one another only by their speed and that enter into this or that individuated assemblage depending on their connections, their relations of movement. A fixed plane of life on which everything stirs, slows down, or accelerates.[33]

In this concept, Deleuze and Guattari follow Baruch Spinoza and his defining thesis: "a single substance having an infinity of attributes."[34] In Spinoza's ontology, there exists only one substance (for him, God), and "everything that is *is* or rather acts as a modifying of this one substance."[35] This conception of the world reduces everything to a single plane of immanence: a plane on which a single substance expresses itself in an infinite variety of ways. To notions of form, structure, and organization, the plane of consistency opposes a world in which nothing stands outside the immanent composition of its unformed elements. Everything is the mode of a single substance, composing itself on a plane "peopled by anonymous matter, by infinite bits of impalpable matter entering into varying connections"[36] not determined by anything outside. On this plane there are no forms; rather, "form is constantly being dissolved"[37] as the plane's unformed elements compose themselves according to varying degrees of speed and slowness. In the moments of chaos or formlessness in Grandrieux's work, Grandrieux figures the screen as plane of immanence. Chaos lays the images' particular articulations and individuations across a plane of composition. The image blurs; forms are dissolved, becoming indiscernible from each other. A common, unformed matter is posited beneath figuration; or rather, all forms appear as a composition of this substance.

Perhaps we are going too far. As anyone who has seen Grandrieux's films knows, his images are not always so indiscernible, do not always appear on the "border between the

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[33] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus,* 255.
[34] Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy,* 17.
[35] Peter Hallward, *Out of this World,* 10.
[36] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus,* 255.
[37] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus,* 267.

figurative and the abstract."[38] Long stretches of both *Sombre* and *La Vie Nouvelle* are entirely figuratively clear (sometimes unbearably so, as in the hair-cutting scene in the latter film). In *The Logic of Sensation,* Deleuze writes that chaos (in the paintings of Francis Bacon) "must not be given free reign, and the necessary catastrophe must not submerge the whole…Not all the figurative givens have to disappear; and above all, a new figuration [should emerge from the catastrophe]"[39]. Chaos, in Grandrieux's work, situates even these most figurative of images upon a common plane of consistency. Having revealed an "unformed matter" out of which each image is articulated, the forms that appear on screen are predicated less on their resemblance to some pro-filmic object (that is re-presented on screen), they appear as *compositions*. Chaos, dissolving the image into a matter not confined to its articulation in particular forms, liberates the cinematic image from a representational logic. A world is revealed "beneath representation, beyond representation."[40]

Representation involves reference to a pre-existing object; it endeavors to represent something already defined, fixed as an object to be depicted. It operates by, as Brian Massumi writes, "organic thought," abstracting its object "from the singular flow of its movements through the world…[and defines it] by similarity across its variations: self-identity"[41]. The principal criterion for representative art is that of similarity: the representative image is evaluated via its degree of similarity to its object. Composition, however, involves the constant dissolution and recomposition of form, or rather, form's continual involution. What one sees cannot be understood through the logic of representation, because nothing is being re-presented; rather, one

[38] Beugnet, 116.
[39] Deleuze, *Francis Bacon,* 89.
[40] Deleuze, *Francis Bacon,* 45.
[41] Brian Massumi, *A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992), 96.

experiences a continual movement of becoming, forms continually varying from themselves in time.

Sombre, as the name implies, is full of moments in which black dominates the image. Grandrieux's figures are continually vanishing into the night or rendered partially visible, fragments of their body appearing and disappearing as they move. The dark in *Sombre* is its own kind of chaos—a "colorless and silent nothingness…without nature or thought."[42] Deleuze and Guattari caution that the plane of consistency can become "a pure plane of abolition" in which the involution of form might turn "into a regression to the undifferentiated." We must, they write, "retrain a minimum of strata, a minimum of forms."[43]

The fourth murder in *Sombre* encapsulates this relationship between the plane of consistency and abolition. Jean picks up his fourth victim late at night from the side of the road. She walks in front of the car, briefly illuminated by the headlights, before vanishing again. We hear the sounds of the car door opening. As she steps inside, her back briefly becomes visible (presumably from the light of a street lamp). Now inside, she turns to face Jean. The outline of her face and hair is perceptible against a blur of light from outside. We see a bit of her ear and the glint of an earring. The back of Jean's neck and his right ear are visible. The rest is lost in the dark. The car takes off. Next, the couple stands outside somewhere unidentifiable. The image remains almost completely black, so much so that the transition between locations would be practically unnoticeable were it not for the new sound of crickets in the night air. We are very close to them both. The woman moves her hand to Jean's neck: only her right arm is visible, appearing almost disconnected from any body. Half of Jean's face appears to us, a small patch of light and color on a black screen. He runs his fingers through her hair and lets it out over her

[42] Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?,* 201.
[43] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus,* 270.

face, its dark color returning her face to the tenebrous image. He embraces her from behind; the image blurs and refocuses, moving all the time. Jean lowers his thumb into her mouth and glances upwards. The woman begins to struggle and they fall on the ground together. The image wavers and blurs while the sounds of strangulation cry out with a gut-wrenching clarity. Finally they end; the woman is dead. The image is now completely black; all that we hear are Jean's footsteps as he walks away and the sound of flowing water. The world flashes back into existence: more than half of the image remains obscure, engulfed in darkness, but at its crest stands the outline of Jean, silhouetted against a grey, rippling lake. The sequence ends with one final cut: the water, blurred and indefinite, now fills the image, its thousand little ripples creating so many micro-movements across its surface.

Here we see the tenuous relationship between the possibility of the void (that chaos might end in destruction, in the undifferentiated) and the immanent composition of forms. The chaos of the night—where we have no form, only a single black plane—threatens to entirely dissolve Grandrieux's figures. Again and again, Jean and his victim seem as though they will disappear completely, swallowed into an undifferentiated abyss. Yet, of course, this does not happen. Or rather, it does—at the darkest moment, at the woman's death—but the scene does not end there. Instead, Grandrieux brings light back into the image to reveal this final image of the lake: a body composing and diverging from itself at every moment, every ripple transforming the whole. Chaos is introduced into the image as possibility, as complete abolition, but does not swallow the image entirely. Grandrieux, asked in an interview about the role of darkness in his work, responds, "I don't know, but *darkness is a possibility that something appears*. You couldn't see exactly what it is, and the difficulty to see is a strong link, it's coming to you and you don't know

exactly what is in front of you, and the shapes are not perfectly recognizable"[44]. The chaos of the image, its complete dissolution of form, serves here as a properly compositional power. Deleuze expresses this same view in his passages on Philippe Garrel: "the screen becomes the medium for variations: the black screen and the under-exposed the intense blackness which lets us guess at dark volumes in the process of being constituted, or the black marked by a fixed or moving luminous point, and all the combinations of black and fire…"[45] The screen becomes the medium for variations, for composition. We see this clearly in this moment from *Sombre*. Not once in this scene does Grandrieux present a whole, objectifiable body. Rather, Jean and his victim's bodies appear piecemeal, as variations of light and colour on a black surface, as a constantly forming and dissolving substance that does not exist as a static form, but as something always in the process of composing itself.

Chaos is a "collapse of visual coordinates"[46]. It disarticulates forms, dissolving them into an almost-undifferentiated substance. Whether an intense blackness or blurred, rapidly fluctuating forms, chaos in Grandrieux's work breaks the figurative linkage between image and object. The image is, as Brenez writes, "no longer given as reflection, discourse."[47] The screen, in the most extreme moments of formlessness, reveals a matter that is common to several forms (the blurred image, reducing all the image's individual articulations to a single plane) or none of them (the intense darkness of *Sombre*). Chaos, Deleuze writes, is "a violent chaos in relation to figurative givens", but it is "also a germ of order or rhythm"[48].

Rhythm

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[44] Philippe Grandrieux qtd. in "Cinema is a back and forth movement between ideas and sensations: Interview with Philippe Grandrieux," accessed March 27, 2016. http://specchioscuro.it/interview-philippe-grandrieux-intervista-grandrieux/ Emphasis mine.
[45] Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 200.
[46] Deleuze, *The Logic of Sensation,* 83.
[47] Brenez, "The Body's Night."
[48] Deleuze, *The Logic of Sensation,* 83.

We are close here to something Deleuze describes as "one of [cinema's] essences: a proceeding, a process of constitution of bodies."[49] This capacity of cinema—to not "give" a body but to "constitute" one—is intimately tied to a particular power of rhythm that Deleuze identifies at the heart of the medium. Rhythm, for Deleuze, fundamentally involves some element of repetition. For instance, Grandrieux's rhythmic images do not leave us in formlessness; we are able to follow recognizable figures throughout *Sombre* and *La Vie Nouvelle* because of a consistency introduced into chaos. In the aforementioned moment in *Sombre*, we can (for the most part) identify Jean and the woman's bodies despite their continual variation. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari takes pains to distinguish their conception of rhythm from that of meter. Meter, regular or irregular, always "assumes a coded form." Constituted by set and unchanging intervals of time between beats, meter is always a repetition of the same. This is true even in the case of irregular meter. As meter is fundamentally coded, any differences that appear in the intervals between beats are nevertheless reducible to a fundamental concept. Rhythm, on the other hand, involves an internal symmetry. Its moments are constantly differing from each other, but never so much that the entire piece falls into chaos. There are "implied vibrations, periodic repetitions of components,"[50] at the same time that the constitutive inequality between components ensures a continual transcoding of its elements. In terms introduced earlier, rhythm takes place across a plane of consistency in which its variation does not follow any guiding notion of structure or form.

How can we think about this in terms of cinema? In *Difference and Repetition,* Deleuze writes that "tonic and intensive values act by creating inequalities or incommensurabilities *between metrically equivalent periods or spaces*. They create distinctive points, privileged

[49] Deleuze, *Cinema 2,* 201.
[50] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus,* 313-314.

instants which always indicate a poly-rhythm. Here again, the unequal is the most positive element."[51] Fifteen years later, in *Cinema 1*, Deleuze will pose such "metrically equivalent spaces" as constitutive of cinema's very workings. He notes that film is composed of "any-instant-whatevers," rather than movement between privileged poses or instants. That is, instead of the ancient conception of movement as the transition between fixed forms, cinema's movement is—as observed on a filmstrip—a mechanical succession of equidistant instants, "immanent material elements" rather than transcendent poses.[52] In other words, there is (as everyone knows) a productive repetition internal to cinema: the appearance of an image at every 24th of a second, the asymmetry of which produces the illusion of movement. Lack of symmetry, Deleuze writes, "is positivity itself"[53]—a fact laid bare each time a filmstrip runs through a projector.

Deleuze distinguishes between two forms of repetition. Static repetition "refers back to a single concept, which leaves only an external difference between the ordinary instances of a figure."[54] In other words, static repetition refers to a transcendent form that each instance refers back to. Therefore, there is no difference internal to each instance—an instance is only different insofar as it is seen as *differing from* some static concept that lies outside and beyond the instance in its immediacy. Dynamic repetition, on the other hand, is "the repetition of an internal difference which it incorporates in each of its moments, and carries from one distinctive point to another."[55] In this case, each instance is different *in itself* and differing *from* itself in time. There is nothing outside to refer to in terms of difference or similarity. Difference is no longer conceived in terms of relation or negation; there is an internal, positive difference. This allows us

[51] Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 21. Emphasis mine.
[52] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 4.
[53] Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition,* 20.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid.

to conceive of singularity. Deleuze reiterates this argument in *Cinema 1*, arguing that the "production of singularities…is achieved by the accumulation of banalities…so that the singular is taken from the any-whatever, and is itself an any-whatever which is simply non-ordinary and non-regular."[56]

Is all cinema rhythmic, then? While dynamic repetition is a kind of ontological first principle for Deleuze, static repetition often effaces or hides it. The repetition of the same (in which all differences refer back to a transcendent, external identity) "appears only in the sense that another repetition is disguised within it, constituting it and constituting itself in disguising itself."[57] This is echoed in the *Cinema* volumes. On the one hand, Deleuze argues that cinema, composed of "any-instant-whatevers," cannot give movement as the passage *between* forms, but rather is a continual *forming* without destination or end. Thus, Deleuze can state that cartoon films are works of cinema because "the drawing no longer constitutes a pose or a completed figure, but the description of a figure which is always in the process of being formed or dissolving…"[58] On the other hand, Deleuze poses that this quality of cinema is effaced in the regime of what he calls the movement-image. In the movement-image, shots are linked by a continuity of actions and reactions that are then internalized into the unified whole of the film, each shot logically following its predecessor. Linkages between shots are made possible by principles of teleology and identity, expressed as a repetition of the same. In this sense, the cinematic image's potential to render becoming visible is inhibited as self-identical spaces are linked together according to the demands of what he calls "organic" narration. For Deleuze, the modulatory capacities of cinema only emerge in full force under the regime of the time-image (more specifically, in one sign of the time-image: the series). I am not so much interested in

[56] Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 6.
[57] Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition,* 21.
[58] Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 5.

attempting to fit Grandrieux somewhere within Deleuze's taxonomy (which itself invites the invention of new signs and images, rather than present itself as a closed system). What's more important is rather the philosophical consequences Deleuze draws from cinema's power of modulation: the destruction of identity and representation, the affirmation of singularity through an ontological grounding of difference.

In his writing on Philippe Garrel, Deleuze notes that his "cinema of constitution…may well develop its effects only in the long term, endowing the cinema with powers that are as yet not well known."[59] In his account of Garrel's time-image cinema, Deleuze places special emphasis on the irrational cut that delinks images to affirm their singularity. Grandrieux, on the other hand, has managed to realize cinema's capacity to describe "a figure which is always in the process of being formed or dissolving" *within* the space of the shot. Grandrieux creates properly rhythmic images that bring the internal difference constitutive of all cinematic images to the fore. We see this taken to its extreme in certain scenes where, as Beugnet notes, Grandrieux reduces the frame rate, crafting sequences that appear at 6 to 8 new frames per second, creating a "trembled effect."[60]

To close our discussion we can turn back to the sequence from *La Vie Nouvelle* that opened this chapter: that of Mélania dancing with Boyan, her pimp. It is perhaps the most audibly rhythmic moment in Grandrieux's filmography, animated by a pulsating techno beat by Étant Donnés and Sol Ixent, and encapsulates wonderfully the relationship between rhythm and chaos in Grandrieux's cinema. The sequence begins with Boyan and Mélania face to face. Boyan moves his hands across Mélania's head as she slowly twirls around, the camera circling around the pair in the opposite direction. Boyan's hand—blurred, in the foreground—directs Mélania in

[59] Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 200-201.
[60] Beugnet, 1.

a series of slow twirls. The camera continually moves ever so slightly, neither mimicking the characters' movements nor tightly framing them, moving like a third part in this strange dance. The background is a blurred and indistinct—dark red walls with large swaths of shadow. Often Boyan and Mélania are the only visible objects in the room, the rest lost in the black. Now a reverse shot—Boyan's face in sharp relief in the background, the back of Mélania's head blurred in the foreground. She continues to spin—we can't catch a glimpse of her face, the image is too out of focus. Pumping techno music has increasingly grown louder. As the beat kicks in Boyan begins to dance, swaying back and forth against a bright patch of red. He faces the camera, spins, then moves close. Inches from the camera, we can only make out the outline of his head—with patches of light for his nose and forehead. He shakes his body rapidly, gyrating and dancing while the camera jerks back and forth. The image is vibratory, everything is in movement. Boyan rejoins Mélania; her pirouettes have grown increasingly rapid, Boyan circles around her, gesturing vigorously. The camera dances around the couple, throwing them into patches of black and red. Boyan grabs Mélania's hand and holds it above them both, twirling her in an increasingly rapid series of pirouettes. Suddenly Mélania appears to drop out of the scene entirely and into an indeterminate space and time. Against a black background, her head vacillates rapidly. Her skin is the only source of light in the image, a rapidly flickering flame in which we only briefly glimpse images of a body in motion. The techno music returns to the soundtrack as the image begins to stabilize—the vibrating light once again becomes an actualized body, now in the midst of a packed rave.

This sequence, like nearly all of Grandrieux's scenes, has no establishing shot. There is no "common measure" through which all the shots can refer back to. The space Boyan and Mélania dance in—like so many other spaces for Grandrieux, like the family cabin in *Un Lac* or

the inferno of *La Vie Nouvelle*—is indistinct and largely undefined. What is the status of the figures in this space? As they dance, shake, and twirl, the camera similarly refuses to remain still—following them, circling their gyrating bodies, approaching their rapid gestures. The image does not delimit a frame through which to watch Boyan and Mélania, but rather dances throughout the space, providing no stable point of anchorage. Furthermore, the frequent blurring, vibrating, and lighting dip the image dissolve the figurativity of the image, flattening detail into blurred planes and shapes or moving at such a speed that one cannot hold onto a single detail: "a matter-flow that can only be *followed.*"[61] At the height of the sequence, these qualities of the image reach their apex: the rhythm of the image becomes so fast that Mélania briefly becomes a rapidly-vacillating patch of light across a dark background. But it does not end there: the image's rhythm decreases, Mélania becomes perceptible once again. Only the location has changed; she becomes refigured in the midst of a packed rave, shaking and dancing among a throng of anonymous dancers.

Chaos is rhythm's risk. It is "infinite *variabilities*, the appearing and disappearing of which coincide…infinite speeds that blend into the immobility of the colorless and silent nothingness."[62] There is always the danger that rhythm can lose its consistency, can spin off into complete entropy, its involution of forms "turning into a regression to the undifferentiated"—a total blur in which nothing remains. Truth be told, there is never chaos proper in Grandrieux's work. There is no blank, grey screen; there is always "a minimum of strata, a minimum of forms"[63] even if these appear on the verge of their own abolition. Even as Mélania reaches the climax of her dance, we still catch the glimpse of a nose or ear, the shape of an arm. The image is never completely undifferentiated. Yet, this is not to say that there is a *pull* of chaos as Beugnet

[61] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus,* 409.
[62] Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?,* 201.
[63] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus,* 270.

does. Chaos certainly exists at the horizon of Grandrieux's images, but in an "operative" manner, as "a possibility of fact" that allows a new figuration to emerge.[64] Chaos is rhythm's risk, yes, but its presence in Grandrieux's cinema is the opening of a possibility. It cannot be emphasized enough that never do Grandrieux's images never become totally formless—something always emerges, something is always composed.

The moments in which chaos appears to enter the image—the climax of Mélania's dance, the landscape's involution into a continually-morphing material, the bodies that blur into the surrounding landscape—unhook the image from its representational function. They dissolve figurative forms into a zone of indiscernibility in which we are not exactly sure what we are looking at. It introduces an asignifying matter into the image, it posits an "unformed matter" beneath or beyond figuration; the image, dipping into chaos, does not reflect or represent anything. It becomes instead what Deleuze and Guattari call a "plane of composition"—a plane in which unformed matter continually composes and individuates itself without reference to anything outside its own immanent development. We go "beyond the organism, plunging into a becoming"[65] without teleology or mimetic loyalty. As such, the rhythm that Deleuze sees as one of cinema's essences—of forming, a continual process of constitution—becomes the basis of the image. Rhythm emerges when there is no overarching code, no single concept or identity to which all its little variations are reducible. There is a consistency between each variation—not all the figurative givens disappear, the image reserves enough such that we do not enter the undifferentiated—but each appears as a composition in its own right, as a moment in a continual movement of differentiation and creation in time. Grandrieux's images have a relationship to

[64] Deleuze, *Francis Bacon,* 89.
[65] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus,* 503.

chaos and occasionally appear to verge on it, but only to, as Deleuze and Guattari write, "borrow weapons from it that it turns against opinion,"[66] against representation.

[66] Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?,* 204.

CHAPTER II

Can Life, can Time, be rendered sensible, rendered visible? – **Gilles Deleuze**[67]

This rhythm, this way of framing, of lighting the body, of interrupting the take, it comes, it's there, and cinema closely touches its essence, a sensorial experience of the world, whose destiny is to transmit through sensations, the only means which are its own, to convey a fraction of the passing world, the sensitive world, soon dissipated, lost, carried away by time, a part of time, and that feeling of "inevitable solidarity" may resound in each one of us. **– Philippe Grandrieux**[68]

Body and Image.

In his interviews and writings, Grandrieux again and again stresses the importance of sensation to his cinema. In his essay in *Cahiers*, Grandrieux describes what he calls the "insane horizon of cinema" in which images act directly on the spectator's body "without interruptions, without representations." Cinema has not gone far enough; it is always pushing towards its secret horizon: a total intermingling of image and body, technology and flesh. This is the secret that haunts the medium, what "animates it, pushes it forward. One must close the gap between oneself, one's body, and the source of sensation. Cinema desires a wrapped body, taken by the instinctive material."[69] Grandrieux's cinema, pushing towards the Real—working to render the world in its immanent becoming, beyond representation and identity—directly impacts the body. There is no more distance between body and image. While representation, as Deleuze writes, must "pass through the brain,"[70] Grandrieux's cinema "acts immediately upon the nervous system,"[71] without the intermediary of representation or language.

In one sense the immediate, physical impact described here is a general characteristic of cinema, as Walter Benjamin details in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical

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[67] Deleuze, *Francis Bacon,* 53.
[68] "About the 'insane horizon' of cinema"
[69] Ibid.
[70] Deleuze, *Francis Bacon,* 32.
[71] Deleuze, *Francis Bacon,* 31.

Reproduction," writing of cinematic spectatorship as a "physical" "tactile" experience in which moving images "assail the spectator."[72] Antonin Artaud, in a favorite essay of Grandrieux, notes the "physical excitement which the rotation of the images communicates directly to the brain…[moving the mind] beyond the power of representation". However, Artaud writes, one must know how to properly seize upon this essential aspect of cinema. Rather than use the medium to tell stories, filmmakers must access "something more imponderable [than a succession of images] which restores [images] to us with their direct matter, with no interpositions or representations" [73]. Earlier I wrote of how Grandrieux's cinema endeavors to access the Real, in its variability and dynamism, beyond representation. This chapter looks to flesh out how his films are experienced sensuously. It could be considered the reverse side of the previous chapter, an attempt to understand rhythm and differentiation through the body.

The second time I watched *La Vie Nouvelle*, I did so with a friend who composes music. Grandrieux's film, if considered strictly in terms of narrative, is quite depressing. By the film's end, Mélania has not escaped the world of human trafficking, Roscoe has been eaten alive by dogs, and Seymour has been unable to attain the object of his desire. Nothing that could be described as optimistic, figuratively or narratively, has occurred. Yet, as we stepped out into the air, my friend turned to me and remarked what a deep sense of joy he felt. What he wanted to do at that moment, more than anything, was rush home to create music. In this account of the sensation of Grandrieux's cinema, of how its images are felt on the body, I hope to illuminate what accounts for this extraordinary vitality.

Sensation and Cinema: Vivian Sobchack and Laura U. Marks

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[72] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 238.
[73] Antonin Artaud, *Antonin Artaud: Collected Works Volume Three* (London: Calder & Boyars, 1972), 65-66.

In her book *Cinema and Sensation*, Martine Beugnet notes the extraordinary confluence between film theory and practice in recent years around the relationship between cinema and sensory experience. Just as many contemporary directors—studied in great detail in Beugnet's book—have undertook "cinematographic [explorations] of a sensory, embodied comprehension of reality,"[74] so has there been a number of recent books that explore spectatorship as a necessarily embodied practice that engages our body beyond just our senses of hearing and vision.

To begin, I will look at two of the most extensive accounts of embodied spectatorship: those of Vivian Sobchack and Laura U. Marks, both writing in the phenomenological tradition. In briefly detailing Marks and Sobchack's accounts—both of which focus on the viewer's "lived body" and how cinema stimulates different sensory modalities such as touch and taste (although these are approached within an understanding of the interrelationship of the senses)—I hope to emphasize the inadequacy of these approaches in regards to Grandrieux's cinema and, consequently, point to how Grandrieux necessitates that we direct our attention to a dimension of cinematic experience not emphasized in recent accounts of sensation and cinema.

I.

In her essay "What My Fingers Knew: The Cinesthetic Subject, or Vision in the Flesh," Vivian Sobchack articulates what she calls "the cinesthetic subject": the film spectator who "through an embodied vision in-formed by the knowledge of the other senses, "makes sense" of what it is to "see" a movie—both "in the flesh" and as it "matters.""[75] Sobchack argues that film viewing necessarily involves the entirety of our senses (e.g. not only sight). This argument is grounded in the phenomenological concept of intentionality. As we watch a film, our

[74] Beugnet, 32.
[75] Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 70-71.

intentionality "streams toward the world onscreen."[76] The screen-world is the subject of our conscious attention, intended towards and invested in by the position of our body. However, we cannot of course actually "touch, small, or taste the particular figures on the screen that [solicit our] sensual desire." Because the figures on screen evade our sensual grasp, our intentional trajectory reverses "its direction to locate its partially frustrated sensual grasp on something more literally accessible…[our] own subjectively felt body."[77] As such film gives us an intense (and diffuse) sensorial experience, our sensual grasp is "reflexively redoubled"; we become both "toucher" and "touched."[78] For example, Sobchack discusses her experience of the woolen and silk clothes worn by a character in Jane Campion's *The Piano.* Her intentionality (or "tactile desire") streams towards the onscreen textures only to rebound back on her own body (and then towards the screen again, etc.) creating an intensified, if diffuse, sense of touch.

We should note two things about this account of embodied spectatorship. First, Sobchack predicates her account on a notion of cross-modal perception (i.e. the intertwinedness of our different sensory organs). As Sobchack writes, we "are, in fact, all synaesthetes—and thus seeing a movie can also be an experience of touching, tasting, and smelling it."[79] Sight is inextricably bound up with the other senses and thus the viewing of a film stimulates these other modalities to varying degrees. Sobchack's account of embodied spectatorship rests on an idea of the unity of the senses—the fact that each sensory domain cannot be dissociated from the others, thus opening up the possibility for film to stimulate other sensory modalities through sight and hearing.

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[76] Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts,* 76.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Sobchack, 77.
[79] Sobchack, 70.

Second, Sobchack's model is based on the premise that a film offers stable, recognizable objects or figures that we attempt to grasp with our entire sensorium. This is true even in the case of the example that the essay's title references. Campion's *The Piano* opens with a seemingly abstract image—blotches of pink and red cover the screen. The second image—a reverse shot of the first—reveals that the opening image was the first-person perspective of a woman covering her eyes. Sobchack, in her account of watching *The Piano*, writes that before the reverse-shot she had already sensually grasped and comprehended the image. In her words, Sobchack's "fingers *comprehended* that image, *grasped* it with a nearly imperceptible tingle of attention and anticipation and, offscreen, "felt themselves" as a potentiality in the subjective and fleshy situation figured onscreen."[80] Even in the presence of what might be called a non-figurative image, Sobchack's account of sensation here is nevertheless predicated on a model of recognition: her body responds to the opening image because it recognizes what holding one's fingers in front of their eyes feels like (bodily experience is "informed by the full history and carnal knowledge of our acculturated sensorium,"[81] even if conscious thought takes longer to catch up. In Sobchack's discussion of sensation and film, we make sense (literally) of movies by responding to recognizable objects on screen through an embodied intelligence that has been formed by our lived experience.

II.

Laura U. Marks' account of embodied spectatorship, on the other hand, looks to the materiality of the image (rather than its represented figures). In the third chapter of her book *The Skin of the Film*, Marks elaborates what she calls "haptic visuality." Opposed to "optical visuality," which relies on a certain separation between viewer and gazed-upon object, haptic visuality requires the viewer's eyes "function like organs of touch…[moving] over the

[80] Sobchack, 63.
[81] Sobchack, 63.

surface of its object…not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture."[82] For a haptic image to emerge, for Marks, the image must enter into a kind of formlessness (though Marks does not herself use this word). The separation between figure and ground becomes indistinct or indiscernible, creating a textured surface rather than a space to penetrate in depth. The viewer is "more inclined to move than to focus, more inclined to graze than to gaze."[83] In the absence of clear and distinguishable forms, haptic images encourage the viewer to "resort to other senses, such as touch, in order to perceive the image."[84] The image evades the mastering gaze of optical vision, requiring one to approach it with different senses—ones that imply a more intersubjective, yielding relationship to the image.

Like Sobchack, Marks emphasizes the original synesthetic unity of our senses that enables us to have a multi-sensory experience of cinema. Taking after Merleau-Ponty, Marks poses that a synesthetic relationship to the world is fundamental to our everyday experience. In the cinematic image, "multisensory experience is condensed into visual form. It does not vanish but is translated into the image."[85] Cinema spectatorship is thus necessarily multi-sensory. In viewing an image, we complete it by searching in our "own circuits of sense memory."[86] Even moreso than Sobchack, Marks emphasizes the role of memory in our multi-sensory experience of cinema. Perception, for Marks, is inextricably linked to the embodied nature of memory. Here, she follows Henri Bergson's conception of memory as "actualized in bodily sensations, and correspondingly…not simply a mental but an embodied process." When one perceives an image (in the Bergsonian sense: as what is isolated by the perceiver's "interested perception"), what

[82] Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), 162.
[83] Marks, *The Skin of the Film,* 162.
[84] Marks, 159.
[85] Marks, 214.
[86] Marks, 212-213.

one perceives is necessarily informed and constituted by one's entire sensorium. It is always multi-sensory, "comprising all the information that one's senses perceive about an object."[87] If, as Marks claims, all sense perception requires "the mediation of memory" then the "audiovisual image necessarily evokes other sense memories."[88] We see something on screen and then, having recognized it in some sense, have our other sensory modalities stimulated by virtue of their interconnection in our bodily memory.

Sobchack and Marks have been selected here because they offer two of the most thoughtful and thorough accounts available of thinking about sensation and cinema. They have not been invoked in order to be dismissed, but rather to serve as a counterpoint to the alternative (though not incompatible) account of cinema and sensation that will be offered here. Insofar as Grandrieux's work, as I have argued, powerfully draws on some of cinema's essential genetic elements, it provides an opportunity to begin thinking about sensation and cinema in some new ways.

III.

A moment late in *La Vie Nouvelle* is instructive in emphasizing how the Grandrieux's cinema engages a dimension of sensation that is elided in Marks and Sobchack's accounts. Late in the film, Seymour sits on a train after a frustrated attempt to buy Mélania. His head rests against the glass, the muted, brown landscape rolling behind him. His eyes close. What follows is perhaps the only instance of pure fantasy in Grandrieux's work. Mélania and Seymour's heads, bathed in a warm red light, fill the image. Seymour's head rests against the back of Mélania's neck, both of their eyes closed. Their heads quiver rapidly, at every moment filling the space in a different way. In the black that fills the rest of the image, street lights rush past. There is no sound to qualify that the couple are, for instance, on a motorcycle; rather, there is only

[87] Marks, 146.
[88] Marks, 147-148.

prolonged, ambient noise as these two faces whirl and vibrate. Seymour's at first impassive face becomes animated, even affectionate. He rubs his head against Mélania's neck, opening his mouth in elation.

Mélania vanishes; the image's rhythm intensifies. Seymour's head, now at the center of the image, fills the screen. No longer fully visible, it vibrates increasingly rapidly: blurring, smudging the image, vanishing in and out of the black, vacillating without pattern. A wide smile can be glimpsed on his face. For a moment, though the image is in such fluctuation that it appears like the briefest spark, Mélania smiles back at him—a vision that emerges from and immediately disappears back into this whirling flux of light and matter. The sequence ends with Seymour—the image's rhythm having stabilized—vibrating alone at the bottom of the screen. His head trembles against the entirely black background, his expression now one of stupor.

While an articulation of the sensory experience of this sequence (and so many others in Grandrieux's work) must come later, this moment provides the ground from which to diverge from the phenomenological theories of Sobchack and Marks. Marks' invocation of Bergson offers a useful lens through which to frame this divergence.

Peter Hallward, in his book *Out of This World: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Creation*, explicates Bergson's work as it is taken up in Deleuze's philosophy. Deleuze's ontology, Hallward writes is that "being is creation" and as such is "essentially differential," i.e. creative. Put another way, "Being is the inexhaustible proliferation of creatings or events of creation"[89] However creation, in Hallward's account, must be grasped as two parts: the *creating* and the *creature* that the creating spawns. Hallward reframes this distinction through two key terms of Bergson's (and Deleuze's) philosophy, the actual and the virtual:

[89] Hallward, *Out of this World,* 27.

> Both creatings and creatures are facets of a single order of creation. They both are in one and the same way. But their modality of being is different. Differentiated creatures are *actual,* extended and definite forms of being…Differentiatings or creatings are *virtual,* and are intensive rather than extensive. Creation is primordially and essentially self-differing, and its 'self-differentiation is the movement of a virtuality which actualizes itself.'"[90] In other words, the virtual is what constitutes the differential and creative force of life, whereas the actual is its determined, differentiated product—an effect "produced by the more profound game of difference."[91]

Sobchack and Marks, for our purposes here, are too concerned with the actual. Sobchack's account hinges on the notion that a film presents stable forms to be recognized and "sensually grasped." In her framework the viewer's (frustrated) intentionality streams towards extended, definite figures onscreen ("a sensible object"[92]). Marks' work is more complicated—and in fact has a rich account of "virtual images"—but her account of sensation is still very much tied to the actual (or rather, in her case, processes of actualization). For her, memory is actualized in bodily sensation. Later, when we perceive a cinematic image, our sense perception passes through "the mediation of memory." Our memory-images are reactivated—or actualized—in this moment of perception, stimulating our other sensory modalities in the act of viewing.[93] This approach emphasizes the actualization of the virtual. Grandrieux's cinema, on the other hand, is closer to Deleuze and Bergson's project: to "counter-actualize"[94] and attain insight into the virtual, creative nature of reality.

The moment just described from *La Vie Nouvelle*—which should not be taken as an exceptional moment, but one through which we approach Grandrieux's cinema as a whole—is intensive, not extensive. Its strange, fluctuating bodies do not present themselves for my (inevitably frustrated and rebounded) sensual grasp for there are no definite, extended forms for

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[90] Hallward, 27 (quoting Deleuze, *Desert Islands,* 40).
[91] Hallward, 28 (quoting Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition,* xix).
[92] Sobchack, 76.
[93] Marks, 147.
[94] Hallward, 35.

my intentionality to stream towards. Mélania and Seymour's faces continually become anew, vibrating, oscillating, and dissolving at every moment against a black background.

"Movement," Deleuze and Guattari write in *A Thousand Plateaus*, "is extensive…[It] designates the relative character of a body considered as "one" and which goes from point to point…" In the terms of *Difference and Repetition*, movement corresponds to static repetition. Each movement of the figure refers back to some common measure of identity. Speed, on the other hand, "is intensive…[it] constitutes the absolute character of a body whose irreducible parts (atoms) occupy or fill a smooth space in the manner of a vortex."[95] Grandrieux's images—as we see in this moment in *La Vie Nouvelle*—have intensive speed, not extended movement. Seymour's face becomes a whirling mass of matter and light, a self-differentiating substance that flickers and mutates from frame to frame. It does not appear as an extended body that moves through a defined space, but rather an unformed matter continually in the process of altering and forming: "an intensive assemblage…[comprised] of elements that are in constant flux, whose own qualities depend on the development of the set of the whole."[96] There is still a creature, to use Hallward's term—there is enough consistency to recognize Seymour throughout as every creating "gives rise to a certain kind of existent creature"[97] —but through the intensive speed with which the image differentiates, we experience the "movement of a virtuality actualizing itself."[98]

If Sobchack and Marks' accounts are too concentrated on the actual for our purposes, we need an account of sensation that can approach differentiation, rhythm, and intensity, constitutive as these are of Grandrieux's images. "Creatings present creatures," Hallward writes, "but are

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[95] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus,* 381.
[96] Hallward, 38.
[97] Hallward, 27.
[98] Gilles Deleuze, *Desert Islands and Other Texts 1963-1974* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Semiotext(e), 2004), 40.

never themselves presentable."[99] But perhaps this creating—this movement of life—can be experienced, felt on a bodily level. As Nietzsche writes, "If the senses show becoming, passing away, change, they do not lie…"[100]

Rhythm: A More Vital Power

To continue this line of thought towards the sensory experience of Grandrieux's cinema, we must turn to Gilles Deleuze's book on Francis Bacon, *The Logic of Sensation*—a book which Grandrieux holds as "really the book about cinema [Deleuze] wrote, much more than *The Time-Image* and *The Movement-Image.*"[101]

In a chapter titled "Painting and Sensation" Deleuze addresses the phenomenological account of sensation—later taken up by Marks and Sobchack—then pivots towards his own theory. Deleuze begins by posing that it "is the nature of sensation to envelop a constitutive difference of level, a plurality of constituting domains." In each of Bacon's paintings, he writes, a single sensation exists throughout all these different domains, enveloping them all. Deleuze then goes on to introduce and subsequently dismiss a number of hypotheses that might answer what these levels of sensation are and "what makes up their sensing or sensed unity."[102]

The final hypothesis offered by Deleuze he calls the more "phenomenological" hypothesis. It poses that the different levels of sensation are "domains of sensation that refer to the different sense organs…[with each having] a way of referring to the others, independently of the represented object they have in common." Bacon's paintings would stimulate, to varying degrees, the spectator's various sensory modalities ("a color, a taste, a touch," etc.) which would all coincide in "the moment of *the* sensation." This account of sensation resonates with those of

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[99] Hallward, 27.
[100] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols or How to Philosophize with a Hammer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 17.
[101] "Cinema is a back and forth."
[102] Deleuze, *Francis Bacon,* 33.

Marks and Sobchack who similarly focus on the stimulation of multiple sensory organs at the moment of viewing an image. Like Marks' proposition that watching a film is necessarily a multi-sensory experience "because the sense perceptions work in concert" and thus, because of our inherent mimetic and synesthetic relationship to the world, sight and sound involve our other sense organs, Deleuze's hypothetical experience involves "a kind of original unity of the senses," its content a "multisensible Figure [that appears] visually."[103]

After detailing the phenomenological hypothesis, Deleuze pivots towards his own theory of sensation. It is important to note that Deleuze does not, unlike the hypotheses that came before it, outright reject the phenomenological framework. Rather, it only does not go far enough. Likewise, I am not dismissing the importance of Marks' and Sobchack's accounts of sensation, nor claiming that they are irrelevant to discussions of Grandrieux's work. In fact their frameworks appear essential for approaching certain moments such as the cutting of Mélania's hair in *La Vie Nouvelle.* Rather, I think that they cannot quite grasp an essential dimension of cinema that Grandrieux seizes upon, one which is essential to thinking about sensation.

Here is what Deleuze has to say about the phenomenological hypothesis:

> But this operation is possible only if the sensation of a particular domain (here, the visual sensation) is in direct contact with a vital power that exceeds every domain and traverses them all. This power is Rhythm…What is ultimate is thus the relation between sensation and rhythm, which places in each sensation the levels and domains through which it passes.[104]

Rhythm, here, is posed as the ground of sensation. Deleuze does not do away with the phenomenological account of sensation that looks at the unity of the different sense organs. Rather, he poses that there is something beyond, something that holds the various levels of sensation together while traversing and enveloping them all: rhythm.

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[103] Deleuze, *Francis Bacon,* 37.
[104] Deleuze, *Francis Bacon,* 37.

By posing rhythm as the ground of sensation, Deleuze affirms that sensation's essential relationship lies not with forms to be recognized and "grasped" by the senses, but rather with forces that intensively act on the nervous system. Let us look at Deleuze's basic trajectory of sensation. For a sensation to exist, he writes, "a force must be exerted on the body." However—and here is the essential point—it is *not* the force that is sensed. Forces are, for Deleuze, necessarily insensible. Rather, the sensation gives "something completely different from the forces that condition it" while nevertheless "[making] us sense these insensible forces."[105]

We can think of this practically through the aforementioned moment in *La Vie Nouvelle.* The virtual—as a pure differentiating or creating—cannot be rendered visible in itself. Yet, insofar as we watch a visually sensible matter continually differentiate before our eyes, the force of a virtual becoming is sensed. Time, as Deleuze writes, is "nonsonorous and invisible,"[106] but art can provide a means through which to sense it by "capturing" it in matter. Elizabeth Grosz, in her book *Chaos, Territory, Art*, describes this operation as art extracting an imperceptible force and "[dressing] it in…sensible materials…in order to create a sensation, not a sensation of something, but pure intensity, a direct impact upon the body's nerves and organs."[107] Sensation is not about grasping forms—actualized, extended objects—but of sensing forces. For Deleuze, it is not a matter of the actual or actualization (as Sobchack and Marks have it), but of a counter-actualization[108] that opens the body onto the virtual. Art renders sensible forces that are insensible in our actual experience. It opens us onto what Deleuze calls non-human becomings: it creates a zone of indiscernibility between our body and the forces that traverse, exceed, and actualize it—in other words the virtual, the dimension of creating as such.

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[105] Deleuze, *Francis Bacon,* 48.
[106] Ibid.
[107] Elizabeth, Grosz. *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 22.
[108] Hallward, 106.

If Deleuze poses rhythm as the ground of sensation, it is because rhythm introduces a consistency to these forces—it renders them sensible while retaining their essential creativity. In the previous chapter, we saw that rhythm involves a continual movement of differentiation that nevertheless retains a certain internal consistency—"implied vibrations, periodic repetitions of components."[109] Art does not completely actualize the virtual (which would render it insensible), but rather captures its differentiating/creating force in a matter through which it can be sensed.

Grandrieux's cinema is intimately concerned with the problem of, as Deleuze writes, not "reproducing or inventing forms, but of capturing forces."[110] His images present the world as in a continual movement of differentiation and creation, a vision in which forms are continually differing from themselves in time. If Grandrieux manages to render forces visible, to bring the vital movement of rhythm to the surface of the image, we must think of how these images are received by the spectator. How do Grandrieux's fluctuating bodies act on us? What can account for their strangely formidable presence and corporeality, despite their continual dissolution and reformation? Perhaps the lack (in my mind) of adequate accounts of the sensory experience of Grandrieux's work arises from a dearth of conceptual vocabulary to discuss sensation in terms of rhythm and intensity, in terms that can envision the holistic bodily experience of cinema described in Grandrieux's essay. However, to get at this aspect of Grandrieux's filmmaking, we need only follow his cue and go back to the world of the *infans*.

The Vision of the *Infans*

"The little baby, in the first weeks is very very powerful, it was for me an incredible adventure to look at my children at the beginning of their life, how they were looking…They were totally inside the sensation of what was happening and they couldn't say something about it" **– Philippe Grandrieux**[111]

[109] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus,* 314.
[110] Deleuze, *Francis Bacon,* 48.
[111] "Cinema is a back and forth."

I.

In his interviews and writings Grandrieux repeatedly situates his work as an attempt to attain the vision of the child. In his essay "About the 'insane horizon' of cinema," Grandrieux illustrates his vision of cinema through a vision of a child who stands before a "vibrating, silent image." The child, or *infans*, Grandrieux writes

> is the one who doesn't speak, who stands aside from social conventions, in front of the chaos, outside language, of sense, without distance…swept away by sensation…[112]

This figure of the child recurs in a later interview with Nicole Brenez. The desire that led to the creation of *La Vie Nouvelle*, Grandrieux states, was to make a film composed of a "constant vibration of emotions and affects…that would reunite us, reinscribe use into the material in which we're formed…our childhood. Before speech."[113] In both instances, the importance of the child for Grandrieux lies in its experience of the world "outside" or "before" language. Pre-linguistic experience, Grandrieux poses, allows a direct or unmediated relation to the world. There is an originary sensorial experience that language inhibits, driving a wedge between the infant and world. Grandrieux's cinema aims to attain this originary experience of sensation.

To articulate what this entails—and how Grandrieux's cinema achieves it—we must turn to Daniel Stern's book *The Interpersonal World of the Infant.* . A "working hypothesis about infants' subjective experience of their own social life,"[114] Stern's book explores the various "senses of self" (which does not refer to "knowledge of," but only simple awareness) that infants

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[112] "About the 'insane horizon'"
[113] Philippe Grandrieux qtd. in Brenez, "The Body's Night"
[114] Daniel Stern, *The Interpersonal World of the Infant: A View from Psychoanalysis and Developmental Psychology* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 4.

develop from birth to age two. Stern appears especially relevant here for his study of the pre-verbal sense of self that exist "long prior to self-awareness and language."[115]

In an interview with Lorenzo Baldassari, Grandrieux cites a moment in Deleuze and Guattari's *What is Philosophy* in which they write of how artists work "to let in a bit of free and windy chaos"[116] that we normally protect ourselves from. In our experience of such art, Grandrieux says, "we are very close to the little child, not the child, to the little baby."[117] Grandrieux, according to Stern's hypotheses, is not being fanciful here. As Guattari notes, part of the originality of Stern's approach is his insight that the pre-verbal senses of self (the emergent, core, and subjective self) are "not at all a matter of 'stages' in the Freudian sense, but of levels of subjectivation which maintain themselves in parallel throughout life."[118] In other words, the immersion into language that occurs in the "verbal self" does not replace the previous stages, but rather functions parallel to them. Those senses of self that existed before language continue to inform our experience, even in adulthood.

Our interest here is in Stern's account of the "emergent self," the first sense of self experienced by the infant. This is the age that Grandrieux is particularly interested in: "…the eyes of a baby, the first weeks of the human being, the first months maybe, but not too much."[119] For Stern, this is the "fundamental domain of human subjectivity…the experiential matrix from which thoughts and perceived forms and identifiable acts and verbalized feelings will later arise." It is also "the ultimate reservoir that can be dipped into for all creative experience."[120]

II.

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[115] Stern, *The Interpersonal World of the Infant,* 6.
[116] Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?,* 203.
[117] "Cinema is a back and forth."
[118] Félix Guattari, *Chaosmosis* (Sydney: Power Publications, 1995), 6.
[119] "Cinema is a back and forth"
[120] Stern, 67.

How does the infant encounter the world before the intermediary of language and representation imposes itself? The infant's emergent sense of self is its experience of the process of organizing its experiences. In this form of self, the infant creates relations "between previously unrelated events," "forms partial organizations" and "[consolidates] sensorimotor schemas."[121] It should be emphasized that this process of *composition* occurs without any overarching principle of organization or development. Contra traditional accounts of infancy, Stern poses that infants cannot experience undifferentiation or non-organization. Rather, the infant has many separate experiences that may exist with "exquisite clarity and vividness"[122] It cannot experience non-organization as this notion requires an external, adult observer's comparison between the "differentiated" experience of the adolescent and the relatively "undifferentiated" experience of the infant. No, rather the infant experiences a "coming-into-being of organization"[123] as it learns about the relations between its different sensory experiences.

Being outside language, the infant lacks any transcendent conception of identity through which to group its experiences. Each sensation is experienced in its singularity. However, the infant is not at all "lost at sea in a wash of abstractable qualities of experience."[124] Rather it is continually involved in the process of introducing a *consistency* between these elements of experience. It composes, forming relations that are immanent to its sensory experience of the world (rather than guided by a representative intermediary).

We are quite close here to the account of Grandrieux's images given in the first chapter. Raymond Bellour, in his essay "Going to the Cinema with Félix Guattari and Daniel Stern,"

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[121] Stern, 45.
[122] Stern, 46.
[123] Stern, 45.
[124] Stern, 67.

usefully draws a connection between this aspect of Stern's emergent self and our experience of the cinema. Bellour reads *The Interpersonal World of the Infant* as "an analogy for the ontological, perceptual, and environmental reality" of the cinema "*where the world is composed and re-composed…in view of learning of something new in relation to which minimal regularities are felt.*"[125] As was previously discussed, Grandrieux's work powerfully draws upon this composing and re-composing of the world that is constitutive of cinema, emphasizing the continual movement of differentiation mentioned by Bellour.

Without rehashing arguments, we could return to the murder scene in *Sombre* described in the first chapter. In this sequence, which takes place in near pitch-black, never are we presented with an image of either Jean or his victim's whole, extended body. Rather, different fragments of their bodies continually appear from and disappear into the darkness. Their figures are constituted piecemeal moment-to-moment, without any determined pattern or movement towards their eventual revelation. The image constitutes them at every moment; they are actualized in a continual movement of difference behind which the sequence provides nothing (no image that shows them in full, revealing an identity that lies behind each variation). Yet, we do not experience this moment as chaos or undifferentiation. Rather, like the infant, we "yoke" these disparate visual sensations together due to an internal consistency ("implied vibrations, periodic repetitions of components"[126]) that exists between them.

So far we have only emphasized the confluence between the infant's experience and the vision Grandrieux's images give of the world. In Stern, the emergent self involves a particular kind of sensory experience. Given the resonance between Grandrieux's cinema and Stern's

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[125] Raymond Bellour, "Going to the Cinema with Félix Guattari and Daniel Stern." In *The Guattari Effect*, edited by Éric Alliez and Andrew Goffey (New York; London: Continuum, 2011), 223-224. Emphasis mine.

[126] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus,* 314.

infant, this account of sensation provides special insight into how Grandrieux's images are experienced on the body.

III.

The emergent self's linking or "yoking" of sensations occurs through what Stern calls *amodal perception*. Infants, in Stern's account "experience a world of perceptual unity." They do not experience phenomena as confined to one sensory domain or another, but rather have a more "global," abstract relation to things. Information received in one sensory modality is not experienced as belonging to that modality, but rather "transcends mode or channel and exists in some unknown supra-modal form." The infant does not experience "sights and sounds and touches and nameable objects."[127] Rather, "sensations, perceptions, actions, cognitions, [etc.]…[are experienced] *directly* in terms of intensities, shapes, temporal patterns…"[128] Sensation, for the infant, is neither restricted to any particular sensory modality nor experienced in a kind of synesthetic unity of the senses. Rather, its experience is *amodal*—an experience of rhythm, forming, and intensity that exceeds its articulation in whatever sensory organ through which the event is received.

Since the infant is without language (and thus cannot qualify its experience) it does not experience a sensation as an (visual, sonorous, haptic, etc.) encounter with an identifiable, defined object, but rather as a certain amodal experience of rhythm, intensity, and form. As Deleuze writes of the body without organs, sensation here is "not qualitative and qualified, but has only an intensive reality, which no longer determines within itself representative elements, but allotropic variations."[129] There is no representation ("I am *looking* at a _____"), only direct action upon the infant's nervous system.

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[127] Stern, 51.
[128] Stern, 67. Emphasis mine.
[129] Deleuze, *Francis Bacon,* 39.

Amodal perception provides the conditions of possibility for what Stern calls "vitality affects." Vitality affects are, as Raymond Bellour clarifies, actualizations of the emergent self's capacity of amodal perception. In other words, they are the affects created by certain configurations of rhythm, intensity, and form. Just as amodal perception involves sensory experience that lies outside of any particular modality, vitality affects cannot be understood through traditional conceptions of affect (i.e. categorical affects). Rather than fit within discrete categories of affect such as anger, fear, disgust, etc., vitality affects are "better captured by dynamic, kinetic terms, such as "surging," "fading away," "fleeting," "explosive," "crescendo," "decrescendo," "bursting," "drawn out," and so on."[130] Crucially, vitality affects involve a different relationship to time than categorical affects. Whereas categorical affects are often explained in terms of "level of activation"—e.g. the affect of disgust might be "activated" at the sight of vomit—vitality affects are rather "patterned changes over time" which Stern urges we understand "in terms of intensity of sensation as a function of time."[131] We experience them as a kind of movement within ourselves, not as a state switched on or off. To illustrate our experience of vitality affects in adult life Stern uses the example of abstract dance. Whereas in dance with some sort of narrative we would experience categorical affects (joy at the protagonist's triumph, fear at a villain's entrance, etc.), abstract dance is entirely composed of vitality affects. It expresses "a way of feeling, not a specific content of feeling."[132]

Grandrieux's work offers a panoply of vitality affects. For instance, to choose a less delirious moment than our examples so far, the final image of Claire in *Sombre.* A woman whispers a story of lost love on the soundtrack. Claire's head rests on her arms, folded on the table in front of her. The image is blurred, softening Claire's features in a haze. Behind her, there

[130] Stern, 54.
[131] Stern, 57.
[132] Stern, 56.

is only a large, uniform field of bluish grey. There are three movements in this scene. The woman's hushed voice—the only audible sound—narrates a brief affair with her childhood love. As the story grows increasingly intimate, ending with her lover's death, the woman's cadence slows, sounding increasingly on the verge of tears. She finishes her story—"And now no one will ever know him"—then grows quiet, leaving the final moments of the shot in silence. Claire, who rests in the image's first moments, slowly lifts her head and tilts it backwards, away from the camera, the whole while her eyes remaining closed. This motion fills the entire length of the shot, occurring in a kind of suspended time. As the woman's story reaches its end, her hair begins to gently tremble from an unknown breeze. Meanwhile the camera floats upwards into the blue field, away from Claire. Claire—rising with a look of utter serenity—occupies less and less of the frame until, at the shot's end, there is only a uniform blue screen. Each movement carries itself towards its own dissolution—the silence at the end of the story, Claire's withdrawal, the camera's rise into a pure field of color—all occurring simultaneously as the image develops.

Vitality affects arise through changes in time in terms of intensity. In this shot, we have three movements that express the vitality affect of "fading," "waning" or "dissolving." These vitality affects are expressed through both sonorous—the changing cadence and tenor of the woman's voice—and visual—the movement of Claire, the movement of the camera—sensations. Each movement expresses a similar *amodal* quality of form and rhythm—a slow, gentle movement of dissipation. Our visual and aural sensations of this image do not open onto other sensory modalities (our sense of touch, of smell, etc.), but rather to an amodal, intensive sensation of a forming (or dissolving) in time. We do not receive a sensation *of* something, but rather feel the "action of forces upon the body"—which Deleuze calls sensation (*LoS,* 40)—the

image's intensive movement of dissolution traced upon our nervous system, or as Steven Shaviro puts it

> a continuity between the physiological and affective responses of my own body and the appearances and disappearances, the mutations and perdurances, of the bodies and images on screen.[133]

Sensation, in this moment of *Sombre,* has nothing to do with the representation of a certain form (to be sensually *grasped*), but is rather intensive—a differentiating movement experienced directly and amodally.

IV.

Grandrieux's vision of cinema is that of the child who stands before a "vibrating, silent image…outside of language, of sense."[134] But we, of course, are no longer children. Stern argues that the sense of emergent self functions throughout our adult life (i.e. it is not done away with as we develop further senses of self, including the verbal self). It is like Deleuze and Guattari's body without organs: the intensive reality of the body that lies "adjacent to [the organism]"[135] or our lived body. But how is it impacted by the development of language?

Stern, on this matter, is quite close to Grandrieux whose interest in the infant comes from its fact of experiencing the world before "language, the word puts all this social distance between the sensation, the emotion and how we manage with this emotion."[136] Language, which emerges in what Stern calls the "verbal self," fractures the infant's amodal experience of the world. Words, Stern writes, "separate out precisely those properties that anchor the experience to a single modality of sensation…they isolate the experience from the amodal flux in which it was originally experienced." Language, in forcing an intermediary of representation between child

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[133] Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 255-256..
[134] "About the 'insane horizon'"
[135] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus,* 164.
[136] "Cinema is a back and forth"

and world, divides experience into discrete modalities of sensation (e.g. "*Look* at the *yellow* sunlight!"). Our global, amodal experience of intensity, rhythm, and form is lost (or rather "goes underground"), unable to be represented in language. It can reemerge, however, when "conditions suppress or outweigh the dominance of the linguistic vision." Stern offers three examples of such conditions, the final of which is "the perception of certain works of art that are designed to evoke experiences defying verbal categorization."[137] In the last chapter, it was argued that Grandrieux's cinema envisions the world outside of the confines of representation, which ascribes static identities to a world that is fundamentally becoming, actualizing itself in continual movement of differentiation. Insofar as this is true, Grandrieux's cinema returns us to the amodal experience of the infant. Without the intermediary of representation and language, sensation in Grandrieux's films is not qualified and representative, but rather impacts the nervous system directly and amodally. The world is experienced through vitality affects, as "dynamic shifts or patterned changes within ourselves."[138]

A Vital Cinema.

Let's now return to the sequence that closed out the previous chapter—Boyan and Mélania's dance in *La Vie Nouvelle.* Sensation, Deleuze writes,

> has one face turned toward the subject (the nervous system, vital movement…[etc.]), and one face turned toward the object (the "fact," the place, the event). Or rather, it has no faces at all, it is both things indissolubly…at one and the same time I *become* in the sensation and something *happens* through the sensation, one through the other, one in the other.[139]

To conclude this chapter I want to consider the sensation of this sequence, grasping its two (inseparable) faces of sensation—image and body—together.

I.

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[137] Stern, 176.
[138] Stern, 57.
[139] Deleuze, *Francis Bacon,* 31.

Throughout the dance Boyan directs Mélania like a puppet master with invisible strings, directing her with a rapid series of hand gestures. These gestures are only one of the many sources of movement throughout the sequence. Not only are the figures continually moving—circling each other, shaking their bodies, dancing around an indeterminate space—but so is the camera—which circles, trembles, and itself dances with the figures—and the image's focus, alternatively blurring and clearing throughout the sequence. The image is not characterized by movement in Deleuze and Guattari's sense of the word—as the extensive motion of discrete bodies through a homogeneous space—but speed: the intensive fluctuation of elements. With no common point of reference—either spatially or compositionally—Grandrieux's figures have speed, continually differentiating from themselves, unable to be fixed to a stable form or identity.

This speed, as we know, increases to an extreme degree in the sequence's apex. A final pirouette releases Mélania from spatio-temporal coordinates. Against an entirely black background, her head vibrates rapidly. It trembles and wavers at an extreme speed, appearing as a vibrating mass of light and matter. There is enough consistency such that the details of a body or face can be glimpsed, but these disappear as soon as they are seen, consumed in the impossible speed of the image. Watching this moment, one recalls Artaud's description of an inhuman reality in which "man with his customs and his character counts for very little." Perhaps even man's head, Artaud writes,

> would not be left to him if he were to confide himself to this reality—and even so it would have to be an absolutely stripped, malleable, and organic head, in which just enough formal matter would remain so that the principles might exert their effects within it in a completely physical way.[140]

This inhuman reality, described by Artaud and presented by Grandrieux, is that of the virtual: the intensive, differentiating flow of the real. In this moment in *La Vie Nouvelle* the actual—Mélania

[140] Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double* (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 49.

as an extended, determined organism—moves towards its dissolution in the virtual. Throughout the sequence, we glimpse aspects of Mélania—her face, the outline of her body—but they dissolve again and again into a differentiating flow of light and matter. Mélania, in her spasms and delirious vibrations, tends towards a "virtual, unformed body-potential."[141] Her actual body approaches its dissolution into the virtual, creative flow that is glimpsed beyond its imprisonment in the actual, erupting into the image as pure intensity.[142]

II.

How can I explain the strong sensation I experience in this scene? Whatever sensation(s) I feel are not experienced as an intensification of my sense of touch (or smell, or taste, etc.), as in Marks' and Sobchack's accounts. Why is this? This moment—as with most of Grandrieux's cinema—presents no stable forms my intentionality to stream towards. No figures solicit my sensual grasp (to use Sobchack's phrase) as they appear to continually become anew—vibrating, oscillating, and dissolving at every moment. As the image pulses and quivers, in no sense do I feel as if there is an object to be conceivably grasped. Laura U. Marks' account of haptic visuality, although it emphasizes the materiality of the image rather than its represented figures, cannot help us here either. "The viewing process," Marks writes, "reactivates a viewer's complex of memory-images at the same time that it creates the object for perception."[143] The image, upon perception, actualizes our memory-images and thus stimulates our entire sensorium (on account of memory's "[actualization] in bodily sensations"[144]). Marks' account, like Sobchack's, requires that there be an extended object to be sensually grasped.

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[141] Hallward, 98.
[142] For more on the virtual or "non-situated" body in Grandrieux's cinema, see Charmarette (2012).
[143] Marks, 147.
[144] Marks, 146.

This moment in *La Vie Nouvelle*—like most of Grandrieux's cinema—does not give us an "object for perception," which necessarily resides in the domain of the actual. As Deleuze and Guattari remind us, "Movements, becomings, in other words, pure relations of speed and slowness, pure affects, are below and above the threshold of perception." Virtual becoming, non-organic life, is "below and above" perception. What do we see in the image then? Or rather, how do we account for the presence of Mélania that persists throughout the image's transmutations? Deleuze and Guattari qualify that if becoming "is imperceptible by nature, it is so always in relation to a given threshold of perception, which is by nature relative and thus plays the role of a mediator." The plane of immanence, of composition, *can* in fact be perceived, yet only "at the same time as that which it composes or renders." [145] In other words the image must take on rhythm, in the sense explored in the previous chapter. Mélania, in this scene in *La Vie Nouvelle*, is not an object for perception—to be sensually grasped, to be perceived or "grazed"—but a rendering-visible of becoming, the mediator through which the intensive force of the virtual can be sensed. As Artaud writes, just enough "formal matter" of the head remains such that forces can "exert their effects…in a completely physical way."[146]

Our sensation of this scene is no longer determined by the *representation* of an object, but rather the differentiating movement of a force. We enter into what Daniel Stern calls amodal perception. That is, this sequence is not received as a specifically visual or aural sensation, nor does it stimulate other sensory modalities. Rather, Boyan and Mélania's dance is experienced in terms of the amodal qualities of rhythm, intensity, and form. Deleuze puts it similarly: the eye is liberated from "its character as a fixed and qualified organ" to virtually become a "polyvalent

[145] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus,* 281.
[146] Artaud, *Theater and its Double,* 49.

indeterminate organ."[147] Mélania's head vibrates across the screen, vacillating rapidly: a form composing and decomposing itself at a rapid rhythm. The rhythm of the image is not "seen" (or touched), but rather directly experienced on an amodal, bodily level as a vitality affect. Vitality affects, Stern writes, are felt as "shifts or patterned changes within ourselves."[148] The rhythm of the image is doubled in our body, the intensive force of the virtual directly impacting our nervous system.

III.

In the anecdote that opened this chapter, I recalled a comment that a friend made after watching *La Vie Nouvelle.* Although Grandrieux's film, considered in terms of narrative and figurative content, is unremittingly bleak, my friend left the film with a powerful sense of joy. Rather than feel disempowered or melancholic, he expressed how invigorated the film had left him, full of desire to create. I believe this feeling—shared by me and many others who have experienced Grandrieux's cinema—can partially be accounted for by the "vitality affects" of the films.

Perhaps a shift in terminology is needed: from "the virtual" to "life." The organism, Deleuze writes, "is not life, it is what imprisons life" (*LoS,* 40). The organism, in other words, belongs to the actual; it is only the staid product of a more fundamental creative power—the virtual—which Deleuze and Guattari alternatively call "non-organic life" or simply "life." "If everything is alive," they write, "it is not because everything is organic or organized but, on the contrary, because the organism is a diversion of life. In short, the life in question is inorganic, germinal, and intensive…"[149] The virtual is life—not biological life, but life as the creative force

[147] Deleuze, *Francis Bacon,* 45.
[148] Stern, 57.
[149] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus,* 499.

of becoming which at once constitutes the actual and traverses it, sweeping it way in an impersonal creating.

"At one and the same time," Deleuze writes, "I *become* in the sensation and something *happens* through the sensation, one through the other, one in the other."[150] Something happens through the sensation, an event. The image disarticulates Mélania from an actual, defined organism into a vortex of matter and light, composed of "axes and vectors, gradients, zones, kinematic movements, and dynamic tendencies, in relation to which forms are contingent or accessory."[151] A whole non-organic life reveals itself beyond or before the organism: an intensive force that moves through, forms, and deforms Mélania. I become in the sensation. I experience the speed of this sequence—an intensive movement of forming and deforming—amodally, that is, "directly in terms of intensities, shapes, temporal patterns."[152] The intensive movement of the image is doubled in my body, as so many "dynamic shifts" on my nervous system. Sensation is no longer qualified—as representing an object—but intensive. My body opens onto the virtual force of non-organic life that Grandrieux's images make sensible. The vitality affects here are just that, feelings of vitality—in Deleuze and Guattari's sense—that arise from this direct, bodily experience. We touch the creative movement of life, expressed as a "trait, flow or impulse traversing"[153] both the image and our physiology.

[150] Deleuze, *Francis Bacon,* 31.
[151] Deleuze, Francis Bacon, 39.
[152] Stern, 67.
[153] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus,* 499.

CHAPTER III

The Living.

A crowd of bodies stands motionless in the dark. When *La Vie Nouvelle* begins, they are only visible as faint smudges on an entirely dark image. Trembling, the image quickly draws closer until it fixates on the faces of these strange figures standing in the black. Each face, caught in the vibrating image, stares transfixed at something in front of them. One figure, an old woman, cries, though not out of any emotion we might recognize. There is no reverse-shot; the throng of people, huddled together in the darkness, gaze spellbound at something behind the image. The camera continually presses up against the crowd, almost colliding with them, but never rotates. *La Vie Nouvelle* begins with this act of witnessing: an anonymous people staring out at something insensible and undefined.

Deleuze, writing of Bacon's screaming figures, addresses the paintings' lack of a referent for the figures' horror. Bacon paints the scream, but not the horror at which the figures' presumably scream. In Bacon's paintings, the scream is disconnected from any defined, representable object that it would serve as a reaction to. In doing so, Deleuze writes, Bacon "establishes a relationship between the visibility of the scream…and invisible forces, which are nothing other than the forces of the future."[154] His images couple together the visible, "perceptible force of the scream and the imperceptible force that makes one scream."[155] Here, in the beginning of *La Vie Nouvelle*, we have a similar image that couples the perceptible force of the gaze with some imperceptible force that provokes the crowd's gaze in all its enigma. What are these forces that Grandrieux gestures towards in his film's first moments, which remain insensible and invisible yet pull this huddled mass forward as if hypnotized? It's a question that

[154] Deleuze, *Francis Bacon,* 51.
[155] Deleuze, *Francis Bacon,* 52.

can only be returned to in the film's final moments, which answer and intensify the opening, folding back with a new vigor.

This chapter concerns the image of "life" given by *La Vie Nouvelle.* The word has been seized upon because of its ambiguity, both in terms of the work (what is the *vie nouvelle*, the new life, in the film?), but also in the various treatments the concept has received in contemporary philosophy from Deleuze to Agamben. In centering this discussion of *La Vie Nouvelle* on the concept of life, the hope is to broaden the two previous chapters' focus on the *vitality* of Grandrieux's images in general by looking at the specific problems of life raised by Grandrieux's remarkable second film.

The New Life.

But a collective nightmare, in no sense just some tiny, private reverie – part of the effective nightmare into which we have all been plunged since revolutionary ideas revealed their non-viable character and left the world without the slightest hope, cast into a ruin not only material but also moral. **– Nicole Brenez**[156]

I.

A first, general definition of life—a first answer to what the "new life" of the film's title refers to—could be its meaning as a state of collective existence (in the sense that one might refer to "life under the Soviet Union"). In an interview, Grandrieux mentions that the film's screenwriter—Eric Vuillard—sent Grandrieux "a very beautiful note where he suggested the film should be 'a documentary on the living.'"[157] The phrase necessarily reintroduces all sorts of ambiguities into our definition, but we can take it as a starting point to address this first figure of life: what is it to live at this point in time, at the very beginning of the 21st century (*La Vie Nouvelle* was released in 2002)?

[156] Brenez, "The Body's Night"
[157] Philippe Grandrieux qtd. in Brenez, "The Body's Night"

What is the setting of *La Vie Nouvelle*? Although some (Adrian Martin, Nicole Brenez, etc.) describe Grandrieux's film as taking place in post-conflict Sarajevo—not without reason, as Grandrieux had, six years earlier, filmed the documentary *Return to Sarajevo*, as well as stated that the film's origin emerged from his time in the city[158]—its status in the film is much more indeterminate. In the English preface to *Cinema 2*, Deleuze describes post-war spaces as "'any spaces whatever', deserted but inhabited, disused warehouses, waste ground, cities in the course of demolition or reconstruction."[159] These spaces are at once historically determined—arising in the wake of massive conflict (for Deleuze, World War II)—and indeterminate, expressing affects that exist "independently of the state of things or mileux which actualize them."[160] Deleuze's any-spaces-whatever emerge in a particular historical situation, yet express something not determined or actualized in one particular set of affairs. They are defined by "a richness in potentials or singularities which are, as it were, prior conditions of all actualization, all determination"—not, as Deleuze cautions, "an abstract universal,"[161] but as the set of singularities that present a thing "as it is itself, pure power or quality which combines without abstraction all possible" things.[162]

These comments clarify the space Grandrieux presents in *La Vie Nouvelle.* Although much of the film—as is characteristic of Grandrieux's work—occurs in close-up, with figures wrestling, fucking, dancing, etc. with only blocks of color or shadow surrounding them, images of a barren urban landscape feature strongly throughout. Early in the film, we witness a scene of human trafficking. A group of naked men and women stand side by side, staring dead-eyed at the

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[158] Nicole Brenez: What were your starting points?
Philippe Grandrieux: Once, during a journey to Sofia in Sarajevo, I saw a young G.I. with a young prostitute in a hotel. Their youth fascinated me – intact despite the chaos and disaster that reigned in Eastern Europe… (Brenez, "The Body's Night").
[159] Deleuze, *Cinema 2,* xi.
[160] Deleuze, *Cinema 1,* 120.
[161] Deleuze, *Cinema 1,* 109.
[162] Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 111.

floor, while Boyan shows them off for purchase. He runs his hands over them, stroking their arms and callously pushing their heads—gestures that provoke no reaction. Immediately preceding this moment, Grandrieux presents an image of the space in which the grim transaction occurs. An abandoned building stands in the center of the frame. Several of its walls—and perhaps even parts of its ceiling—are missing. Rubble surrounds the structure, although the image is too blurry for one to make out any specifics besides their generic character as debris. There is no diegetic sound that might grant this image a spatio-temporal specificity that might make up for the fuzzy indeterminacy of the image. Rather Étant Donnés's menacing, ambient score plays. This moment is chosen for its precise interior-exterior dynamic—the indeterminate, decrepit structure that houses an uncomfortably vivid scene of human trafficking—yet this relation persists throughout *La Vie Nouvelle.* In exterior shots, we glimpse a grey and desolate urban landscape, one with a great similarity to the numerous images of bombed out, crumbling cities that recur on the news.[163]

Just as Deleuze's any-spaces-whatever are at once spaces produced by specific historical circumstances and expressions of singularities or potentialities that exist before any actualization, so does Grandrieux's city in *La Vie Nouvelle* form a strange, indefinite relationship to Sarajevo (or perhaps more broadly any of the cities affected in the Balkans conflicts). The desolate cityscape, along with the accent of the local mafia, roughly situates the film as taking place in one of those countries associated with the Balkans conflicts. So much so that several critics refer to *La Vie Nouvelle* as set in Sarajevo, despite the film's own lack of specificity. The seemingly-deserted, urban wasteland of the film is thus, as Deleuze ties the any-spaces-whatever he

[163] Martine Beugnet mentions an essay (at this moment untranslated) by Raymond Bellour in which he "relates Grandrieux's work to the endless multiplication of images and sounds of destruction that fill our daily lives" (Beugnet, 118).

discusses to the aftermath of World War II, situated at a particular historical conjuncture: the aftermath of the massive conflict and ethnic-cleansing that closed out the 20th century.

Yet the film's locale is never specified—either in dialogue or the image (through landmarks, characteristics of a specific city, etc.)—such that it becomes an actualized space-time. *La Vie Nouvelle*'s city is not at all an image of a universal city—its resonances with the Balkans give it a determinedly historical character—but rather a set of "pure singular qualities,"[164] expressed in themselves, outside of actualization in a determined milieu. We are speaking here of landscape, but a similar comment could be made about the film's characters whose roles and relationships vis-à-vis each other remain indeterminate throughout the entire film.

What singular quality does *La Vie Nouvelle*'s setting express? Perhaps *the* most striking moment of the film, besides the later thermal camera sequence, is a shot of the city's bleak landscape. This moment occurs after a scene of horror: Mélania meets her second client of the evening in his hotel room. After undressing them both, the client brutally assaults her, beating Mélania with his fists as she screams. Having reached some obscure satisfaction, he then reclines on his couch, masturbating as he softly sings to himself. Mélania gathers her clothes and steps out into the corridor of the hotel, leaving the man alone—now only a splotch in the blurred image—to slowly masturbate. The following shot begins in the corridor of the hotel, facing a window that lies at the hallway's end. At its beginning, the walls of the corridor comprise the majority of the image with the "bare window that cuts through the wall, centre-frame, in the distance."[165] In the window—a perfect square—is framed *La Vie Nouvelle*'s unnamed city. Slowly the image tracks towards the window. The walls of the corridor disappear as the

[164] Deleuze, *Cinema 1,* 102.
[165] Beugnet, 114.

cityscape comes to occupy more and more of the frame. Finally, the walls recede from the sides of the image: the window comes to coincide with the frame; the cityscape fills the entire image.

It is a completely desolate view. High-rise buildings intersect with long, horizontal apartment blocks, all in an apparent state of decrepitude and ruin. The predominant colors are dim greys and browns; even the sky appears muted, sapped of life. It appears less as a living city than as ruins; one of the buildings looks as if it is even covered in cobwebs, the long-empty husk of an apartment building.

A strange geometry is at work here. What immediately stands out from this urban landscape are the numerous dark squares which checker the image as windows that cover nearly every surface of the various buildings. Or, as Martine Beugnet so powerfully puts it, "an endless layering of tall concrete buildings that seem to return the gaze of the camera with the dead stare of countless rows of blind windows puncturing their dismal grey facades."[166] As the square of the hotel's window draws closer and closer, approaching the borders of the frame, so do the numerous little windows of the city come to more and more fill the image, multiplying as the camera continues to track down the corridor. Only as the hotel window fills the frame do we see them all—a thousand little other windows of the city that stare back at us.

This moment is not only a view, but also a reflection. The shot opens onto a view of the ruinous city, but simultaneously reflects or situates what has come before it—the client's violence against Mélania—within this landscape, as occurring in one of the many dark windows that checker the barren cityscape. As Grandrieux says, as the landscape shot follows the violent encounter between Mélania and her client "there's a possibility of understanding that in each of these little windows the same story is happening."[167]

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[166] Ibid.
[167] Brenez, "The Body's Night"

Walter Benjamin, in his final essay "Theses on the Philosophy of History," famously invokes what he calls "the angel of history." Benjamin's angel faces the past, while "irresistibly [propelled] into the future to which his back is turned."[168] For the angel, where humans perceive a progression of events that build on top of each other, he sees only "one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage…a pile of debris…[that] grows skyward."[169] Contra any image of any image of historical progress, Benjamin's figure of the angel invokes a conception of history as catastrophe, as a continual piling up of debris. History is grasped as a spatial image, as a palimpsest in which the wreckage of past and present co-exist in the image of a perpetually growing heap of refuse.

It is this affect—of catastrophe, disaster—that *La Vie Nouvelle*'s city expresses. As Nicole Brenez writes of this moment in Grandrieux's work,

> it is almost like a visual condensation of what has been written for a century on disaster as the very symbol of civilization. The urban landscape represents what is familiar in its pure state, except we have never also considered it at the same time catastrophic."[170]

La Vie Nouvelle's desolate city, glimpsed throughout the film but revealed here in its totality, presents this image of historical wreckage.

As we have seen, *La Vie Nouvelle* maintains a certain relationship to a historical moment—the ethnic conflicts in the Balkans. In this way its city does not appear as a timeless, universal, or fantasy setting, but rather in a particular historical conjuncture. Whereas Deleuze associates any-spaces-whatever with the aftermath of World War II, *La Vie Nouvelle* exists in the wake of the 20th century's last, most bloody conflict. On the other hand, in its indeterminacy *La Vie Nouvelle*'s city is less a determined setting than an any-space-whatever; it manifests a

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[168] Benjamin, *Illuminations,* 258.
[169] Benjamin, 257-258.
[170] Brenez, "The Body's Night"

"richness in potentials or singularities…prior conditions of all actualization, all determination."[171] That quality is of a desolate urbanity, of civilization as catastrophe—the sense that, as Benjamin poses with his figure of the angel of history, modernity should be grasped not as a narrative of progress, but a spatial image of disaster. *La Vie Nouvelle*'s city, in its indeterminacy, does not actualize this quality in a defined setting (in which it would perhaps appear as specifically a commentary on the state of the Balkans at the turn of the millennium). Rather this affect exists as a "pure singular [quality]," one which is actualized in all the images of devastation and ruin that have become commonplace images, but exists here in itself—singular, but not at all universal.

The tracking shot down the corridor—moving towards the window of the hotel to reveal the decrepit city, its many dark windows each holding the promise of containing their own violence—sets *La Vie Nouvelle* amid the wreckage of the 20th century. The war-torn cityscape's relationship to the Balkans situates the film at the turn of the millennium, yet it is not a film set in Sarajevo, or any other specific city. Rather, the landscape of post-war Balkans opens onto an any-space-whatever, expressing a quality of devastation which exceeds any one conflict: the sense that there has been no progress from the last hundred years, no birth of the greater civilization promised by modernity, communism, etc., only catastrophe after catastrophe. In this tracking shot, Nicole Brenez writes, we grasp *La Vie Nouvelle* as a "political film on the material, not sociological state of the world."[172] *La Vie Nouvelle* takes place among the ruins seen by Benjamin's angel, the wreckage of a century that ended with yet another genocide and war. This is the first meaning of the "new life" of the film's title: the new millennium as an experience of living within the ruins of the 20th century, the conception of historical progress

[171] Deleuze, *Cinema 1,* 109.
[172] Brenez, "The Body's Night"

having definitively lost its validity, and the intolerable having become "no longer a serious injustice, but the permanent state of a daily banality."[173] It is within this horizon that *La Vie Nouvelle* takes place.

II.

What relations between people are prevalent within this space? *La Vie Nouvelle'*s narrative—to the extent there is one—begins with the scene of human slavery mentioned above: a group of anonymous people, men and women, who are appraised and auctioned off. The first relation present in *La Vie Nouvelle* is that of humans treated as objects—abused and sold, robbed of their autonomy. "Bodies are objects in Grandrieux's films," Jenny Charmarette writes, "things are done to them…"[174] In *La Vie Nouvelle* this is true especially of Mélania, bought at the slave auction that opens the film. Throughout the film, Mélania is continually under the control of men: bought from Roscoe in order to be pimped, tortured by Boyan, beat by her client. Even in dancing—besides that brief moment of dissolution discussed earlier—she is under Boyan's thrall, him directing her movements in the manner of a puppet master.

Other forms of relation are not much rosier. Although it would be misleading to say that there is nothing resembling comradery or love in the entire film—Seymour's dream of Mélania, for instance—a sense of potential violence and destitution looms over much of *La Vie Nouvelle.* By the film's conclusion, Seymour has forsaken his friend—a slave trader—who is in turn betrayed by Boyan to be eaten alive by dogs. In the final moments of the film Seymour, alone and despairing, violently beats his sexual partner while yelling for her to "shut up". *La Vie*

[173] Deleuze, Cinema 2, 170.
[174] Jenny Charmarette, *Phenomenology and the Future of Film: Rethinking Subjectivity beyond French Cinema* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 222.

Nouvelle's world is cruel and immoral, evoking, as Nicole Brenez writes, a "war of all against all…a violence that occurs in every possible way to every possible person."[175]

Grandrieux's films are often been reproached for what is perceived as an aestheticization of this violence, especially in regards to women. James Quandt, in one article, decries the "bleary voyeurism" of Grandrieux's cinema, charging it as giving a "fashionista vision" of real world horror.[176] In a follow-up essay, he asserts that one can grasp the "morally stunted tenor" of *Sombre* and *La Vie Nouvelle* by reading an online exchange between two fans, one of which, speaking of Grandrieux, writes "You can never be too obsessed with killing prostitutes."[177] Grandrieux himself has addressed this question of his films' "morally stunted tenor":

> Those who reproach the film for its violence want to know a reason for that. But what kind of reason? It isn't a question that can be resolved on the level of a social or psychological morality, but a morality of forms.[178]

Here, Grandrieux states that he is in fact—as Quandt correctly charges—uninterested in social morality, i.e. in condemning (or validating for that matter) the often-gendered violence that characterizes *La Vie Nouvelle.* He instead emphasizes his films' aesthetics ("a morality of forms"), precisely what critics might find especially problematic given the lack of good moral content (e.g. the accusation of aestheticizing or celebrating violence). We must determine then, the relationship between *La Vie Nouvelle*'s figurative and narrative content—a parade of interpersonal violence and betrayal—and its aesthetics. In doing so, something more vital and important than morality emerges vis-à-vis the film's depicted horrors.

The sequence that follows the slave auction only amplifies the first scene's objectification. Boyan, having purchased Mélania, cuts her hair to his liking with a knife. This

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[175] Brenez, "The Body's Night"
[176] James Quandt, "Flesh and Blood," 22.
[177] James Quandt, "More Moralism from that 'Wordy Fuck,'" in *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe,* ed. Tanya Horeck & Tina Kendall (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 212.
[178] Philippe Grandrieux qtd. in Brenez, "The Body's Night"

moment, which lasts nearly five minutes, is nauseating in its unsettling mix of intimacy and brutality. There is a strange gentleness to Boyan's gestures—placing his forehead against the side of Mélania's head, at one moment almost cradling her in his arms—all while he remains completely impassive to her suffering. As he shears her hair away he maintains the same almost-amused facial expression, while Mélania flickers between expressions of dread, misery, and hatred. As Jenny Charmarette writes, though "no blood is shed, no body parts are maimed, an unflinching hand-held camera holds the pair in an extreme close-up…As he pulls the blade along each hair, the close-miked sound reveals an extraordinarily acute and nauseating grating of the blade."[179] Grandrieux allows absolutely no distance from the act—the camera hovers close to the two figures, while the soundtrack records with vivid clarity every cut of the blade, all the stuttered breaths, whimpers, and gasps emitted by Mélania throughout the ordeal.

In fact, although it is the gut-wrenching sound of knife cutting through hair that Charmarette and others most emphasize in this sequence, the most present sound is rather Mélania's breath which remains constant throughout. While Boyan shears her hair, Mélania's nervous exhales become increasingly rapid then fall back, break into groans and cries—differentiating in response to the cruelty of Boyan's gestures. As Boyan's actions dehumanize Mélania, treating her as a plaything to be sculpted by him, the soundtrack insists upon the pulse of her life—the presence of a life under threat that does not bend to Boyan's will, but resists even as Mélania herself is stripped of autonomy.

Here, starting from this moment in which we are confronted with what Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito calls life in its "vital, bare facticity,"[180] I would like to pivot from the notion of *the life*—the organic life of *La Vie Nouvelle*'s characters, perpetually at risk, but

[179] Charmarette, *Phenomenology*, 198.
[180] Roberto Esposito, *Bíos: Biopolitics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 192.

also the fact of living in the 21st century amid and within "a powerful organization of poverty and oppression"[181]—to the more indefinite, enigmatic idea of *a life.* For the "life" of *La Vie Nouvelle*'s title is not only our collective, historical condition, but also the germ of possibility for a new existence.

A Life.

Creatures can be separated, but something more profound links and keeps them together. – **Nicole Brenez**[182]

I.

In "a strange interval before his own death,"[183] Gilles Deleuze wrote a final essay titled "Immanence: A Life." In this small, cryptic work, Deleuze describes a plane of pure immanence. On this plane there are neither subjects nor objects; immanence does not refer to something outside itself nor is it "in" something, but rather "it is only when immanence is no longer immanence to anything other than itself that we can speak of a plane of immanence."[184] Deleuze gives this pure immanence another name: *a life.* "We will say of pure immanence," Deleuze writes, "that it is A LIFE, and nothing else. It is not immanence to life, but the immanent that is in itself a life."[185]

Deleuze articulates his notion of *a* life through the example of Charles Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend*. In Dickens' story an immensely disliked man named Riderhood, "held in contempt by everyone" lies on the verge of death. As he lies in a coma the community suddenly comes to his aid, expressing "an eagerness, respect, even love, for his slightest sign of life." Eventually Riderhood awakes from his coma, no longer in danger. Everyone immediately turns

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[181] Deleuze, *Cinema 2,* 20.
[182] Brenez, "The Body's Night"
[183] John Rajchman, introduction to *Pure Immanence: Essays on A Life,* by Gilles Deleuze (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 20.
[184] Deleuze, *Pure Immanence,* 27.
[185] Ibid.

back against him; he again becomes wicked and unpleasant. In the man's coma, as Riderhood trembled on the delicate line between life and death, the "life of the individual [gave] way to an impersonal and yet singular life."[186] The community, gathered around the man's body, witnesses not *the* life of their much-despised companion, but rather *a* life—indefinite, not attributable to him as a subject. The life of the individual gives way to a "singular essence, a life" with whom "everyone emphasizes."[187]

Deleuze takes care to emphasize that a life should not be confined only to such an encounter between an individual's life and "universal death." Rather "*A* life is everywhere…an immanent life carrying with it the events or singularities that are merely actualized in subjects and objects."[188] It is, as Jane Bennett puts it in her *Vibrant Matter,* an indeterminate vitality, a "restless activeness, a destructive-creative force-presence that does not coincide fully with any specific body. A life tears the fabric of the actual without every coming fully 'out' in a person, place or thing."[189] (*VM,* 54). It is this conception of life that is key to Deleuze's professed vitalism[190]: life as univocity, not confined to particular organisms or forms; life as universal differentiation and creation, with forms, organisms, etc. as so many indefinite actualizations of life's "singular creative force."[191] As Deleuze and Guattari write in the conclusion to *A Thousand Plateaus*, "not all Life is confined to the organic strata: rather, the organism is that which life sets against itself in order to limit itself, and there is a life all the more intense, all the more powerful for being anorganic."[192] In the Dickens example offered in "Immanence: A Life," the personalized individual temporarily gives way to "an impersonal and yet singular life." The

[186] Deleuze, *Pure Immanence,* 28.
[187] Deleuze, *Pure Immanence,* 29.
[188] Deleuze, *Pure Immanence,* 29.
[189] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 54.
[190] "Everything I have written is vitalistic, or at least I hope it is..." (Deleuze, *Negotiations*, 143)
[191] Hallward, 5.
[192] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus,* 503.

community no longer encounters *the* life of a discrete person, but rather *a* life—released from its particular incarnation in an individual—that flickers in a "pure event freed from the accidents of internal and external life"[193]

II.

The world of *La Vie Nouvelle* is one in which bodies are depersonalized and abused: stripped of agency and subjectivity, enslaved, violated, or killed. This tendency towards depersonalization is not confined to the narrative (i.e. the relations between characters), but is rather a major feature of the images themselves. Speaking of *La Vie Nouvelle*, Jenny Charmarette writes

> Bodies and faces are subject to continual attack, both diegetically, through cruelty, submission, commercial exchange, punishment and (sexual) penetration or invasion of body-space, and cinematically, through their always only partially revealed status.[194]

Charmarette here echoes Martine Beugnet's proposition that Grandrieux's films are animated by a *pull* towards the void or formlessness, with bodies continually dissolved into a state of undifferentiation. As the first chapter addressed this argument in depth, it will not be restated here. Rather, I want to focus on an exemplary moment of figurative dissolution in *La Vie Nouvelle* that will allow the points of the first and second chapter to be concretely articulated through this conception of *a* life (in its connection and divergence from *the* life[195]).

Close to the *La Vie Nouvelle's* end Seymour, after spending the bulk of the film attempting to find Mélania, the objection of his obsession, finally meets with Boyan to purchase her. Boyan stands at the bottom of a set of stairs, beckoning Seymour to descend with him. Waiting for Seymour to follow, Boyan strikes a strange, almost ritualistic pose, slowly twirling

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[193] Deleuze, *Pure Immanence,* 28.
[194] Charmarette, 197.
[195] Esposito, *Bíos,* 192.

with both of his hands raised. As Seymour walks down, Boyan's hand—held in close-up—dissolves into the darkness then reappears, blurred, moving in front of Seymour's face. He strokes Seymour, moving his hand across his face while Seymour's head hangs back, eyes closed. As the image darkens, with only a hint of skin visible, Boyan whispers into Seymour's ear, answering Seymour's earlier claim that he is looking for a "special girl": "All the girls are special." Boyan's face fills the image, fuzzy and indistinct. "Come." With that Boyan descends down a further flight of stairs into complete darkness, Seymour close behind.

For what follows, Grandrieux utilizes a thermal-imaging camera. The sequence is not constituted by the impression of light on film, but rather "heat, transformed into a scale of greys."[196] In complete darkness, grey bodies grope and stumble amongst each other. Some retain "in the blurred outline of familiar features, the disappearing traces of an identity,"[197] while others are more amorphous—a vaguely human-shaped smudge of grey light against the black. At times, the boundaries between bodies are uncertain or completely dissolved, the screen manifesting an anonymous grey matter that bustles and writhes. The figures begin to scream, first as a nearly-undifferentiated mass in which one can glimpse the tiniest outline of a mouth, then as a succession of faces that appear in close-up, screaming at the camera. The image quivers and vibrates, these more-defined visages blurring into a more unformed matter.

A figure that resembles Mélania appears on screen. She holds herself on top of another figure, chewing at his neck. It is impossible to distinguish where one body ends and the other begins; the action is only discernable through the dark splotches that constitute the figures' noses and hair. She chews a piece of flesh, torn from the other figure's neck, then climbs back onto the him, her back a shapeless white surface that black hands run across, the two figures held in a

[196] Beugnet, 88.
[197] Ibid.

violent, inscrutable embrace. Next, the Mélania-figure now crawls on her hands and knees; Seymour, still relatively distinguishable, watches transfixed. The only source of light in the image, the figure that walks on its hands and knees is barely distinguishable as human. It turns over on its back, slowly writhing on the floor. The sequence ends with a close-up of this figure's face, tilted back with its mouth open.

Martine Beugnet, in her account of this scene, notes its resonances with certain aspects of Deleuze's philosophy. Yet she qualifies that "it is difficult to equate [these images] with the positive, life-expanding dimension of Deleuze and Guattari's concepts."[198] It this challenge that I would like to take up, through the distinction between *the* new life that Grandrieux's film documents and *a* life—Deleuze's "indeterminate vitality,"[199] freed from "the accidents of internal and external life."[200]

III.

La Vie Nouvelle confronts what is intolerable in this world. For Grandrieux, this is not a matter of discrete acts of violence—individual instances of rape, exploitation, murder, etc.—but a larger condition. Jenny Charmarette cites a response Grandrieux gives to criticism of the "dehumanizing abjection" that human bodies undergo in his cinema: "I sincerely believe first and foremost that there is no such thing as an inhuman action, however monstrous it may be. Man is attached to his species."[201] *La Vie Nouvelle*—proposed as a "documentary on the living"—evokes the collective, unbearable situation in which we are all embedded. Its bodies are continually in peril: reduced to the status of objects, subject to the will of powerful forces (in

[198] Ibid.
[199] Bennett, 53.
[200] Deleuze, *Pure Immanence,* 28.
[201] Philippe Grandrieux qtd. in Charmarette, 220.

Brenez' words, "the incomprehensible logic of the Mafia"[202]). The film revolves around a particularly dark fact of our modern age—the use of women's bodies as objects of commerce in human trafficking (in 2010, the U.S. Department of State estimated 12.3 million slaves around the world[203])—but evokes a broader, collective condition of debasement at the beginning of the 21st century, vividly expressed in the thermal camera sequence.

This sequence constitutes the most intense expression of "the new life" presented by *La Vie Nouvelle*. In Grandrieux's inferno, barring a single image of Seymour in its final moments, we no longer have any characters to recognize or narratives to (attempt to) follow. Seymour and Boyan descend together into the dark, Seymour on a mission to claim his love, but it's not them that appear in this sequence. Instead we are confronted with an anonymous horde, less a group of individuals than a blurred mass. These bodies huddle together, moving aimlessly in a space with no orientation, pitch black in every direction. Walter Benjamin, in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama,* writes how, when narratives of progress falter, sequential temporality collapses into a spatial, figural image. This does not imply paralysis. Rather a certain movement of bodies comes to the foreground; "loss is registered as a certain motion of bodies…[a] moving, which has no direction and is motivated by no causality."[204] If the city of *La Vie Nouvelle* expresses an image of 21st century as standing in the rubble of the 20th—yet another genocide definitively invalidating any notion of historical progress—the thermic camera sequence shows its inhabitants: a mass wandering aimlessly without orientation, reduced to the bare fact of their bodies, screaming with anguish at where history has left them.

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[202] Brenez, "The Body's Night"
[203] "What is Human Trafficking?" CASE Act, accessed March 27, 2016, http://www.caseact.org/learn/humantrafficking/
[204] Judith Butler, "Afterword: After Loss, What Then?" in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning,* ed. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 469-470.

Furthermore, this scene culminates the violence that characterizes the world of *La Vie Nouvelle*. The film begins with the trafficking and selling of humans as slaves. The slave who is initially purchased, Mélania, is bought to be pimped by Boyan, who sculpts her body to his liking (cutting her hair) and sells it to those with enough money (even if the encounter is entirely abusive, as with her second client). People in *La Vie Nouvelle* are depersonalized, reduced to the bare fact of their body (which, in Mélania's case, becomes a unit of commerce). In the thermic camera sequence, which Beugnet describes as "a vision of ultimate abjection,"[205] the image incarnates such violence. The camera strips human figures of nearly all of their individual features, reducing them entirely to their vital facticity.

Narratively, this moment should have been a repetition of the earlier slave auction. Seymour enters this space to purchase Mélania from Boyan, who seems to promise an array of women to choose from ("all the girls are special"). Instead, we experience what could be described as an extreme manifestation of the logic of human slavery or, better, that moment's "originary world" which "exists and operates in the depths of [the] real milieu…the world which is revealed at the basis of the social milieu which are so powerfully described."[206] Seymour attempts to buy Mélania, but when he finds her she can no longer even said to be human, crawling on all fours with her features almost entirely erased. The thermic camera reduces her to the simple fact of being alive; any notion of subjectivity or individuality vanishes, leaving only a grey body behind.[207]

IV.

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[205] Beugnet, 88.
[206] Deleuze, *Cinema 1,* 125.
[207] The sequence has not a small figurative resonance with the 21st century fact of drone warfare: the reduction of humans to flickering lights on a screen, to be killed by people in offices continents away. Michael Haas, a former drone operator, describes how he was able to stomach his actions: "Ever step on ants and never give it another thought? That's what you are made to think of the targets – *as just black blobs on a screen.*" (Michael Haas qtd. in "Life as a drone operator: 'Ever step on ants and never give it another thought?," Ed Pikington, accessed March 27, 2016. http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/18/life-as-a-drone-pilot-creech-air-force-base-nevada

Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito concludes his 2004 book *Bíos* with a discussion of Deleuze's "Immanence: A Life." In his commentary, Esposito notes that the Dickens story cited by Deleuze "has not a little to do" with Nazi thanatopolitics. In Dickens' story, just as in the Nazi camps, the life of an individual is depersonalized, put "in direct contact with death." Yet, for Esposito this resonance is significant only insofar as Deleuze's account *reverses* (not opposes) what occurred in Nazi laboratories. There is "a fundamental difference that has to do with a change in orientation; no longer from life seemingly to death, but from death seemingly to a life in which Riderhood awakens."[208] Mélania never emerges from *La Vie Nouvelle*'s inferno; Grandrieux does not depict any "awakening" from her status as a disindividuated, flickering body. Are we left with an image of despair?

Martine Beugnet, in her reading of the thermic camera sequence, ultimately argues so. In this scene, as throughout Grandrieux's cinema, she emphasizes "the pull of the formless in its terrifying, Bataillean horror that this [scene] evokes – a reminder of film's powerful capacity to conjure up and then annihilate the human figure by swallowing it into the images' matter."[209] Again, I wonder whether it might be more productive to approach this moment of "chaos" in Grandrieux's cinema through Deleuze's notion of the plane of immanence, a plane

> upon which everything is given, upon which unformed elements and materials dance that are distinguished from one another only by their speed and that enter into this or that individuated assemblage depending on their connections, their relations of movement.[210]

On the plane of immanence, there is only one substance, with "everything that is *is* or rather acts as a modifying of this one substance."[211] While this conception of the world was presented as a major principle of Grandrieux's cinema in general, the aforementioned moment in *La Vie*

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[208] Esposito, 194.
[209] Beugnet, 88.
[210] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus,* 255.
[211] Hallward, 10.

Nouvelle brings it to its apex. Shot with a thermic camera, each image is constituted only by "the animal warmth of the bodies which imprints itself on the celluloid."[212] Each figure exists as the individuation of one matter—heat, figured here in variations of gray.

Furthermore, these bodies are continually transforming, dissolving and recomposing as what Deleuze and Guattari call unformed matter—here a gray substance that individuates into recognizably human figures and dissolves into amorphous, abstruse shapes. Again it must be stressed that Grandrieux does not picture "unformed matter"; it can only be gestured towards through its continual differentiation. On a plane of immanence, Deleuze writes, there "is no longer a form, but only relations of velocity between infinitesimal particles of an unformed material."[213] The unformed gray matter forms these bodies, but also involutes them, dissolving their individuality into a nearly undifferentiated mass.[214] It appears prior or perhaps underneath form and expression, the common substance that constitutes each body.

This substance is not at all abstract; rather, it is simply life. All that appears in the image only does so on account of a common fact of being alive. The thermic camera records the heat of living bodies; all else vanishes into the black. Each figure, whether screaming alone at the camera or embracing another, is situated on a common plane of life, which the image renders entirely synonymous with matter. Life here is not the biological life of bounded organisms, but rather "unformed matter, anorganic life"[215]—a "matter-energy"[216] that at once constitutes the common substance for all the different bodies and exceeds them, dissolving and creating them in a movement of continual variation. In the thermic camera's dissolution of the bodies it records, it

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[212] Philippe Grandrieux qtd. in Brenez, "The Body's Night"
[213] Deleuze, *Spinoza,* 128.
[214] Beugnet similarly notes "sense of 'becoming' in the way the transformations of the figures seems to occur as if an exchange of 'particles', through the mutation of their very 'molecular' make-up" (Beugnet, 88; quoting Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus,* 272).
[215] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus,* 503.
[216] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus,* 407.

reveals the presence of an immanent, indeterminate life that "does not coincide fully with any specific body."[217] The image is entirely alive, but life here is not confined to individual organisms. Rather, it is "a power of life…which matter now expresses as the trait, flow or impulse traversing"[218] the entire mass of bodies.

With this in mind, we need to reconsider the thermic camera sequence—or, more specifically, the significance of its final image. For Beugnet and Charmarette's accounts do not account for the scene's development. Yes, the bulk of the sequence is "a vision of ultimate abjection"[219]; a horde of screaming, monstrous bodies that express nothing but anguish, that evoke a common condition of despair. But this is not where the inferno ends.

In the final moments, Seymour discovers a figure that resembles Mélania. Yet, as many have noted, this figure appears less as Mélania than as a "part-animal, part-human,"[220] crawling on all fours. Its body—grey, indefinite—cannot be attributed to Mélania as a subject or organism, but rather appears only as a certain composition of the unformed, anorganic life-matter that constitutes the sequence. It does not behave "animalistically"[221]—i.e. Mélania does not "act" like an animal—but rather is dissolved into a "zone of indiscernibility or undecidability between man and animal…never a combination of forms, but rather the common fact: the common fact of man and animal."[222] This common fact here is, of course, life—a "matter-energy" that is not confined to any one organism.

The last image of the scene is of this figure's (for we can no longer ascribe it the identity of "Mélania") face held in close-up. Grey and white, it is unsexed and indefinite, a glowing face

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[217] Bennett, 54.
[218] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus,* 499.
[219] Beugnet, 88.
[220] Ibid.
[221] Charmarette, 209.
[222] Deleuze, *Francis Bacon,* 20.

made entirely of light. Its head tilts backwards, mouth open. Unlike those of the frightened, desperate horde that precedes it, this image conveys something between peace and ecstasy. The face floats in the black, totally at rest. Its open mouth gives the impression of orgasm or even ecstasy. Amid the low, rumbling noises that bathe the entire sequence we hear one final sound: not a scream, but a breath.

The life of the individual (Mélania) fully gives way to "a singular essence, a life."[223] No longer Mélania or anyone else; impersonal, yet singular. *La Vie Nouvelle* is no doubt a film of horrors, but in this moment Grandrieux gives us the gift of a perfectly innocent image: "a life of pure immanence, neutral, beyond good and evil, for it was only the subject that incarnated it in the midst of things that made it good or bad."[224] A life of pure immanence: this face no longer refers to Mélania, but must be "apprehended for itself, through that which it gives, in that which it gives"[225]; a completely impersonal face, composed from life itself. In the final moments of the inferno, as the Mélania-figure moves through a becoming-animal to this last shot, even Seymour (the only figure that might embed this sequence in a narrative) vanishes. The image, for a moment, "[releases] a pure event freed from…the subjectivity and objectivity of what happens"[226]—*a* life. The figure's mouth is open; not to scream in despair like the rest of the inferno's inhabitants, but to breathe. An image of "complete power, complete bliss"[227]: the pulse of a life.

Grandrieux, in the thermal camera sequence of *La Vie Nouvelle*, takes a certain logic of the modern world (as presented in his film) to its figural extreme: people depersonalized and

[223] Deleuze, *Pure Immanence,* 29.
[224] Ibid.
[225] Deleuze, *Spinoza,* 128.
[226] Deleuze, *Pure Immanence,* 28.
[227] Deleuze, *Pure Immanence,* 27.

reduced to their "vital, bare facticity,"[228] blobs on a screen that register only the fact of their being alive. Yet, in doing so, perhaps we emerge out on the other side. In the final image, *La Vie Nouvelle* reaches *a* body as "the germ of life"[229]: a completely impersonal, singular body that refers to nothing and signifies nothing outside itself, expressing only—in a breath—the movement of life.

[228] Esposito, 192.
[229] Deleuze, *Cinema 2,* 173.

CODA: A NEW LIFE.

To believe, not in a different world, but in a link between man and world, in love or life, to believe in this as in the impossible, the unthinkable, which none the less cannot but be thought: 'something possible, otherwise I will suffocate.' – **Gilles Deleuze**[230]

I.

Earlier this year, I had the opportunity to meet and interview Philippe Grandrieux. Midway through our interview, I began to ask a question about the "violence and abjection" in his films. Before I could finish my sentence, he cut in:

> Yes, but I think the main question is what you said: the vitality of the scenes and the energy that you put in the movie…The paradox is that even if the movies are sometimes very violent, very brutal, there's also always a kind of softness in them. A kind of possibility of love in a way. And that's very important, because otherwise it's not possible for me to do the movie…Vitality is very important…So it's nice to hear what you say to me [about] your friend, that after [watching *La Vie Nouvelle*] he wanted to compose. That's great because this is the power of art, you know, it's giving to you the strength to go…

Minutes later, I again tried to ask about the debasement and violence in his films (especially his most recent, *Malgré la nuit*—"Despite the Night"). Grandrieux replied that "through abjection you can access another possibility of being," citing Simone Weil. Having answered, his voice trailed off into silence. As I began to ask my next question he spoke again, correcting my line of questioning:

> But the main question, even if it seems very romantic to say…I think the most important question is love, in a way. I mean love in terms of the power of the movement, you know. In *La Vie Nouvelle* there is this sentence in this song…"Love moves the sun and the stars." It's a very decisive question. [231]

The most important dimension of his cinema, Grandrieux reminds me twice, is not violence, but love. Without the presence of love, none of his films could be made. Although *Sombre* and *La Vie Nouvelle* each rotate around a couple—Claire and Jean, Seymour and Mélania—the love

[230] Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 170.
[231] Philippe Grandrieux, interview with Benjamin Crais, February 21st, 2016.

Grandrieux emphasizes is not at all the possibility of romance between two people. Rather, each film must retain the possibility of love *as the power of movement*, as a vitality that surges through each image.

II.

I think of the inferno in *La Vie Nouvelle.* The sense of claustrophobia is overwhelming. The anonymous mass of grey bodies huddle together. Space is abolished; these figures exist on an infinitely black plane, constricted together in their mutual lack of direction. We are amongst this strange, amorphous horde, the grey matter of their bodies flickers and slides across the screen. At first they wander slowly, trying to find their way in the dark. Then they scream, the only action that remains possible in this infinite abyss. They scream at the camera, each anonymous grey face adding its voice to a collective clamor of despair. Nicole Brenez, in her essay on *La Vie Nouvelle*, quotes a line from Pasolini's *Medea*: "Nothing is possible any longer!"[232]—a sentiment redoubled in the single, reverberating scream that tears from each figure's mouth.

And yet. The final image, holding an impersonal face in close-up to register one thing: a breath, a movement. An event. An event, Deleuze and Guattari write,

> is the virtual that is distinct from the actual, but a virtual that is no longer chaotic, that has become consistent or real on the plane of immanence that wrests it from the chaos—it is a virtual that is real without being actual, ideal without being abstract…the event is pure immanence of what is not actualized or of what remains indifferent to actualization, since its reality does not depend upon it.[233]

This last figure: *a* life, distinct from its incarnation in Mélania or anyone else. A composition of the unformed life-matter that continually forms and dissolves the terrified crowd of bodies—threatening the undifferentiated—that takes on a perfect consistency as this face, no longer on

[232] Brenez, "The Body's Night"
[233] Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?,* 156.

the verge of chaos, but full of grace. It's not an actualization—Mélania's individual features do not emerge from the blurred grey matter, the pure white light of the figure's eyes betray nothing of a subject—yet remains perfectly real: a virtual, impersonal visage that exists in itself, a life of "pure immanence."

What is the nature of this movement—the slight widening of the figure's mouth, the soft, barely-audible breath that it releases? The image no longer expresses "the movement of a virtuality actualizing itself"[234]—in which the virtual could only be sensed through "that which it composes or renders,"[235] i.e. the actual—but the movement of the virtual, of non-organic life itself, realized without its accompanying actualization. As Giorgio Agamben writes of gesture, "nothing is being produced or acted, but rather something is being endured and supported"[236]—a means without ends. The image endures—gives form and rhythm to—a movement of life that neither actualizes nor represents anything, but rather exists for itself in the "dead time"[237] of the event. A breath: the pulse of *a* life distinct from its actualization (in the "new life," in Mélania's predicament), given consistency in this last image of a neutral, blessed face.

The thermic camera sequence constitutes the most intense expression of the sense of despair and abjection that permeates *La Vie Nouvelle.* It evokes a common condition shared by all the living—an intolerable, degraded existence that seems to offer no way out. Yet, at the end, Grandrieux gives this final image of movement. Not a movement *towards* something—out of this "collective nightmare"[238] and into a better future—but a movement, a becoming, in itself, as the *dynamis* that exists within and beyond any determined state of affairs.

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[234] Deleuze, *Desert Islands*, 40.
[235] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus,* 281.
[236] Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 56.
[237] Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?,* 158.
[238] Brenez, "The Body's Night"

The image of *a* life, but also the germ of possibility for a new life. A movement of vitality that exists beyond the actual, in its cruelty and seeming fixity, and traverses a body that exists "before discourses, before words, before things are named."[239] This is not an optimistic image, or even a redemptive one. It is simply a promise: that life, beyond good and evil and indifferent to the horrors of our "new life," continues to flow and become, offering to us the possibility of new modes of existence. It is "complete power, complete bliss"[240] or, as Grandrieux puts it, love—the power of a movement that gives us the strength to create.

[239] Deleuze, Cinema 2, 172-173.
[240] Deleuze, *Pure Immanence,* 27.

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