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THE EROTICISM OF NATURE IN THE CONTEMPLATIVE CONTEMPORARY CINEMA

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ABSTRACT: This article questions how contemplative contemporary cinema "sexualize" the landscapes. Through the filmography of four directors, Abbas Kiarostami, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Lars von Trier and Bruno Dumont, the relationships between nature and human body are highlighted. Furthermore, based on the "eroticism" notion developed by Georges Bataille, our study tries to emphasize how these relationships turn out to be synonymous with bliss but at the same time of terror.

KEYWORDS: landscape, nature, cinema, eroticism, Georges Bataille.

"Eroticism is [...] an experience wedded to life itself; not as an object of scientific study, but more deeply, as an object of passion and poetic contemplation."

Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death & Sensuality*.¹

Contemplative cinema, sometimes also called *slow cinema*, has been growing since the end of the 1960s and more specifically with the works of Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky². These films distinguish themselves from classic cinema by emphasizing, in particular, long takes with little or no narrative. In addition, these films, which take place for the most part outdoors, are also characterized by a great attention paid to nature, landscapes and the relationships that the characters have with them. Indeed, the rather uncluttered staging creates space-times conducive to contemplating and listening to nature. More than producing "an image of the world", contemplative cinema can "create a presence in the world beyond the image",³ as the inherent poetics of landscapes reveals, in this type of film, a sensitive and even cenesthetic relationship with nature, for the characters but also for the spectator. Moreover, as we would like to highlight in particular in this article, contemplative contemporary cinema seems to "sexualize" nature and landscape.

Indeed, more than literature and painting, more even than theatre or dance, cinema draws its strength as close as possible to the body, which is perpetually captured in the variety of framings, lightings and depths of field. Eroticism is thus omnipresent in the seventh art, since the camera is not satisfied with awakening in us allusive fantasies and symbolisms, but places us as *spectator-voyeur*. Any look that is offered or sees itself offered within a shot is multiplied by the looks of the spectators. Cinema would thus have the capacity to exhaust the whole field of possible eroticism.

However, it should not be forgotten that cinema is an art *and* an industry, most often restricted to the requirements of producers and censorship. In the 1970s, cinema was subjected to important restrictions concerning the exposure of the flesh. In France, it was at the end of 1975 that the law classifying "X" films of a pornographic nature appeared, and in 1990 that a decree concerning the classification of films (according to the age of spectators) was applied. Eroticism in cinema therefore

had to become more discreet, more subtle, and more diffuse than before. It therefore does not seem trivial that it was around the same time (mid-1970s) that contemplative films began to appear on screens. We then consider that nature and landscapes could have become the ground for a distillation of a "forbidden" eroticism. Contemplative cinema would be mostly revealed, not as a cinema of pure eroticism, but as a cinema of suggestion and erotization, "a production of light, diffuse, mercurial eroticism"⁴ to use Roland Barthes' terms. These images divert us from the triviality of pornographic productions by redirecting us towards an original path of erotic exploration. In particular, the works of four filmmakers will allow us to shed light on several facets of this erotization of contemporary cinematographic space: Abbas Kiarostami, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Lars von Trier, and Bruno Dumont.

To explore how the landscapes of contemplative cinema stage a singular eroticism of nature, which, as we shall see, is both synonymous with bliss and terror, we will rely, *inter alia*, on several notions developed by Georges Bataille in his work *Erotism: Death & Sensuality* (1957), as, according to us, it seems there is a close connection between the films studied in this paper and some theories of the French writer. For example, Bataille states that every human being is, in essence, a discontinuous being who relentlessly seeks continuity, union and fusion, especially through the sexual act, but also through death. This statement seems to be able to find a real echo with the metaphorical situations in which many characters of contemplative films are trapped: a quest, which often continues to repeat itself without any hopes for progression, as in the punishment of the mythological character Sisyphus. Moreover, in his book, Bataille develops the notion of "sacred eroticism" that seems to us to be able to overlap with the eroticism of nature, which is at work in the films we focus on, except that the sacred is no longer found in a *stricto sensu* religious mysticism but rather within the natural forces themselves.

In fact, as landscapes are an almost inexhaustible source of imagination and projection, the human spirit could be inclined to transform nature into strong erotic chimeras. Thus, this is where the spectator of contemplative cinema needs to respond to the invitation of contemporary filmmakers that we are studying, as Abbas Kiarostami expresses:

I cannot stand narrative cinema, I am leaving the room. The only way to envisage a new cinema is to give more emphasis on the role of the audience. We must consider **an incomplete cinema** so that **the spectator can intervene and fill in the gaps**. Instead of making a film with a solid and impeccable structure. We must weaken it - while being aware that we must not scare away the spectator! The solution is perhaps to encourage audience members to have an **active and constructive presence**. I believe more in an art that seeks to create difference. The divergence between people rather than the convergence where everyone would agree. In this way, there is a diversity of thought and reaction. Everyone builds their own film.⁵

SEEING THROUGH THE LANDSCAPES

The final sequence of the film *Trough the Olive Trees* (1994) by Abbas Kiarostami enacts an erotization of nature characteristic of contemplative films. The filmmaker offers a singular staging of Hossein's last attempt to conquer the heart of Tahereh. The camera follows in a close-up shot the progression of the two protagonists through a wood. During this entire scene, when they are not hidden behind the trunks, the faces and the upper bodies can only be distinguished through the leaves of the trees. The use of a continuous lateral traveling shot and parallel editing between the two characters suggests a certain sexualisation of the surrounding space, established from games of

openness and penetration. In fact, the many branches set up a multitude of embrasures that the characters cross one after the other, but which are also the place of passage of the gaze of the spectator. The space reveals reliefs which give a texture, a materiality to the image: the haptic function of the gaze, as theorised by Gilles Deleuze⁶, is called upon: the eye becomes seduced by the landscape forms and the movements of the gaze become caresses.

During this placid race, the space and the landscapes become sexual, physical, and almost erogenous. The tree trunks and branches that fill the frame also participate in an erotization generated by the exacerbation of a tension between disappearance and appearance, between occultation and revelation. The viewer's gaze on the images joins Hossein's towards Tahereh: they seem driven by the same desire, that of seeing through (as the title of the film indicates), of seeing beyond, of approaching that which is hidden, secret, distant, and unknown. The multiple fabrics that make up Tahereh's clothing also echo this game of hiding and revealing, which constitutes the very foundations of the scopical drive. The famous words of Marcel Proust could then become those of the male character, even of the spectator: "I do not desire a woman, but the landscape that envelops her".⁷

In addition, the clothes worn by Tahereh have three characteristic colours. Indeed, the white (of the veil), the blue (of the waistcoat) and the red (of the velvet dress) invoke the Marian colours, which we find in many pictorial representations of the Virgin (for example, in *Virgin and Christ Child Enthroned* (1270) by Guido da Siena, or the Virgin of the *Annunciation* (1434) by Fra Angelico). The colours of Mary's clothes are based on symbolic codes established during the Middle Ages: white corresponds to purity and virginity, blue to the bond with the celestial (she is the chosen one of God) and red to blood (the Passion of Christ). Tahereh's purity is materialized by the silent refusal which she opposes to the countless requests of Hossein. The red velvet that covers her highlights the sensuality of the female body that white and blue annihilate by making it sacred. By means of this chromatic concordance, she acquires a comparable status to that of the Virgin Mary, which condenses the feminine and maternal mystery.⁸ She renounces the pleasures of the flesh and becomes a figure of renunciation, refusal, even sacrifice, which arouses in humans (Hossein) misunderstanding and questioning. It thus symbolizes a prohibition of erotic pleasure, an inaccessible which sharpens desire.

Following this scene, a recurring landscape motif in Abbas Kiarostami filmography appears: the path. More precisely, a zigzagging dirt road on the side of a hill (dug by the film crew⁹), reveals different functions depending on the story. Here, in this film, it seems at the heart of the love game that exists between Hossein and Tahereh. The winding path turns into the field of appearance of desire and condenses the previous scene metaphorically. Hossein races in vain: the closer he gets, the more he seems to move away. The path would thus stage, visually and physically (through the painstaking journey of the two characters), the dialectic of closeness and distance, which underlies many games of seduction.

In *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010) the Thai director Apichatpong Weerasethakul offers a sequence where a female figure has several traits in common with the character of Tahereh. This sequence seems to have a particular role within the film insofar as it appears in the middle of the film without any real narrative link with the other scenes. The fourteen minutes devoted to this metaphorical aside introduce the character of a princess, who can be understood as an embodiment of Uncle Boonmee's previous lives, to which the film's title alludes. This princess is presented, like Tahereh, under an accumulation of veils: those which hide her body and the lower part of her face but also those which cover the sedan chair on which she stands. Here, too, the intermittent appearance of branches and leaves of trees in the foreground enhances the concealment effect of the female body. From the outset, this character thus embodies the mystery and the inaccessible.

A little later in this mid-film interlude, the journey in the forest ends in a dream-like landscape with a huge foaming waterfall. In this moonlight scene with bright bluish tones, the princess will also

shy away from the advances of one of her servants, like Tahereh did in Kiarostami's film. Water will then play a key role in this scene: it will reveal the reflection of the princess's extinct beauty but also give life to an enigmatic catfish with which the young woman will speak at length before welcoming it inside of herself. In this scene, the shrill sound of the cicadas which punctuates the entire soundtrack of the film is replaced by a continuous flowing aquatic sound. This natural buzzing evoking an organic noise seems to announce the sexual act to come. Later, a dull underwater noise suggests a subjective penetration within the body of the princess. The shapes and colours of the rocks and porous stones trapped in an aquatic bubbling nevertheless recall the curves of the princess body: a parallel is drawn between the interior of the female body and the underwater world. The water then acquires plasticity and sonority which evoke both sensuality and immersion in a matrix bath, both sexual secretions and amniotic fluid. In *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud recalls, in fact, that "in countless dreams, the parent-child relationship is represented by the act of pulling out of water and rescuing from water".¹⁰ The aquatic element would thus symbolize the primary desire and enjoyment relating to the mother's body, which are at the heart of the Oedipus complex and the construction of the libido.

Additionally, this extraordinary mating between human and animal reinforces the mythical quality of the female character. Like with the Virgin Mary, it is a supernatural being that is at the origin of fertilization. Man (like Joseph in the Bible) is dismissed from the sexual act; he is powerless literally and figuratively in the face of a sacred insemination. The princess would thus become the place of the incarnation of a meeting between the terrestrial and the celestial, between the human and the divine. Several scenes cut during the editing process abound in this direction.¹¹ In scene 49 (entitled *The Princess and the Villagers*¹²), while the princess is throwing food at villagers who surround and cheer her, she says, in voice-over, that she is "the daughter of a divine being, the master of the earth". The figures of the foster Mother and Mother Nature are then summoned. Scenes 56 to 58 and 59 (respectively entitled *Protozoa* and *The Princess gives life*), meanwhile, bring together childbirth (of which we will not see the outcome and therefore the child) and the formation of primitive life forms on the water's surface. The Princess would be likened to the Mother of all living forms, of all beings made up of cells. Inserted in the middle of the film by the Thai filmmaker, this tale with mythological aspects connects landscapes and human bodies, but also microcosm and macrocosm, through the evocation of a cosmic and universal dynamic.

A CENESTHESIC RELATIONSHIP

The feature film *Melancholia* (2011) by Lars von Trier also proposes a conception of eroticism based on a relationship between human being, landscape and cosmos. Indeed, very often throughout the film, the character of Justine (played by Kirsten Dunst) walks mesmerized towards the woods which surround the manor house where her wedding is celebrated. In opposition with the anthropocentric interactions of the reception's worldliness, Justine is constantly looking for a body and sensory contact with nature. Many extreme wide shots of Justine in vast landscapes depict her communion with nature, as suggested, in the overture of the film, with a very pictorial shot where she is floating on water, as in John Everett Millais's 1852 painting of *Ophelia*.

More, she seems captivated by the stars and has a unique relationship with them. On several occasions, the observation of the stars seems to awaken in her an internal sensation which completely isolates her from surrounding people. While the other characters appear worried when they observe the planet Melancholia approaching Earth, the close-ups of Justine's face suggest a communion with the cosmos. The young woman seems to be in the grip of an intense shock and a cenesthetic pleasure, which could be linked to what Bataille calls "sacred eroticism", namely "the fusion of beings with a world beyond everyday reality"¹³. The term "coenesthesia" comes from the ancient Greek *koinós* (*κοινός*, "in common") and *aísthêsis* (*αἴσθησις*, "perception") and therefore literally means "common

perception". It should be noted, however, that coenesthesia, according to psychological studies by Théodule Ribot in particular, relates to a specific perception, a perception linked to the interior of the body, to the organs and not to the five senses. The cenesthetic pleasure of the character would be linked to a "rumour of viscera"¹⁴ which exacerbates the memory of an ontological correspondence between the body and the nature, and awakens the consciousness of belonging to a cosmic rhythm, as described by Leonardo da Vinci:

Man has been called by the ancients a lesser world. [...] Seeing that if a man is composed of earth, water, air, and fire, this body of earth is similar. While man has within himself bones as a stay and framework for the flesh, the world has stones which are the supports of earth. While man has within him a pool of blood wherein the lungs as he breathes expand and contract, so the earth has its ocean, which also rises and falls every six hours with the breathing of the world, as from the said pool of blood proceed the veins which spread their branches through the human body, so the ocean fills the body of the earth with an infinite number of veins of water.¹⁵

The cosmic event to come, the collision of the two planets, seems to fall on Justine in cenesthetic vibrations, closely linked to an understanding of the immeasurable force of nature. The scene, where Claire follows her sister (Justine) in the woods bordering the manor they inhabit, explicitly exposes the sacred eroticism that Melancholia arouses in Justine. Lying naked in the grass, like "a shape desired in a dream, Eve being born from the earth",¹⁶ she gazes lasciviously at the planet in the sky. The eroticism of nature reveals an awakening of the flesh, which then appears as the most beautiful of clothes, rather than an absence of clothes.

The nudity - not the nakedness¹⁷ - of the character evokes a state of communion and "communication, revealing a quest for a possible continuance of being beyond the confines of the self"¹⁸ : as explained by Bataille, "through the activity of organs in a flow of coalescence and renewal, like the ebb and flow of waves surging into another, the self is dispossessed".¹⁹ Justine does not fear the meeting of the two planets like the other members of her family do. She seems, on the contrary, to desire it, in order to find again the harmony of the primal state of matter, the harmony of a lost union with the "music of the spheres", as described in Plato's *Timaeus*. Justine, under the influence of an irrepressible attraction, abandons herself to cosmic forces while communing with the landscape. As Georges Bataille pointed out, there is indeed a close relationship between eroticism and the dissolution of the ego: it is the fantasy of a fusion, of a "transition from discontinuous to continuous",²⁰ which motivates the sexual act and fuels eroticism.

The contemplation and this cenesthetic feeling can then constitute the very foundations of sacred eroticism. Moreover, could these affects not be considered also as the basis of the mechanisms involved in aesthetic pleasure itself? Could we think of an erotic aesthetic pleasure which brings into play the scopic impulse and a feeling of belonging and union? Stendhal syndrome²¹ would appear, for instance, as the extreme exacerbation of this sensual and bodily relationship with art. Like a passing consolation in the face of discontinuity, the work of art becomes a temporary refuge, synonymous with spiritual but also physical pleasure. The wonder of the gaze eroticizes the image, insofar as "the sight of anything extremely beautiful, in nature or in art, brings back the memory of what one loves, with the speed of lightning".²² We know that aesthetic pleasure is, indeed, to be compared to the psychoanalytic concept of *sublimation*, as demonstrated by Sigmund Freud:

The science of aesthetics examines the conditions under which we experience beauty. It could not give an explanation of nature and genesis of beauty.[...] Only its origin out of the field of sexual feelings seems assured. It is an exemplary instance of a tendency

which has not reached its aim. Beauty and charm are primarily qualities of the sexual object itself.²³

The contemplation of the artistic image—and of landscapes—makes it possible to “substitute sight for touch, to make of sight an almost-touch but in order to see, not to touch”.²⁴ The eroticism of aesthetic pleasure would thus be intimately linked to a dialectic of distance and proximity, based on a "haptic drive" whose goal would be an intimate vision. The sensual relationship with the work of art would be based on a contemplation that “embraces” the work, as proposed by Alberti’s famous assertion: “What else can you call painting but a similar embracing with art of what is presented on the surface of the water in the fountain?”.²⁵ Contemplative cinema would then laud a contemplation which frees the senses from the constraints of reason and awakens both a sensitive and cenesthetic eroticism of the landscapes but also of art itself. Aesthetic pleasure would no longer be restricted to a platonic love relationship with art and beauty, but would summon enjoyment of both body and mind. In his writings, Richard Shusterman recalls that this conception of aesthetics is quite recent and testifies to a real philosophical debate, which separates *materialists* and *spiritualists*:

Philosophy’s separation of art from life has also eviscerated aesthetic experience by repudiating its connection to bodily energies and appetites and by defining its delight in contrast to the sensual pleasures of living. [...] Modern aesthetics put the experience of art on a path of disembodied spiritualization, where full-blooded and widely shared appreciative enjoyment is refined away into anemic and almost ascetic contemplative devotion.²⁶

Contemplative film would therefore celebrate the return of this "repressed" conception of aesthetics and set a true bodily and sensitive pleasure caused by art. The eroticism of aesthetic pleasure that emerges from these works would then be based on a union between body and mind, as it is mentioned in Schelling and especially Schopenhauer’s writings.²⁷ The work of art is offered to perception as an intermediate object which allows energy to discharge in a regressive way, removing the barriers of repression, as “the true enjoyment of [art] proceeds from the release of tensions in our minds”.²⁸ More, when image of landscapes and artistic image go hand-in-hand, as in this kind of film, a new category of Aristotle's *mimesis* seems to emerge: a *mimesis* no longer based on the recognition of figures, but on the recognition of oneself in landscapes and natural elements. The search and identification of common ontological traits (between nature and the human body) would be the very principles of the aesthetic pleasure offered by contemplative film. The work of art would provoke a sensory and cenesthetic excitement where everything is intertwined in a continuous flow of correspondences and allegories, capable of recreating the lost unity.

LOCUS AMOENUS AND LOCUS TERRIBILIS

Furthermore, by staging “images [...] whose sight causes us pain”,²⁹ the eroticism of nature also participates in the implementation of catharsis, the second concept developed by Aristotle in relation to the aesthetic pleasure, because, as Bataille reminds us, “in essence, the domain of eroticism is [also] the domain of violence, of violation”.³⁰ With the film *Antichrist* (2009), Lars von Trier mixes, both thematically and stylistically, horror and the sublime thus illuminating two facets of eroticism: sacred eroticism and erotic violence. The film highlights an eroticism of nature which, in several respects, echoes that of *Melancholia*, except that the landscapes (mostly in very dark colors) look, in this film, much more scary and unwelcoming. During a long dialogue with her husband, the character played by Charlotte Gainsbourg declares: “Women do not control their own bodies. Nature does.”

The next scene will show the couple having sex in their chalet. But, following the refusal of the man³¹ (Willem Dafoe) to hit his partner as she asked him, the young woman fled into the woods which border the chalet. Under a tree, in the middle of nature, we find the female character masturbating frantically, before being joined by her husband to continue the sexual act previously initiated. The immense exposed roots of the tree draw the continuity of the female body. The final shot gives a glimpse of a multitude of hands emerging from the roots. The flesh of the couple and that of people trapped in the ground intertwine with the roots of the tree: human body and landscape seem to become one, to form only one strange and frightening entity linked to the earth.

This dreamlike and nightmarish image evokes sacred eroticism and the fact that “existence itself is at stake in the transition from discontinuity to continuity”.³² The human body would then follow Aristotelian “natural movement”, that of an element towards its home, as described by Leonardo da Vinci:

All elements, removed from their natural place tend to return to that place, in particular, the water, fire and earth; and the shorter the line along which this return takes place, the more its course will be rectilinear; and the more it will be rectilinear, the greater the percussion against the obstacle will be.³³

If the sexual act is the “shortest line”, so it seems normal that the return to the land is not done without difficulty, without a “great percussion” because it uncovers/unveils the carnal and mortal nature of the human being.

The "cursed part" of sexuality is also exposed from the prologue of Lars von Trier film. As the title indicates, the scenario reverses the schemes of the Annunciation and the Nativity³⁴: it is during the sexual act that the character embodied by Charlotte Gainsbourg loses her child, while the Virgin Mary receives Jesus in her womb without succumbing to the sins of the flesh. The cross-cutting makes the fall of the little boy through the window coincide with the cry (mute in the soundtrack) of enjoyment of the female character. The film is, moreover, haunted by a figure which takes different forms³⁵: that of the three beggars who came to beg for death and proclaim chaos. These three characters are explicitly opposed to the Three Kings who offer gifts to celebrate the birth of Christ, and at the same time the redemption of Original Sin.

In fact, the "Fall" is often considered as the radical opposite of the prodigy of the Annunciation. The latter becomes Redemption, by reversing the "evil" work of Original Sin. Thus, the expulsion from Paradise sometimes fits, as if in remorse, in the background landscapes of pictorial representations of the Annunciation, like those of Fra Angelico. However, as Didi-Huberman points out, if the Fall constitutes the "before" of Annunciation, it is necessary to recall the importance of the Annunciation for its expectant capacities because it is the prefigurative act of divine motherhood but it also coincides with the day of the Crucifixion, and therefore of the death of Christ. “Memorizing the mystery of the Incarnation is therefore equivalent to memorizing its end: a Virgin will give birth, but she will only give birth in anticipation of the death of the child, *embodied in her to die*- and this for eternal salvation of humans.”³⁶ The inaugural *Antichrist* scene would thus condense the memory and expectancy functions³⁵ of the Biblical Annunciation, while revealing the "cursed part" of sexuality. This film also illustrates the shift from the field of erotization to that of eroticism³⁷ : we consider that, while the erotization of nature would consist in a subtle and diffuse suggestion of the erotic potentialities of nature, the eroticism of nature would be seen as something more raw, more direct where the sexualisation of nature is then obvious.

In several Bruno Dumont films, and more particularly in *Twenty-nine Palms* (2003), erotization and eroticism of landscapes are constantly intertwined, as for the French director, nudity and sexuality are exposed in close-ups and without shame. The immensity of the desert, on which the

bodies of the two protagonists are imprinted, highlights a return to terrestrial matter. In addition, the many rocks that populate the landscape of the Joshua Desert reveal a minerality whose touch would remind that of the human body. The first part of the film multiplies the scenes of sex in nature and thus establishes a correspondence between the human body and terrestrial elements. The characters seem, in fact, as receptive to the caresses of their partners as to those of the air that surrounds their body or those of the stones on which they rest. The director's statement is particularly enlightening with regard to the choice of shooting location, which was established even before the script was written:

Populated by these thorny trees on rocky soil, the Joshua desert is atypical. It renews, in its own way, the impregnation of this extent of time and place on the sensibility experienced by the spectator/customer of cinema. It turns him on.

It re-sensitizes him to the experience of the desert where a visible, infinite and poetic immensity is paradoxical in the exiguity of the human condition. 'Mystical' interval, interior landscape, the desert is then an illusion, a waking dream: the test for the spectator of a pure representation of the spirit, the proven experimentation of oneself with the only trampling and the tangible desolation of a space-time.

A metaphysical place if ever there was one, the expressiveness of Joshua's desert is powerful to our senses.

[...] Mythical place, physical, tangible and consubstantial part of the human mind and body: primitive place, primary space, natural, expressive (cinematographic) and regenerating.³⁸

The skin of the actors and the mineral surface of the desert landscape constitute the paradigm of a haptic function of art, as the mortal coil would allow an experience and an intimate exploration of the self and the other. If the first part of the film rests on a serene idleness, it nevertheless lets emerge the disorder and the violence which will constitute the heart of the second part. The deeply unhealthy atmosphere of rape and final murder (which echoes the destruction of the genitals of the two protagonists of *Antichrist*) would have been initiated by the repetition of the sexual act. In his work on eroticism, Georges Bataille has highlighted the close link between eroticism and violence, sexual act and death:

The fusion of lovers' bodies persists on the spiritual plane because of the passion they feel, or else this passion is the prelude to physical fusion. For the man in love, however, the fervour of love may be felt more violently than physical desire is. We ought never to forget that in spite of the bliss love promises its first effect is one of turmoil and distress. [...] Possession of the beloved object does not imply death, but the idea of death is linked with the urge to possess. If the lover cannot possess the beloved he will sometimes think of killing her; often he would rather kill her than lose her. Or else he may wish to die himself. [...] If the union of two lovers comes about through love, it involves the idea of death, murder or suicide.³⁹

The eroticism of nature could then be considered as a special case of Bataille's sacred eroticism, based on an inextricable entanglement of horror and sublimity that characterizes the transition from discontinuity to continuity. The path to this transition could be synonymous with returning to an original place, as a dreamlike landscape, which would have many points in common with the uterine place. Traditionally, the woman's vagina is the object of all fantasies because it hides from sight and thus preserves its secret. But, the close-up view of the female sex at the start of the film *L'Humanité* (1999) by Bruno Dumont, like Courbet famous painting *L'Origine du monde* (1866), presents it as

both an erotic and prohibited object because in this particular film it evokes birth, and even rape and death.⁴⁰ As André Masson's canvas made of sand and oil paint entitled *Earth* (1939) suggests, the return to natural matter could thus be linked to a certain nostalgia for the mother's body, which is synonymous with bliss and comfort but also with *locus terribilis*. Indeed, the words "mother" and "matter" have the same etymological root: *mater*, a Latin term relating to origin and creation. The maternal figure would therefore be closely linked to nature and raw matter; and the landscapes of contemplative cinema could be considered as a way of representing a return both to the maternal bond and to nature. By presenting "a nebula complex of elements buried underground in us",⁴¹ contemplative film manages to reconstruct "the vague reminiscence of graces and blissful stages of 'paradisiac' being",⁴² as developed by Sergueï Eisenstein on his *Mutterleib* theory, which highlights the drive for the return into the mother's womb. The link between universal and personal past can thus be found in the expression "Mother Earth":

A remarkable proof that the earth bore our forefathers lies in the consideration that everything, which has given birth, possesses the necessary food for that to which it has given birth, so that a woman who has given birth is readily distinguished from one who pretends to have done so, but has no fountains of nourishment for the birth; in regard to which point our earth gives a notable proof that she has given birth to men, for she produced crops of wheat and barley, which are admirably adapted for the nourishment of the human species; and this proof is of far greater consideration in the case of the earth, than in the case of women, for the earth does not imitate women in conception and parturition, but women imitate the earth.⁴³

This Plato quotation highlights the antique conception, which links the Earth to the maternal figure, which Gaston Bachelard also evokes in his work *Earth and Reveries of Will: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*. Thus, the beginning of Bruno Dumont's film *L'Humanité* (1999) can be seen in the light of this association between the mother and the terrestrial element we experience as landscape. In the first scene, before the shot of the little girl's body, the steps of Pharaon (the main character) are presented in close-up sound, while his silhouette is barely noticeable in the background. From the first moments, before Pharaon is actually presented on the screen, he is therefore designated by a noise which reveals his "attachment" to the land. When the camera gets closer, a close-up on his feet, which sink into the wet earth, announces the fusion to come: after this shot, Pharaon falls head first on the ground. Instead of getting up, he remains lying down and seems to delight in this moment when his body merges with terrestrial matter, human flesh and terrestrial flesh uniting in the abstraction of a purely formal plan. The following shots stage a sensual coupling between the body and matter. The burial of the character seems then to aim at a return to the maternal womb and the restoration of the original link. Later in the film (around the 33th minute), when Pharaon kneads and caresses the soil of his garden, it is the same sensual union that seems to be at work. The crumbling earth, shapeless form, incomplete and without possible limit, is in essence opposed to a rational thought and thus evokes a passionate ontological link: "it is really a return to the mother, a confident submissiveness to the material powers of mother earth".⁴⁴

Contemplative contemporary cinema involves a self-projection movement toward nature: the experience of spatial relationships thus goes hand in hand with a rediscovery of one's body as possible expression of the landscape and vice-versa. More than a background or a motif, the landscapes become a material allowing to question our sensitive and intuitive relation to nature. Finally, this eroticism (or erotization, in certain cases) seems to be related to an irresistible drive to the final resting place but at the same time a return to the womb of Mother Earth. What motivates the

eroticism of nature and eroticism in general would therefore be the fantasy of a fusion, of a transition from discontinuity to continuity, from one's own body to the vastness of nature and landscapes, in other words a return from the dyad to the monad, because "we are discontinuous beings, individuals dying alone in an unintelligible adventure, but we are nostalgic for the lost continuity"⁴⁵.

NOTES

1. Bataille, *Erotism: Death & Sensuality*, 9.
2. Other well-known contemplative filmmakers include Terrence Malik, Béla Tarr, Theo Angelopoulos, Lav Diaz, or Lisandro Alonso.
3. Brun, *Poétique(s) du cinéma*, 41 (my translation).
4. Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, 62.
5. These words by Abbas Kiarostami come from an interview with Jean-Luc Nancy: Nancy, *L'Évidence du film*, 67 (my translation, emphasis mine).
6. Deleuze considers "the most rigid link between the eye and the hand because its element is *the flat surface*, which allows the eye to function like the sense of touch; furthermore, it confers, and indeed imposes, upon the eye a tactile, or rather *haptic*, function". Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 122.
7. Proust, *Du Côté de chez Swann*, 154 (my translation).
8. See Gagnebin, "Le cri de la mère morte", 59-70.
9. See Sabouraud, "L'aura, l'aura pas... Le cinéma de Kiarostami à l'ère du numérique", 25.
10. Freud, *L'Homme Moïse*, 69 (my translation).
11. The bonuses of the French DVD, edited by *TF1 Vidéo* and *Pyramide Vidéo* in March 2012 offer several cut scenes from the film, which, for the most part, were an integral part of this sequence devoted to the princess.
12. Each cut scene is introduced by a title.
13. Bataille, *Erotism: Death & Sensuality*, 18.
14. Juin, *Aragon*, 220 (my translation).
15. Da Vinci, *Notebooks*, 44-45.
16. These are the terms that Zola uses to describe the nudity of the female character of Edouard Manet *The Luncheon on the Grass* (1863): Zola, *L'Œuvre*, 47 (my translation).
17. On this subject, see the distinction made by art historian Kenneth Clark between *nude* and *naked* in his book: *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form*. For Clark, to be naked means simply to be without clothes, whereas the nude is a form of art.
18. Bataille, *Erotism: Death & Sensuality*, 17.
19. *Ibid.*, 18.
20. *Ibid.*, 15.
21. Stendhal syndrome is a psychosomatic response characterised by symptoms including the feeling of faintness, heart palpitations, and dizziness, all brought on by the enormous awe on experiences when viewing an array of supremely beautiful art. It is named after the French author who described Giotto's frescoes in the Basilica Santa Croce: "Absorbed in the contemplation of sublime beauty... I reached the point where on encounters celestial sensations. [...] I had palpitations of the heart [...]. Life was drained from me. I walked with the fear of falling." Stendhal, *Naples and Florence*, 89.
22. Stendhal, *De l'amour*, 53. (my translation)
23. Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, 35.
24. Arasse, *Take a closer look*, 119.
25. Alberti, *On Painting*, 64.
26. Shusterman, *Surface and Depth*, 184

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27. See Sami-Ali, *Penser l'unité*.
 28. Freud. *Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming*, 156.
 29. Aristotle, *Poetics*, 35 (IV, 1448b 10-11).
 30. Bataille, *Erotism: Death & Sensuality*, 16.
 31. The names of the characters are not given in the film, which gives the story a universal scope.
 32. Bataille, *Erotism: Death & Sensuality*, 17.
 33. Da Vinci, *Les Carnets*, 27 (my translation).
 34. As in several films by Lars von Trier, *Antichrist* is traversed by many biblical references: for example, the chalet where the couple will retire to mourn is named by the characters "Eden".
 35. A human form during the prologue (three statuettes placed on a table), an animal form in the woods (the doe, the crow and the fox) and an astral form revealed by the young woman's research (a constellation).
 36. Didi-Huberman, "La dissemblance des figures", 783 (my translation).
 37. When it was released in theaters, the film was prohibited for children under the age of sixteen.
 38. Dumont, Statement of intent for *Twentynine Palms* (my translation).
 39. Bataille, *Erotism: Death & Sensuality*, 19-20
 40. The corpse, discovered at the beginning of the film, is an 11-year-old girl's, brutally raped and murdered.
 41. Eisenstein, *MLB. Plongée dans le sein maternel*, 60. (my translation).
 42. Ibid.
 43. Plato, *Menexenus*, t. 4, 193-194 (237d3–238a5).
 44. Bachelard, *La Terre et les rêveries*, 127 (my translation).
 45. Bataille, *Erotism: Death & Sensuality*, 17.
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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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