

The Dissolving "I":  
Abjection and Becoming in Queer Cinema

by

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## Abstract

This thesis explores abject depictions of gay, racialized and gender nonconforming people in independent and experimental queer films. I analyze *O Fantasma* (Portugal, João Pedro Rodrigues, 2000) and *The Living End* (US, Gregg Araki, 1992) in relation to theories of queer negativity, utopia, affect and embodied spectatorship; *Un chant d'amour* (France, Jean Genet, 1950) and *The Attendant* (UK, Isaac Julien, 1993) through theories of race, bottoming, shame and debasement; and *Liquid Sky* (US, Slava Tsukerman, 1982) and *Dandy Dust* (UK, A. Hans Scheirl, 1998) in conjunction with posthumanist and transgender theories of becoming. I argue that these films create opportunities for ambiguity, in-between states, and multiplicities, eliciting intellectual and affective responses that exceed anti-normative and nihilistic approaches in queer theory.

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## Introduction

This thesis explores cinematic depictions of gay, racialized and gender nonconforming characters that confront, negotiate with, or embody negative experiences. These films help us confront our own conflicted sensory responses to abjection, to that which threatens to shatter our structured, discrete lives. They explore pre-subjective states of being and transformative encounters with the unbearable. The films do not necessarily offer subversion, but rather a way of approaching the void that looms in us all, inspiring both fascination and horror, waiting to rupture our bodily boundaries. In this thesis, I bring a variety of theories into contact with films in ways that create a certain friction. I simultaneously use theory to help elucidate the images on screen, but also to show how the films sometimes exceed theory.

The “dissolving ‘I’” in the title indicates a process of desubjectification, when individualized notions of identity break down and there is no separation between subject and object, self and other. It also contains another meaning, the subordination of optic knowledge (i.e., “dissolving eye”) in favor of affective and embodied spectatorship. The dissolution of subjectivity appears throughout this thesis in scenes of abjection and modes of becoming in the films, understood through theories of queer negativity, racially-informed theories of bottoming and shame, and transgender phenomenology. I understand *abjection* through Julia Kristeva’s theorization of the term in *Powers of Horror* (1980). Kristeva describes the abject as a primal aspect of being that recalls pre-subjectivity and threatens to shatter bodily boundaries, subject/object distinctions and social structures. For Kristeva, the corpse epitomizes abjection by showing us what we will inevitably become: an object. She also refers to body fluids, which signal a

breakdown of corporeal boundaries, as an example of the abject. While abjection entails an emptying of structured language and social norms that wrests the subject from psychoanalytic narratives of phallogentrism and fetishism, *becoming* evokes intercorporeality and an opening up of being towards seemingly endless possibilities of transformation. I use Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's (1987) concept of becoming to refer to intra- and inter-species alliances divorced from hierarchy and filiation. Deleuze and Guattari argue that the process of becoming is distinct from imitation in that it is a process of deep interconnection rather than dualism.

What happens to prevalent conversations in queer theory that focus on anti-normativity and identity politics when we shift our focus to abjection, becoming and intercorporeality? In this thesis, I will show how films, including our intellectual and affective responses to them, can exceed some approaches in queer theory. Rather than echo nihilistic notions about being gay, or centralize feelings of shame and debasement (particularly in a racial context), I argue that these films create opportunities for ambiguity, in-between states, and multiplicities. The films I analyze are: *O Fantasma* (Portugal, João Pedro Rodrigues, 2000) and *The Living End* (US, Gregg Araki, 1992) in relation to theories of queer negativity, utopia, affect and embodied spectatorship; *Un chant d'amour* (France, Jean Genet, 1950) and *The Attendant* (UK, Isaac Julien, 1993) through theories of race, bottoming, shame and debasement; and *Liquid Sky* (US, Slava Tsukerman, 1982) and *Dandy Dust* (UK, A. Hans Scheirl, 1998) in conjunction with posthumanist and transgender theories of becoming.

When I began my research, my initial intention was to locate as many queer films permeated with abject imagery as I could. I read Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* as I

watched European and North American independent and experimental queer films of the past half century. I found that the vast majority of the characters and filmmakers who revelled in sex, violence, death and body fluids were gay white men. Similarly, Lee Edelman, a gay white male scholar, centralizes the death drive and self-shattering pleasures in his writing (2004). His theories seemed to subsume the complexity of lived experience under a narrow idea of transgressive queerness. The notion of dissolving subjectivity that is central to so many films created by and starring gay white men seemed quite different from how films involving racialized and gender nonconforming people tended to depict bodies, subjectivities and identities. Racialized, gender nonconforming and intersectional filmmakers seem to be less interested in self-shattering experiences than gay white men, whether in theory or in cinema, perhaps as a result of their necessary preoccupation with survival. I then decided to look into films and theories that explore more varied experiences, such as racially-informed scenarios of dominance and submission, as well as theories of multiplicity, becoming, and gender nonconforming bodies. These prompted me to open my project beyond the initial focus on Kristeva's concept of abjection.

In some ways, my project is similar to film and philosophy scholar Tina Chanter's *The Picture of Abjection: Film, Fetish, and the Nature of Difference* (2008). Chanter mobilizes the concept of abjection in a cinematic context in order to supplant Freud's logic of fetishism, which is governed by a phallus/lack binary, and to traverse less stable boundaries of representation. Chanter draws from Kristeva's theory of abjection while also going beyond her, addressing not only "feminized others" but also those who are "racialized, classed, and sexualized" (33). Like Chanter, I will incorporate Kristeva's idea

of the semiotic as a state of being where structured language breaks down, in my analysis of the films. As Chanter observes, Kristeva does not describe the semiotic as external to the symbolic and thus unfathomable, nor the symbolic as a “self-generating” system. Chanter writes: “Kristeva construes the semiotic as that which can only be approached—but always inadequately—from within the symbolic” (115). My primary departures from Chanter are my focus on queer cinema, as well as my orientation toward a Deleuzoguattarian and posthuman perspective that maps different forms of embodiment and ways of becoming *with* the world.

All the films I analyze are either experimental or otherwise challenging towards conventional genre films. They all feature elements of visual excess and combinations of violence, homosexuality, death, body fluids, perverse pleasures, as well as ambiguity and ambivalence. The films also centralize marginal figures that take their social, political and historical position to a greater extreme, at times revelling in it, at other times grappling with the cultural hegemony, including heteronormativity, white supremacy, and colonialism.

In addition to the six films at the center of this project, I also considered *Fireworks* (US, Kenneth Anger, 1947), *Flaming Creatures* (US, Jack Smith, 1963), *Sebastiane* (UK, Derek Jarman, 1976), *In a Year with 13 Moons* (Germany, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, 1978), *Querelle* (Germany, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, 1982), *Loads* (US, Curt McDowell, 1985), *Muscle* (Japan, Hisayasu Sato, 1989), *Poison* (US, Todd Haynes, 1991), *Totally Fucked Up* (US, Gregg Araki, 1993), *Frisk* (US, Todd Verow, 1995), *Nowhere* (US, Gregg Araki, 1997), *The Raspberry Reich* (Germany/Canada, Bruce LaBruce, 2004), *Stranger by the Lake* (France, Alain Guiraudie, 2013), and

*Tangerine* (US, Sean Baker, 2015). Many of these films fall under “New Queer Cinema,” a term coined by film scholar B. Ruby Rich in a 1992 issue of *Sight & Sound* magazine (vol. 2.5). Rich characterized this emerging independent film movement as *queer* in reference to how the word had previously been reclaimed by academics to describe gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people in a way that aims to subvert heteronormativity and any notion of a stable identity. Many New Queer Cinema films explore abjection, becoming, and the dissolution of the self. The particular films I chose to focus on in my thesis reveal how our responses to films can elicit more ambiguous or contradictory responses than previous theoretical approaches allow. I also chose specific films in order to point toward a desired future that acknowledges difference and lived experience rather than subsumes them under any all-encompassing dictum about how to be queer.

In Chapter 1, I show the limits of Edelman’s queer politics by exploring characters in *O Fantasma* and *The Living End* that flirt with self-annihilating desires without ever fully succumbing to them. Edelman’s (2004) polemic against homo- and heteronormativity places itself against reproductive futurity and the idealized notion of the Child. To counter what he perceives to be an inevitably oppressive heteronormative future, Edelman emphasizes the death drive and advocates self-shattering pleasures and states of being that overwhelm the gay subject. While Edelman’s account of queer negativity presents a particular way of being queer, the films are able to inspire more complex and contradictory responses in the viewer. Bringing Kristeva’s concept of the abject into conversation with Edelman’s celebration of *jouissance* helps us understand images of violence, death and sexuality, as well as pre-lingual states of being in the films. Lauren Berlant’s (2013) ideas about negotiating and dealing with unbearable experiences

and José Esteban Muñoz's (2009) utopian writings on queer time and togetherness help explain how these films exceed total negativity. Additionally, Vivian Sobchack's (2004) phenomenological ideas about cinema, which describe embodied viewing experiences, help illustrate the affective interconnection between the viewer and the bodies on screen. Using these theories, I argue that *O Fantasma* and *The Living End* exceed Edelman's account of queer negativity and elicit multifarious responses in the viewer by showing characters that approach self-destruction without ever reaching it.

In Chapter 2, I will discuss how the depictions of racialized gay men in *Un chant d'amour* and *The Attendant* complicate our usual perceptions of shame and debasement, as well as theories that centralize them. Using these two films, I will explore how some queer people of color encounter negative experiences in ambiguous ways, disrupting the power dynamics of racial and sexual hierarchies. I will begin by incorporating Kathryn Bond Stockton's (2006) analysis of the intersections of blackness, queerness, shame, and the different ways of being a bottom, while departing from her over-emphasis on shameful attractions. I will show how the films contradict Stockton's centralization of debasement, which creates a homogeneous image of gay black men.

To help foster a more experientially nuanced analysis, I will work with Nguyen Tan Hoang's (2014) analysis of gay Asian American masculinity in porn and experimental film. Nguyen addresses the various pleasures that can be experienced in "bottom" positions, which sometimes involve relinquishing power. He also criticizes the negatively coded stereotypes about Asian men that perceive them as submissive bottoms, not to redeem any form of masculine power, but to reinstate vulnerability, agency and femininity in the bottom position as valuable sources of desire and pleasure. Equally

important to this section is Juana María Rodríguez, who describes ambiguous and ambivalent feelings of shame and pleasure that some Latinas experience in viewing or participating in acts of submission (2014). She rejects the normative/anti-normative dichotomy, identifies these contradictory pleasures as rooted in colonial violence, and does not idealize negative pleasures or ignore the very real dangers and traumas of lived experience. Through analyses of *Un chant d'amour* and *The Attendant*, I depart from theories that emphasize shame and debasement and argue that these films reframe conventional understandings of racialized acts of dominance and submission.

Chapter 3 brings my ideas in the previous chapters to the more expansive territory of becomings, multiplicities, and bodily reconfigurations. Through my discussion of *Liquid Sky* and *Dandy Dust*, I will challenge gender essentialist and dualistic ways of thinking, shifting towards a way of imagining different modes of being in the world. Donna Haraway's postmodern feminist concept of the cyborg (1984) and Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome (1987) are the two main pillars of this chapter. I also incorporate theories of transgender phenomenology and inter-species alliance such as Nikki Sullivan's (2003) theory of bodily transmogrification, Sandy Stone's (1987) "posttranssexual," Cael M. Keegan's (2016) writing on trans phenomenology, and Eva Hayward's (2008) descriptions of trans-speciation and trans-embodiment. Additionally, I will explore how the films' experimental construction of narrative and aesthetics exemplify representations of abjection in queer cinema. By mapping the relationship between gender fluidity and narrative incoherence, the films confuse epistemological and ontological certainty through depictions of gender nonconforming becomings that disrupt the meaning and boundaries of heteropatriarchal society.

This thesis explores some of the ambiguous experiences and ambivalent feelings that stem from abjection. I explore queer films that feature characters that confront negative encounters and indulge in abject behaviour, as well as images of bodies being unmade and remade in ways that point towards endless self-configurations. I depart from theories that subsume queerness under one way of being, always situated *against*, and that often ignore the variedness of lived experience. Instead, I argue that these films create opportunities for ambiguity, in-between states, and multiplicities, eliciting intellectual and affective responses in us that exceed some approaches in queer theory. I will attend to the dynamic relationship between the films, our complex responses to them, and a variety of often intersecting theories, which at times correspond with one another and at other times expose theoretical limits.

## Chapter 1

### **Ambivalent Pleasures: Desire/Death in *O Fantasma* and *The Living End***

There is a scene in *O Fantasma* (Portugal, João Pedro Rodrigues, 2000) that shows the protagonist, Sergio (Ricardo Meneses), engaging in a public sex act with his boss Virgilio (Eurico Vieira). As Virgilio fucks Sergio against the steel bars of an outside gate, it seems as though Sergio is experiencing both pain and pleasure simultaneously. The expressions on his face are ambiguous, signalling both feelings, and any sounds Sergio may be emitting are drowned out by the rattling of the gate and Virgilio's grunts and moans. This sequence displays Sergio's thirst for potentially dangerous and violent sexual encounters with men, and exemplifies in some ways the perspectives of queer theorists like Lee Edelman, who advocate the pursuit of pleasure and intense states of being that overwhelm the gay subject. The film's depiction of public sex and the conflation of pleasure and pain, sex and violence, seems to embody Edelman's self-shattering queer politics, which calls for the disruption of both hetero- and homonormativity. *The Living End* (US, Gregg Araki, 1992) also seems to exemplify Edelman's ideas through its defiant attitude and characters that personify the death drive. *O Fantasma* and *The Living End* both contain characters that indulge in negative encounters and behaviours that approach self-destruction but never truly reach it, cultivating a complex relationship with the viewer that potentially inspires different ways of dealing and negotiating with seemingly unbearable experiences. Thus, the affective and intellectual experience of watching queer films, even those as dark and transgressive as *O Fantasma*, exceeds Edelman's account of queer negativity.

In this chapter, I will put the films *O Fantasma* and *The Living End* in conversation with theories of queer negativity to show how it can be possible to derive certain pleasures, however ambivalent they may be, from these types of films without succumbing to nihilistic ideas about being gay. Kristeva's concept of the abject will also be helpful here in that it is adaptable to a queer context without presuming an anti-normative stance, allowing for an exploration of the darker aspects of the human condition that exist beyond the positive and the negative. Kristeva's descriptions of the impossible and elusive, those parts of ourselves that we are compelled to repress in order to live within our daily boundaries, help illuminate the self-shattering, transformative, painful, and pleasurable experiences in the films. While *O Fantasma* and *The Living End* can serve as filmic manifestations of a certain negative attitude that seems to echo that of Edelman in particular, they also show how our responses to cinema are often more complex than this set of theories allows. I will show the limits of Edelman's account of queer negativity, which adopts a polemical approach that prescribes how queer people *should* live, in a way that leaves no room for the necessity of communities and a utopian vision, as José Esteban Muñoz has also argued.

*O Fantasma* and *The Living End* serve as apt examples of the more "negative" side of gay cinema, those that deviate from positive or idealized representations of homosexuals by focusing on characters that revel in their abjection. Kristeva's multifaceted elaboration of abjection is expressed in both films through gay characters that embody that which has been cast off to preserve an orderly existence. *O Fantasma* interweaves images and themes of violence, filth and sexual obsession, depicting a trash collector in Lisbon, Sergio, who becomes fixated on a biker, João (Andre Barbosa), who

is indifferent to him. The film obliterates the separation between the private and the public and homosexual encounters are made possible with anyone, anywhere. The protagonist also begins to act mute and feral; he crawls, climbs, licks and fucks, and emits barks and moans more than any discernable human speech. All of these elements work together in a way that embodies many of Kristeva's ideas about the abject, particularly that it signals a breakdown of structured language and the separation between self and other, as well as between subject and object in the face of death and decay. Kristeva's theory of the abject will help illuminate these sounds and images, allowing for a reflection on those buried parts of humanity in conjunction with homosexuality, moving beyond Edelman's narrow conception of queerness.

*The Living End* will propel my argument further by simultaneously embodying and transcending Edelman's account of queer negativity, particularly since the film is more ambiguous in its characterizations and tone than *O Fantasma*. I will look at *The Living End*'s depiction of violence, death and sexuality, as the two HIV-positive leads, Luke (Mike Dytri) and Jon (Craig Gilmore) develop a relationship that is at once volatile and tender. This film shows how two gay men living with HIV navigate a world that is largely hostile to them, how they face it with an attitude of defiance, as well as how they experience pleasures (both sexual and romantic) in spite of it. I argue that, despite the film's embodiment of negativity, it also points towards Muñoz's notions of queer optimism and utopia, however faint and uncertain they may be. The utopia that is conceived here entails a world in which queer subjects can thrive in their difference, rather than be forced to compromise it. The third chapter will expand this notion of

difference through a discussion of gender nonconforming bodies on screen and concepts of multiplicity and becoming.

### **The Limits of Queer Negativity**

Lee Edelman, in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), emphasizes the death drive as an inherent and vital element of gay desire that destabilizes the structures of Symbolic reality. In psychoanalytic theory, the Symbolic refers to the social, ideological laws that make up heteropatriarchal society; how we communicate with and relate to others is dictated by these norms. However, Edelman argues that embracing one's abjection as a queer subject does not result in liberation from the Symbolic, as the Symbolic is in fact inescapable. He writes, "Not that we are, or ever could be, outside the Symbolic ourselves; but we can, nonetheless, make the choice to accede to our cultural production as figures—*within* the dominant logic of narrative, *within* Symbolic reality—for the dismantling of such a logic and thus for the death drive it harbors within" (22). In other words, the Symbolic contains within itself the conditions of its own disruption, even as it perpetually reconstitutes itself. Edelman demonstrates that the creation of any narrative, whether it is (hetero)normativity, identity, the Law, etc., is an attempt to achieve a sense of linearity and control over time, past and future. The future is traditionally associated with the idea of the Child. This idealized image of the Child advocated by the conservative right implies a heterosexual child and traditional family unit and also points out the unproductive nature of homosexual sex. Edelman argues that by embracing unproductive sexuality and rejecting the illusory idea of the Child, as well as any notion of a stable identity, the queer subject reveals the inherent instability and ultimate futility of any imposed teleology or stricture. Edelman argues that

gay men should become harbingers of death, always positioned against an unavoidably heteronormative future, and that they should perceive self-shattering pleasure as an end in itself. This argument erases the multifarious ways of conceiving identity and being in the world. Both films discussed in this chapter feature characters that embody Edelman's ideas about gay desire and the death drive. In *O Fantasma*, Sergio dives headlong into his dark impulses, fueled by lust, obsession, and loneliness, and in *The Living End*, Jon and Luke seem to perpetually exist on the road, on the margins of American society, condemned to an HIV-positive status and adopting a defiant attitude towards a world that rejects them. There are also instances in the film of Jon murdering violent homophobes, and his nihilistic attitude seems to embody Edelman's ideas.

At this point, it is important to clarify the connection between queer negativity and Kristeva's concept of the abject, since they overlap in several ways. When it comes to the self-shattering sexual experiences advocated by Edelman, as well as by Lauren Berlant (2013) and Leo Bersani (2009), unproductive sexuality implies the death drive. These theorists argue that this form of self-negation, of being unconcerned with productivity (on multiple levels), is closely tied to queer identity and desire. These desires undermine and reveal the inherent instability of heteronormative and masculinist ideologies in society. The death drive, the desire to be annihilated (whether figurative or not), becomes embodied by some marginalized people. In contrast, Kristeva's concept of the abject does not specifically concern homosexuality and does not argue for a particular way of living. Unlike theorists of queer negativity, Kristeva describes the death drive in relation to that which threatens to unravel an orderly existence. She exemplifies this ambivalence with the sight of a corpse, which she refers to as the most fundamental

manifestation of abjection. A human being objectified, the sight of a corpse destabilizes our separation between subjects and objects; it is something we feel compelled to reject, even as it undeniably inspires fascination.

The self-shattering sexual experiences elevated by Edelman, Bersani, and Berlant are similar to Kristeva's theorization of the pre-lingual phase in childhood development, when language is non-representative and fluid. Kristeva and these theorists all conceptualize affective experiences that overwhelm subjectivity. Affect is central during the pre-lingual or semiotic phase (which Kristeva terms *chora*), when self-identity is not yet concrete. The "I" is unformed and there is no separation between self and (m)other (Kristeva 12-14). Kristeva's concept of the semiotic chora exceeds the expressive limits of the Symbolic, governing its own signification system that recalls the pre-lingual phase through poetic expression. The intense states of being advocated by Edelman, Bersani and Berlant, particularly excessive pleasure (or *jouissance*), point towards the semiotic chora in that they also overwhelm the subject and dissolve bodily boundaries. *O Fantasma* exemplifies these ideas about excessive pleasure through Sergio's sexual encounters with anonymous men, as well as through scenes of autoeroticism, which often interweave images or impressions of violence, death, and filth.

*The Living End*, as negative as it appears, also points to Berlant's sense of optimism and Muñoz's idea of utopia. Berlant departs from Edelman's brand of queer negativity by incorporating a sense of optimism alongside her theories of self-shattering experiences that create new knowledges and pleasures. This departure from Edelman's ideas, elucidated through a dialogue between them in *Sex, or the Unbearable* (2013), will be a productive starting point in transcending some of the more limiting aspects of queer

negativity. Berlant's articulation of how we remain attached even in unbearable situations, which to her is a form of optimism, as well as her idea that overwhelming, dramatic experiences can be transformative, will be productive for my analysis of *The Living End*.

José Esteban Muñoz's theory of queer utopia, which perceives glimmers of utopian possibility through instances of queer togetherness, including public sex, will be fruitful for my departure from the confines of queer negativity. Muñoz takes Berlant's position further in his book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009), where he declares that "we are not yet queer," and that queerness can be perceived on the horizon (1). He writes, "We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future" (1). Muñoz adopts a "critical idealism" in order to counter the prevalence of political pessimism and queer negativity's tendency to dwell in the present. He instead seeks alternative ways of being in the world. I will show how Muñoz and Berlant's approaches are expressed in the films, as well as in our potential responses to them, since the films contain their own pleasures that tap into feelings of attraction and repulsion, as well as the desire to breach societal boundaries.

### **Silent Phantoms**

In *O Fantasma*, Sergio's behaviour approaches Kristeva's idea of the semiotic, which is a gestural and poetic expression of interiority that defies the coherence of structured language. Sergio often acts like a feral animal and communicates primarily without words. He crawls, licks, sniffs, bites, and barks alongside his pet dog. He seems to exist in a liminal state, on the threshold between human and animal, defying the laws

that govern human relations. This representation of an unstable, almost ecstatic, subjectivity personifies Edelman's notion that queer identities challenge Symbolic reality. Sergio's animalistic, violent behaviour is interrelated with his sexuality, which takes on a self-shattering quality that recalls Edelman.

Sergio's mode of being also evokes Kristeva's theory of pre-subjectivity, which consists of expressions of interiority and intensities that overwhelm the body, without the use of speech. Kristeva's concept of the semiotic chora challenges psychoanalytic certainty and its preconceived notions of the unconscious. She argues that the chora "causes the sad, analytic silence to hover above a strange, foreign discourse, which, strictly speaking, shatters verbal communication (made up of a knowledge and a truth that are nevertheless heard) by means of a device that mimics terror, enthusiasm, or orgy, and is more closely related to rhythm and song than it is to the World" (30). This idea of the chora and the unconscious being akin to rhythm, song, and poetic language will come up again in the second chapter when I consider more experimental films that exemplify these concepts through narrative structure and the ways that actors' bodies move on screen.

Kristeva names these self-shattering experiences that defy language as we know it with the French word *jouissance*, which refers to feelings of intense pleasure or ecstasy (9). Edelman describes *jouissance* in a similar manner to Kristeva, though he does not source it in a primal or pre-subjective stage as Kristeva does (Edelman 25). Both theorists describe *jouissance* as a painful passion that overwhelms the ego (the Symbolic), and Kristeva elaborates that the ego is preserved by creating an "alter ego" that dwells in "sublime alienation, a forfeited existence," fascinated by that which remains abject and

“repugnant” (Kristeva 9). This notion of an alter ego that maintains the subject while flirting with abjection echoes Edelman’s belief that we can never truly exist outside of the Symbolic, even in experiences of *jouissance*. According to Edelman, the state of excess that occurs on the threshold between pleasure and pain points towards a figurative death of the self through the practice of unproductive sex. It also signals a rupturing or decentralization of binaries, and thus the end of identity as we know it. The “alienation intrinsic to meaning,” as Edelman puts it, is what *jouissance* is meant to help the queer subject escape, since they are in a position in which their identity is either called into question or outright rejected (25).

In *O Fantasma*, Sergio personifies these self-annihilating desires. His subjectivity becomes more and more slippery as he succumbs to his sexual obsessions. The height of this occurs when he appears in a black latex bodysuit and mask, prowling the city. His identity is blotted out, and he appears as a tear in the fabric of the landscape. His feeling of *jouissance* is primarily represented through his overwhelming desire for João, the mysterious biker, specifically when he performs autoerotic asphyxiation in the shower while wearing João’s torn swimsuit after retrieving it from his trash. Sergio is in the center of the frame, in the corner of the shower, with only his upper body visible. He faces the wall on the right and rubs the swimsuit aggressively, with soap all over his body. He then ties the shower head around his neck, tightening it as he masturbates, moaning and grunting. After he ejaculates, he tiredly leans his face against the shower wall, and then continues cleaning himself.

This scene depicting Sergio’s state of *jouissance* has the ability to elicit in the viewer a strange identification with gay desire that is colored by filth and death. I may

not share in the source of Sergio's feelings and pleasures, as they are inextricably bound to his obsession with João and his own job as a trash collector, but the scene still evokes an erotic power. His body is visibly tense and constricted as he fervently jerks off and tightens the showerhead around his neck. He breathes heavily, panting, deriving intense pleasure from wearing the biker's swimsuit and feeling it touch his skin. It is this *jouissance* expressed by the actor that arouses me, while it retains a strange and unknown quality that makes it even more powerful.

Sergio's state of *jouissance* is intertwined with the death drive. His life is permeated with filth, violent obsession, and an unbridled libido. He is at once destructive towards others and himself. The film opens with a man dressed in a black latex bodysuit and mask penetrating another man, whose hands are handcuffed behind his back. There is a cut from a view of their lower bodies to a shot of their faces. The bound man is shown struggling with his mouth covered, and the aggressor is biting on his neck as he ejaculates. This shot is made visually appealing through the black latex suit and mask, as well as the contrast between the black latex, the muted and blurred grey-green background, and the naked upper body of the man getting fucked, bitten, and chloroformed. Only near the end of the film do we realize that the attacker is Sergio, when the film replays the scene but with more detail. Sergio slowly walks into the biker's room as he sleeps, with handcuffs and tape in hand. After restraining him, Sergio drags João outside the house and onto the street, kicking him repeatedly. He then runs away, leaving him behind. On his knees, Sergio bends over a lake and drinks from the water. He prowls around the city in his black latex suit, climbing rocks and hills; a crawling void. He climbs on the back of a garbage truck and gets off near a landfill. As dawn

approaches, he sifts through the trash for food. At one point he captures a rabbit, grabs it by the ears and holds it over a rock as he drinks from dirty water, which he vomits out shortly after.

There is something deeply alien about these images, which depict a man so consumed by the darkness of his desires that he becomes inhuman. The viewer's pleasures stem from that which repels and from the strangeness of these images, as well as from the defiance of language and common human relations. This indulgence in a destructive, consuming passion is inseparable from gay identity in the film, in the sense that Sergio takes his marginal status in Portuguese society to the extreme. I enjoy these images even (and especially) when they are not directly relatable. There is a morbid beauty behind the scenes that commingle violence, death and sexuality. This beauty lies in the fact that they are unusual and visually striking images that evoke seemingly contradictory ideas and emotions, showing the extremes of human behavior that stem from loneliness and obsession. It becomes less about the specificity of the images and fantasies displayed on screen, and more about our hidden desire to lose ourselves, at times even to be destroyed, to become nothing, or perhaps something else, beyond our limits. Even though Sergio seems to embody the self-shattering and un(re)productive pleasures that Edelman advocates, the delight that the film may elicit in some viewers is less a guide to queer living and more about confronting the darker parts of ourselves, as well as the desire to disrupt social boundaries and heteropatriarchal culture.

### **Latex, Trash, and Decay**

The representation of Sergio's pleasures and obsessions on screen explodes desire beyond the limits of fetishism and phallocentrism as conceived by many psychoanalysts.

Sergio surrounds himself with decay, rummaging through waste. He looks through João's garbage and finds his ripped swimsuit, which he then presses against his face, taking a deep whiff. A psychoanalytic approach to these images might perceive them as fetishistic, the swimsuit standing in as a substitute for the missing phallus. In *The Picture of Abjection: Film, Fetish, and the Nature of Difference*, Tina Chanter critiques psychoanalytic narratives that presuppose the phallus as that which is constantly being substituted by other objects in order to satiate the lack always already present in the mother's missing penis. Chanter writes, "Symbolically, the role of the fetish is always and only to represent a penis that never existed. Or rather, it only ever exists as conforming to the *expectation* fostered in the masculine imaginary that organizes Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, namely that women *should* have a penis" (12). As a counternarrative, Chanter foregrounds abjection in order to destabilize the classificatory system upheld by fetishism, which privileges a white/masculine imaginary. In the context of cinema, Chanter's approach troubles homogenizing ideas about the process of identification that emphasize an insatiable originary lack, allowing us to challenge "imaginary assumptions" perpetuated by symbolic structures, such as racism and heteronormativity (122). For the sake of this chapter, I will focus on this challenge to heteronormativity, and echo Chanter's turn to abjection rather than fetishism, in order to better understand the conjunction of gay desire, sexuality, violence and death on screen.

Foregrounding abjection ultimately reveals the illusory nature of fetishism, specifically when it is governed by phallogocentric logic. In other words, the abject shows desire and fetishism to be a bottomless void. In *O Fantasma*, when Sergio fondles and sniffs João's swimsuit, the garment takes on a sacred quality, embodying an unattainable

object of desire. The film represents the fetish object as abject, wresting the nature of desire from the confines of Freudian psychoanalysis, which locates the sacred quality of the fetish within the Symbolic and a lack/plenitude binary. The abject thus renders our desires more complex, fluid and mysterious. Since the swimsuit embodies an unattainable object of desire, and serves as part of Sergio's obsessive fixation on someone who is ultimately unknown to him, the object ends up exceeding that which is desired. It becomes less about the biker himself, and more of a catalyst that triggers Sergio's abject drives, delusions, and aggressions.

Sergio's desires become inseparable from trash, death, and decay, creating an orientation toward abjection that confounds psychoanalytic narratives of fetishism that uphold phallogentrism and a lack/plenitude binary. Sexual desire (in this case violent obsession and lust) is equated with the death drive, which is most strikingly exemplified in the scene depicting autoerotic asphyxiation. These scenes that display sexual pleasure, violence, trash, and death are interesting because they seem contradictory or otherwise unrelated. Aspects of this, particularly the collision of trash and sexuality, may seem foreign to viewers because they are specific to Sergio. These images are affectively (and intellectually) potent, working on our bodies, even making our own desires seem strange. Vivian Sobchack, a film theorist known for her work on phenomenology, discusses the interrelationship between the screen and the viewer's body, describing the ambivalent/ambiguous experience at the movies as "unnameable" and "undecidable" in its collision between the literal and the figural (73). The point is not to derive a direct understanding of the protagonist's desires or his actions, or to relegate them to psychoanalytic narratives, but to enjoy, be disgusted, or both, even without

understanding. *O Fantasma* can then serve as a fractured mirror of the abject parts of ourselves, filled with gaps, confusions, fears, and attractions.

### **Dark and Cold: Public Sex in *O Fantasma***

*O Fantasma* contains a few instances of public sex that differ from Muñoz's more positive and utopian ideas about public sex, while still being effective (and affective) in their representation of the breakdown of social divisions between private and public through gay desire. Muñoz discusses the writings of John Giorno, who describes his public sex experience with artist Keith Haring in 1982 at the Prince Street subway toilets in Bristol. Muñoz argues that the descriptive excess in Giorno's text signals a "transformative queer politics" through a transgressive sexual experience (36). Muñoz uses texts like this to work towards his notion of "queer world-making" which manifests "through the performance of queer utopian memory, that is, a utopia that understands its time as reaching beyond some nostalgic past that perhaps never was or some future whose arrival is continuously belated—a utopia in the present" (37). These moments in time are frozen through the performative act of writing, with descriptions of genitalia, body fluids, and orgasm. These experiences transcend their occurrence in history by embodying moments of *jouissance* in an otherwise bleaker time for homosexuals. According to Muñoz, moments like this, as well as moments of tenderness between men (as in Frank O'Hara's poem *Having a Coke with You*), can be gleaned from the past in order to imagine and enact a better future. He argues that, beyond Giorno's text simply being a "picture of sex, [...] it is also a picture of utopian transport and a reconfiguration of the social, a reimaging of our actual conditions of possibility, all of this in the face of a

global epidemic” (38). Muñoz elevates public displays of sexuality above private sex, arguing that the former is vital, inherently revolutionary, and has utopian potential.

While the different scenes of public sex that Muñoz describes show tenderness and a sense of connection among gay men, those depicted in *O Fantasma* are colder and more detached, revolving around a lonely and (self-)destructive character. However, despite the fact that these dark and destructive public sex acts differ from the image Muñoz projects, they elicit a similar sort of pleasure and perverse enjoyment in the viewer that stems from witnessing the transgression of boundaries and social structures. The separation between the private and the public is nearly obliterated in the film, resonating with Muñoz’s descriptions of public gay sex acts that break with the confinement of homosexuality to private spaces. In addition to the scene between Sergio and Virgilio, Sergio finds a cop (Jorge Almeida) restrained in the back of a car. He gives the cop a hand job until he ejaculates in his hand. With duct tape covering his mouth, the cop is unable to moan, and Sergio’s dog licks the semen off of Sergio’s hand. In another sequence, after being caught breaking into João’s home, Sergio is restrained by a different police officer (Guerra da Mata). Sergio crawls against a tree, and the officer stands over him, caressing him with a baton. Sergio uses his teeth to undo the officer’s belt. While Sergio gnaws at the cop’s underwear, the cop pushes him onto the ground and walks away. These two cop scenes incorporate both pleasure and violence in scenarios that depict embodiments of state power. The scenes become more like fantasies that manipulate presumptions of law and order.

In a different scene that also contrasts with Muñoz’s utopian image of public sex, Sergio seduces a man (Rodrigo Garin) in a public washroom. Sergio looks through the

mirror, licks his lips and locks eyes with the anonymous man, who is standing at the urinal. The man gets down on his knees beside the urinal and gives Sergio a blow job for a few seconds, until Sergio decides he is finished with him and pushes him off. This scene exemplifies Sergio's coldness and cruelty, as he uses anonymous men for brief moments of pleasure that always fail to satisfy him, since he is obsessively fixated on someone who is indifferent to him.

Ultimately, these images of public sex do not carry the utopian potential that Muñoz describes in that they do not resurrect moments of gay bliss, togetherness and affection from the past, nor do they show glimpses of them in the present. However, this does not make the public sex depicted in *O Fantasma* any less vital, even if the characters in the film remain trapped in a culture that stigmatizes homosexuality, causing it to manifest in deranged ways. What makes the film's representation of public sex vital is that this derangement is brought to the surface, with the private leaking into the public, fantasy into reality, a ruptured wasteland of society and the product of its attempts at repression and control.

### **Desire Pierces Reality**

*O Fantasma*'s dark visual tone and depiction of perverse sexuality work with its dream-like quality to destabilize everyday reality, allowing those abjected parts of ourselves to surface. In the book *Independent Queer Cinema: Reviews and Interviews* (2006), Gary Kramer states that the film's director, João Pedro Rodrigues, "admits that his own fantasies inspired him to depict the intense sexual escapades in *O Fantasma*. 'I was always attracted to rubbish collectors,' he says" (26). It is interesting to note that Ricardo Meneses, who plays Sergio, is not a professional actor, and that Rodrigues met

him at a gay bar where Meneses worked. There is a collision between fiction and reality, and the rawness of the film becomes more potent when the director describes the exhausting and difficult scenes endured by the actor. The one he describes in particular is when Meneses is wearing “the latex suit in the freezing dump at night. He suffered a lot. I believe we can actually see his pain on screen, and the sense of reality and tension we got could not be achieved if we faked the scenes in any way” (Kramer 27). The viewer can discern the character/actor’s exhaustion through his heavy breathing as he climbs a hill while wearing the latex suit, at one point crouching down in the fetal position, shivering next to a fire that has been lit inside a barrel. This blurring between actor and character resonates with Sobchack’s idea that the bodies, both off and onscreen, “subvert their own fixity from within, commingling flesh and consciousness, reversing the human and technological sensorium, so that meaning, and where it is made, does not have a discrete origin in either spectators’ bodies or cinematic representation but emerges in their conjunction” (67). With the knowledge that the actor who plays Sergio is truly experiencing exhaustion rather than simply performing it, another layer is added to the complex affective and intellectual relationship between the viewer’s body and the bodies on screen. More generally, being reminded that the characters and images on screen are suffused with actual human flesh and consciousness reflects back on us and our own bodies as we sense (and make sense of) the images on screen.

Despite this impression of realism, the film contains a fantastical quality that works with its abject depiction of homosexuality to disrupt everyday reality. The film’s aimless structure, which primarily serves as a vehicle for Sergio’s unspoken desires and obsessions, his inexplicable transitions into animalistic behaviour, as well as the stark and

unusual quality of his black latex suit, all work to create the film's fantastical quality. Rodrigues explains, "I tried to reveal 'hidden mysteries' in the film, [...] I pursued a 'fantastic ambiance' through real palpable places and objects" (Kramer 26). As a garbage collector, Sergio is represented as a lonely, invisible character; he becomes "part of the urban landscape," as Rodrigues describes it, the black latex suit adding to this considerably (26). The city itself becomes unrecognizable to those that live there, according to Rodrigues, who sought to construct an imaginary geography (26).

*O Fantasma* also illustrates Muñoz's concept of queer time. In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz describes what he refers to as queer, ecstatic temporality, as opposed to straight (heterosexual) temporality. He writes, "Queerness's time is a stepping out of the linearity of straight time. Straight time is a self-naturalizing temporality. Straight time's 'presentness' needs to be phenomenologically questioned, and this is the fundamental value of a queer utopian hermeneutics. Queerness's ecstatic and horizontal temporality is a path and a movement to a greater openness to the world" (25). Sergio in *O Fantasma* seems to exist outside of straight time, crawling aimlessly around the city in his black latex suit, relentlessly pursuing pleasure. Sergio becomes more and more inhuman as the film progresses, culminating in the scene when he climbs on the back of a garbage truck and crawls into a garbage dump. He digs through dirt, slowly creeps among rocks and trash and drinks from dirty water. Rodrigues' creation of an imaginary geography out of the streets of Lisbon also contributes to this, in the sense that the spaces become more subjective, coinciding with a marginal and alien character like Sergio. By creating a meandering structure and subjective landscapes that coincide with Sergio's strange behaviours and desires, Rodrigues' film creates a landscape of otherness that invites the

viewer to think outside of straight time and also space. The next two chapters also resonate with Muñoz's concept of queer time through even more formally experimental films.

Overall, Sergio's animalistic and mute behaviour in *O Fantasma* embodies Kristeva's concept of the semiotic and the stage of pre-subjectivity that the abject recalls, and defies psychoanalytic narratives of fetishism and phallogentrism. Sergio's feral mode of being is interrelated with his sexuality and self-destructive sexual encounters with anonymous men, resonating with Edelman's adherence to self-shattering and un(re)productive gay sex. Sergio personifies states of *jouissance* that oscillate between pleasure and pain and that approach the death drive, while ultimately escaping a total undoing of the self. The film embodies Muñoz's idea of queer time (and space). The depictions of public sex in the film, while not positive or utopian in the way that Muñoz theorizes, foreground the effects of a culture that renders homosexuality as deviant, as well as the confrontation with the abject parts of ourselves. Sergio becomes like an alien creature roaming the streets of Lisbon, a mysterious figure whose behaviour and pleasures evade strict categorization or easy relatability on the part of the viewer, who is invited to both enjoy and be disgusted by images that conflate violence, death and sexuality in ways that exceed the specificity of Sergio's actions as well as any prescriptive or totalizing way of being in the world.

### **Towards (and Beyond) the Death Drive**

While *O Fantasma* elicits pleasure in viewing the unrelenting darkness of Sergio's desires, *The Living End* transcends Edelman's nihilism by combining an attitude of defiance towards a homophobic society with moments of tenderness. In *The Living*

*End*, the two gay leads are beacons of death without being either cautionary or celebratory. Shortly after Jon, a Los Angeles film critic, finds out he is HIV positive, he is thrown into a violent and dangerous relationship with Luke, a vagabond who is also carrying the infection. Jon meets Luke after Luke has shot and killed three homophobic young men toting baseball bats. Luke flees the scene and jumps in front of Jon's car, urging him to help him escape. Jon's ambivalence towards Luke is constant throughout the film. Film scholar James M. Moran likens the film to Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* (1964), particularly in its depiction of "surrender to an attractive rebel whose homoeroticism is linked to the death drive" (19). Luke's erratic outlaw attitude inspires both fear and attraction in Jon, who has a timid but warm personality. Even though this warmth never truly disappears throughout the film, Jon's encounter with Luke is also an encounter with death, as Jon leaves behind his old way of living, showing the potentially transformative power of approaching abjection.

From the bumper sticker on Jon's car that reads "choose death," to the corpses shown on television as Jon discusses his HIV-positive status over the phone, as well as the decorative skulls and skeletons shown throughout, death is ubiquitous in the film. Murder is shown and talked about numerous times. In addition to the sequence that shows Luke killing three men, there is a scene that shows Luke erotically beating a man's bare ass with a tennis racquet, until the man's wife comes home and stabs him, his blood splattering on Luke's face. In another scene, Luke goes to see Jon in the middle of the night after killing a homophobic cop. Jon wakes up as Luke approaches him with the cop's blood on the side of his face, and the two men embrace while Luke holds the gun in his own mouth. Later, Luke recounts a suicide he witnessed, and describes the sound the

body made when it hit the ground. By permeating the world of the two protagonists with death, the film creates an image of gay abjection that is correlated with HIV/AIDS. The film also draws connections between death and sexuality, specifically when the two men are having sex in the shower and Luke says, “When I start to come, choke me,” which recalls Sergio’s act of autoerotic asphyxiation in *O Fantasma*. In a later scene, Luke says to Jon, “I hear death is a lot like coming,” and requests that Jon kill him if he begins exhibiting symptoms of the virus.

On the surface, these images seem to complement and embody Edelman’s ideas about being queer by embracing the death drive. However, the viewer’s pleasure in watching images of death, violence and eroticism in queer films does not necessarily entail such potentially stifling theories because they do not argue for a particular way of being gay. Watching films that intermingle images of life and death, pleasure and pain is an intellectual and affective experience that creates a temporary escape from the obligations and limits of everyday reality. These films also point towards the abject parts of the human condition, tapping into that which inspires fear and fascination, attraction and repulsion. The scenes and recurring visual motifs in *The Living End* show death encroaching on life in a way that is often over the top and comedic, which is a major difference from *O Fantasma*. Araki treats the topics of death and HIV/AIDS lightly while also incorporating angst and despair, expressing a particularly *gay* angst. This ambivalence towards that which could kill us or drastically disrupt our life is most clearly represented in the film through the relationship between Luke and Jon.

## **Ambivalence of Dread**

*The Living End* exemplifies some of Lauren Berlant's ideas about dread and the conflicting emotions that may result from it. In *Sex, or the Unbearable*, Berlant writes, "Dread gives a fundamentally queer shape to life, multiplying a cacophony of futures and attachments. This is a relational style made stark, and collective, by illness" (39). This feeling of dread, in this case within the context of HIV/AIDS, creates a sense of connectivity in an otherwise amorphous community, while also raising "uncomfortable questions about repair, the unclarity of what repair would fix, how it would feel as process and telos, and whether it would be possible, desirable, or worth risking" (Berlant 39). Berlant is referring to queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's (2002) notion of reparativity, which seeks to mend the negative effects of homophobia, though Sedgwick emphasizes that the repaired parts do not necessarily amount to "any pre-existing whole" (128). Sedgwick contrasts reparativity with paranoia and the more simplistic, linear relations it fosters. The final scene in *The Living End* shows these two HIV-positive gay men, who are in many ways alienated from the world, but who manage to find a connection (however unstable it may be) with each other. Their relationship is both tender and hostile, and this instability and uncertainty are what cause one to question, as Berlant mentions, whether or not repair is worth risking.

In this final scene, Jon decides they should go back home after Luke slices his own wrist so that he can "see" the disease. Luke refuses to go back, and when Jon begins to walk away, Luke pulls out his gun and says: "You'll never, ever find anybody who cares as much about you as I do." Luke then shoots his gun into the air after Jon tells him that he doesn't "have the balls" to shoot him, which prompts Jon to attack Luke, pushing

him to the ground. When the two men come to a stop after rolling on the dirt road, Jon taunts Luke to shoot him, and Luke hits him on the side of the head with his gun, knocking him unconscious, and then licks the blood off of his head. Luke then drags Jon onto the beach, and as he begins to wake up, he sees that Luke is tying his hands and feet to stop him from leaving. Luke says to Jon: “Can’t you see? I love you more than life. I don’t care about anything anymore.” Luke then proceeds to rape Jon while holding the tip of the gun in between his own teeth. Provoked by Jon’s taunts to “just do it,” Luke pulls the trigger, but the gun doesn’t go off. Luke throws the gun and sits in silence, and then Jon hits him in the face and walks off screen, only to come back moments later to sit with him. Jon sits facing away from Luke and leans on his shoulder. The camera cuts to an extreme long shot of them at the beach before cutting to the film’s credits.

The contradictory emotions that this scene elicits exemplify Lauren Berlant’s ideas about the ambivalence of dread. Despite their recurring arguments that culminate in Luke raping Jon, a sense of camaraderie is always just beneath the surface, and the last moment solidifies this, particularly when Jon leans on Luke’s shoulder. They may be HIV positive, but this diagnosis does not necessarily seal their fate. The scene is strangely optimistic, even while uncertainty about the future looms on the horizon. Berlant’s idea that feelings of dread cause us to question whether or not repair is worth risking arises in the film as a result of an unstable relationship depicted in its liminal state, with both characters existing together in a sort of limbo, facing an uncertain future.

This sense of ambivalence, and of ambiguity, is akin to Kristeva’s description of abjection, which delineates the subject in peril, in the presence of death in the midst of life. While not as self-consuming and negative as in *O Fantasma, The Living End*

portrays an uncertain and in-between mode of being that is tied in with being gay, facing homophobia, and being diagnosed with HIV. The title of the film alludes to this liminal state. Luke and Jon, particularly since they are HIV-positive and thus perceived to be a threat to society, are zombies; the living dead. Luke in particular embodies this in-between state. However, rather than being strictly miserable in his marginality, there is a “desperate euphoria” in his behaviour, as Moran observes (22). At one point Luke says to Jon, “Don’t you see it? We’re totally free.” Moran argues, “Such a stress on the individual self is anathema to collective notions of identity. With barely each other to turn to, Luke and Jon are left despairing in the limbo of a terminal existence, a doomed middle without resolution in either a narrative or political sense” (22). However, the in-between state that the film ends with does not necessarily have to be doomed, as proven by the moments of tenderness in the film, as well as its overall angry attitude, which inspires action rather than despair. The film may not come to any resolution “in either a narrative or political sense” as Moran points out (22), but it depicts a bond between gay men that, despite its precariousness, shows defiance towards heteronormative culture and politics. The film also shows what it’s like to be queer and live in a constant in-between state, with the feeling of being both in and out of society.

### **Transcending Queer Negativity**

Lauren Berlant perceives the transformative power of “being incomplete, contradictory, and out of control” and seeks a “transfigured relation of drama to dramatics,” which is an interrogative and contemplative relation to seemingly unbearable experiences (67). *O Fantasma* and *The Living End* exemplify this receptivity to the world and to negative experiences through encounters with unbearable experiences that

approach self-destruction but never truly reach it. Watching films like these invites me to seek a “transfigured relation” to my own dramas, with all the ambivalent and bittersweet emotions that they entail. They overwhelm me, at times I feel as though I may die from them, at other times I am able to detach myself and analyze them, knowing I will not be the same once they are finally over (although they are never truly over). Edelman perceives there to be a problem with Berlant’s approach because it does not allow for the type of undoing he is advocating. However, this prompts one to question whether this total undoing of the self is even possible. Is it not a state of being that we can only ever approach, catch glimpses of, or negotiate? Berlant’s position seems more grounded in lived experience. Furthermore, Berlant clarifies that she does not seek to overcome nonsovereignty through reparativity, but rather to apprehend unbearable negative experiences so that we do not repudiate them for being too dramatic and overwhelming.

Muñoz’s ideas about queer utopia take Berlant’s position even further, allowing a clear departure from Edelman’s insistence on a bleak future that is always and inevitably heteronormative. Rather than focusing exclusively on the individual and the pursuit of intense pleasure, Muñoz combines antirelational and relational approaches to queer theory for a more complex approach. To illustrate his perspective, he describes French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy’s notion of “being singular plural.” According to Muñoz, Nancy’s theory “addresses the way in which the singularity that marks a singular existence is always coterminously plural—which is to say that an entity registers as both particular in its difference but at the same time always relational to other singularities” (10-11). The final shot of *The Living End*, when the characters are sitting together at the beach against the horizon, illustrates this theory in that it not only displays the men’s

connection to each other, but also to other gay and queer people, expressed through an extreme long shot that evokes a wider world beyond the limits of the two individual gay men at the center of the film. Jon and Luke may seem isolated from the world, but this isolation is primarily in relation to conservative, heterosexual culture. The final sequence expresses the feeling of solitude and togetherness, loneliness and mutual connection, in a community as amorphous and varied as the LGBTQ+ community, filled with its own conflicts and contradictions.

Muñoz's conception of utopia draws from German Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch, who argued that seeking utopia entails "a critique of the present and of its limits, its barriers" (Muñoz 37). The defiant attitude of *The Living End* elevates the film beyond mere nihilism and hopelessness, and this defiance is exemplified through violence against homophobes, as well as criticism against Republican politics and the American president at the time, George H.W. Bush. This anger towards Bush and the negative impact of Republican politics on those who are HIV positive is shown in the film when Luke, holding a gun, says to Jon: "What do you say we go to Washington and blow Bush's brains out? Or better yet, we can hold him at gun point and inject him with a syringe full of our blood." He follows this by saying that there would be "a magic cure by tomorrow." This statement implies the neglect faced by queer people and other minorities, who may be subjected to HIV/AIDS but whose sexuality, gender, race, and/or socioeconomic status deprives them of medical attention. Luke's anger towards the way things are is also shown when he says "Fuck work, fuck the system, fuck everything!", as well as when he writes "I blame society" on the support structure of an underground parking. The film's director Gregg Araki expresses his own anger in a similar manner to Luke at the end of

the credits, where he adds that the film is “dedicated to Craig Lee (1954-1991) and the hundreds of thousands who’ve died and the hundreds of thousands more who will die because of a big white house full of republican fuckheads.” This polemic against the way things are allows us to see such injustices as anything but inevitable, inspiring a better future beyond the limits and barriers of the present.

Aside from this angry and defiant aspect of the film’s attitude, Araki has described *The Living End* as “a love story calling for tolerance and compassion” (quoted in Hart 17). The anger and despair over the AIDS pandemic is palpable in the film, but Araki’s intention to create something compassionate, even romantic, also shows, even if it isn’t as obvious as its negative sentiments. Film scholar Kylo-Patrick R. Hart, in his book on Araki’s films titled *Images for a Generation Doomed*, describes some of these “touching, romantic moments between the two gay protagonists, such as when Luke draws a huge heart on the window of the phone booth in which Jon is talking to Darcy and writes ‘Jon + Luke, till death do us part’ in the middle of it, or when Luke tells Jon that he is wild about him, or when Luke playfully moons Jon repeatedly outdoors in order to get Jon off the phone” (21). These moments interspersed throughout create friction with the more violent, confrontational encounters between the two men. The rape scene and the subsequent moment of tenderness that occurs before the credits roll complicate any straightforward reading of their relationship. Hart argues that Jon has been, in some ways, “corrupted” by Luke, exemplified when Jon accepts a blowjob from Luke while driving (after previously rejecting him when Luke wanted him to fondle his crotch while driving), as well as in the few instances when Jon resorts to violence against Luke (Hart 19). Hart concludes from this that despite the destructive aspects of their relationship, Jon

seems to stay with Luke at the end of the film “because his everyday life as he had come to know it (pre-HIV-infection and pre-Luke) now ceases to exist and he, like Luke, has been set free, liberated [...] from his previous shortsightedness and repressed way of being” (19). This is not to idealize HIV as some sort of necessary evil that triggers a vital transformation for gay and queer-identifying people, but rather a way of facing the negative and the lethal that does occur in a way that can entail “positive” changes. Jon’s previously dull, lonely and unhappy life is disrupted by a collision of two explosive events: his diagnosis and meeting Luke.

Equipped with a defiant attitude towards death, the film adopts some of the conventions of the road movie genre while subverting other aspects of it, centering on a gay relationship between men that may be turbulent but is not necessarily doomed to mutual destruction. As Hart observes, the protagonists’ lives are disrupted by the virus, essentially forcing them into challenging scenarios, with “the newfound knowledge, personal awakening, and/or tragedy that typically results” (21). However, *The Living End* subverts the road movie convention of a tragic ending by keeping both men alive at the end, which is both surprising and refreshing, particularly within the context of queer cinema. These transformative experiences that birth new knowledges, pleasures, and epiphanies recalls Berlant’s own flirtation with optimism in the face of negative, unbearable experiences. This mode of being in the world, in relation to others and oneself, fosters an “affective creativity” that produces, as Berlant writes, “the possibility of a recalibrated sensorium, as when a comic orientation toward aggression and pleasure produce new capacities for bearing, and not repairing, ambivalence” (Berlant and

Edelman 61). *The Living End* shows this “comic orientation” in the face of uncertainty, disease, and death, embodied by the gay protagonists and their troubled relationship.

This chapter analyzed two transgressive gay films, *O Fantasma* and *The Living End*, through and beyond theories of queer negativity, optimism, and utopia. I showed how films that seem to embody Edelman’s account of queer negativity by focusing on characters that are condemned to seemingly unbearable experiences or that revel in abject ways of being in the world actually exceed his negative stance in numerous ways. Our responses to these films are more complex than this type of theory will allow, especially when the theories are prescriptive, limiting, and ultimately nihilistic. Our pleasures, both intellectual and affective, in viewing the strange, sexually perverse and violent images in a film like *O Fantasma*, has more to do with our attraction and repulsion to those abjected parts of ourselves, as well as the desire to defy societal boundaries. Furthermore, *The Living End* personified this ambivalence with the destructive but affectionate relationship between Luke and Jon. This film transcends its nihilistic attitude by also being defiant, romantic, and compassionate. The next chapter will also reveal the limits of some contemporary queer theory by analyzing interracial acts of dominance and submission on screen.

## Chapter 2

### Role Reversals: The Fantasy Spaces of *Un chant d'amour* and *The Attendant*

In this chapter, I will show how the representation of feelings of shame and debasement in *Un chant d'amour* (France, Jean Genet, 1950) and *The Attendant* (UK, Isaac Julien, 1993), configured through the abjection of racialized gay men, challenges conventional understandings of these feelings, as well as theories that elevate them. Specifically, I will illuminate the layers of ambivalent emotion that emanate from seemingly negative experiences, as well as how these films disrupt the power dynamics of racial and sexual hierarchies. Similar to the first chapter, I am not arguing for a guide to how queer people *should* experience feelings of shame and debasement, but revealing how *some* encounter them in ways that complicate our usual perception of them.

To illuminate the complex relationship between racialized gay characters, their pleasures and fantasies, and the power structures they occupy, I will use queer theorist Kathryn Bond Stockton's analysis of the intersections of blackness, queerness, shame, and the different ways of being a bottom (social, economic, sexual, racial), Nguyen Tan Hoang's exploration of Asian male masculinity and bottomhood, which critiques conventional understandings of agency and submission through race and homosexuality, as well as Juana María Rodríguez's ideas about the contradictory but mutually-informing feelings of shame and pleasure that some Latinas experience in viewing or participating in acts of submission that are rooted in racism and colonial violence. Furthermore, I will think through Nguyen's stance that "we do not always have to attribute resistance and subversion to gay Asian American bottomhood in order to justify its existence and accord it serious analysis. In certain circumstances, bottoming entails the gleeful surrendering of

power; its pleasures do not always depend on resistance and subversion” (20). Thus, I will shift from the usual insistence on sociopolitical subversion to a more nuanced approach that acknowledges the racist heteropatriarchal confines that the racialized gay characters navigate in the films. I will discuss the dialectical relationship between the characters’ racial and sexual identities, their desires and fantasies, as well as how they all inform each other in and through various power structures. Having subversion as an ultimate goal obscures the manifold and at times contradictory nature of lived experience, expressed through the sounds and images on screen, which involve subjects that may simply feel *trapped*, finding pleasure in things they are not expected to, or even “supposed to” derive pleasure from. To illuminate this, I will discuss how embracing certain feelings of shame and debasement exemplifies our often conflicted bodily and sensory responses to abjection, particularly through analyses of limit-experiences that entail ambivalence, vulnerability, pleasure and pain. Thus, sadomasochism will be a recurring topic when discussing the films, which feature gay subjects that find pleasures in bondage and violent submission.

Nguyen Tan Hoang’s perspectives on bottomhood provide a foundation for my analyses of *The Attendant* and *Un chant d’amour*, which contain, respectively, a black and an Algerian character who enjoy temporarily suspending power over their bodies. Nguyen does not attempt to redeem bottomhood (in terms of anality or submission) in a way that preserves an image of masculine prowess, but rather seeks to incorporate the bottom position, along with prevalent notions of effeminacy and weakness attached to it, among the multitude of ways of deriving pleasure. Nguyen echoes the criticisms put forward by Mandy Merck and Tania Modleski of Leo Bersani and other gay theorists

who emphasize the “sacrifice” of masculinist agency, comparing homosexual men to heterosexual women in acts of bottoming, submission, and self-shattering sexual experiences. Nguyen explains, “These two feminist scholars’ arguments expose the masculinist basis of Bersani’s thesis, which rests on a surrendering of a male privilege that women do not possess” (13). Nguyen seeks to trouble the common associations between gay Asian American bottomhood and effeminacy since they tend to carry negative connotations that are at once racist, sexist, and homophobic. However, rather than perpetuate an idea of bottomhood that is somehow masculine as opposed to feminine, Nguyen “propose[s] an alternative paradigm that recognizes femininity, vulnerability, and other negatively coded aspects of the bottom position” (14). He sees the transgressive quality of bottoming as at times occurring in the very surrendering of power (20). These dynamics play out in *Un chant d’amour* and *The Attendant*, which contain characters that derive pleasure from relinquishing power through acts of submission that are informed by white supremacy, while also serving as a threat to it.

In a slight departure from Nguyen’s attributions of pleasure, vulnerability and femininity in the bottom position, Kathryn Bond Stockton centralizes feelings of shame and debasement in what she refers to as the “switchpoint” between black and queer (4). Stockton emphasizes the coexistence of self-sacrifice, beauty and bottomhood in queer aesthetics, drawing connections between the stigmas surrounding gay anal sex and those that occupy “the bottom of an economic scale” (68). Furthermore, Stockton argues that these various ways of being a bottom—the social, racial, sexual and the economic—all contain their own pleasures that cannot be denied, despite their damaging impact on marginalized people. I will mobilize Stockton’s ideas about “bottom values” and their

“unconventional pleasures,” as these things are foregrounded in both *The Attendant* and *Un chant d’amour*. However, Stockton’s project is hampered by its lack of intellectual engagement with black queer theorists (and scholars of color more generally), which makes her analyses less experientially nuanced, as critical race theorist Amy Abugo Ongiri has pointed out (1). In order to conduct an analysis of the films that more effectively conveys the complexity of lived experience, I will incorporate scholarship by Nguyen and queer of color scholar Juana María Rodríguez, as well as black feminist theorist bell hooks’ analysis of race and class in *The Attendant*.

Rodríguez describes the pleasures that some Latinas experience in viewing or participating in acts of submission, and the shame associated with these acts that are informed by their lived experience as abject racialized subjects. There is ambiguity and ambivalence rooted in these pleasures and experiences, which Rodríguez links to Latina@s’ “hybridity as a product of colonial violence” (142). She identifies the potential for pleasure in even those oppressive aspects of gender, racial, and sexual norms, while remaining conscious of the very real dangers and traumas of lived experience. Rodríguez writes, “In saying yes to gender, yes to our racial attachments, and in creating a space in which we can say yes to the perverse allure of heteronormativity, we can step away from a pathologizing discourse, even as we refuse to step away from the lived impact these discourses exert on social bodies” (145). I will use Rodríguez’s approach to address the displays of submission and ambiguous pleasures in *Un chant d’amour* and *The Attendant*, both of which are informed by white supremacy and colonialism.

## Scenes of Dominance and Submission

*Un chant d'amour* is an experimental short film from 1950, and author Jean Genet's only film. It centers on two male prisoners in France, one white (Lucien Sénémaud) and the other Algerian (Java), who communicate with a language of pure desire, without words. The film also includes a voyeuristic prison guard (André Reybaz), who abuses his power to leer at the prisoners, and is particularly transfixed by the Algerian prisoner. The film is highly poetic in its incorporation of fantasy and symbolic imagery, constructed in a way that complements the rhythmic and ecstatic movements of the various prisoners shown throughout. For the purpose of this chapter, I will focus on the Algerian prisoner and the desires he inspires in the voyeuristic prison guard, particularly within the context of French colonialism.

Isaac Julien's *The Attendant* is a short experimental film made 43 years later in the UK. The film is set in the real museum of Wilberforce House in Hull, England, dedicated to abolitionist William Wilberforce and the history of slavery. The museum space is transformed through the sadomasochistic interracial fantasies of a black male attendant (Thomas Baptiste) that involve a white male visitor (John Wilson), as well as the pleasures of a black female conservator (Cleo Sylvestre) as she witnesses the attendant's desires. As film scholar Devin Orgeron has observed, the film draws not only from the tradition of avant-garde cinema, but also from "magical realism, the African tradition of the griot story teller, camp, and gay beefcake film—none of which are typically termed avant-garde or 'high art'" (34). In addition to the conservator's delight in witnessing gay interracial sadomasochistic fantasies, I will focus on Julien's

reconfiguration of classical art, traditional History, and white supremacy through these fantasies.

### **Love and Lust behind Prison Walls**

Genet's *Un chant d'amour* is a productive example for my analysis of race and the disruption of power relations. The film is constructed to resemble a stream of consciousness, or a dream, which makes it work intuitively on the viewer. This approach mirrors Genet's experimental career as a novelist, playwright, and poet, as well as his own imprisonment. In the film, the Algerian and the white prisoner, held in adjoining cells, find strange ways of communicating, involving a straw and a cigarette, as well as by pressing their bodies against the dividing wall. The film fuses images of violence and eroticism throughout. The prisoners' desires, which are at once fostered and abjected by the prison and the Law, exist in spite of the concrete walls dividing the cells, and are intensified by their forced separation. The voyeuristic prison guard's position of power is threatened by his jealousy and sexual attraction to the Algerian prisoner. In one sequence, he enters the Algerian prisoner's cell and whips him with his belt, but rather than struggle against him, the prisoner smiles and kneels down in front of him. Both men gleam with sweat. The Algerian prisoner's unexpected response in the face of the guard's abuse undermines the guard's position of power in the film's fantasy world. In another sequence that seems to be part of the guard's fantasy, the guard pulls out his gun and forces the prisoner to suck on it. These scenes recall Sergio's sexualized encounters with policemen in *O Fantasma*, in that both films incorporate fantastical scenarios that twist embodiments of state power. The sinister implication behind these scenes that sexualize oppression is that they show how our desires, sexual or otherwise, are not innocent but

informed by various power structures. The eroticization of power that occurs in these two films evokes S/M subcultures, which will be foregrounded in my analysis of *The Attendant*.

This encounter between the guard and the prisoner is inseparable from France's occupation of Algeria at the time. These colonial power relations resonate through the French guard's fetishization of the Algerian prisoner, with the mixture of violence and eroticism implying ambivalence. Rodríguez understands these conflicting feelings and pleasures in a racial context, arguing that they are "never always already subversive or transparent [as a result of their correlation] to individualized histories of oppression." Thus, she "considers how personal sexual pleasures, written through domination, submission, or otherwise, are endlessly intertwined with collective histories and genealogies" (140). Since Genet, a white French citizen, is orchestrating the fantasies on screen, the colonial perspective cannot be denied. However, the presence of the Algerian prisoner complicates any straightforward reading of these power relations and the desires they foster. The prisoner, who is thrice abjected by French society as an Algerian, a convict and a homosexual, inadvertently causes the guard's dangerous desires to surface. By rejecting the guard in the end, the Algerian leaves the dominant power structure exposed and vulnerable (temporarily, through Genet's fantasies). From the elusive structure of this fantasy space manifests the *possibility* for subversion through racially-informed gay desires that reveal the thin layer separating racial and sexual norms from the destabilizing force of abjection.

## **Sexuality, Filth and the Limits of the Body**

The Algerian prisoner's attraction to the young white prisoner in the adjacent cell is interrelated with his confined and unclean living conditions. At certain times throughout *Un chant d'amour*, the Algerian prisoner presses himself against the dirty prison wall (on the other side of which rests his object of desire, the young white prisoner), kissing and caressing it longingly. At one point, the Algerian's erect cock is visible, hitting the wall as he rubs himself against it. The two prisoners touch themselves in their torn and filthy clothes and communicate without words. The Algerian prisoner penetrates the wall separating him from the young white prisoner with a straw, blowing smoke from his cigarette through it. This gesture is at first ignored, and then reciprocated the second time around, when the young prisoner feeds his own straw through the wall. It seems as though the two men have grown accustomed to uncleanliness, which in a sense becomes an integral part of their sexual desires. This configuration of desire recalls Sergio in *O Fantasma*, whose loneliness as a garbage collector creates a fusion of homosexuality, obsessive fixation, and filth. The lack of dialogue in both films allows the viewer to focus on the characters' bodies in relation to their surroundings, their silence creating an expression of the internal as a reflection of (and on) the external environment, a melding of inside and outside.

The intensely physical manifestation of the Algerian prisoner's desires creates a phenomenological encounter between the film viewer and the images on screen. The Algerian prisoner's arousal, which neither the prison walls nor the prisoner's body can contain, is shown through the expression of ecstasy on his face, as well as the sweat pouring from his body, dissolving boundaries. In one instance, after his first failed

attempt at attracting the attention of the young white prisoner in the adjacent cell using the straw and cigarette, the Algerian prisoner uses a chewed and soggy piece of bread to clog the hole in the wall. The viewer is shown a close-up of his saliva-drenched fingers rolling the piece of bread, as opposed to using it for sustenance. Right after this, he lies on the bed and caresses his bare chest, and he is visibly aroused, almost beside himself. These sexual desires towards an unattainable other work on our bodies, particularly because they are expressed in the film through the character's body in a way that is visibly overwhelming, beyond words, colliding with the limits of the body and the prison cell. This exemplifies Sobchack's embodied understanding of the cinema, which breaks the strict division between subject and object, self and other, inner and outer, as well as between the screen and the viewer (66). To illustrate and personalize her concept of embodied spectatorship, Sobchack describes her own sensuous experience while watching *The Piano* (New Zealand, Jane Campion, 1993). She writes, "However intellectually problematic in terms of its sexual and colonial politics, Campion's film moved me deeply, stirring my bodily senses and my sense of my body. The film not only 'filled me up' and often 'suffocated' me with feelings that resonated in and constricted my chest and stomach, but it also 'sensitized' the very surfaces of my skin—as well as its own—to *touch*." (61). While watching *Un chant d'amour*, the discernable pleasure experienced by the prisoners, visible on their faces and bodies, acts on the film viewers' bodies first, making way for what Sobchack refers to as "more conscious analysis" (60). This analysis entails a working through of our sensorial experience while watching the film, which allows us to perceive an interrelation between the bodies on screen and our bodies, and thus the breakdown of boundaries on multiple levels.

The connection between abjection, filth and gay sexuality in Genet's film can be understood as a relationship between queer anality and the economic bottom, which Stockton connects through dirt. She writes, "The presumed physical and moral dirtiness of anal sexuality offends sensibilities in a way not entirely distinct from the dirtiness (physical and moral) that is presumed to attend (black) life on the economic bottom" (68). Both Sergio and the Algerian prisoner are "bottoms" in a variety of ways—in their criminality, social stratum, and sexuality. Though he is not black, the Algerian has the added element of being racially marginalized in a white-dominated, colonial French society, which deepens the interrelationship between his submission to the guard and the young white prisoner, as well as his imprisonment, which causes him to wallow in uncleanliness.

### **Fantasy Transfers and Dissolving Boundaries**

Through Genet's loosely-structured fantasy and shift in perspectives, the viewer is invited to adopt multiple points of identification, which complicates the audience's alignment with characters who are watching and who are being watched, as well as those who are dominant and who are submissive. The viewer is given a glimpse into the separate prison cells as the guard looks through the peep holes, using his position of power to invade their privacy. He sees one prisoner urinating; another masturbating naked, dripping in sweat; a black shirtless prisoner (Coco Le Martiniquais) who loses himself in a strange, erotic dance; and the young white prisoner desired by the Algerian, who is picking at the dirt underneath his toenails. The guard dwells a little longer on this last prisoner. There is a close-up on the prisoner's hairy arm pit, dripping in sweat, then an extreme close-up of his face, showing his tongue wetting his lips. The prisoner touches

himself, staring straight at the guard, then begins making out with his arm, and then moves on to his leg. The prison guard seems to be the dominant one, but this is only true on a surface level. The Algerian prisoner seems to be the most submissive, considering his attempts at getting the adjacent prisoner's attention, as well as his willingness to perform fellatio on the guard's gun, but he has a power of his own. As I argue above, it is his existence within the confines of the French prison that causes forbidden desires to surface, inspiring both fear and attraction in the guard. Ultimately, the Algerian prisoner is shown to be in control by rejecting the guard and leaving him to face his abject desires. Since the film is a loosely-structured manifestation of Genet's fantasies, his white and French background must be taken into account. In the elusive fantasy space, Genet adopts multiple points of identification (as does the viewer), but his position as an outsider-looking-in at and fetishizing raced bodies (the Algerian, the black prisoner) is ultimately unavoidable, thus aligning him with the voyeuristic prison guard.

*Un chant d'amour* is a materialization of Genet's fantasies and desires that creates fluid psychic and bodily borders between the Algerian prisoner, the guard, and the young white prisoner. It reflects the filmmaker's homosexuality and abject social status at the time. Film scholar William Rothman discusses how Genet's film is an expression of an "inner fantasy," transcending "the everyday separation, or opposition, between 'inner' and 'outer'" (59). He describes the scene in the film when the prison guard enters the Algerian prisoner's cell and begins whipping him with his belt. Rothman observes that since we never see the whip actually hit the prisoner as the scene cuts back and forth between the two men, it is unclear as to whether or not this is a fantasy, and if it is, whose fantasy it is (59). I would argue that the entire film is a projection of Genet's fantasy,

which expresses a desire to dissolve boundaries (bodily, psychic, and societal). This fantasy space shows an interrelationship between abjection and gay identity, in the sense that Genet's stigmatized homosexuality in France at the time, as well as his own criminality and imprisonment, combine with sexual desire and fantasy in the film to disrupt boundaries. This amorphous, fantastical vision is made possible in the film largely through the editing, which Rothman argues creates "an exchange or transfer of identities – but not bodies – between one character and another in a medium in which the 'material specificity' of the actor's body *cannot* be denied" (61). This fantasy transfer between the actors on screen entails an inversion of power relations in the prison between the guard and the prisoners, particularly the Algerian one.

This notion of the film being a projection of Genet's fantasies would explain the ambiguity of perspective and the interweaving of the characters' inner worlds. Rothman describes how one of the guard's fantasies seems to transition to what is presumably the Algerian prisoner's fantasy, by fading into it. In this fantasy space, the Algerian prisoner seems more in control of his object of desire. He is carrying the younger white prisoner, as though dead, over his shoulder, and lays him down in hay where he slowly comes back to consciousness. According to Rothman, what seems to be a sharing of fantasies occurs when "the older prisoner is loosening the younger prisoner's belt, [and] there is a cut to the guard, still backing away towards the door, as in the shot that initiated the fantasy" (61). This makes it seem as though the characters on screen have nearly equal access to each other's inner worlds as the viewer does. However, Rothman neglects to acknowledge the racial aspect of this scenario and the film as a whole, specifically the dynamic between the white guard and the Algerian prisoner, filtered through Genet's

French colonial gaze. Despite the notion of power that connects to colonialism and informs the fantasy space of the film, the presence of the Algerian prisoner complicates any straightforward reading of these power relations. These are characters whose bodily and psychic boundaries are transgressed, made fluid by their desires. In this way, the order of things, the relations of dominance and submission, of the subservient to those in power, are perverted.

### **Art/History Reconfigured: Slavery and Sadomasochism in *The Attendant***

Like *Un chant d'amour*, *The Attendant* is a short experimental film and erotic fantasy that takes place in an architectural space of power and discipline (a museum, rather than a prison). The space comes alive through desires informed by race and homosexuality. However, Julien's film is a more conscious interrogation of these power relations. In *The Attendant*, the space of the Wilberforce House museum is transformed through black gay desire, and the attendant's fantasies disrupt that which is seemingly fixed and rigid (i.e. History and classical art, housed in the museum). *The Attendant* reveals some of the limits of Stockton's approach. While some of her ideas are useful in considering the counterintuitive pleasures of being an economic, social, sexual, and/or racial bottom, including in Genet's novel *Querelle*, much of the media she analyses neglects subjects who actually occupy the switchpoint of black and queer. Ongiri criticizes Stockton's book for this absence and for the way she centralizes debasement in understanding people who identify as black and queer. Stockton's approach simplifies and in a sense "locks her inquiry into widely accepted concepts" of these categories, Ongiri argues, ignoring the fact that the identifiers of black and queer "have also existed historically as markers of liberation and emancipatory possibility" (1-3). Ongiri asks:

“What role do cultural politics and an intellectual culture that continue to marginalize people of African descent play in the choice to highlight the question of shame and debasement in relation to these categories?” (3). My analysis of *The Attendant* will depart from Stockton’s emphasis on shame and debasement to focus on the power of fantasy in reframing histories of oppression.

*The Attendant*, made by a black gay filmmaker, depicts not merely the possibility of deriving pleasure from interracial sadomasochistic gay sex, but a sense of control over traditional History, white supremacy, and classical art. F.A. Biard’s 1840 painting *Scene on the Coast of Africa*, which hangs in the gallery, is reconfigured as a tableau vivant, and an image of slavery is rendered in contemporary S/M subcultural style, with white slave owners wearing leather harnesses and strap-on dildos. Thus, the film deemphasizes the notion of wallowing and taking pleasure in debasement in favor of fantasies controlled by Julien that serve primarily as a way to temporarily gain power over white heteropatriarchy. By placing real male bodies that show subtle movements into the positions of tableau vivant, transforming a classical painting, Julien harnesses the power of Eurocentric Art/History and reframes relations of dominance and submission, master and slave, in a way that twists them and lays them bare. The black subjects in the paintings are no longer strictly bound by the institutions that oppress them, becoming live persons with desires and the ability to experience pleasure, even within their shackles. Their ability to move and breathe within an originally immobile painting is what then allows them to shift positionalities in relation to the white slave owners, becoming dominant as well as submissive.

Another striking image in the film that also signifies Julien's control over Eurocentric Art/History is a close-up on the eye of a white bust, which Julien infuses with life only to take it away, as the dark eye fades to white. The camera zooms out to show the bust's head with black fingers (presumably the attendant's) moving across its mouth, as though it were sucking the life out of it. These sequences illustrate Julien's conscious manipulation of the power dynamics of white supremacy, as depicted in the museum, through fantasy.

However, the attendant's influence over his fantasies is not a one-way street. His fantasy space is in part formed by white supremacy. As Stockton observes, "Attraction is often a function of time. History (specific relations over time) can produce attractions and, simultaneously, deem them unnatural—as (un)recognizable as a corpse" (162). Stockton's comparison of certain forbidden attractions to a decomposing corpse is apt. This idea of abjected attractions resonates with Kristeva's description of the corpse as "the most sickening of wastes, [...] a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel, 'I' is expelled" (3-4). Like the knowledge of inevitable death and decay, forbidden attractions lay dormant in the recesses of the mind, threatening to disturb our boundaries. The uncanniness of that which is both human and no longer human is like the unfamiliarity of taboo fantasies that have been repressed in the collective imagination. What has historically been deemed "unnatural" is rendered even more unrecognizable in *The Attendant* through images that combine gay interracial desire, slavery, and sadomasochism.

There is also a shifting of positions in the film, when the white visitor is on the submissive end of the attendant's whip, which differs from Stockton's focus on gay black

men in subordinate positions. The attendant takes control through fantasy, and the viewer is introduced to his fantasy space almost immediately. The film opens with a low angle establishing shot of the museum, which takes on an oppressive quality, enhanced by ominous non-diegetic pared-down electronica. The music continues as the film cuts to the inside of the museum, and there is a close-up on the attendant's face as he searches the visitors' bags. This image fades into the attendant's fantasy, which consists of him singing an aria on a stage, as a half-naked, predominantly white male dance troupe led by a black dancer perform, and the conservator is the sole member of the audience. The foreboding music begins again when the film cuts to the white visitor walking into the museum, carrying a leather bag, with a confident demeanor. He smiles at the attendant, who smiles back. When the visitor enters the museum, he is essentially entering the attendant's fantasy space. Thus, while the visitor carries the tools of dominance in his leather bag (a whip and bondage wrist cuffs are shown), they will be used "against" him later. The initially stoic visitor is not only affected by pain and arousal at the hands of the attendant, but also moved to tears as well. When the film cuts back to the attendant singing the aria at the end, this time the white visitor is also present in the audience. Visibly moved by the performance, he wipes tears from his face with his leather-gloved hand.

By re-enacting a history (and present) of virulent white racism through S/M master-and-slave scenarios, as well as switching sexual positions from white dominant/black submissive to the reverse, Julien's fantastical images show a redistribution of power through gay sex practices. Nguyen discusses this fluidity of power and the pleasures it offers, referring to Laura Marks' elaboration of her pleasures

in viewing gay pornography as a woman. Marks considers there to be an equal distribution of power in gay porn that is not present in hetero porn, and she delights in the power dynamics of alternating positions in gay porn (top/bottom, dominant/submissive). She states, “I don’t want everybody to be disarmed, equal, touchy-feely, always treating each other like full, autonomous subjects. I think this is a tedious democracy of looking. I think it’s a bore. Sexuality is not about equality; it’s about an exchange of power. What I want is for that power to flow around more” (Marks, as quoted in Nguyen 154). Nguyen agrees with this emphasis on bottom pleasures, but critiques the fact that Marks does not consider race and the power imbalances that occur in gay pornography (particularly Asian submissive bottoms for white dominant tops). He points out that “the playfulness and negotiation between ‘looking and being looked at, . . . fucking and being fucked, being the top, being the bottom’ continue to be inaccessible for gay Asian men, who are relegated to only one side of the equation, that of bottomhood, when they figure in the equation at all” (154). While these ideas cannot simply be applied to *The Attendant* due to the differences between black and Asian experiences in the West (one difference being that black men in this part of the world are stereotyped as aggressive and dominant rather than submissive), Julien’s film indulges in images of bottomhood, dominance and submission, allowing the power to “flow around more.” However, the viewing experience that *The Attendant* elicits is more intellectual, even theoretical, rather than pornographic or titillating, which is a key difference from *Un chant d’amour*. Julien grounds his representation of racial, sexual and power dynamics in history, specifically a history of slavery, pointing towards Stockton’s idea that taboo attractions are cultivated through time.

Regardless of who is dominant and who is submissive, the attendant seems to control these images and ideas through his fantasy, twisting images of slavery and white dominion by perverting the power relations behind them. Rodríguez accurately describes the amorphous quality of fantasy when she writes that it:

[E]xceeds the limits of the possible and the present, and very often even the desirable. [...] In our sexual fantasies, we can occupy an imaginary time and space of our own creation, devise our own tactile, visual, and auditory codes, assign new queer meanings to gestures and utterances that have preceded our entrance onto the sexual stages we inhabit. In fantasy we can rewrite scripts of sexualized objectification, subjection, and racialized violence. (180)

*The Attendant* shows this conscious exercise in fantasy making. In the attendant's first fantasy sequence, the image is framed in gold and the white visitor wears a leather harness and purple dildo, his leather gloved hand placed on a black man's shoulder, who is also wearing a harness. Shortly after, the attendant is positioned on the floor of the museum facing the viewer, with a pained expression on his face, as the visitor stands behind his bare ass brandishing a whip. Orgeron observes that "[t]he fantasy allows for 'forbidden' sexuality or pleasure, but at this point is unable to sustain a complete reversal (i.e., black sadism, white masochism). In other words, black male pleasure, at this stage in the fantasy sequence, is envisioned as masochistic and is disturbingly bound to the roles suggested by history" (35). However, I argue that the possibility of a role reversal is already present on the margins of the frame. On the left, next to the black submissive man in the foreground, another black man is wearing a dildo, and on the far right of the frame, a white man can be seen, partially off-screen, with one of his arms up, his hand attached

to a leather choker by a chain. This scenario of black dominance and white submission is fully realized later, when the white visitor is on the submissive end of the whip, sprawled out on the museum floor. Julien's images show that sexuality is not innocent and that it is informed by white supremacy. Ultimately, these scenarios are not about gaining power but undermining it and hollowing it out through a form of sexual play that foregrounds positions of dominance and submission.

### **Class Relations and Interracial Pleasures**

The intersection between race and class is depicted in the film through the connection between the black male attendant and the black female conservator. hooks elaborates on the relationship between these two characters in terms of race and class, as the attendant and the conservator are both black workers in the museum (115). hooks describes how the conservator expresses delight in the interracial homosexual relations between the attendant and the visitor, perceiving the subversive power therein. In one scene, while the conservator is performing her usual duties, she overhears the sound of flesh being whipped and muffled moans penetrating the walls of the museum. In order to hear better, she presses her ear against the wall. As hooks observes, "While [the conservator] listens with her ear to the wall, smiling, she sees that in the private space of desire all the neocolonial configurations of master and slave can be disrupted" (116). The pleasures in transgressing these "neocolonial configurations" manifest themselves as loud moans, as well as in the delighted expression on the conservator's face as she listens to the sounds that permeate the museum, a space in which she and the attendant are expected to be passive workers.

While in some cases these taboo desires and fantasies that involve interracial sex may seem psychologically intrusive and shameful, Julien takes control of them through his film. This approach differs from Rodríguez's notion of gleaning pleasure in otherwise oppressive conditions. Stockton characterizes such thoughts and fantasies as ineluctable and overwhelming. She describes attraction to that which is considered shameful to be "uncontrollable":

We do not elect them, or always consent to them. Uncontrollable mental fascinations often violently strike our eyes. (Brutal interracial same-sex sex; a blown-off face.) Sometimes to our incomprehension. Sometimes to the effect of a pleasure we embrace or deny. Sometimes to the dictates of a history we cannot redeem or decompose. (150)

While Stockton describes the power of History and white supremacy as being almost inevitable and unchangeable, Julien fosters hope with his film by grappling with cultural hegemony. The fantasies and attractions depicted in *The Attendant* may in some cases be involuntary and uncontrollable, but Julien intellectualizes them, plays with them, and twists them.

It is interesting to note that the distorted moans and utterances heard by the conservator through the museum wall "are not pro-filmic and are easily traceable to the gay porn industry," as Orgeron has observed (37). Writing about the use of unsynced, postproduction sounds in gay male porn, Nguyen refers to Rich Cante and Angelo Restivo's idea that this "mishmash of moans, breathings, gasps, cries [...] effectively constructs a utopian, phantasmic pornographic space" (Nguyen 63). By incorporating non-diegetic sounds that stem from gay pornography, an industry that is often racist in its

depictions of racialized men, Julien constructs his own “phantasmic pornographic space” from the perspective of a gay black man who is laying bare a history of slavery and white supremacy that lives on in the present. Julien also creates another layer of dialogue between hegemonic structures in his film, namely between that of a museum celebrating white abolitionist William Wilberforce, and the gay porn industry, both of which marginalize and fetishize black bodies.

Behind Julien’s manipulation of power relations lies an awareness of personal hybridity. In the context of Latin@ identity, Rodríguez links racial hybridity to colonial violence. She writes, “It is this racial ambiguity that wraps around *latinidad*, the terror of uncertain racial signs that complicates facile forms of identification or refusal” (142). Rodríguez’s foregrounding of the racial ambiguity that informs desire is an important departure from Stockton’s primary concern with elevating bottom positions. Rodríguez’s methodology locates unconventional pleasures in lived experience and historical context, showing that they always occupy uncertain ground. This uncertainty that stems from racialized violence evokes the in-between space of abjection, which Kristeva describes as a looming threat to the self that leaves the subject “in perpetual danger” (9). *The Attendant* depicts this abject personal hybridity through interracial gay sex acts that take on the form of S/M subcultures. These sounds and images show how white violence continues in the present, making its way into black fantasies and desires. *The Attendant* consciously interrogates racialized scenarios of dominance and submission, pointing towards the possibility for a role reversal that is meant to undermine power, rather than gain it.

While in the previous chapter I argued that films and our responses to them exceed some approaches in queer theory, focusing on characters that approach self-destruction, in this chapter I considered how racialized gay abjection and the often conflicting desires that result from scenarios of dominance and submission resonate with but also exceed theories that foreground shame and debasement. Through *Un chant d'amour* and *The Attendant*, I analyzed how the power dynamics of white supremacy can be perverted through interracial desires and sadomasochistic fantasies within contexts of (neo)colonialism and slavery. I incorporated Rodríguez and Nguyen to help foster a more experientially nuanced perspective in my analysis of the films, allowing me to trouble common perceptions of submission and the bottom position in the context of race and sexuality. In the next chapter, I will expand on my departure from dualistic thinking by analyzing filmic representations of gender nonconforming people through theories of becoming and multiplicity.

### Chapter 3

#### **Fluid Neon Bodyscapes: Becoming-Alien, Becoming-Cyborg in *Liquid Sky* and *Dandy Dust***

Representations of androgynous, gender fluid, and trans people in two experimental science fiction films, *Liquid Sky* (USA, Slava Tsukerman, 1982) and *Dandy Dust* (UK, A. Hans Scheirl, 1998) exemplify aspects of Donna Haraway, Nikki Sullivan, and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's theories of the body. These films and theories help us navigate beyond binaries and gender essentialism, towards different modes of becoming in relation to others and the world. While the first and second chapters begin to transcend dualistic thinking, this chapter goes further. The creative, grotesque and monstrous bodily configurations in *Liquid Sky* and *Dandy Dust* prompt us to think in terms of multiplicities and a desired future that accepts difference. The films confuse the distinction between transgression and conformity, being strange and being normal, as well as ideas about what is natural and unnatural. The films' lack of formal and narrative coherence corresponds to their visions of gender fluidity, rupturing the meaning and boundaries of heteropatriarchal society.

Feminist theorist Donna Haraway's concept of the cyborg is imperative to my analysis of *Dandy Dust*, which shows human/machine and inter-species bodily combinations, gender fluidity, and the confounding of origin stories. In fact, the film and its accompanying "Manifesto for the dada of the cyborg-embryo" (1997) were directly inspired by Haraway. Writing from a postmodern feminist perspective in her 1984 essay "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," Haraway proposes the concept of the cyborg as a monstrous assemblage of apparently contradictory parts, machine and organism, human and animal.

Haraway describes the cyborg as a byproduct and “illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism,” an abomination that renders the “father” inconsequential (105). The figure of the cyborg challenges the traditional binary genders of male and female, revealing their at times fluid qualities. Even though Haraway seeks to harness the power of the cyborg to enhance female embodiment and experience, including finding pleasure in illegitimate combinations of the organic and inorganic, she acknowledges that “bodies are maps of power and identity,” and that cyborgs are no exception to this (115).

Scheirl wrote the “Manifesto for the dada of the cyborg-embryo” as a kind of blueprint of *Dandy Dust*. The numerous combinations of organism and machine in Scheirl’s manifesto directly recall Haraway’s cyborg. Scheirl writes, “‘As monsters, can we demonstrate another order of signification? Cyborgs for Earthly survival!’ Donna Haraway, Cyborg Manifesto 1984” (*The Eight Technologies of Otherness* 47). This new “order of signification” can be seen in the creative and grotesque ways in which *Dandy Dust* configures gender and sexuality, bodies, landscapes, and film form, as well as in the experimental form of Scheirl’s manifesto, which is highly fragmentary and incorporates symbols as well as different font styles and sizes. Scheirl plays with syntax strategically. The use of the symbols ‘&’ and ‘>’ between words without the use of spaces eliminates distance and connotes an overlap between them, as in “loss&becoming” and “lose an arm>become a fountain” (57). The use of the dash (-) between words connects that which otherwise seems disjunctive, creating a dialectical relation between them, as in “Protagonist-Space” and “Protagonist-Multiplicity” (54).

Both *Liquid Sky* and *Dandy Dust* feature characters that alter their bodies and appearances in various ways, from the purely aesthetic to the surgical. To illuminate how these two films showcase the alterations of gender nonconforming bodies in different ways, I will use queer theorist Nikki Sullivan's discussion of bodily transfiguration and trans embodiment, in which she questions whether monstrosity is always a negative thing, and proposes (un)becoming other/strange/grotesque, linking different forms of body modification. Sullivan discusses the possibility of moving away from essentialism and pathological discourse surrounding trans embodiment through "the association of transgender practices and procedures with other forms of body modification (tattooing, piercing, branding, cosmetic surgery)" (553-4). However, Sullivan also acknowledges the specificity of being transgender, and the difference between that and other forms of body modification. She aims to disentangle being trans from both the stigma surrounding transitioning and appearing as the "proper" gender (passing), as well as from anti-normative academia that tends to blindly advocate transgression and pin it against conformity. This leads her to the idea of intercorporeality—how identities are not autonomous but "constituted in and through relations with others and with a world" (556).

The parenthetical prefix of Sullivan's (un)becoming is redundant if we understand the process of becoming in the Deleuzoguattarian sense, which is always simultaneously a process of undoing and of forging new connections among multiplicities. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's theories of multiplicity, the rhizomatic, deterritorialization and reterritorialization in *A Thousand Plateaus* help illuminate the modes of becoming and difference articulated in *Dandy Dust* and *Liquid Sky*. Deleuze and Guattari describe

multiplicities as the interconnectedness of all things, comprised of a multitude of productive machines or collective assemblages that lack unity or fixed positions of subject and object. These assemblages are like constellations that intertwine heterogeneous parts, collapsing distinctions between inside/outside, self/other and forming intra- and inter-species connections.

The two theorists use the botanical term rhizome, which is a subterranean stem that grows roots horizontally and produces shoots that grow above ground. If a rhizome is divided, its pieces can develop new plants. Deleuze and Guattari equate rhizomes with multiplicities to denote “[p]rinciples of connection and heterogeneity: any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be. This is very different from a tree or root, which plots a point, fixes an order” (7).

They use the term deterritorialization to describe a fluid process that produces a change in the nature of an assemblage when an aspect of it escapes (i.e., line of flight). The co-occurring process of reterritorialization refers to the formation of new connections in multiplicities, when a component of a machine is plugged into another machine, and always entails a change in the nature of both. This process is part of the nature of the rhizome, which Deleuze and Guattari describe as a map that breaks with dichotomy and unity (8-12). Deleuze and Guattari also conceptualize a “body without organs,” a machinic assemblage that is always interconnected with other assemblages, without center or hierarchy, a conflation of nature and culture that does away with dualisms. This symbiotic relationship, when thresholds between assemblages are crossed through lines of flight, is what produces endless becomings and transformations (249). These ideas will be useful for me to move beyond queer theory’s overemphasis on

performativity and identity politics that lock the subject in sociocultural structures and norms and focus instead on forms of expression and embodiment that exceed singular identities and notions of the Subject.

*Liquid Sky* centers on the early-1980s heroin-fueled new wave subculture in New York City. Its aesthetics are dominated by avant-garde fashion, neon lights, and a UFO's infrared vision. The city is stalked by a mysterious spacecraft that kills people during sex, extracting the endorphins produced during orgasm. Club kid Margaret's (Anne Carlisle) pleasureless sexual encounters with men serve as a focal point for the alien, which spares her because she never climaxes. Margaret then serves as a kind of human proxy for the alien, which she begins to feverishly embrace and embody as a result of the abuse at the hands of those around her. Carlisle also plays a gay male character named Jimmy, a drug addict and model who often clashes with Margaret.

*Dandy Dust*, an experimental cyber/splatterpunk film, is the perfect film to analyze in conjunction with *Liquid Sky*, in that both are neon-tinged and depict gender ambiguity, body alterations and avant-garde styles, as well as various becomings. However, *Dandy Dust* is rooted in a transgender perspective and takes all of these elements to a greater extreme. Scheirl's film follows a cyborg named Dandy (proper pronoun *cy*), played by Scheirl. Dandy leaves *cy*'s life on the planet of Blood & Swelling, a place of endless carnage, and goes to planet 3075, where *cy* encounters humanoid beings exchanging vital fluids through tubes connected to their black-lit genitals, as well as to the planet itself. Dandy discovers *cy*'s future gender-fluid self after being taken time-travelling by an animal/human hybrid named Spidercuntboy (Svar Simpson). Along the way, Dandy meets Supermother Cyniborg XVII, Duchess of Loft & Spire (Suzie

Krüger), who wears 16-inch heels and a purple bishop's mitre. Cyniborg oversees surgical procedures on the planet and is fixated on restoring her family tree by stitching together the body parts of her ancestors. She also serves as a controlling mother figure and carrier of Dandy's body parts. She employs Dandy's unborn black twin sisters Mao and Lisa (Leonora Rogers-Wright) to conduct parthenogenetic experiments. The twins frequently attempt to seize Dandy, at one point removing cy's memory disc containing recollections of 3075 because they believe it will taint the atmosphere of the planet.

*Dandy Dust* intertwines machines, organisms and landscapes, shows bodies being unmade and remade in seemingly endless ways, and overcomes the linearity of time and space. I will put both films into conversation with the theories to illustrate modes of becoming and transcend dualistic thinking.

### **The Body/Self as Art in *Liquid Sky***

*Liquid Sky* depicts the self as a creative process. Though represented within a dystopic context, the film opens up to different forms of embodiment, including transgender and non-binary (even though they are not directly represented in the film), pointing towards a future, and present, of difference and possibility. This future-oriented perspective recalls *The Living End* in that, despite negative experiences in both films, there persists an opening up of being towards the future, as well as different ways of configuring the self and the body. In *The Living End* this occurs through the connection and relationship between Luke and Jon, particularly in the image of them seated together against the horizon, which paradoxically retains a sense of positivity despite their seemingly doomed fate. In *Liquid Sky*, Anne Carlisle plays both an androgynous bisexual woman (Margaret) and a gay man (Jimmy), creating a sense of ambiguity in terms of

gender and sexuality. There is cohesiveness to the film's new wave aesthetic, but also a sense that the aesthetic configurations are manifold and limitless. The new wave fashions, makeup and hair cultivate the body/self as art. The film foregrounds the artificiality of identity, breaking with the distinction between what is natural and unnatural. However, this artificiality is represented as neither strictly positive nor negative.

*Liquid Sky* creates images of alterity, gender ambiguity, and bi/homosexuality within a dystopian context, embodying some of Sullivan's ideas about transmogrification, specifically "as a process of (un)becoming strange and/or grotesque, [which] is both transgressive and conformist, and simultaneously, is neither of these things" (561). In one sequence, the attendees stand around the club (e)motionlessly, and several of them are singled out, via medium-close up shots, for the viewer to see their various styles. Margaret is shown, with part of her hair dyed blue, frizzy and puffed up. Her face is painted white with blue and red makeup, consisting of red lipstick, eyeliner and line designs on her cheeks, as well as a blue inverted triangular shape on her forehead. Her makeup compliments her abstract outfit, which is colored blue, red, orange and purple. A male character is shown wearing a white suit with his chest exposed and painted yellow, and he is wearing a blue and black jacket that mirrors the abstract pattern of his makeup. A blonde woman is shown with frizzy hair held towards her left side; the top of her outfit is shaped like an inverted triangle, made of what appears to be translucent plastic material. The colorful lined pattern of her makeup also echoes her outfit. This sequence of medium close-up shots presenting the characters' aesthetics points toward the self as infinitely variable and as a site of creativity.

More significantly, these different stylistic configurations are interrelated with the way in which the film presents gender, specifically Margaret's androgyny and Carlisle's performance as both a woman and a man. The film depicts new wave fashion as integral to the characters' bodies and identities, resonating with Sullivan's idea that "the trope of transfiguration might allow us to acknowledge important similarities, overlaps, resonances, and intersections between a range of modified bodies. And that recognizing and theorizing these connections might be helpful to any attempt to rethink trans-embodiment" (561). The body/self in *Liquid Sky* is presented as being endlessly alterable in ways that break with conventional understandings of what is natural and what is artificial, a dichotomy that is often harmfully directed against trans bodies. However, this isn't to equate being transgender, the various ways in which trans people alter their bodies, and the social pressures to pass, with new wave subculture and the fashions and body modifications associated with it. Drawing loose connections between different forms of bodily alterations is a way to counteract prevalent stigmas surrounding transgender people that link transphobia, gender essentialism, and sociocultural beliefs about what constitutes natural and unnatural bodies, which will become even more apparent in my analysis of *Dandy Dust*.

### **Margaret: *Becoming*...**

Margaret's frequently shifting looks throughout the film, from the highly stylized to the bare and stripped down, as well as the complexity and variedness of her behaviour, exemplify Deleuze and Guattari's concept of becoming. Carlisle's simultaneous performance as Jimmy adds another layer to these aspects. Sexuality scholar Yetta Howard situates Carlisle's performances in the film in an extradiegetic space, since

Margaret and Jimmy often appear in the same scenes. Howard writes, “Margaret’s ‘alienated’ body becomes a de-idealized space through which binaries such as male/female, beautiful/ugly, masculine/feminine break down, only to surface as the residue of queer female sexuality, an alienated lesbianism” (45). However, while Howard later posits that “the alienated subject comes through as unambiguously female and lesbian” (Howard 49), I would argue that while lesbianism is part of it, the ways in which *Liquid Sky* depicts gender and sexuality is anything but “unambiguous.” Carlisle’s fictional incarnation as a bisexual woman and a gay man does not necessarily create an undifferentiated image of lesbianism. Rather, lesbianism becomes one aspect of the film’s orientation toward multiplicities.

*Liquid Sky* does not render its avant-garde characters in a necessarily positive light. The reterritorialized aspect of society created by the new wave subculture is inscribed with the same type of controlling and repressive mechanisms as the so-called hegemonic society. As Deleuze and Guattari describe, “Groups and individuals contain microfascisms just waiting to crystallize” (9-10). Howard observes that in *Liquid Sky*, what seems to be subcultural in terms of style and sexuality “do not function as utopian promises of resistance to the status quo” (53). Margaret is verbally and physically abused by everyone around her, including her girlfriend Adrian (Paula E. Sheppard). This abuse makes Margaret’s eventual embrace of the aliens and her new murderous power seem like a form of revenge and escape from the dystopian world she lives in. Through Margaret’s responses to abusive men, the film challenges heteropatriarchal ideas about gender essentialism and sexual orientation. This questioning of sexuality manifests not only visually, but also through dialogue. During the scene when Margaret, looking to buy

cocaine, invites a man named Vincent (Jack Adalist) from the club to her apartment, he asks Margaret intrusive questions about her sexuality. Irritated by him, she says “I’m always curious about people who have to make those kinds of sexual definitions—homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual. Whether or not I like someone doesn’t depend on what kind of genitals they have.” After she rejects him for only offering Quaaludes, he beats and rapes her.

In another scene, a drug addict named Paul (Stanley Knapp) shows up at Margaret’s apartment. He tells Margaret, “I’m gonna show you the difference between men and women.” She mocks him and he tells her that he’s going to make her come. She replies that she can come with or without him, that he is inconsequential. He feels emasculated, asking her “You think I can’t get it up? I know you’re wishing for a big hard man.” She tells him, “Seems to me that too many men today are telling me what I want.” He then repeatedly calls her a “dyke.” She continues to mock him: “You’re so attractive to me I’m just coming and coming,” then becomes angrier, “You sick pig. I don’t need your cock for anything. You’re nothing, you’re nobody, you’re nothing, you’re nothing!” He then tears her dress, revealing her bra, and calls her a whore. She replies that she is a whore and that he can fuck her all he wants, and that it won’t matter because he doesn’t exist. Margaret’s anger and repeated declarations of the man’s insignificance shows how the abuse directed at her is creating a need to detach herself from others and the world. This need gestates a becoming-inhuman that can allow her to escape and turn the man and the imposition of his cock as a tool of misogynistic domination into nothingness.

Ideas about gender and sexual orientation also manifest in the recurring presence of a mask, which hangs on Margaret's wall. This mask seems to contain a magical or mystical aura. It also evokes the idea of being able to put on different masks to suit different notions of the self. These meanings relate to the artful way in which makeup is used in the film, which is neither intrinsically positive nor negative and evokes the ambiguous process of gender performativity. However, these ideas about identity, symbolized by the mask, seem to impose a limit on Margaret. Her abusive environment reduces her ability to enjoy using makeup and clothing to express herself. She shatters the mask near the end, showing her desperate need to escape the world of fashion and performance, and a body that men can abuse.

As the film progresses, Margaret begins embracing herself as a bodily vessel for the aliens, becoming murderous through her sexuality. Each person who orgasms while having sex with her is killed by the aliens. Their death materializes as a phallic crystal lodged in the back of the head. At one point Margaret says "I'm a killer. I kill with my cunt." This breaching of boundaries, violating the taboo of murder, is correlated with the transgression of gender roles. When she paints her face ultraviolet blue, surrounded by darkness, she seems to become disembodied. This process is a *becoming-alien*. Deleuze and Guattari describe becomings as intra- and inter-species alliances divorced from filiation and imitation. Margaret's mode of becoming began when she was chosen as a kind of proxy for the aliens to extract the endorphins produced in the brain during sex, but is also inseparable from her own alienation, confounding of gender roles and abuse at the hands of those around her.

Margaret is an anomalous human threshold, who could be understood along the lines of Deleuze and Guattari's description of an otherness in between assemblages. They write:

[T]he self is only a threshold, a door, a becoming between two multiplicities.

Each multiplicity is defined by a borderline functioning as Anomalous, but there is a string of borderlines, a continuous line of borderlines (*fiber*) following which the multiplicity changes. And at each threshold or door, a new pact? A fiber stretches from a human to an animal, from a human or an animal to molecules, from molecules to particles, and so on to the imperceptible. Every fiber is a Universe fiber. A fiber strung across borderlines constitutes a line of flight or of deterritorialization. (249)

Deleuze and Guattari's description of the interstitial fibers that extend through humans, animals, molecules and particles to the imperceptible is not a hierarchization or linear reduction of being. They are describing the interrelatedness between assemblages, which are rhizomes or maps of multiplicities. Margaret is the monstrous assemblage that evokes conflicting, ambivalent feelings in those around her, particularly because she embodies the instability of identity and the self, as well as its intercorporeality. As Sullivan argues, the disavowal of intersubjectivity and bodily transmutation, of (un)becoming, creates a kind of scapegoat out of the other/monster (558).

Margaret becomes increasingly transfixed by the alien near the end of the film, as she struggles to escape a world that treats her like a monstrous scapegoat. Johann Hoffman (Otto von Wernherr), a German scientist investigating the UFO, tries to warn Margaret of the danger she's in and reveals to her that the reason she is still alive is

because she never had an orgasm during her recent sexual encounters. Ignoring him, Margaret beckons to the alien to take her, and then stabs Johann. She then goes out onto the balcony and calls to the alien, at one point saying that she wants to make love with it. This demand implies a desire for fusion with the alien. When the craft begins to leave, she becomes more desperate and rushes back into her apartment. She shatters the mask against the wall, then goes back outside and shoots up heroin in order to induce the chemical reaction that occurs during orgasm. She climbs higher up the building, surrounded by the void of night, and moves closer to the alien craft, looking into its blue-lit eye. The viewer is shown the alien's perspective as Margaret inches closer, intercut with a long shot of her flailing her arms and contorting her body uncontrollably, moments before the craft's light overwhelms the screen and she vanishes. Margaret's desperate plea to be united with the alien indicates her deep-seated feelings of otherness and desire to escape the cruelty of those around her. The scenes of her shattering the mask, injecting heroin, and disappearing into the UFO after experiencing a fit of convulsions show a final wilful destruction of her human form. She abandons her flesh prison and the confines of subjectivity and identity, potentially becoming something inhuman.

### **Margaret/Jimmy: Split Selves and Gender Identities**

Departing from transgender identity politics and popular media representations directed towards non-transgender audiences, trans media theorist Cael M. Keegan argues for a concept of "aesthetic transgenering" even in media that do not directly represent trans people. In his analysis of *Under the Skin* (UK, Jonathan Glazer, 2013), Keegan writes, "Rather than seeking realist representations of transgender bodies that display the 'truth' of their difference, aesthetic transgenering looks for moments of

phenomenological encounter that sustain transgender poiesis: an extension of transgender becoming” (30). Keegan analyzes the moment in *Under the Skin* when an alien known only as The Female (Scarlett Johansson) first encounters her/itself in the mirror, as well as when she/it peels off her/its skin and stares at the face of its human female form. There are resonances between the scenes Keegan analyzes and the confrontations between Margaret and Jimmy in *Liquid Sky*.

In *Under the Skin*, Keegan encounters his own coming into being as a trans man, a phenomenological experience of his own feeling of otherness. Keegan refers to Emmanuel Levinas’ theory of the “face-to-face encounter” which reveals to us the borders of experience when confronted with a separate subjectivity, which is like us but not. Keegan then inquires, from a trans perspective, what sort of relation occurs when these separate selves are located in the same body, in the same life (36-7). Keegan refers to this as an endless “alien loop” and a phenomenological encounter for the trans viewer that supplants pity with an “internally-directed empathy” (38). This “alien loop” is best exemplified for Keegan in *Under the Skin* when the split selves encounter one another after the alien sheds its human skin, creating a perpetual loop that falls through their eyes meeting. He writes:

We see that the alien has a life of its own, but the skin also has a life of its own, its own subjective trace. There are two skins, neither of which is the ‘real’ skin; yet, both are real. The two do not necessarily appear to be one. They live together, layered over one another, but they are not entirely integrated. They are not the same being. They are becoming-together but not being-together identically. Where, then, is the self located? (38)

Keegan is describing the sense of gender dysphoria that occurred during his transition, as well as the idea that the image of one's past self leaves traces behind in the present. This personalized account of gender dysphoria and transitioning embodies Deleuze and Guattari's concept of becoming, which shows that the self is not static, that we can change ourselves and our bodies to suit our shifting sense of self, as well as the interconnectedness among different forms of becoming.

While the image of two selves in one body in *Under the Skin* is not directly present in *Liquid Sky*, it resonates with Carlisle's performance as Margaret and Jimmy, as well as with Margaret's connection to the alien. Similar to *Under the Skin*, Margaret and Jimmy share the same body, yet they are separate. Their ambivalent relationship evokes the dissonance created by having the same actress play two different characters. Near the beginning of the film, Jimmy goes to Margaret's apartment in hopes of obtaining drugs he can't afford to buy from Margaret's roommate Adrian. Jimmy, seated on a chair in the colorful neon-lit room, stares blankly at Margaret as she dances to electronic music. The scene is intercut with the alien's vision of them and the electronic music becomes almost like an alien transmission. At one point Jimmy says to Margaret, "I don't usually fuck girls," to which Margaret replies, "That's okay, I prefer women to men anyway." This scene sets the tone for their relationship, which is often ambivalent and antagonistic throughout the film. There is also a shot that shows Margaret and Jimmy talking to each other in front of multiple mirrors in the dressing room, their reflections pointing towards multiple selves and the precariousness of identity.

Another encounter with a mirror occurs later in the film, when the crowd of new wavers refer to Jimmy as "Miss America of the '80s" and hold up a mirror to his face,

telling him to look at himself. They say, “You are the most beautiful boy. You are the most beautiful fucker. We want to see you fuck her.” The crowd tries to get Jimmy to fuck Margaret after she tells them that she has caused several deaths through sex. It is as though the crowd unconsciously senses the threat that Margaret and Jimmy pose to traditional ideas about gender and sexuality and therefore seeks their destruction through sexual union. Knowing that it will destroy him, Margaret gives Jimmy a blow job as the crowd collectively repeats “Do it.” Their voices become distorted when the alien vision takes over. Jimmy vanishes, shocking the crowd. This sequence, when all of the crowd’s attention is on Jimmy and Margaret, contains evidence of the conflicted ways in which the crowd perceives both characters. They refer to Jimmy as Miss America, only to describe him as a beautiful boy and beautiful fucker moments later. The crowd’s collective act of shouting, pressuring him to fuck Margaret, and forcing him to look at his reflection in the mirror is a way for them to exert control over his sense of self, to lock it down in their gaze.

This last scene contains further resonances with the scene in *Under the Skin* when The Female is raped by a logger (Dave Acton), causing a tear in its skin. After the scene where the alien looks at its human face, the logger destroys the alien’s body by dousing it in gasoline and setting it on fire. Similarly, the crowd in *Liquid Sky* destroys the dissonance created by Margaret and Jimmy by pressuring them to engage in a fatal sexual encounter. This scene shows a collective attack on the two characters, played by the same actress, revealing the crowd’s unconscious discomfort with Margaret and Jimmy’s simultaneous difference and sameness. Through its different stylistic configurations, Margaret’s process of becoming-alien, and Carlisle’s performance as a woman and a

man, *Liquid Sky* creates an image of difference and multiplicity. A sense of ambiguity can be seen throughout the film in androgynous characters and alien becomings, a confusion of gendered embodiments that is taken even further in *Dandy Dust*.

### **Dandy Dust: Rhizomatic Cyborg**

*Dandy Dust* embodies both Haraway's concept of the cyborg and Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome. In Scheirl's film, as in Haraway's vision of the cyborg, there is no unity, fullness, or "origin story in the Western sense" (Haraway 104-5). This lack confounds traditional ontological conceptions, fusing imagination and tangible reality, as well as machine and organism. The father figure (i.e., phallogocentrism) becomes inconsequential, even though the cyborg was in part constituted by and through it, which points to the lack of originary innocence (and sin) of the cyborg. Haraway perceives the cyborg as being capable of taking control over machines and the boundaries they set, calling for a serious consideration of "the partial, fluid, sometimes aspect of sex and sexual embodiment. Gender might not be global identity after all, even if it has profound historical breadth and depth" (115). *Dandy Dust* shows partial identities and bodies as well as the fusion between animals, humans and machines, and emphasizes regeneration rather than rebirth.

There are some overlaps between Haraway's cyborg and Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome, which the latter describe as an "anti-genealogy" (11). *Dandy Dust*, as well as Deleuze and Guattari and Haraway's theories, all destabilize the distinction between the natural and the artificial. The film depicts a world that no longer considers biology to be *the* determining factor behind gender. *Dandy Dust* shows bodies in fragments, regenerating, changing shapes, interconnected with other bodies, exchanging fluids

through tubes, as well as attaching external genitalia. Both the cyborg and the rhizomatic decentralize reproduction and genitality from the realm of sexuality.

However, unlike Haraway's cyborg, Deleuze and Guattari imagine the rhizome as a way of being in the world, in relation to others, that is infinite in its possible (re)configurations. This claim leads them to argue that "regenerations, reproductions, returns, hydras, and medusas do not get us any further" than dualisms and arborescent structures (16). While there are instances of regeneration in *Dandy Dust*, they are not simple returns or equivalences, since the film shows frequently shifting bodies. There is an emphasis on and detailed elaboration of multiplicities in the concept of the rhizome that is not integral to the cyborg. Deleuze and Guattari theorize the rhizome as a multiplicity in which "there are as many sexes as there are terms in symbiosis, as many differences as elements contributing to a process of contagion" (242). Deleuze and Guattari's concept of *becoming* complements and expands upon Haraway's illegitimate and monstrous cyborg.

In *Dandy Dust*, there is the interfusion of human and animal, embodied by the character Spidercuntboy, a sort of literalized Deleuzoguattarian becoming-animal. Spidercuntboy emerges from Dandy's genitals with a hairy labia-shaped torso, initially appearing as a grotesque extension of cy's pubic hair. This extension makes Dandy and Spidercuntboy both separate yet intertwined at a molecular level. These images of fluid boundaries between humans and animals, as well as Deleuze and Guattari's concept of becoming, resonate with Scheirl's previous self-description: "I identify myself as boy, dragking, transvestite, and transgender. Insect. That's the truly new word: insect" (Scheirl, as quoted in Kuzniar 224).

While these theories and descriptions of inter-species transformations may seem somewhat detached from transgender embodiments, trans theorist Eva Hayward's combination of personal accounts and theory in "Lessons from a Starfish" can help us perceive the connection in a more effective way. Hayward, using Antony and the Johnsons' (now Anohni) song "The Cripple and the Starfish" as a point of inspiration, theorizes a phenomenological and discursive relationship between transsexuality and trans-speciation, in this case between trans bodies and starfish. Departing from binary distinctions between being in the wrong body versus being in the right body, as well as from metaphoric language, Hayward describes modes of *transformation* and *regeneration* that explode the limits of representation (256, 261).

Hayward does not equate trans-speciation with transgenderism, but maps out relationalities and becomings among species that help us understand trans embodiment in a way that does not place it beyond gender and sex. She writes: "We create embodiment by not jumping *out* of our bodies, but by taking up a fold in our bodies, by folding (or cutting) ourselves, and creating a transformative scar of ourselves. For example, neo-vaginas are made from originary penises or skin grafts, and the beards of F2Ms emerge from their own testosterone-invigorated hair follicles" (256). *Dandy Dust*, particularly when perceived within the context of Scheirl's own transgender identity, exemplifies Hayward's descriptions. The film presents inter-species alliances and artificial genitalia, such as Spidercuntboy, black lit genitals and dildos; intercorporeality, via the orgiastic display of bodies exchanging vital fluids through tubes; and transformed, regenerated, surgically-constructed bodies, exemplified through Cyniborg stitching together the body parts of her ancestors.

## Who Am I Again?

*Dandy Dust* troubles the idea of having an origin story, specifically by having Dandy's past interrupted and intercut with cy's future gender-fluid self, as well as portraying cy as a black child. The choice to portray one of this white character's past selves as black problematically correlates gender fluidity with a post-racial society. The notion of racial fluidity is part of a white fantasy that evokes the illusion of color blindness. It is inseparable from aspects of white supremacy that exert control over other races through appropriation and the erasure of difference.

While this racial aspect does not contain any apparent connection to Scheirl's actual identity, in that she doesn't claim to be racially fluid, the way in which the film portrays gender is expressive of Scheirl's transgender identity and shifting sense of self. Scheirl was assigned female at birth and given the name Angela, then took the name Hans and identified as a trans man up until recently, when she began identifying as *she* under the name Ashley Hans Scheirl.<sup>1</sup> The troubling of traditional gender essentialist discourses that Scheirl embodies and incorporates in *Dandy Dust* and her manifesto shares a deep affinity with the way in which trans theorist and performance artist Sandy Stone conceptualizes the "posttranssexual" in her 1987 essay "The *Empire* Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto." Stone writes: "The disruptions of the old patterns of desire that the multiple dissonances of the transsexual body imply produce not an irreducible alterity but a *myriad* of alterities, whose unanticipated juxtapositions hold what Donna

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<sup>1</sup> A. Hans Scheirl. "hey Friends, celebrating my 60th birthday this month. On this occasion I started calling myself Ashley (though Hans is still ok) and to identify as 'she' again (it was exactly 20 years ago that I went on this amazing testo journey). Thank you all for supporting me. Best wishes Ashley." *Facebook*. 19 Aug. 2016. [19 Mar. 2017. <https://www.facebook.com/hans.scheirl>]

Haraway has called the promises of monsters—physicalities of constantly shifting figure and ground that exceed the frame of any possible representation” (16). Stone calls for a more nuanced consideration of the “ambiguities and polyvocalities” that had already been present in feminist discourse, in order to adequately express the multiplicities of gender (15).

*Dandy Dust* exemplifies Stone’s argument for a “myriad of alterities” that disrupt old ways of imagining the body and desire. The film shows frequently shifting, surgically-constructed and artificial bodies, combinations of machine, human and animal, as well as other strange physicalities: Dandy is led into cy’s memories by a character with a flame for a head. While these monstrous physicalities do not “exceed the frame of any possible representation” as Stone describes them since they are ultimately committed to celluloid, the film points toward this difficulty with representation through its experimental narrative structure, degraded film stock, luminescent imagery, intertwining of characters, landscapes and technology, and presentation of bodies that frequently expel fluids. All of these elements work together in a way that effectively illustrates bodies bursting beyond the confines of the flesh and the film nearly bursting beyond the confines of the screen, approaching an impossible representation.

In the film, Dandy’s sense of self is intertwined with cy’s home planet, 3075, described by the film’s narrator as a “cybernetic, hermaphroditic being,” a merging of flesh and machine. One example of this is when Dandy says: “I don’t care about memory data. My pattern is 3075.” Similarly, Deleuze and Guattari write: “Becoming is an antimemory” (294). Scheirl’s manifesto acts as a map in the Deleuzoguattarian sense of being a connection among multiplicities, describing bodies in a perpetual process of

becoming. The filmmaker/actor's trans identity in a sense entails, on some level of consciousness, a certain forgetfulness in order to become something else, not entirely new or separate from past selves, but a true becoming nonetheless, through the creative self-configurations in *Dandy Dust*. In the film, the story of Dandy's past is frequently interrupted; images are sped up, slowed down, and frozen, often featuring bright neon colors against a black background. The characters and environments are permeable, and images are often projected on the landscape or on walls, visually intertwining the characters with the planet, which expresses Scheirl's question, "Where does the me start and where does it end?" (54). This question is reminiscent of Haraway's own in her manifesto when she asks "Why should our bodies end at the skin, or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin?" (114). In *Dandy Dust*, Scheirl depicts this idea of non-discrete bodies of flesh subsumed in their surroundings through fluid and fragmentary bodies, identities, and environments, as well as through the rupture of boundaries between the organic and the inorganic.

Death is not finality in the film, and the characters seem to exist outside of linear time, as past, present and future fold in on each other. The film's deviation from "straight" time recalls Muñoz's concept of queer time, which I described in the first chapter in relation to Sergio's haunting presence in *O Fantasma*. Scheirl takes this subversion of straight time even further through experimental film form that embodies gender fluid and transgender identities on multiple levels. Cultural theorist Eliza Steinbock characterizes the film as a "curiosity about gender-transition" that confounds knowledge at every turn (102). Steinbock describes the film's low-budget effects as integral to its abstract bodies and environments, referring to how Scheirl was "especially

enamored of a ‘particular ‘glow’ produced by shooting on video, filming off the monitor, and then transferring the film image back to video, that made the film grain seem to come alive” (102). Steinbock argues that the film invites the viewer to adopt different ways of experiencing the film by showing images that are not immediately discernable. She writes: “This approach has far-reaching implications for the understanding of the film’s bodily environ and the spectator’s sensuous engagement with its gendered space” (103). The film expresses a specifically gender nonconforming sensibility by confusing origin stories and showing seemingly endless bodily (re)configurations that breach the threshold between life and death, transcending linear time and space.

The characters in *Dandy Dust* go through several deaths, integrated in processes of becoming and shape-shifting. At one point Dandy is killed by the black twins, Mao and Lisa. They throw flower petals and shoot Dandy, pinning cy to the wall in a crucifixion pose. They then water cy’s feet, cy’s nails grow unusually long, and the twins stand together as though praying. Dandy is revived in the next scene. When cy says they want to die, the twins say, “Death does not seem to be a solution in this strange life.” This notion of rebirth is also exemplified when the flame-headed character shows Dandy’s past on television (a conflation of memory and technology), specifically the mysterious death of cy’s mother. The phrase “Long Live Cyniborg XVII” is inscribed on her tombstone, which invites the viewer to question whether this is the same Cyniborg we have been seeing throughout the film, thus obscuring another origin story and exemplifying the timelessness of the film’s world. *Dandy Dust* and its accompanying manifesto destabilize time and space, as well as ontological and epistemological certainty

through experimental form and depictions of fluid bodies and environments that are informed by Scheirl's own experimental self-representation.

### **The Abject: Body Fluids in *Dandy Dust* and Scheirl's Manifesto**

*Dandy Dust* and Scheirl's manifesto also represent Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, particularly the aspect that describes the collapse of bodily boundaries through body fluids. This association between body fluids, organism/machine hybrids and gender nonconforming bodies puts Kristeva's theory of the abject in contact with Haraway's cyborg and Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome. Both Kristeva and Deleuze/Guattari depart from the phallogentric and Oedipal pillars of psychoanalysis to describe something more expansive. In Kristeva it is through a confrontation with bottomless horror and the ambiguous aspects of human existence, while in Deleuze and Guattari it is through multiplicities and infinite configurations of being in the world. Deleuze and Guattari write:

We know nothing about a body until we know what it can do, in other words, what its affects are, how they can or cannot enter into composition with other affects, with the affects of another body, either to destroy that body or to be destroyed by it, either to exchange actions and passions with it or to join with it in composing a more powerful body. (257)

There is an emphasis here on viscera and the interconnectedness between bodies that contains affinities with Kristeva's idea of the abject as a breakdown of distinctions between subject/object, self/other, as well as Haraway's feminist concept of the cyborg, which also delineates a way of "composing a more powerful body." In *Dandy Dust*, all of this is illustrated through diverse physical connections between bodies, as well as

between gender fluidity and bodily waste, which is one way of showing bodies bursting out of the confines of their flesh to become something else.

In the film, Spidercuntboy takes Dandy time travelling to meet cy's future self in order to speed up cy's sexual development. Dandy witnesses cy's future gender-fluid self in an orgiastic exchange of bodily waste. The narrator explains, "Dandy was so shaken by seeing his sexually fluid future self that he went nuts!" Dandy's intense arousal manifests itself in erratic and violent behaviour. Cy disrupts cy's father's aristocratic gathering, shoves food in cy's pants, kills a rat and eats it, then, with blood pouring from cy's mouth, forcefully kisses an aristocratic woman. This sequence demonstrates how Dandy's encounter with cy's future self puts cy in a state of ecstatic pleasure and violence that stems from a breaching of social and corporeal boundaries.

In addition to the inhabitants of planet 3075 exchanging vital fluids, there are many images of body fluids splattering. The film opens on the planet of Blood & Swelling and shows a body being dismembered by an executioner who begins vomiting and ejaculating. The hooded figure's sperm is shown via close-up, mixing with the planet's dust, as though it were fertilizing the landscape. In another scene, Supermother Cyniborg XVII crashes an art show that consists of sexual paintings. The members attempt to apprehend her, and her large sword falls to the ground and breaks, releasing a formless mass of purple slime. When Cyniborg tries to kidnap Dandy, one of the members stab her and she splatters blood everywhere, screaming. The visual recurrence of blood spatter, vomit, sperm and slime strongly evokes a Kristevan shattering of corporeal boundaries. Similarly, Scheirl's manifesto frequently describes various body fluids, at times juxtaposing them with ideas of gender fluidity, as in "S/HIT: she + he +

it,” and artificial genitalia, “The splatter-artiste gurgles & ejaculates a spurt of blood † into your greedy eye out of cy immense & disgusting rubber-prick” (46, 53). Scheirl seems aware of the ambivalent feelings that Kristeva associates with abjection, which Scheirl describes as “diverse trembling-languages! fast oscillation between attraction&repulsion, romanticism&shock, laughter & desperation creates a virtual playspace” (57). This “virtual playspace” is an environment that gives free rein to powerful affective responses that the body cannot contain.

The fluid environment and characters in *Dandy Dust* is echoed in the manifesto’s description of a specifically transgender embodiment: “Imagine a soft/hard object that looks like a high doughnut [without any space 4 looking through] folding its in/out/side insideout: a transgendered arsehole!!!” (55). As Steinbock observes, “Scheirl describes anal space as ‘transgendered,’ or non-gender specific, or gender-irrelevant, rather than associating it with gay men or homosexuality” (105). Scheirl’s description of a formless bodyscape that folds inside out also recalls Hayward’s descriptions of localized *transformations* that occur by creating folds or cuts in the body, thus evoking Scheirl’s transgender becoming. The manifesto’s confusion of bodily boundaries resonates with Kristeva’s theory of the abject, as well as Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of becoming, especially when they describe the “unique plane of consistency or composition for the cephalo-pod and the vertebrate.” They write: “[F]or the vertebrate to become an Octopus or Cuttlefish, all it would have to do is fold itself in two fast enough to fuse the elements of the halves of its back together, then bring its pelvis up to the nape of its neck and gather its limbs together into one of its extremities” (255). This description again evokes the transgender bodily folds described by Scheirl and Hayward, and is exemplified in

*Dandy Dust* through animal becomings and recurring images of bodies transforming through surgical procedures.

In the film, Dandy's control over the fluid environment and characters becomes apparent. Near the end, Dandy is restrained by cy's mother, father and the twins. Cy's legs are spread, revealing an open wound. Cyniborg says, "We must end sloppy patchwork. We shall breed clean and intelligent. Replant our future." The family members are all carrying large phallic objects spurting white fluid. Dandy says, "I am Dandy Dust. I am without fear! Come you feeble fleas, come feed from my rivers, come and see that I'm burning." The family then says: "Remember the extra selves, waste products of unification." They remove their masks, revealing that they are all Dandy. This moment resembles Carlisle's double roles in *Liquid Sky*. Both films illustrate endless becomings and the lack of a unified self. At the very end of the film, Dandy is suspended in the void, carrying tiny figurines of cy's mother and father. Laughing maniacally, cy says, "Come to me babies!" These images show an ecstatic Dandy taking control over the traditional, cisheterosexual family unit, reminding the viewer that the film is Scheirl's creation, a toy akin to the mother/father figurines that frustrates ontological and epistemological certainty.

*Dandy Dust* and Scheirl's manifesto illustrate bodies exploding beyond the limits of the flesh. The film draws connections between bodily waste, gender fluidity, and organism/machine hybrids, which creates a theoretical bridge between Kristeva, Deleuze/Guattari, Haraway, and Hayward. Bodies become like clay in Scheirl's hands, and through her role as Dandy, all the characters become direct extensions of her own becoming. Scheirl blurs the distinction between inside and outside, self and other,

intertwines bodies through vital fluids, and creates cuts and folds that point towards infinite becomings.

In this chapter, I showed how *Liquid Sky* and *Dandy Dust* call upon modes of difference and monstrous bodies that exemplify mutually illuminating theories of becoming and multiplicity. I argued that the androgynous, gender-fluid, and trans characters in the films break with gender essentialism, linking trans embodiments with body modification, intercorporeality, and inter-species alliances. The concepts of the rhizome and the cyborg allow us to depart from dichotomous distinctions between the natural and the artificial, transgression and conformity, and between wrong body/right body. I contend that there is a symbiotic relationship between these films and these theories, which can together facilitate ideas and images of transformation that change our perceptions of gender, and more broadly, of what it means to be human. The films and theories in this chapter help us imagine *becoming* as an infinite process that intertwines us with others and the world. This emphasis on difference and multiplicities fosters a more expansive and variable approach to conceiving bodies and identities than some of the theories in previous chapters, allowing us to navigate beyond dualistic thinking and theories that delineate limited ways of being in the world.

## Conclusion

There are no easy answers to be found in this thesis. I emphasized ambiguity to illuminate our ambivalence towards abjection, which is essentially a repressed desire to live less separate, structured and isolated lives; the desire to devour and be devoured. This thesis explored abject imagery and modes of becoming in queer cinema that reveal our contradictory responses to that which threatens to shatter our bodily boundaries. The complexity of our visceral reactions to this breakdown of subjectivity exposed the limits of psychoanalytic narratives of fetishism and phallogentrism, as well as nihilistic and anti-normative approaches in queer theory. Kristeva's concept of the abject proved productive in that it is adaptable to the contexts of race, gender and sexuality, paradoxically providing a bottomless foundation without prescribing any one particular way of being in the world. Haraway's concept of the cyborg and Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome allowed for a more expansive and multifarious perspective, particularly in relation to transgender theories of becoming and experimental films that depict gender nonconforming characters.

Abjection is primal and predates social structures, even as it is informed by them. Those who are marginalized in society occupy a unique position relative to the abject that is neither necessarily positive nor negative; it is only a measure of proximity that reveals the instability of social structures and subjectivities. In this thesis, the instability and ambiguity signalled by abjection made way for irreducible difference, modes of becoming and intercorporeality, all of which were exemplified by the final set of films. This turn allowed me to move beyond certain theoretical impasses in theories of queer and racialized abjection. While the first two chapters began with my departure from the limits of Edelman's account of queer negativity and Stockton's centralization of shame

and debasement, the third chapter propelled my argument further by emphasizing multiplicities.

Abjection can be seen as a hollowing out, serving as a complementary theory to Deleuze and Guattari's opening up towards multiplicities. Both Kristeva and Deleuze/Guattari are positioned against a psychoanalytic framework and an Oedipal triangle that superimposes meaning onto the unconscious, circumscribing it. Deleuze and Guattari's theories displace the subject from a fixed position, which is exemplified throughout this thesis in characters that wallow in abject pleasures, encounters with potentially transformative unbearable experiences, as well as various modes of becoming and intercorporeality.

Moving forward, I believe it is important to expand the analysis of embodied spectatorship when analyzing films like the ones in this thesis, particularly in the contexts of racialization, abjection and becoming. More can be done to position these films and others like them relative to the intertwining of the viewer's body with the images on screen, particularly by engaging with scholars of film and phenomenology like Jennifer Barker (2009) and Laura U. Marks (2000), in addition to Sobchack (2004). This approach continues the shift away from phallogentrism and gaze theory in Film Studies towards a more productive framework of phenomenology, abjection, and multiplicities. My argument that the films elicit more complex responses than some approaches in queer theory allow could also be enriched by new theorizations of affect and the nuances of lived experience, especially through scholars like Kara Keeling (2007) and Eugenie Brinkema (2014). Can further research into embodied spectatorship of queer cinema point towards an extension of the human sensorium through technology that exemplifies

Deleuze and Guattari's concept of becoming as a process of entanglement, of involution rather than evolution?

This thesis began by exploring characters that confront or revel in negative experiences that approach self-destruction without ever truly reaching it, as well as scenarios of dominance and submission involving racialized gay men that disrupt the power dynamics of racial and sexual hierarchies. These abject encounters in the films allow us to perceive new ways of dealing with seemingly unbearable experiences, cultivating more complex responses in the viewer that exceed some approaches in queer theory. I then explored gender nonconforming characters on screen through posthumanist and transgender theories of becoming in order to more effectively elucidate my argument that the films create opportunities for ambiguity, in-between states, and multiplicities. Flirting with abjection doesn't have to end in nihilism or self-destruction. This dark horizon can potentially create transfigured relations in us, producing new thresholds that can help us imagine all sorts of becomings.

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