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 FILM-PHILOSOPHY
 

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 Re-viewing the Sexual Relation:  
 Levinas and Film

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When considering possible theoretical perspectives for an ethical conceptualisation of erotic or sexually explicit display in cinema, such as recent controversial work by French female directors Catherine Breillat and Claire Denis, the thought of Emmanuel Levinas is perhaps not the most likely or obvious candidate. Levinas has little to say *directly* about sexuality or pornography, even though the concepts of desire and Eros are central to much of his philosophy.<sup>1</sup> Equally, he is notoriously suspicious of figurality and the realm of the visual, a suspicion he voices especially forcefully in his essay on the work of art 'Reality and its Shadow' ('La Réalité et son ombre', 1948) (Levinas 1987a). It is, paradoxically, and perhaps perversely, for this very reason that this article will consider him as potentially the theorist *par excellence* for viewing sexual images in cinema.

Michel Foucault, meta-theorist of theories of sexuality, drew attention in his key study of 1976 *The Will to Knowledge (La Volonté de savoir)*, to the problems of speaking authoritatively or authentically about the truth of sexuality, in a system in which sexuality is constructed, within networks of power and knowledge, as that which is to be spoken, confessed, named and known. In this model, which contradicts the so-called repressive hypothesis, any talking about sex risks shoring up rather than transgressing, the workings of dominant power relations. By not speaking directly or straightforwardly about sex, then, Levinas offers sideways-on strategies for thinking the problems inherent in conceptualising and representing it. Moreover, perhaps, precisely by being suspicious of the image, Levinas may encourage us to look at film particularly acutely, in the

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<sup>1</sup> In *Totality and Infinity (Totalité et infini, 1961)*, Eros manifests primarily in the concept of 'fecundity', problematic to feminist and non-heteronormative readings. Later, however, for example in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence (Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence, 1974)*, ethics is located directly in relation to passion and embodiment. For more on Levinas's 'ethical passions', see Ziarek 2001.

awareness of the ethical dangers of unproblematic viewing. My contention is that reading the erotic spectacle through Levinas, via this insight offered by Foucault, affords a unique ethical perspective that might resonate particularly powerfully for the medium of cinema. This article is a short, speculative position paper that very much constitutes work in progress in this direction, rather than a conclusive statement. Its aim is to think towards an alternative way of viewing what would usually be delineated as 'the sexual' in film through an ethical lens that, I will argue, approximates a 'queer' ethic that emerges both out of and through the gaps in the Levinasian text.

In an interview with the French director, Catherine Breillat, in which she defends the controversial hardcore sexual content of her cinema, Breillat has stated that the meaning of any image is wholly dependent on whether it is looked at with a vision that is 'hideous and obscene' or 'with love' (Sklar 1999, 26). In a previous published work, in which I was attempting to identify the ideology subtending such explicit representations and directorial claims about them, I found myself changing the terms of Breillat's formula, transposing her emotional and ethical terms with political ones: 'the meaning of an image is wholly dependent upon the ideological positions which it appears to uphold' (Downing 2004, 278). My problem with Breillat's terminology consisted of a suspicion that the term 'love' was not sufficiently dissociated from the commonplace everyday discourse of love, with its echoes of courtliness, heteronormativity and emotional subjugation. I therefore found Breillat's assertion idealistic and politically naïve. In retrospect, and in the light of my recent thoughts on Levinas's specific understanding of love, I regret my determination to iron out what I perceived as a 'wooliness' in the notion of looking at the explicit spectacle with love, and would like to return to it here within a Levinasian framework, which may, surprisingly, offer the best denaturalisation of the discourse of love as it obtains in heteronormative thinking.

An obvious objection to the aims of the current article – indeed to the project of this special issue of *Film-Philosophy* as a whole – is, as I stated at the outset, the difficulty of using Levinas for a consideration of film when Levinas's thought is characterised by iconoclasm, a suspicion of the image and of artistic representation, which he perceives as inherently violent. This is a problem that Philippe Crignon has addressed in some detail in his essay 'Figuration: Emmanuel Levinas and the Image'. Crignon writes: 'Levinas tries to found ethics by wresting the face of man from visibility, by freeing it from the image that it is forever tempted to lapse into' (Crignon 2004, 101). On the subject of Eros and the body, he asserts 'the ethical and the erotic stand in sharp

contrast to sensible experience', such that 'the human body is at odds with the visible' (Crignon 2004, 101). Crignon notes the parallel within Levinas's *Totality and Infinity* of the face and the genitalia. Levinas describes these as naked and formless, as resisting specularisation. However, as Crignon's essay points out, the face and the most intimate regions of the body *are* figured, regularly, in high art and in pornography, as phenomena, and therefore, within a strictly Levinasian understanding, as traces of violence. Part of my project here, then, will be to explore the limits of the Levinasian assumption that looking equates always with possessing, that to have before one's eyes is to have. This model of the gaze as acquisitive is, I would suggest, part of what is put into question by Breillat's formulation of looking with love. Levinas's suspicion of representation may be understood as a critique of the culture in which looking equates with possessing. I would contend that this characteristic of the look is not a transcultural and ontological absolute, but culturally constructed and specific, that which occurs when the look manifests as the gaze (a reification of the active, as figuration is seen as a reification of the passive).

Another possible objection to my project, as I have already stated, would be Levinas's reluctance to theorise sexuality *as such*. In place of a theory of desire, such as that offered by psychoanalysis, or a theory of transgression, such as that offered by Bataille, Levinas speaks of the erotic in terms of transcendental love, fecundity, the metaphor of the caress and of futurity (resolved, problematically for feminist readings, and indeed for the current reading, in metaphors of paternity and the birth of a son). However, despite this, he deliberately dismisses the psychologising and biologising utilitarian accounts of the sexual in dominant discourse as missing the potential of the erotic for reconfiguring ontology. In writing of Eros in *Time and the Other (Le Temps et l'autre*, 1979), Levinas speaks of the importance of avoiding 'fusion', 'possession' and 'knowledge' in love (Levinas 1987b, *passim*). In *Totality and Infinity*, he writes: 'Love is not reducible to a knowledge mixed with affective elements which would open to it an unforeseen plane of being. It grasps nothing, issues in no concept, does not *issue*, has neither the subject-object structure nor the I-thou structure. Eros is not accomplished as a subject that fixes an object nor as a pro-jection, towards a possible. Its movement consists in going beyond the possible' (Levinas 1969, 261).

Whereas Foucault states it explicitly, Levinas gestures towards the fact that epistemology and ontology have constructed the sexual relation according to (dynamic) power relations and subject-object positions. These keep intact the dialectical relation of the one and the other, of which classical phenomenology consists, and which Levinas

contests more generally in *Totality and Infinity*. I am not suggesting here that this is the precise point that Levinas is trying to make via his critique of classical phenomenology, but rather that this is an application to which Levinas's theorisation can be put, or a proposition we can make in parallel with, and in debt to, Levinas's philosophical reflections. The social sexual relation is revealed as *constructed according to discourses of knowledge and power* in the terms of Foucault's discourse, and as *unethical*, in the terms of Levinas's logic. The notion of love or the erotic as a relation going beyond the subject and object towards infinity may suggest a directorial and spectatorial attitude with regard to the filmed image, as well as an ethics applicable to the relationship between lovers. It may suggest the excess of meaning that images can provoke and convey, the excess in which lies indeterminacy and a threat to hierarchical and dialectic principles. Moreover, Levinas's critique of the image is founded not so much on looking *per se* but on the processes of meaning-making that accompany it, the harnessing of *knowledge* that is its correlative. The face resists the gaze because 'it is what cannot become a content' (Levinas 1985, 86–87). However, the face, or the formlessness of the erotic body, *may* appear in the realm of the visible *qua* face, precisely in so far as their appearance confounds the Looking-Knowing relation, undermining the context of the gaze. Levinas's critique of looking is properly a critique of the kind of looking that is perceived to be inherent to patriarchal culture. The metaphor of the caress as an approach to the other, where other could be a person or spectacle, absolute in its difference from me, can be used for our attempt to conceive of looking with love at love on the screen. Levinas writes in *Totality and Infinity*: 'The caress consists in seizing upon nothing, in soliciting what ceaselessly escapes its form toward a future never future enough, in soliciting what slips away as though it *were not yet*. It *searches*, it forages. It is not an intentionality of disclosure but of search: a movement unto the invisible' (Levinas 1969, 257–258).

Although this experiential caress is different in status from the mediated experience of a cinematic caress, certain cinematic images which foil our desire to interpret, name and understand may be conceived of in light of this analogy of movement from what is disclosed to what is undisclosed; from the meaningfulness of intentionality to the ethical of epiphany. If, for example, we resist interpreting images of interacting bodies onscreen according to familiar discourses of knowledge pertaining to sexuality – perversion, domination and submission, autoerotism, heterosexuality/homosexuality etc. – we allow for the possibility of being affected *beyond*

the level of meaning and intellect; interpellated at the level of ethics without social positions of subjectivity and objectivity being pre-defined for us. Foucault has made a similar argument to this in his 'Sade, Sergeant of Sex', an interview that appeared in *Cinématographie* in 1975, one of the very few times that Foucault ever commented directly on film. Asked about the representation of bodies in contemporary films such as *The Death of Maria Malibran* (*Der Tod der Maria Malibran*, Werner Schroeter, 1972), he comments that the body is filmed differently here than in such classic spectacles as Marilyn Monroe's body in *Some Like it Hot* (Billy Wilder, 1959). In experimental cinema:

what seems new is (...) the discovery-exploration of the body by means of the camera. (...) It's an encounter at once calculated and aleatory between the bodies and the camera, discovering something, breaking up an angle, a volume, a curve, following a trace a line, possibly a ripple (...) and then suddenly the body derails itself (Foucault 1994, 225).

Foucault opposes this innovative filming of the body and the effects it produces *both* to any cinematic adaptation of Sade, which, he says, would be a tiresome repetitive, ritualistic spectacle of perversion – sex according to a 'disciplinary' regime – *and* to the traditional Hollywood method of filming the woman's body, as first critiqued by psychoanalytic feminists at roughly the same time as Foucault produced the above-cited comments. Foucault's comments are extremely pertinent to the project I am undertaking with and through Levinas here, with the difference that Foucault speaks of the *aesthetic effects* of the innovative filming of the body, where a Levinasian reading would make the type of filming that Foucault describes a matter of ethics.

Before proceeding by way of specific case studies of filmic sequences, I need to say a brief word about the well-documented model of feminist psychoanalytic gaze theory to which I have alluded above, since my viewing through Levinas is both close to and troubles the epistemology of such psychoanalytic models. In this theoretical feminist discourse, inaugurated by Laura Mulvey (Mulvey 1975), based on earlier work by Christian Metz, the spectator's position is masculine and 'scopophilic' while the object onscreen is feminised and connotes 'to-be-looked-at-ness'. Subsequent feminist psychoanalytic film theory, including Mulvey's own later revisions to this article (Mulvey 1981) and Mary Ann Doane's reflections in 1982 on the female spectator as subject of the masquerade (Doane 1990) began to problematise the stability of gendered spectatorial identifications with, and desires for, filmed bodies and subjects. Further revisions to these theoretical positions came with the recent body of film criticism

influenced by Lacanian psychoanalysis as radical philosophy, for example the work of Joan Copjec (2000) and Slavoj Žižek (2000, 2001), in which the gaze is the *object*, rather than the *possession* of a (patriarchal) subject and, as Žižek strikingly claims, 'when I am looking at an object, the object is already gazing at me' (Žižek 2000, 530). Copjec has argued that the viewer is not the master of what he gazes at, but a divided subject of trauma, as well as a subject desiring mastery over that division. Such writings have undone, to some extent, our adherence to a dynamic of power relations in which male / masculine / active straightforwardly opposes and oppresses female / feminine / passive positionality. My proposition for a Levinasian gaze-as-caress or 'looking with love' has similarities to these methodologies, but seeks to undo even further the diagnostic thinking to which psychoanalytic criticism still tends, with its lexicon of desire and the law. It aims to stretch and deform the intelligible categories brought to bear through and on the gaze, in a manner that gets closer to the ideas about Schroeter's film suggested by Foucault in 'Sade: Sergeant of Sex' than to the body of psychoanalytic film criticism I have just described (which itself is extremely critical of a Foucauldian discursive-analytic method). However, my Levinasian notion of 'looking with love' aims to push through the intelligible categories to which I allude, moving even closer to a queer ethics through film than Foucault, Copjec or Žižek have essayed.

Certain contemporary filmmakers seem to encourage this fragmenting or 'wobbling' of the interpretative or diagnostic gaze. Catherine Breillat, in her attempt to look with love at bodies and pleasures, has adopted techniques to disconcert our apprehension of erotic spectacle, inviting modes of watching that trouble the investment of possessive or interpretative impulses. More significantly than in the mere inclusion of explicit 'real' sex ('genuine' penetration and oral sex) in an 'art film'; the way in which certain sequences are shot creates a rupturing of our expectations of how *types* of *forms* of 'the erotic' should appear. A key example of this is the exceptionally slowly filmed scene of bondage between Robert (François Berléand) and Marie (Caroline Ducey) in the ironically named *Romance* (1999). The 'love' with which these scenes are filmed, I shall argue, makes them resonate far beyond the 'old-fashioned, oppressive male fantasies' (Vincendeau 1999, 52) that they have been accused by certain critics of upholding; and makes them exceed the boredom or tedium often pejoratively attributed to sexual acts perceived as ritualistic.

The first of the two sequences lasts some 11 minutes in total; the second 7 minutes. In both sequences, the camera focuses in real time on Robert's rope-work, and

for the only times in the film, Marie's persistent voice-over – her philosophical meditations on the nature of the sexual – is silenced. The spectacle *itself* becomes a meditation. The first sequence follows Robert as he lifts Marie's dress, leads her around his apartment, gags Marie, ties her wrists above her head with rope, binds her waist, before feeding the cord between her legs and around her neck. Once she is trussed up, the camera focuses in close-up on her face, partially obscured by the gag. Robert speaks no words for several seconds. There is no tension or *jouissance*; just slow concentration on technique. When she has had enough, Marie indicates her desire to be unbound. The sequence closes with Marie weeping on the bed after Robert has released her from her bonds, while he strokes her hair tenderly. (Somewhat bathetically, the undoing takes a few seconds; while the preparation has taken many minutes.) They are framed in a tight two-shot that lasts for four minutes, in almost complete immobility.

The second bondage sequence – a very different viewing experience – begins with the camera cutting between Marie's expectant face, with closed eyes, and Robert's rummaging in a chest for his rope. This time, the atmosphere of the scene is less intense and more light-hearted. Rather than the silence and contemplation as he binds her and cuffs her, he tells an anecdote of having once had sex with a famous woman he met in the street without knowing who she was. Robert's rather silly banter contrasts with the intensity of the pleasure visible on Marie's face as the bondage becomes more complex and intense. A scarf is thrust in her mouth; her legs are fastened wide apart. Finally Robert cuts the fabric of her knickers with scissors and pushes his finger inside her. It emerges, very wet and the camera zooms in on it until it fills the screen. Because of the way we are made to look at them, these sequences constitute an example of an apparently codified sexual scene (the ritualistic nature of SM that Foucault argued would make Sadean adaptation un-filmable) re-appear to us in a different light. It is re-presented through a non-pathologising or objectifying lens; but also through a lens which decontextualises eroticism, accounting for ways in which the 'knowledge' about sexuality that we bring to looking can be disrupted, and challenging the notion that looking at 'sex' always *means* the same thing. Possession that equates to understanding/recognising is effectively forestalled here as stillness, meticulousness, humour, and eroticism *all* come into play as alternatives to the qualities that certain feminist critics may expect to find in a scene of heterosexual bondage (Vincendeau's notion that male-on-female bondage must always be conventional, macho and oppressive); and suggests that certain acts should not be labelled as reducible to uninteresting or regressive perversion, because of

being ritualistic or repetitive. The two sequences effectively show up difference and diversity *within* perceived ritual. Moreover, violence is entirely absent – from both the sexual behaviour represented and from the representational means employed – and only an insistence on technique and its effects (again, of both filming and of eroticism) remains.

The characterisation of Robert denaturalises even further any simplistic notions of what ‘domination’ might mean; and undermines any suspicion that a ‘subject-object structure’ is in play. Where Vincendeau has labelled him a ‘self-important Don Juan figure’ (Vincendeau 1999, 52), I have argued elsewhere (Downing 2004, 270–271) that the mask of ‘Lothario’ that Robert initially wears is made to slip progressively and reveal itself as no more than a mask, in a film in which codes of masculine and feminine sexual roles and identities are put constantly into question. Robert increasingly fulfils what would traditionally be seen as a maternal rather than paternal figure in the film, as he nurses Marie and attends the birth of her baby as pseudo-midwife or non-paternal birth partner. The posing Don Juan with whom we are first presented has been erased, undone by the end of the film. Masks of masculinity and femininity constantly slip throughout *Romance*, then, preventing the body, expression, or gesture from presenting as reified face or object. Like the art of rope-work, the film carefully and ponderously makes and then unmakes sexual spectacles and identities, suggesting their necessary precariousness.

If Breillat troubles conventional ways of looking at sexual practices, Claire Denis deliberately confounds traditional ways of filming and viewing the body. In films such as *Beau Travail* (1999), with its unusually lingering focus on the male body ‘in all its density’ (Beugnet 2001, 114); and more especially in the controversial erotic-horror pastiche *Trouble Every Day* (2001), the human body is subjected to a radical making-unfamiliar. *Trouble Every Day* is constructed around a series of visual plays with texture, both organic and inorganic; surfaces which are filmed slowly and ponderously, refusing the acceleration and pacing that would create suspense in a ‘straight’ horror film. In filming the body, the focus is on expanses of flesh, of the genitalia, of cloth covering the body, of blood-soaked skin and shrouds made reflective and liquid, that fill the screen allowing little framing or contextualisation. Douglas Morrey has written: ‘the camera travels at length over the expanse of [a boy’s] torso, suddenly become strange and immense: his hairs twitch and flutter like the grasses on the wasteland earlier; mysterious ridges are discovered on his body like the surface of the moon; dark moles appear like planets

within this uncharted solar system, gravitating around the shocking black hole of his navel' (Morrey 2004). Although his framework is not Levinasian but Deleuzian, the qualities Morey ascribes to *Trouble Every Day* demonstrate convincingly how the erotic is mobilised as an encounter with the absolute other – body become unrecognisable landscape – in such filming.

In a particularly striking sequence of the film, Coré (Béatrice Dalle) makes love to a male victim before killing him. Her first gentle caresses to bring him pleasure and the violent, cannibalistic perverse caresses that end in murder are filmed with identical languor. The caresses are also adumbrated in a later scene in which the honeymoon couple Shane and June, played by Vincent Gallo and Tricia Vessey, engage in 'vanilla' sex, broken off when Gallo's character runs to the bathroom to masturbate frenziedly. Both sequences are shot with extreme close-ups on the supine bodies, and look similar, refusing the differentiation of sexual taxonomy. The camera's proximity to the bodies throws them into shadow and it is not always clear whose limbs and body parts are whose, or what the interlocked bodies are doing to each other. Only slowly and eventually, in the scene between Coré and her victim, does blood begin to appear on the boy's face, still in extreme close-up; a liquid sexual emission that is unexpected and disorienting. As his face becomes covered and distorted with the blood, the meaning of the sexual scene literally liquifies. Coré licks the blood from the dying face and body and lifts the flaps of skin she has torn open, playing with the wounds as newly made parts of the body; a male body reconfigured as open and accessible. Just as the horror conveyed by the biting and tearing up of the body, consistent with the 'theme' of cannibalism, is undercut by the beauty, indeterminacy and strangeness of the images, so the notion of unitary body-objects ripe for possession and offering automatic interpretability is confounded. The slow destruction of the idea of the body, culminating in a visually stunning scene of Coré spattering the bare white walls with her victim's blood and rubbing herself against them until her own body blends, chameleon-like, into the *mise en scène*, suggests the flickering of the image or the momentary disappearance of the body as object. Rather than violence *qua* violence, there is a melting away of meaning here. The only acceleration allowed for in the sexual murder scene is the intensification of the victim's groans and cries, ambiguously expressing ecstasy or horror; competing with the eerie and insistent extra-diegetic music. Sound and image are, then, discordant and stand in contradiction to each other, making the ascription of meaning more difficult, such that it is deferred. Just as Levinas writes of the

face or genitalia as that which 'cannot become a content', Denis refuses to allow us to ascribe meaningful content to the scene *as it is being watched* (though we may retroactively re-construct it in terms of familiar or conventional epistemology or as a reference to/digression from filmic genre). The images of bodies in *Trouble Every Day* present as strange, as 'epiphany' rather than content, and shy away from the meaning that they may simultaneously suggest. 'Looking with love' here has nothing to do with tame, domestic or everyday concepts of love. Rather, the caress of the camera becomes a making-strange rather than a movement towards the acquisitive familiarity of possession, that can transform even the cannibal's embrace and the vampiric devouring of blood, familiar to us from the codes of horror cinema, into an erotic strangeness.

In a project that begins to sound similar, perhaps, to those of the women film directors named above (and the point might be precisely to find parallels between the projects of filmmakers and Levinas, rather than to *apply* Levinas to film), Levinas insists upon the power of the carnal to undermine the meaningful certainties of epistemology. He writes: 'The carnal, the tender par excellence correlative of the caress, the beloved, is to be identified neither with the body-thing of the physiologist, nor with the lived body [corps propre] of the "I can", nor with the body-expression, attendance at its own manifestation, or face. In the caress, a relation yet, in one aspect, sensible, the body already denudes itself of its very form, offering itself as erotic nudity. In the carnal given to tenderness, the body quits the status of an existent' (Levinas 1969, 258). This very exhortation to conceive of the body beyond the 'body-thing', and the warning that representation entails the reification of the body, may remind us again of the substance of Laura Mulvey's early feminist cinema theory, discussed above. In the psychoanalytically informed model, the gaze is phallic, the body a superficial, glittering surface. The film discourse encodes the experience of filming and watching in clinical diagnostic terminology, pathologising cinema's erotic appeal, and insisting upon a looking that is all Levinasian violence. The sequences analysed above show the 'body-thing' put under erasure; constricted with bonds that still and then release; obscured with blood; de-constructed; merged with another body. Does the ethical 'looking with love' formulated by Breillat and fleshed out through, with and sometimes *despite* Levinas help us to move beyond the traditional model of gaze as possessive?

### Feminism and Levinas

As I am dealing here with issues that have traditionally been part of feminist film criticism and feminist theory more generally, and as I have placed Levinas into dialogue with a challenge posed by a female director, it is important to discuss the status of Levinas's thought in relation to feminism. Of significant relevance to this discussion is a recent collection of essays on *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas* (Chanter 2001), since it offers a series of reflections which highlight the changing and apparently self-contradictory use of the problematic concept of 'the feminine' throughout his body of work. Levinas uses the concept 'feminine' to delineate that which presents itself as vulnerability, as the call to ethics, as other *par excellence*. This risks ignoring the specificity of female subjectivity. In Simone de Beauvoir's classic critique, Levinas 'deliberately takes a man's point of view, disregarding the reciprocity of subject and object' (quoted in Chanter 2001, 2). However, Chanter has proposed the converse view that alterity is privileged over sameness in Levinas's corpus, infinity over totality. This is the power that the 'feminine' bears in the opus – a power that is disruptive and challenging to existing systems of thought, offering a way of *exceeding* reciprocity, which is equated with totality, a closed system.

Moreover, I would like to try to separate Levinas's rhetorical use of 'the feminine' (*le féminin*) from the place of 'woman' (*la femme*) in his philosophical system. While Levinas's allusions to an eternal feminine may be problematic for feminist readings, 'woman' is determinedly not reified or her political position neutralised. Indeed Levinas writes: 'Equivocation constitutes the epiphany of the feminine – at the same time interlocutor, collaborator and master superiorly intelligent, so often dominating men in the masculine civilisation it has entered, and woman, having to be treated as woman, in accordance with rules inprescriptable by civil society' (Levinas 1969, 264). The social construction of woman is touched on here, even though Levinas's metaphysical discourse does not often engage explicitly with political constructivist concerns.

What is more, 'the beloved' is not straightforwardly equated with 'woman' (*qua* object-other) in the Levinasian opus. Speaking of the ethical potential of the erotic encounter, of the capacity of the beloved to appear as the formless consciousness-provoking 'face', he writes: 'the whole body – a hand or a curve of the shoulder – can express as the face' (Levinas 1969, 262). This ethics of the erotic is not specifically or conclusively sexed or gendered – indeed this is one of the persuasive powers of the concept of the erotic as formlessness, as a way of resisting knowledge. The absolute

other who calls the subject to ethical responsibility is erotically charged and multiply embodied here. This is where Levinas seems surprisingly close to certain recent texts of queer theory which borrow productively from Lacanian psychoanalysis. In particular, I am reminded of Tim Dean's striking argument in *Beyond Sexuality* that Lacanian theory constitutes a queer theory in its own right, since Lacan's *objet a* can mobilise desire in the form of: 'the gaze, the voice, the phoneme, the lips, the rim of the anus and the slit formed by the eyelids' (Dean 2000, 194). Unexpectedly, then, Levinas, like Dean's Lacan, becomes ripe for reading as proto-queer here, or at least as polymorphously perverse rather than asserting heteronormative assumptions about the masculine and the feminine. His feminine is a figure of radical ambiguity and plurality, rather than simply the reciprocal other of totality that he eschews. This assertion is in accordance with Chanter's observation that:

Levinas wants to think difference (...) as asymmetry and excess. The feminine figures in his work as that which resists essence, concept and presence, disrupting totality and displacing the hegemonic imperialism of being (Chanter 2001, 21).

I would like to take this a step further to argue that 'the feminine', broadly speaking, works as a principle of queerness rather than of identity for Levinas, as a troubling force unsettling sexual epistemology and Western ontology. Femininity is not essence; and has little to do with femaleness. It is the place from which another way of speaking, seeing, being might emanate.

However, one might argue that the specificity of *female sexuality* on film has to be accounted for by and within a framework that insists upon the specificity of sexual difference, and tries to account for a uniquely feminine model of subjectivity. Luce Irigaray may appear as the contemporary thinker most likely to offer this theoretical framework.<sup>2</sup> However, bringing my unlikely alliance of Foucault and Levinas into play again, I would argue that it is the very specificity of the meaning of the 'feminine' and of 'sexual difference' for Irigaray that would make a discussion of her work for my current purposes fall into an ideological and epistemological trap. By this I mean that, just as understanding the filmic spectacles I described above only through the lens of the field

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<sup>2</sup> I am indebted here to Lucy Bolton's groundbreaking unpublished PhD research on the uses of Luce Irigaray's theory of sexual difference for viewing onscreen female consciousness in cinematic spectacle and for female filmmaking practice. Downing, Lisa (2007) 'Re-Viewing the Sexual Relation: Levinas and Film', *Film-Philosophy*, vol. 11, no. 2: pp. 49–65. <<http://www.film-philosophy.com/2007v11n2/downing.pdf>> ISSN: 1466-4615 online

of 'sexuality' limits our reception of them to a specific set of pre-existing epistemologies, so understanding them as representations of bodily and imaginary experiences specific to the female or feminine (in a system in which this still stands as the binary opposite and complement of maleness and masculinity) reduces the possibility of our ethical viewing, since we would view wearing the blinkered binary frames of hetero-logic which pre-determines meaning.

Irigaray states, in an assertive essay on the incompatibility between her theory and Levinas's that: 'there can be no real recognition of the other as other unless the feminine subject is recognised as radically other with respect to the masculine subject, whatever their secondary resemblances or shared group membership' (Irigaray 2004, 68). Irigaray wants the recognition of difference to be at the level of the sexual difference between men and women. However, this approach has its own problems. While this gesture may create a 'culture of two', it is a culture that stops at two. Recent work in queer theory, in trans theory, in polyamory or non-monogamy studies, and in intersex activism, tries to disrupt the binarisms by which sexualisation is understood in Western thought and representation, and in the social world, ordering subjects into the masculine/feminine; male/female; hetero/homo binary straitjackets. Irigaray's approach to the problem of difference does not allow for this dismantling of the power-laden construction of the field of sexuality ordered in binaries, as critiqued by queer. On the other hand, by hinting towards infinity within the encounter, rather than a distinct and binary twoness in which masculinity and femininity are reified and manifest as biological or social man and woman – 'the body-thing of the physiologist' – Levinas offers a more unusual way of looking with and at love outside of the usual frameworks of sexual knowledge and understanding.

Not perceiving this to be the case, Irigaray takes Levinas to task for his statement in *Time and the Other (Le Temps et l'autre, 1979)* that 'the difference between the sexes is a formal structure' (Levinas 1987b, 85). For Irigaray this bespeaks a denial of female subjectivity. For me, however, this statement rings with queered Lacanian resonance (his famous dictum that 'il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel'/'the sexual relation does not exist'), and with Foucauldian prescience. Similarly, Levinas's refusal to foreclose the content, meaning or philosophical significance of Eros as caress suggests a refusal to conceive of sexuality in terms of knowledge:

the caress does not know what it seeks [... Eros is a] not knowing, a game with something slipping away, a game absolutely without project or plan, not with what can become ours or us but with something other, always other, always inaccessible, and always still to come. The caress is the anticipation of this pure future without content (Levinas 1987b, 89).

This, for me, describes more the ‘becoming’ of bodies and pleasures of which Foucault speaks so highly (Foucault 1990, 157) than the delineated sexual knowledge of prescribed acts and identities. It speaks the strange and disturbing textures, movements and valences of the caress in scenes such as those filmed by Breillat and Denis described above, which one could interpret as representations of sexual perversions – if one follows the logic of Western sexual epistemology, the source of which Foucault describes so convincingly in *The Will to Knowledge* – or, alternatively, look at with love as an ethical not knowing, a slipping away of the certainties of meaning.

### Conclusion

My reading of Levinas for a revision of sexual spectacle has involved some determined reading against a series of grains. Much of what Levinas says about femininity as other to man has been rebarbative to feminist philosophers such as Irigaray, who look instead to find models of specifically feminine subjectivity available to women. Levinas certainly uses the feminine to draw attention to and interrogate the position of alterity; but he does this without collapsing the ‘feminine’ or ‘the beloved’ onto the ‘woman’, and without ignoring the historical and political specificity of women’s social construction as subordinate, despite his primary concern with metaphysical and transcendental questions. While focusing on elements of Levinas’s theory that are controversial for feminists, I have also used Levinas in ways that he would probably never have envisaged his thought being used, queering Levinas rather as Tim Dean has queered Lacan; using Levinas’s metaphors of love and infinity outside of any context of religious or spiritual transcendence as paradigms to allow us to rethink sexuality. All of this may be troubling for both the purist feminist and the purist Levinasian reader. However, like Levinas’s endeavour, my project is concerned with thinking otherwise. It is the quest for a relation of becoming and the becoming of a relation, empty of predetermined content, that might offer a radical model for thinking about and viewing the erotic ethically, and ethics through Eros. The disturbingly paternalistic and patriarchal metaphors of the son as the outcome of the caress in Levinas have been deliberately downplayed here, in

favour of a concentration on those moments when Levinas's slippery and often self-contradictory and self-undermining texts seem to insist on the erotic as lacking an outcome, on the absence of resolution, on a futurity that is an ethical imagining of possibilities beyond current power dynamics, rather than the mere procreation of the next generation. Similarly, any extensive discussion of the Levinasian metaphor of fecundity, originating as it does in the link between female biology, birthing and maternity, has been deliberately omitted as less fruitful for the present argument than those moments at which 'femininity' is used by Levinas to signify the radical principle of difference, disturbance and unitary-order-shattering, an abstract queer concept that undoes itself from biology and from binarism to hint at an as-yet unimagined infinity. Using Levinas's text in this way involves a certain, perhaps controversial, dislocation of resonant, suggestive concepts from the traditional reception of Levinas, a postmodern queering of Levinas as text for film.

Looking at and understanding spectacles such as Breillat's and Denis's through the lens of 'sexuality' inscribes them within the historically and culturally specific field of knowledge and power described in discursive terms by Foucault. It forecloses their meaning in pre-inscribed networks of power relations intrinsic to the erotic within the field of Western sexuality. Allowing them to resonate instead with Levinasian overtones of the caress and of a formless and infinite Eros, without mapping these ethical concepts onto subject/object, masculine/feminine positionality allows for a very different viewing of such cinematic spectacles to ones that draw on more traditional theories of pornography or of feminist film theory, which aim to assert a truth about the politics of representation. Moreover, if we apply to the process of looking at the spectacle the same deforming, renovating qualities we have applied to thinking about discourses of sexuality, we may approach a way of looking that does not yoke the realm of the visible to the desire for knowledge and power, such that Levinas's suspicion of figurality *tout court* becomes a specific critique of a cultural form of looking in which the look apes the subject-object dynamic.

Looking with love thus conceptualised may define, for the position of both director and spectator, a type of 'visual pleasure' that exceeds the gaze as traditionally conceived in post-Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. The traditional gaze is phallic and acquisitive in its aim, using the energies of sadism to fix dominant meanings and assert meaningful dominance. In following Levinas's exhortation to abandon the desire to possess (knowledge, meaning, the other) in favour of the caress, the ethical viewer

might radically disturb established ways of watching. In this reading, the ethical is implicitly political and polemical, as it is the ethical looking that disrupts the normative and normalising frameworks of knowledge by which erotic acts, relations and spectacles have been understood.

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