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Desire for Transformation: The Actualization of Self-identity Through Change In
the Films *Raw* and *Titane*

A Thesis by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Film Studies

May 2023

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April 2023

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ABSTRACT

Desire for Transformation: The Actualization of Self-identity Through Change In the Films *Raw* and *Titane*

by Owen R. Bradford

The aim of this thesis is to illustrate a distinction between the films of The New French Extreme and Ducournau's *Raw* and *Titane*, in their handling of gender and identity, primarily in regard to how these films handle transformation and self-identification. Ducournau explores themes of cannibalism, the linking of desire and violence, and transformation in order to disrupt hegemonic conceptions of sex and gender binaries. The disruptions to these binaries are initially perceived as monstrous, due to the implementation of genre conventions, they play on perception of the monstrous feminine, to reveal cultural perceptions that these transgressions are dangerous, destructive, and disruptive. Yet through primary identification with the protagonists, as well as the thematic significance of familial and platonic love/connection as resolution or conclusion to the horror, the films refute that these transgressions are monstrous. The cannibalism and transformation displayed in *Raw* and *Titane* could be taken as negative in isolation, however, this thesis considers how the films handle the relationships that their protagonists foster, and how these become realized not just despite the monstrous acts that they commit, but primarily through them. While the films of the New French Extreme emphasize the isolating effects of violent patriarchal capitalist societies in which they are set, *Raw* and *Titane* focus instead on their protagonists working towards self-realization in spite of their societies.

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I. Introduction:

Building on the conventions of body horror and the sensibilities of The New French Extreme¹, Julia Ducournau's films *Raw* (2016) and *Titane* (2021) deal with issues of sexual repression, desire, violence under patriarchy, gender, and how the family and familial love affect these issues. In this, Ducournau explores themes of cannibalism, the linking of desire and violence, and transformation in order to disrupt hegemonic conceptions of sex and gender binaries. By examining The New French Extreme through the works of Tim Palmer, Carol Clover, and Linda Williams, this thesis first establishes context of depictions of gender and sexuality in French Horror in which *Raw* and *Titane* build from. Then, through textual analysis of these two films, with consideration of the scholarship on *Raw* from Eve Watson, Kathe Dooley, and Louise Flockhart, this thesis aims to demonstrate how these films provide further disruption. Ultimately, this thesis seeks to illustrate that the disruptions to these binaries are initially perceived as monstrous, due to the implementation of genre conventions, they play on perception of the monstrous feminine, to reveal cultural perceptions that these transgressions are dangerous, destructive, and disruptive. Yet through primary identification with the protagonists, as well as the thematic significance of familial and platonic love/connection as resolution or conclusion to the horror, the films refute that these transgressions are monstrous.

The aim of this thesis is to illustrate a distinction between the films of The New French Extreme and Ducournau's *Raw* and *Titane*, in their handling of gender and identity, primarily in regard to how these films handle transformation and self-identification. The first section looks

¹ 'The New French Extreme' as explained by Barton Fumo in, Barton-Fumo, Margaret. "PLEASURES OF THE FLESH." *Film Comment* 53, no. 2 (2017): 42–46. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44991053>. Tim Palmer also defines the New French Extreme, but opts to define it as *cinema du corps*, which is more inclusive of films that fall to the edges of horror in genre and stylistic terms, but still deal with the body in extremes of both sexual content and violence shown on screen. Palmer, Tim. *Brutal Intimacy: Analyzing Contemporary French Cinema*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2011.

into the New French Extreme and the similar categorization of the *cinema du corps* identified by Palmer, examining how the films in these categories have been previously analyzed by scholarship. Of particular interest here is the isolating effect of violence, in which the protagonists, a majority of which are women, become ostracized from their relationships due to their violent acts, or face extreme instances of violence onto themselves. The following section examines the thematic element of cannibalism as it appears both in the New French Extreme and *Raw*, and how this act can be read as self-empowerment and self-identification, for the protagonists. Following this, the act of transformation as it appears in both *Raw* and *Titane* is considered as a thematic element that has been traditionally employed in horror cinema as a status of change that makes one more monstrous. While Ducournau's films do employ transformation in moments of horror or disgust, the act of transformation is a way in which the protagonists of both films are able to actualize their selfhood, particularly in their gender identity, rather than move towards a state of monstrous. Finally, while it is certainly the case that the cannibalism and transformation displayed in *Raw* and *Titane* could be taken as negative in isolation, this thesis considers how the films handle the relationships that their protagonists foster, and how these become realized not just despite the monstrous acts that they commit, but primarily through them. While the films of the New French Extreme emphasize the isolating effects of violent patriarchal capitalist societies in which they are set, *Raw* and *Titane* focus instead on their protagonists working towards self-realization in spite of their societies.

II. The New French Extreme:

Of most direct and immediate influence on *Raw* and *Titane* are the films of the New French Extreme cinema, which has also been referred to as New French Extremism(mity), New Extreme, and the *cinema du corps*. Coined by Tim Palmer, the *cinema du corps* differs slightly

from the New French Extreme in that it refers to extreme French cinema more broadly rather than just as a subgenre of horror. Palmer explains this term as referring to “a spate of recent French films that deal frankly and graphically with the body, and corporeal transgressions, has provoked an international scrutiny at times nearing hysteria.... whose basic agenda is an onscreen interrogation of physicality in brutally intimate terms.”² To this basic extent, the link between Ducournau’s films and those of the *cinema du corps* is clear, as these films derive their horror from the body and violence to it. The further investigation of gendered bodies that these films provide also comes from these moments of intense violence and intimate displays of sexuality, frequently combining the two. However, further investigation of the films of *cinema du corps*, or The New French Extreme, reveals not just the surface influence, but the ways in which Ducournau’s films build upon the gender dynamics presented within them, and push them further.

Instances of extreme violence, however, are not unique to this New French Extreme, or the broader horror genre. While discussing the film *Caché*, Alison Taylor explains that “By focusing on the family unit, its marital and parental tensions, and of reconciling one’s past actions with the present, *Hidden*’s unprecedented burst of violence unsettles the foundations of the very institutions that we rely upon to craft and maintain our identities.”³ While Taylor refers to film in which violence comes suddenly and unexpectedly into the everyday, this disruptive tendency of violence to disrupt persists within films that contain violence throughout. With this

² Palmer, Tim. *Brutal Intimacy: Analyzing Contemporary French Cinema* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 57. In this work, Palmer looks at the scope of the then contemporary French cinema, and his second chapter looks specifically at a set of films that he sets as exemplary of the *cinema du corps*. In more recent work, Palmer has investigated Denis’ statement of ‘Frontier horror poetry’, and how it relates to the rise of the horror genre in French cinema in the twenty-first century.

³ Taylor, Alison *Troubled Everyday: The Aesthetics of Violence and the Everyday in European Art Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 3.

in mind, the horror genre's noted ability to disrupt and challenge the everyday structures which persist within society and culture are particularly strengthened by the diegetic violence's ability to unsettle. The particular disruption of identity through narratives that center on families will be returned to and examined in more depth later when discussing *Raw* and *Titane*. Though here, it is beneficial to examine what in particular the New French Extreme disrupts, both the films individually and as a grouping.

The horror genre's ability to disrupt identity, particularly gender, has long been identified as a key feature of the genre. Carol Clover, writing on the genre's affective nature in audience perception explains that "Cinefantastic horror, in short, succeeds in incorporating its spectators as 'feminine' and then violating that body – which recoils, shudders, cries out collectively – in ways otherwise imaginable, for males, only in nightmare."⁴ Continuing that "We are, as an audience, in the end 'masculinized' by and through the very figure by and through we were earlier 'feminized'. The same body does for both, and that body is female."⁵ The affective nature of the genre, then, works not just in a fear reaction to suspense and violence, but works alongside affective identification to change the interaction based on how the violence is shown, and who commits it and who is the victim of it.

Within the texts of these films, gender appears in a way that is more loosely constructed than the male monster, female victim, dichotomy would initially suggest. The presence of these roles appearing pervasively within the genre "Suggest that the gender inheres in the function itself – that there is something about the victim function that wants manifestation in a female,

⁴ Clover, Carol J. *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 53.

⁵ Clover, Carol J. *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 59.

and something about the monster and hero functions that wants expression in a male. Sex, in this universe proceeds from gender, not the other way around.”⁶ However, Clover takes this further, by explaining that while, “The world of horror is in any case one that knows very well that men and women are profoundly different (and that the former are vastly superior to the latter) but one that at the same time repeatedly contemplates mutations and slidings whereby women begin to look a lot like men..., men are pressured to become like women..., and some people are impossible to tell apart.”⁷ The world of horror that Clover discusses is that before the 21st century, and therefore the films of the New French Extreme. While the dichotomy of male monster, female victim, is hardly an all-encompassing idea in the genre before the New French Extreme, it still functioned as the primary mode through which horror narratives were presented. What Clover considers the gendered confusion of these characters, particularly those of the killer and final girl in the slasher subgenre, point to unbinding of the presentation of the conventional gender binary within the genre. Clover’s primary aim is to uncover the audience’s identification and participation in horror cinema, particularly in how the gender of the viewer potentially interacts with this.

The shift in the New French Extreme can primarily be placed within the affective dimension of these films, which deal with difficult and disturbing narratives and unrelenting scenes of violence in which the camera rarely moves or cuts away from the violence and damage done to physical bodies, rather, fixating on this for uncomfortable lengths of time. While many films of the New French Extreme faced harsh criticism and divisive receptions due to their

⁶ Clover, Carol J. *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 12-3.

⁷ Clover, Carol J. *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 15.

graphic nature, scholars and critics have sought to value these films not by looking past their graphic content, but by engaging with it. Palmer's view on this is that "On first viewing – or at a glance – these motifs of physical and/or sexual debasement are undeniably challenging. They are categorically not, however, the sole basis, or only interest, of this mode of cinema."⁸ He continues that, "Above all, however, this new French Cinema of the body has facilitated bold stylistic experimentation, a fundamental lack of compromise in its engagement with the viewer."⁹ This engagement, for Palmer, works along with the stylistic experimentation to create a more unique style to amplify the affect. For the disruptive effect of these films, then, their extremities push the discomfort of bodily identities into insecurity.

For example, the film *High Tension* (*Haute Tension*, Aja 2003) deals with gender in a way similar to the films of the slasher subgenre. The film follows Marie (Cécile de France) as she attempts to rescue her friend Alexia (Maïwenn) from the male killer/ kidnapper (Philippe Nahon). Marie is masculinized both in her appearance and actions, through her short hair and her aggressive actions to rescue Alexia, reflecting the tropes that masculinized the Final Girl. While these particular tropes of masculinization are dated, in that they do not hold the same social power in gendering Marie, their presence in *High Tension* does signal that the film is calling upon these identifiers for recognition in Marie. However, the film presents a twist in the narrative that Marie had been the killer the whole time, and the majority of her previous actions had been delusions. What is of particular interest here, is Marie's image of the killer, or herself as a killer, as a man. This blurring of gender for her presents the interpretation that "Marie's

⁸ Palmer, Tim. *Brutal Intimacy: Analyzing Contemporary French Cinema* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 60.

⁹ Palmer, Tim. *Brutal Intimacy: Analyzing Contemporary French Cinema* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 64.

transgression of gender categories makes her an impure interstitial creature; because the filmic discourse presents her as both female and male, she is a monster.”¹⁰ *Haute Tension* does not particularly challenge the idea that transgressions from traditional conceptions of gender identity are monstrous, rather it seemingly reinforces those ideas, and it brings those transgressions to the forefront of the film text, the entire narrative of the film constructing itself around Marie’s identity. For *Titane*, Alexia makes a similar transgression, however, this is not only handled in a different manner narratively and thematically, but it also moves the transgression from a mental one to a physical one on Alexia. Further, Alexia’s transgression is not portrayed as the source of her violent actions, she murders before the transformation begins, and becomes less violent as it continues.

While the particular example of *High Tension* does not seem to make significant strides in challenging preconceptions of gender and sexuality, other films of the New French Extreme do. Palmer particularly cites Catherine Breillat, whose films predate the majority of *the cinema du corps*, as creating films that are provocative in their frank depiction of sexuality and sexual images. He explains that “At heart, these films use sex to emblemize the power struggles that arise within patriarchal societies, gender duels which Breillat intensifies through deliberate casting mismatches.”¹¹ From this description Breillat’s films, along with Palmer’s statement on the films of the new French Extreme as “Exploring sexuality and physicality at fascinating extremes,” and “having rigorous, committed intensity akin to the avant-garde at its most dynamic

¹⁰ Hurst, Matthias. “Subjectivity Unleashed: *Haute Tension*” in *European Nightmares: Horror Cinema in Europe Since 1945*, Ed. Patricia Allmer, Emily Brick, & David Huxley. 109.

¹¹ Palmer, Tim. *Brutal Intimacy: Analyzing Contemporary French Cinema* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 62.

and compelling,”¹² we can see that these films have begun to centralize their depictions of gender and sexuality. Rather than the slasher films analyzed by Clover, where the depiction of gender can be carefully examined and considered as a function of the film text, the films of the New French Extreme seem to make it their purpose to not only shock and disturb, but depict gender and sexuality in such a way that it must be considered when viewing the film.

Within the films more often noted to be a part of the New French Extreme, Kath Dooley cites *Trouble Every Day* (Claire Denis 2001) and *In My Skin* (*Dans ma peau*, de Van 2002) as two cannibal films that predate *Raw*. In her analysis of these films, she explains that they portray the cannibal as an “unstable body”, that cannot maintain relationships or exist in the society of capitalistic oppression that the films are set in.¹³ Following Dooley, these films can be seen as not only challenging existence within capitalist societal structures, but how women in contemporary France navigate their society. Here, as well, a clearer line from the films of the New French Extreme and those of Ducournau begins to form.

Trouble Every Day presents an interesting case that is very much focused on the sexuality of the characters clearly linking their desire to consume human flesh with their sexual urges. This particularly becomes a key feature of *Raw*, as well as *Titane*, though in the latter it is linked to violent urges or desire for metal rather than cannibalism. In this film “The director presents the two killers Coré and Shane, not so much as evil monsters, but as human subjects who are

¹² Palmer, Tim. *Brutal Intimacy: Analyzing Contemporary French Cinema* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 78.

¹³ Dooley, Kath. “Chapter 4: Navigating the Mind/body Divide: The Female Cannibal in French Films *Grave* (*Raw*, 2016), *Dans ma peau* (*In My Skin*, 2002) and *Trouble Every Day* (2001)” in *Gender and Contemporary Horror in Film*, Ed. Samantha Holland, Robert Shail, and Steven Gerrard (United Kingdom: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2019), 54.

plagued by the problem of dealing with their irrational and transgressive urges.”¹⁴ This presentation of the monstrous subject as afflicted by monstrosity rather than being a monster themselves is also key feature in Ducournau’s films. By focusing on the desire aspect of both sexuality and cannibalism, *Trouble Every Day* presents the isolation of its protagonists due to their affliction as a denial of the desires and sexuality as well.

Where the film deals more directly with gender is in presentation of two monstrous figures, one man and one woman, and the contrast in how their narratives develop. Dooley’s interpretation of the ending is that while Coré’s death presents a restoration of the normative order, the ambiguity of Shane’s fate creates the possibility of greater violence than that committed by Coré¹⁵ However, much more can be read from the ambiguity than the possibility of greater violence from Shane. Certainly, it is the case that rather than restoring the normative order, which occurs in many other films of the genre, Denis’ film works to firmly unsettle it through Shane. The distinctive choice in ending with Shane’s violence presents a gendered distinction between the two, where Shane’s monstrosity is allowed to exist openly. The ambiguity of the ending encourages this interpretation that Shane will not meet the same fate as Coré, despite both of them dealing with the same affliction.

Like *Trouble Every Day*, *In My Skin* also presents a character with seemingly uncontrollable urges who exists disillusioned of the patriarchal capitalist society of France. Dooley cites the other significant connection between the two films as a psychological one,

¹⁴ Dooley, Kath. “Chapter 4: Navigating the Mind/body Divide: The Female Cannibal in French Films *Grave* (*Raw*, 2016), *Dans ma peau* (*In My Skin*, 2002) and *Trouble Every Day* (2001)” in *Gender and Contemporary Horror in Film*, Ed. Samantha Holland, Robert Shail, and Steven Gerrard (United Kingdom: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2019), 56.

¹⁵ Dooley, Kath. “Chapter 4: Navigating the Mind/body Divide: The Female Cannibal in French Films *Grave* (*Raw*, 2016), *Dans ma peau* (*In My Skin*, 2002) and *Trouble Every Day* (2001)” in *Gender and Contemporary Horror in Film*, Ed. Samantha Holland, Robert Shail, and Steven Gerrard (United Kingdom: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2019), 58.

explaining that “As with Denis’ film, de Van’s protagonist is unable to control her bodily urges; the director’s corporeal images explore feminine psychology with a particular focus on a perceived divide between mind and body.”¹⁶ However, with this film, the violent urges are reflected back onto the self, and therefore should be interpreted more as an internalization of her struggle against her society¹⁷ Both films present these desires as isolating, and for the women, as incompatible in coexisting within their patriarchal societies. Dooley links this isolation as more than just that of societal, but that of self as well, explaining, “The protagonist’s problem is not unlike that of Shane and Coré in *Trouble Every Day*: how to control and manage an unstable body. The failure or inability to do so means alienation from friends, colleagues and loved ones, as well as from the self.”¹⁸ Dooley’s interpretation of a mind/body divide in the characters of *Trouble Every Day* and *In my Skin* is significant in that it engages with a disturbance in their own identities, which, when applied to *Raw* and *Titane*, lends strength to the idea that these characters are also struggling with an identity of gender.

For the films of the New French Extreme, issues of gender and sexuality come to the forefront. While only a few examples were explored here, there are many other films that examine these topics in unique ways with varying levels of success. Further, to quote Palmer again, “As *Trouble Every Day*, *Irreversible*, and *Twentynine Palms* demonstrate, the systematic

¹⁶ Dooley, Kath. “Chapter 4: Navigating the Mind/body Divide: The Female Cannibal in French Films *Grave* (*Raw*, 2016), *Dans ma peau* (*In My Skin*, 2002) and *Trouble Every Day* (2001)” in *Gender and Contemporary Horror in Film*, Ed. Samantha Holland, Robert Shail, and Steven Gerrard (United Kingdom: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2019), 58.

¹⁷ Dooley, Kath. “Chapter 4: Navigating the Mind/body Divide: The Female Cannibal in French Films *Grave* (*Raw*, 2016), *Dans ma peau* (*In My Skin*, 2002) and *Trouble Every Day* (2001)” in *Gender and Contemporary Horror in Film*, Ed. Samantha Holland, Robert Shail, and Steven Gerrard (United Kingdom: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2019), 59. Dooley presents this interpretation as an internalization of the pressures of “mundane corporate life”, along with Palmer’s that it is an embodiment of her ‘corporeal malaise’.

¹⁸ Dooley, Kath. “Chapter 4: Navigating the Mind/body Divide: The Female Cannibal in French Films *Grave* (*Raw*, 2016), *Dans ma peau* (*In My Skin*, 2002) and *Trouble Every Day* (2001)” in *Gender and Contemporary Horror in Film*, Ed. Samantha Holland, Robert Shail, and Steven Gerrard (United Kingdom: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2019), 60.

pursuit of an opposite objective, the craft of agitation, sensation, and provocation, gives rise to an artful cinema.”¹⁹ The provocative nature of these films allow for a more visible disturbance in affective viewership, and their fore fronting of gender, sexuality, and the body allow for a stronger interpretation of how these films engage with identity.

III. *Raw*, Cannibalism, the Linking of Desire and Violence, and Gendered Bodies:

Raw follows a young woman named Justine (Garance Marillier) as she starts attending a veterinarian school, which her older sister, Alexia (Ella Rumpf), also attends. During a hazing ritual, the lifelong vegetarian Justine is pressured into eating raw animal flesh. After this she begins to develop a craving for more raw meat, which eventually develops into an urge to consume human flesh. She soon discovers that her sister is also afflicted with the same desires and causes car accidents in order to find human flesh to eat. The film ends after a fight between the two sisters, and Justine’s father (Laurent Lucas) revealing to her that their mother has the same desire for flesh, and as a solution has been taking pieces of flesh willingly given from him.

This section seeks to explore *Raw* both as an extension of the female cannibal films of the New French Extreme, then how it separates itself from these. From this, it will be shown how *Raw* links sexual desire and desire for violence in a similar manner to these films. This can primarily be observed in the scenes where Justine is consuming flesh, both animal and human. Then context will be given to how this film particularly presents gender for Justine, and how the horror and violence done to her body reflects this. Of particular importance here is the presence of her sister Alexia, which establishes the familial tensions present throughout the film, and

¹⁹ Palmer, Tim. *Brutal Intimacy: Analyzing Contemporary French Cinema* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 70.

allows for the ending to become hopeful despite the preceding horrific events. Lastly, these ideas will be shown to be present in *Titane* as well, though notably, the focus of the film has shifted.

Key to understanding how *Raw* presents Justine as refusing traditional norms of gender identity is through the film's portrayal of cannibalism. Both Kath Dooley and Louise Flockhart read the film within the context of other films featuring female cannibals to frame their analyses. Dooley analyzes the film as both a part of the *cinema du corps*, and as a film that breaks away, explaining that "Like Coré and Esther, Justine appears to be suffering from a mind/body divide that leads to uncontrollable physical urges but she seeks to control these through connection (rather than disconnection) with those around her, with varying levels of success."²⁰ On the other hand, Flockhart reads the film primarily in the context of "postfeminist" culture, and how this affects portrayals and readings of cannibals. Flockhart also focuses on the subjectivity of these female cannibals, explaining that the act of cannibalism establishes a frame of subjectivity within the film text; "The female cannibal raises questions about the limits of the human, especially how gender complicates the relationships between objectification and subjectivity, and representations of women as humans, animals and monsters."²¹ Flockhart then relates the consumption within capitalist patriarchal society to the literal consumption of the cannibal characters, stating "in other words, systemic equality is replaced by personal empowerment based on the highly flawed notion of 'choice'. Consumption is so key to postfeminist culture

²⁰ Dooley, Kath. "Chapter 4: Navigating the Mind/body Divide: The Female Cannibal in French Films *Grave* (*Raw*, 2016), *Dans ma peau* (*In My Skin*, 2002) and *Trouble Every Day* (2001)" in *Gender and Contemporary Horror in Film*, Ed. Samantha Holland, Robert Shail, and Steven Gerrard (United Kingdom: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2019), 62.

²¹ Flockhart, Louise. "Chapter 5: Gendering the Cannibal in the Postfeminist Era" in *Gender and Contemporary Horror in Film*, Ed. Samantha Holland, Robert Shail, and Steven Gerrard (United Kingdom: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2019), 67.

because it is through consumption that subjectivity is expressed.”²² With these two readings of the act of cannibalism within *Raw* in mind, a clearer understanding of Justine’s subjectivity, and the film’s disruption of identity can be made.

After dealing with cravings for raw meat, Justine’s first act of cannibalism occurs after an accident that serves her sister’s finger. The scene is significant not just in its narrative function as advancing Justine’s urges to human flesh, but also in what causes the accident and whose flesh she consumes. The scene starts after a brief mention of Justine’s virginity between her and Alexia, when Alexia suggests that she must wax herself before she can have sex. While trying to wax her sister, the wax gets stuck, and Alexia brings out scissors to cut it off instead. However, Justine’s fear causes her to suddenly kick out at her sister, resulting in the scissors cutting off her finger, and her fainting. Shocked, Justine gets up from the bed and picks up the amputated finger, to prevent the dog from licking it, and then, sitting in the corner of the room, stares at it. When some blood drips onto her hand, she reactively drinks it, then pauses in shock, before continuing on to bite at the finger, while the score picks up and takes over the sound of the film.

Justine’s initiation into cannibalism significantly occurs during a scene in which Alexia was attempting to a kind of preparation of Justine for her first sexual experience. This very clearly directly establishes the relationship of Justine’s growing understanding of her sexuality to her desire for flesh, which is further cemented later on in the film. In this context, and the further context of Justine going off to a college experience, presents her initiation into cannibalism as a

²² Flockhart, Louise “Chapter 5: Gendering the Cannibal in the Postfeminist Era” in *Gender and Contemporary Horror in Film*, Ed. Samantha Holland, Robert Shail, and Steven Gerrard (United Kingdom: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2019), 69.

part of her coming of age. The other significance in the scene, that it is her sister's flesh that she first consumes, links to the larger thematic concern of the film of familial connection and love.

However, if cannibalism and sexuality are linked within *Raw*, then Justine's consumption of her sister can be read as an incestuous act. Flockhart concludes that incestuous acts and cannibalism are linked in these films, that "incest in these texts is a form of sexual cannibalism in that it is an act of sexual consumption which takes place within groups of people who are the same."²³ She continues that "This constructs an opposition between incestuous abuse performed by men against women, and cannibalism which, in these texts, is most often an act of destruction (and creation of a new identity) performed by women against men."²⁴ While Justine's cannibalism here is not against a man but her sister, and the incest not literal, this is a useful frame in which to understand the incestuous undertones of the scene. Here Justine is forming her identity, though it comes at the cost of destruction to her sister's body. Although the two sisters had attempted to work through Justine's coming of age together, their act of creation comes at the expense of one another, which is later brought into focus as the two fights in the climactic scene of the film.

Flockhart contends that cannibalism within films is a specific act of empowerment for women, although it always is at the expense of consuming others. For *Raw*, "The film explores how objectification justifies the abuse of others by those in power. There are two sides to the cannibalism; on the one hand, it is animalistic and uncontrollable and makes

²³ Flockhart, Louise "Chapter 5: Gendering the Cannibal in the Postfeminist Era" in *Gender and Contemporary Horror in Film*, Ed. Samantha Holland, Robert Shail, and Steven Gerrard (United Kingdom: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2019), 73.

²⁴ Flockhart, Louise "Chapter 5: Gendering the Cannibal in the Postfeminist Era" in *Gender and Contemporary Horror in Film*, Ed. Samantha Holland, Robert Shail, and Steven Gerrard (United Kingdom: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2019), 73.

them sick, on the other hand, it does allow the girls to assert their subjectivity but only at the expense of others.”²⁵ Interestingly enough it is the same act that marks Justine and Alexia as monstrous is what empowers them in each of their coming of age, and allows them to develop their identities. She relates this back to her discussion of postfeminist media by explaining that, “As with postfeminist media culture, the narrative of empowered consumption glosses over the continued victimization of women through institutional structures.”²⁶ For Flockhart then, the empowerment gained from cannibalistic consumption is limited as the women are still marked as monstrous within the film text and do not work against larger misogynist structures that objectified and victimized them in the first place. However, Flockhart states that “Even where the cannibalism seems to reinforce a conservative or hegemonic idea... the very evocation of cannibalism, of the relationship between eater and eaten, undermines any certainty about the absolute difference.”²⁷ Therefore, while cannibalism is certainly a monstrous element within the film text, it is that monstrosity which brings attention to the relationship between the cannibal and whose flesh she consumes.

While much of the film is focused on Justine and her coming of age, the school itself acts as a microcosm of larger society. Through the hazing rituals and brief glimpses of professors, the film shows that the school “is an oppressive environment where the importance of ritual

²⁵ Flockhart, Louise “Chapter 5: Gendering the Cannibal in the Postfeminist Era” in *Gender and Contemporary Horror in Film*, Ed. Samantha Holland, Robert Shail, and Steven Gerrard (United Kingdom: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2019), 77.

²⁶ Flockhart, Louise “Chapter 5: Gendering the Cannibal in the Postfeminist Era” in *Gender and Contemporary Horror in Film*, Ed. Samantha Holland, Robert Shail, and Steven Gerrard (United Kingdom: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2019), 79.

²⁷ Flockhart, Louise “Chapter 5: Gendering the Cannibal in the Postfeminist Era” in *Gender and Contemporary Horror in Film*, Ed. Samantha Holland, Robert Shail, and Steven Gerrard (United Kingdom: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2019), 68.

overrides personal circumstance and the following of orders is paramount.”²⁸ These rituals are what influence Justine into eating meat for the first time as she does not want to be ostracized. The resulting horror of Justine’s inability to completely meet her school’s rituals resembles the woman monster/victims of the New French Extreme, whose monstrosity isolates and victimizes them further, However, as Dooley argues, “it breaks away from the narrative tendencies of the *cinéma du corps* through its exploration of warm character relationships and its hopeful ending. As such, the film both deploys and subverts generic horror film conventions,”²⁹ The hopeful ending of this film is explored further later, however, the character relationships of Justine and her family, along with her roommate Adrien (Rabah Nait Oufella), form the central hopefulness of the film and allow it to break away further from the *cinema du corps*.

Titane too explores a warm relationship that allows for a hopeful ending, though its first half resembles the horror aspect of *Raw* more closely. The first part of the film follows Alexia (Agathe Rousselle), who after a car accident as a child has a metal plate inserted in her skull. Cutting to her as an adult, Alexia works as a dancer at a car showroom where after one of the shows, she seemingly has sex with one of the cars. After this and killing a man who followed her to her car, she begins to go through physical changes, and possibly psychological ones as well, including a desire to consume metal. This desire to consume metal is reflective of Justine’s cannibalistic urges, and Alexia is soon driven to violence as well, establishing the link between desire and violence seen in *Raw* and many other films of the genre.

²⁸ Dooley, Kath. “Chapter 4: Navigating the Mind/body Divide: The Female Cannibal in French Films *Grave* (*Raw*, 2016), *Dans ma peau* (*In My Skin*, 2002) and *Trouble Every Day* (2001)” in *Gender and Contemporary Horror in Film*, Ed. Samantha Holland, Robert Shail, and Steven Gerrard (United Kingdom: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2019), 61.

²⁹ Dooley, Kath. “Chapter 4: Navigating the Mind/body Divide: The Female Cannibal in French Films *Grave* (*Raw*, 2016), *Dans ma peau* (*In My Skin*, 2002) and *Trouble Every Day* (2001)” in *Gender and Contemporary Horror in Film*, Ed. Samantha Holland, Robert Shail, and Steven Gerrard (United Kingdom: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2019), 60.

Two scenes in particular, that occur early in the film, establish this. The first is the scene in which Alexia murders the man who follows her outside to her car and harasses her. As with *Raw*, Alexia's victimization within her society causes her to strike back, becoming what is conventionally seen as monstrous. While Justine is fighting to break out of this victimization, Alexia resists victimization entirely. Watson particularly notes Justine's struggle with this as an anxiety, explaining, "In this vein, I suggest that *Raw* can be read as portraying female anxiety about being reduced to the abject, a denigrated status, a fleshy hole in the patriarchal gaze. The film dares to respond with the notion that a woman will bite back and mean it."³⁰ Understanding *Raw* as depicting Justine's coming of age, her anxiety and biting back is framed as a resistance of falling into this victimization that the school, representing the larger society, is working to induct her into. For *Titane*, however, Alexia is not framed with this same anxiety of victimization, as the early scene shows. After the title card, the camera tracks Alexia through a car showroom, as she walks to a car, where she strips down to a revealing outfit and begins to dance provocatively next to, and on top of, the car. The camera watches her focuses on different parts of her body, emulating what could be traditionally viewed as the male gaze. Just as the car she is on, Alexia is being reduced to an object to be looked at by the men in the showroom. However, after the dance and a brief locker room scene, Alexia is followed to her car by a man who seeks her out after her performance. In the sentiment of "woman biting back" Alexia stabs him in the ear with a metal hairpin, committing her first murder of the film. Her objectification by the camera reflects the vision of the men in the showroom, and just as the man who follows her back to her car is stabbed, the audience is met with the disturbing imagery and sounds of the murder.

³⁰ Watson, E. *A psychoanalytic exploration of the film Raw (2016), with special emphasis on the capitalist discourse.* (Psychoanal Cult Soc 25, 2020), 445.

The following scene is more directly linked to the desire for metal and violence, which is when Alexia is with her coworker Justine (Garance Marillier). In an interesting display of intertextuality, Justine is played by the same actress from *Raw*, and Alexia shares a character name with her sister. Here the two are sitting outside and kissing when Alexia begins to bite at a metal piercing on Justine's body. Justine cries out in pain and pushes Alexia away. When they go back to the house Alexia discovers that she is pregnant, then goes to continue kissing Justine on the couch. However, she then kills Justine with the same metal hairpin, then kills Justine's roommates who discover the murder. The intertextual reference of Justine being played by the same actress in both films, the same character names being used, and even Alexia sharing a name with *Raw* Justine's sister, suggests a figurative sisterhood between the two protagonists. The two protagonists are united in this scene, through this intertextuality, and their monstrosity. It would seem that this familial connection would further extend to a larger concept of sisterhood as well. Further than her own films, Ducournau also seems to make at least two intertextual references to *In my Skin*. The first is a casting and name reference to the boyfriend, Vincent played by Laurent Lucas, who plays Justine's father in *Raw*; and then in *Titane*, Alexia's surrogate father figure (Vincent Lindon) is named Vincent as well. Esther too eats flesh, and while only her own, the first time she bites herself is on the forearm, mirrored by Justine who bites her forearm during sex. The intertextuality here suggests a familial link, and all the women are united in their monstrosity, particularly within their acts of biting.

Returning focus to *Titane*, the two scenes together work to link Alexia's desire and violence in a similar fashion to *Raw* as she not only strikes back at the system around her, but also comes to hurt others who seemingly have little part in it. For Flockhart:

These texts work on two levels: on one level, these texts show how individual women can access power through femininity and consumption. Although this creates a kind of catharsis and empowerment, the women are often monstrous. On another level, they demonstrate the continuation of patriarchy, institutional misogyny and the limits of postfeminist empowerment.³¹

Applying this to *Titane*, there is a clear line that Alexia as a protagonist works in a similar fashion as Justine in *Raw*, and her violence acts as a sort of cannibalism as well. However, as the film continues, Alexia decides to go into hiding and undergoes two transformations that mark a distinct shift from *Raw*. A final note on cannibalistic desires is the connection to capitalist consumerism. Eve Watson notes, in reference to *Raw*, that “the film’s “hunger,” as I will develop below, can be read as a critique of the unending pleasure-attaining imperatives of consumerist capitalism that, in spite of its guarantees of satisfaction, does not satisfy the libidinal drive of the contemporary subject. The film poses gendered sequelae to the capitalist discourse with catastrophic consequences for the young protagonist’s coming of age.”³² While *Raw* and *Titane* do build on the critiques of capitalist consumerism and societal isolation found within the *cinema du corps*, their aim is notably shifted to more personal stories of their protagonists, and the development and redevelopment of their identities as they not only go over changes in desire, but as this next section will explore, bodily transformations akin to the films of body horror.

³¹ Flockhart, Louise “Chapter 5: Gendering the Cannibal in the Postfeminist Era” in *Gender and Contemporary Horror in Film*, Ed. Samantha Holland, Robert Shail, and Steven Gerrard (United Kingdom: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2019), 71.

³² Watson, E. *A psychoanalytic exploration of the film Raw (2016), with special emphasis on the capitalist discourse*. (Psychoanal Cult Soc 25, 2020), 442.

IV. Transistors and Transformation: Changing the body, changing meaning in

Titane:

The transformations that Justine and Alexia undergo over the course of their respective films are twofold. The first is linked to their desire, violence, and the horrific monstrous femininity that they embody within their films. The second transformation is of how they outwardly present and perform gender. For Justine, this is more subtle as she attempts to embrace a more traditional femininity in her coming of age. For Alexia, however, the gendered change marks a major narrative shift as she creates a more masculine appearance for herself so that she can go into hiding for the murders that she commits in the first part of the film. This section explores how the thematic focus on both forms of transformation within these films cause them to move more clearly away from the troubled monstrous woman of the *cinema du corps* and the cannibals of the past. Here, as the twofold transformation for each of the characters demonstrates, the exploration of gendered identities specifically unsettles traditional ideas of gendered norms, and, as elaborated on later, the societal binary structure of gender identity.

Shortly after consuming her first bit of animal meat, Justine begins to undergo her first transformation. She wakes up in the middle of the night scratching herself from an itch that does not seem to go away. When she turns on the light, she reveals a rash that has spread all across her body, with skin beginning to peel off from the rash and her scratching. Through a psychoanalytic lens, Watson interprets this by explaining that “With perhaps a denominational link to her Sadean counterpart, Justine bears a masochistic suffering in her body. Her symptomatic bodily eruptions, an itching, oozing rash, reveal an excess of enjoyment and point profoundly to the absence of lack on the side of the Other (the symbolic world of language, family, law), which

instead comes to reside temporarily in her layers of peeled-away skin.”³³ To build on this, Justine’s “excess of enjoyment”, a result of her continued consumption of meat, causes a physical bodily reaction, sparking a transformation. The camera focuses on her rash, and damaged skin, along with the sound of her scratching and groans of discomfort. The rash and discomfort seem to be linked to her new desire for meat, and the breaking of her vegetarian diet, signifying tradition.

While this moment of physical transformation resulting in horror plays a small role in the overall film, Alexia’s transformation is a much more prominent focus in *Titane*. After she discovers that she is pregnant, Alexia’s body soon begins to undergo changes typical of pregnancy. What is not typical though, is both the accelerated rate of this pregnancy, as well as the black motor oil that leaks from her body, along with new metal appearing under her skin. This pregnancy transformation resembles the transformations of the possessed women in the occult/possession films identified by Clover. She identifies pregnancy as a key feature of these possession films, stating “It is the possession film – stories that hinge on psychic breaking and entering – that plunges us repeatedly into a world of menstruation, pregnancy, fetuses, abortion, miscarriage, amniotic fluid, childbirth, breastfeeding.”³⁴ Beyond the possession film, Alexia’s transformation into a human/metal hybrid resembles Shinya Tsukamoto’s *Tetsuo: the Iron Man* (1989), whose salaryman protagonist (Tomorowo Taguchi) begins to incorporate metal into his body after a car crash.

³³ Watson, Eve. *A psychoanalytic exploration of the film Raw (2016), with special emphasis on the capitalist discourse*. (Psychoanal Cult Soc 25, 2020), 448.

³⁴ Clover, Carol J. *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 82.

In understanding the importance of transformation, and the particular nature of transformation, within a film narrative, Ian Conrich's analysis of *Tetsuo* is particularly relevant to *Titane*. Conrich situates the salaryman's transformation into an iron man (*Tetsuo* translating literally to iron man), as a reflection of a postindustrial society in Japan. He explains this as "In the mechanical age, machines were designed to serve and produce; in the post-industrial, advanced technology overtakes much of heavy industry and unites the operator and the product. With the change, though, comes loss and abandonment"³⁵ Further, the rapid industrialization and modernization of the country is reflected in the rapid growth of the salaryman's body, which incorporates metal objects around him. Conrich argues that this is particular to Japanese narratives of transformation and expansion, elaborating "Gill argues that in American Comic fiction, extreme body alteration is the result of bio-transformation, the mythology dependent on a serum for the power to change. In contrast, the Japanese tend to 'mecha-transform', employing a technological device to change size or appearance."³⁶ Where this applies to the French films *Raw* and *Titane* is not in a one-to-one replacement of *Titane* completely reflecting French society, but rather, how the transformation works within these particular narratives.

The metal transformations of *Titane* also reflect a connection between society and industrialization, specifically that of cars as that is what Alexia's transformation resembles. Though Alexia's car accident as a child, where she surgically has a metal plate inserted into her skull, implies a much deeper connection to the transformation, than the salaryman of *Tetsuo*, whose accident happens suddenly in adulthood. If the salaryman's metal incorporation and

³⁵ Conrich, Ian. "Metal-Morphosis: Post-Industrial Crisis and the Tormented Body in the Tetsuo Films" in *Japanese horror cinema* ed. J. McRoy (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), 101.

³⁶ Conrich, Ian. "Metal-Morphosis: Post-Industrial Crisis and the Tormented Body in the Tetsuo Films" in *Japanese horror cinema* ed. J. McRoy (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), 100.

transformation is reflective of a rapidly industrializing Japan, Alexia's transformation, which truly started in childhood, is more connected to her personal identity, and how she interacts with her society. Conrich links *Tetsuo* as a break from traditional representations of man in society within Japanese film, explaining "In the violence and unfamiliarity of the transformations of *Tetsuo*'s salaryman into a man-machine, a flesh-metal hybrid, the stability of the domestic and work spaces is removed – an explicit challenge to the traditional images of social harmony and value established in the classical films of a director such as Ozu Yasujiro."³⁷ Instead of a break from the family dramas of Ozu, Ducournau's *Titane* should rather be read as a challenge of the *cinema du corps* and the possession films Clover identifies.

While Alexia's pregnancy is certainly one aspect that resembles the possession films, the other aspect is the major transformation of the film, that of her gendered disguise. After killing her parents in a house fire, Alexia flees to a train station, however in fear of being identified, she decides to disguise herself as a boy whose missing poster she sees at the station. In the bathroom, Alexia cuts her hair down, binds her breasts back, and lastly breaks her nose on the sink in a graphic scene of body horror. With her nose broken she looks into the mirror, seeing her complete transformation and smiles as blood runs down her face. She then gets picked up by the father of the missing boy who convinces himself that she really is his son, beginning the second part of the narrative.

In relation to the possession films, Alexia's transformation not only resembles the pregnancies and secretion of bodily fluids (most often abnormal such as Alexia's oil), but also in that the possessed women become more masculine throughout the film. Citing two possessed

³⁷ Conrich, Ian. "Metal-Morphosis: Post-Industrial Crisis and the Tormented Body in the *Tetsuo* Films" in *Japanese horror cinema* ed. J. McRoy (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), 95.

characters, Clover states that “Linda and Regan become aggressively masculine in the course of their possession,”³⁸ though notes that these characters come back from the masculine possessed self by the end of the film. Clover does elaborate that the significance here is not in the permanence of the change, but that the occurrence of the change, explaining “For the moment let me simply suggest that what is at stake is not masculinity per se and not hyperfemininity and sexual aggressiveness per se; it is gender transgression, crossing over.”³⁹ For *Titane*, then, it is not just that Alexia transgresses, but that she maintains her masculine appearance for the rest of the film, and that she moves away from violence as well. While she does keep this appearance, she does not always perform masculinity, as she dances in front of the firemen, imitating her dance at the car show. In this, she does not simply ‘crossover’ but transgresses from the feminine and never fully embraces the masculine either. Alexia’s transgression itself is not the significance here, as transgression is in the films of Clover’s analysis, rather, it is that Alexia transgresses as a way to realize herself and form her own identity regardless of a specific gender binary. Alexia does not move from one to the other, either becoming monstrous or reverting back and restoring normality, rather, her change is continual, positive, and only reaches its conclusion with her death rather than a moment of complete change.

This is a shift from the limited portrayals in the possession films identified by Clover, as she admits “The cultural observer hoping for signs of change in the representation of females and femininity will find little satisfaction in the female story, the spectacular story, of occult

³⁸ Clover, Carol J. *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 96.

³⁹ Clover, Carol J. *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 104.

horror.”⁴⁰ When referring to the subgenres of the slasher and occult, particularly possession films, Clover states “Both subgenres have as their business to reimagine gender.”⁴¹ While these films certainly offer a reimagining of gender, they work through it in a binary, of men and women crossing over expected forms of masculinity and femininity, eventually having their characters revert back or perish. As Clover elaborates, the body in these horror subgenres is gendered in social performativity, through actions that occur over the length of the films.⁴² The films that Clover analyzes allow for this model of analysis, where the transgression is the crossing over. Ducournau’s films, on the other hand, present their protagonists rejecting an easy categorization of masculinity or femininity, of being socially gendered as women or men. *Titane* in particular pushes further, which suggests that the crossing over that occurs in earlier horror films is perhaps not in and of itself transgressive enough. The next section looks towards the conflict of monstrosity and this crossing over, and how these films offer the possibility for the characters to choose their own way in the endings of the film.

While Alexia’s gender transformation is much more obvious, as she physically changes herself and her performance, along with the narrative direction of the film, Justine’s is more integrated into her coming of age, and involves an acceptance and understanding of her identity. For Justine, this means coming to an understanding of her femininity and sexuality, a navigation of her identity that has her on the outside of her classmates. Again, the scene in which she eats her sister’s finger is important not just in its linking of her sexuality and cannibalism, but also

⁴⁰ Clover, Carol J. *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 105.

⁴¹ Clover, Carol J. *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 107.

⁴² Clover, Carol J. *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 159. Here Clover suggests that the rape-revenge genre also operates on the basis of the one-sex model, as the slasher and possession films do.

that narratively it occurs in an attempt to make her body more feminine in appearance by removing body hair. The disastrous result of this is not her only failed attempt at becoming more like her classmates, who embrace their femininity and sexuality more easily than Justine is able to.

Watson identifies Justine's displays of femininity as failure and suggests that her failure suggests an inability to represent traditional feminine performance. She explains that "Justine's unleashed appetites are anything but subtle or oblique; indeed, they are shamelessly glaring. When she totters in high heels and garish makeup to a party in an attempt at a traditional form of feminine masquerade, Justine's masquerade sets her up as an obvious failure that taunts the viewer with the precocity of an appetite that will not conform to gendered representation."⁴³ Her attempt at transforming herself into a more feminine image is unsuccessful when compared to Alexia's disguise, however it is still significant for her character, as this transformation signals a working through of her identity, which in line with her coming of age narrative is not yet complete or confident. Watson furthers this by linking it to the body horror aspect of the film, explaining "From wobbling clownishly in high heels and make-up to regurgitating her locks of hair, peeling away layers of skin and a bikini wax gone horribly wrong, the feminine masquerade and the male gaze that supports it is returned by Justine as a horrifying specter of raw female body materialism."⁴⁴ While Watson correlates Justine's attempts of 'feminine masquerade' with a supporting male gaze, the camera does not seem to frame Justine with this type of gaze. Where *Titane* introduces Alexia through this gaze, any attempt at framing Justine as such does not

⁴³ Watson, Eve. *A psychoanalytic exploration of the film Raw (2016), with special emphasis on the capitalist discourse*. (Psychoanal Cult Soc 25, 2020), 444.

⁴⁴ Watson, Eve. *A psychoanalytic exploration of the film Raw (2016), with special emphasis on the capitalist discourse*. (Psychoanal Cult Soc 25, 2020), 454.

exactly occur. For instance, when Justine walks through the school in heels, the camera is distanced, and other students observe her disfunction and awkwardness. When the camera does frame Justine closely, it is primarily in scenes of horror, such as the rash or waxing incident. In these scenes, Justine's own discomfort is brought to attention, signaling the imminent horror of her materialism. The body horror consistently brings to attention Justine's materialism as she struggles to work through identity and desires. Together, these elements disrupt a simple identification of her as she never becomes fully monstrous or is able to embrace traditional feminine performance. While the transformations of Justine and Alexia clearly present a working through of sexuality, gender, and self-identity, it is the endings of these films, which center on familial love and hope, that offer a distinction and a refusal to revert back or condemn the transgressions.

V. Hopeful Endings: Familial Love, Disrupting the Binary, and an Acceptance of Change:

Both *Raw* and *Titane* do not revert their protagonists back to their original state by the end of the film, yet they each still offer endings that are hopeful, yet in tone with the rest of the film horrific in their own ways. After a fight with her sister in front of the school, Justine visits Alexia in jail who has been arrested for murder. The two sisters look at each other through the thick glass, and Justine presses her scarred cheek against the glass, which Alexia had bitten. They smile and Alexia jokingly flips off Justine with the finger that she lost to the scissors earlier in the film. After this Justine eats with her parents and listens to her father (Laurent Lucas) talk. Her father reveals that Justine's mother also had cannibalistic desires, and unbuttoning his shirt reveals his scarred chest and stomach, which her mother has presumably been eating pieces of to

deal with her desires. He assures a horrified Justine that he believes she will find a way to deal with it as well.

This ending is undoubtedly hopeful for Justine, as she is presented with a possibility of living and dealing with her cannibalistic desires. However, the ambiguous nature of what follows, and the overall restoration of some normality offers different interpretations of this ending. Watson argues that “Justine’s monstrosity, which could be read as an inconclusive female identity, and her choice of cannibalism suggests a refusal of the sexual binary and presents the impossibility of rapport between the sexes as extreme.”⁴⁵ Though she continues that “This too, however, proves to be a traditional and unflattering trope of women, indicating that the non-assumption of normative femininity is destructive, even catastrophic.”⁴⁶ This interpretation takes the understanding that the possibility of *Raw*’s disruption of the sexual binary as being a presentation of a monstrous character. Watson does concede that “Perhaps the best thing about the film *Raw* is that it highlights the difficulty of producing positive representations of womanhood outside of normative femininity and the heteronormative masquerade that do not devolve into models of monstrosity and catastrophe.”⁴⁷ However, under further consideration the monstrosity of Justine’s cannibalism and refusal of traditional femininity does not inherently have to be entirely negative.

While Watson contends that Justine’s descent into her cannibalistic desires marks her clearly as a monstrous feminine character of generic horror tradition, Flockhart believes that the

⁴⁵ Watson, Eve. *A psychoanalytic exploration of the film Raw (2016), with special emphasis on the capitalist discourse*. (Psychoanal Cult Soc 25, 2020), 455.

⁴⁶ Watson, Eve. *A psychoanalytic exploration of the film Raw (2016), with special emphasis on the capitalist discourse*. (Psychoanal Cult Soc 25, 2020), 455.

⁴⁷ Watson, Eve. *A psychoanalytic exploration of the film Raw (2016), with special emphasis on the capitalist discourse*. (Psychoanal Cult Soc 25, 2020), 455.

woman cannibal offers a different view of the monstrous feminine. She explains that “By eating human flesh, cannibals are marked as different, monstrous, but by being identified as the same as their victims, their humanity is confirmed.”⁴⁸ While certainly a form of monstrosity of horror tradition, the specificity of Justine’s monstrosity being cannibalism complicates an easy classification of her as a monster. Rather, Justine acts in a monstrous way to gain power and control over herself and identity as she comes of age, it is the lack of control and attempted suppression of her desires that causes her to hurt those close to her. Flockhart explains that the cannibal is an example of the postfeminist gothic, explaining “The postfeminist gothic does not only refuse to position women as victims, but also explores the link between femininity and monstrosity,” and citing Genz, she continues “following from a shift in postmodern gothic towards more humane monsters, monstrosity is often placed onto feminine bodies. Genz argues (2007, p. 69) that the postfeminist monster is sexy, confident and emphatically not a victim. Rather she ‘inhabits femininity’ in order to access power.”⁴⁹ This reading offers a complication to the easy understanding of Justine as a monster, as she moves towards gaining a kind of control over her desires at the end of the film, accepting herself and her desires, which is reflected in her making up with her sister, as their reflections overlay one another in the glass that separates them.

While Flockhart observes a complication in an easy understanding of the woman cannibal as monstrous, Dooley believes that the ending of the film firmly sides itself with Justine. She states that “one could view Justine’s cannibalism as an act of rebellion against established gender

⁴⁸ Flockhart, Louise “Chapter 5: Gendering the Cannibal in the Postfeminist Era” in *Gender and Contemporary Horror in Film*, Ed. Samantha Holland, Robert Shail, and Steven Gerrard (United Kingdom: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2019), 68.

⁴⁹ Flockhart, Louise “Chapter 5: Gendering the Cannibal in the Postfeminist Era” in *Gender and Contemporary Horror in Film*, Ed. Samantha Holland, Robert Shail, and Steven Gerrard (United Kingdom: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2019), 70.

norms, for which she goes unpunished.”⁵⁰ The lack of punishment, and the fact that Justine moves towards an acceptance of her desires points to the idea that those desires are not so monstrous but are in fact a part of her identity that she must learn to understand. Dooley continues that this contrasts with the otherwise return to normality ending that the film seems to follow, “*Grave*’s more optimistic ending, by contrast, returns Justine to a world where traditional values are restored... Despite this end point, however, Justine’s journey is one that subverts generic horror expectations, through her ultimate mastery of her condition. As monstrous-feminine figure, she is rewarded with freedom, rather than punished, signaling a successful coming of age... *Grave* nonetheless moves away from a generic depiction of the female cannibal, and in doing so, asks the viewer to reconsider the gendered tropes of the horror film.”⁵¹ Further than simply asking for a reconsideration of gendered tropes in horror film, through its linking of Justine’s awakening sexuality and cannibalism, along with the twofold transformations she undergoes, and within the further context of *Titane*, *Raw* presents a disruption to the gender binary by crafting Justine’s identification and acceptance of it in monstrous terms.

Justine’s monstrous refusal of the sex/gender binary presented here is indeed destructive to just that binary, and the hegemonic heteronormative structure that supports it. However, this traditionally monstrous and socially taboo act of cannibalistic consumption itself is not wholly condemned in the film text itself. As the final scene reveals, Justine’s parents have been living with this cannibalistic desire as her mother takes from father and father gives to mother in an act of love. Justine’s cannibalistic desire is continuously linked to her growing sexual desires and

⁵⁰ Dooley, Kath. “Chapter 4: Navigating the Mind/body Divide: The Female Cannibal in French Films *Grave* (*Raw*, 2016), *Dans ma peau* (*In My Skin*, 2002) and *Trouble Every Day* (2001)” in *Gender and Contemporary Horror in Film*, Ed. Samantha Holland, Robert Shail, and Steven Gerrard (United Kingdom: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2019), 63.

⁵¹ Dooley, Kath. “Chapter 4: Navigating the Mind/body Divide: The Female Cannibal in French Films *Grave* (*Raw*, 2016), *Dans ma peau* (*In My Skin*, 2002) and *Trouble Every Day* (2001)” in *Gender and Contemporary Horror in Film*, Ed. Samantha Holland, Robert Shail, and Steven Gerrard (United Kingdom: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2019), 64-5.

coming of age in her formation of self, identity, and body. Because of this link, refusal to completely condemn this cannibalistic desire then stands in as a further refusal to condemn Justine's nonconformity. Just as the rashes and wounds on her body and the socially taboo cannibalism appears monstrous to the viewer, so too does Justine in her refusal of femininity and exploration of her sexual desires appear monstrous to the heteronormative society.

As mentioned before, in the context of how *Titane* functions to challenge this as well, *Raw*'s own disturbance becomes clearer. An important motif appears in both films, which is reflections and mirrors. In *Raw*, this first happens with "Justine's sexual awakening via an identification with her self-image in the mirror – the 'grinding' scene – is Narcissus-like and resonates as a 'one-by-one' identification over a group or communal ideal or identification."⁵² This self-image perceived by Justine is a working through of her identity and understanding of her sexuality for herself. However, towards the end of the film when she and her sister talk in jail, their images are reflected onto one another in the glass, signaling a coming together and understanding between the two. Although they had fought, their identification of each other's bodily transformations through the scars they left on each other, relates to their understanding of each other's self-image. Their love for each other allows them to move forward in their lives and prompts the father's discussion on the possibility of a future for them.

The most significant mirror scene in *Titane* occurs during Alexia's transformation of herself into the missing boy. She looks into the mirror as she cuts her hair, binds her chest, and inspects her face for further changes she can make. After breaking her nose, she looks back into the mirror and smiles at her new face, showing that she identifies the new image of herself, as

⁵² Watson, Eve. *A psychoanalytic exploration of the film Raw (2016), with special emphasis on the capitalist discourse.* (Psychoanal Cult Soc 25, 2020), 453.

she changes. This also marks the beginning of her shift away from the violent murders of the first part of the film. Later in the film we see Alexia about to murder Vincent (Vincent Lindon), the man whose missing son she has disguised herself as in order to avoid being caught for her murders. She holds the same metal hairpin that she used previously, but hesitates, then decides against it and cares for him instead. Her developing feelings of affection, and even love, separates her from the emotionless sex and violence of the first half of the film. *Titane* ends with Alexia and Vincent coming together and accepting each other, Vincent no longer cares that she is not really his son but is rather grateful that he has somebody to love anyway. The pregnancy that has been rapidly changing Alexia finally comes to its conclusion as she goes into labor, her skin splitting apart and revealing metal underneath. While Alexia presumably dies from giving birth, the baby lives, and is revealed to have a metal spine before the film cuts to its credits.

While Alexia does not live through the end of the film, the birth of her part metal baby signals the success and completion of transformation. Vincent now has someone else to love and care for, and Alexia's life ends with her creating new life contrasting against the violent murders that she commits in the beginning. Alexia's gendered change is not challenged, she is still in her masculine presentation while giving birth, though no longer hides her full identity from Vincent. The baby that she gives birth to is both metallic and human, neither one or the other but both, reflecting Alexia's own challenge to her gender identity as she embraces both her femininity and masculinity.

These films mark a shift in the horror genre, as they do not just reimagine gender roles and presentations, challenge patriarchal hegemony of their capitalist society, but they also allow their characters to work through their identities. Their monstrosities become not just negative aspects to create horror and violence, but as a way for them to reassert their power and

subjectivity, and craft their own identities without strictly following the binary guidelines of gender identity. On *Raw*, Ducournau explains that “I wanted it to be clear at the end that there is a solution, and that the solution is in (Justine) [...] when you open your eyes to who you are and your humanity, then there is a solution, and the solution is in you”⁵³ These films are ultimately about not just challenging and observing the destructive objectification that the New French Extreme forcefully engages with, but looking towards the possibility of creating a new identity focused on love, a different path for its protagonists, and hopeful endings.

⁵³ (Ducournau quoted in Heller-Nicholas, 2017, p. 33), quote cited from: Dooley, Kath. “Chapter 4: Navigating the Mind/body Divide: The Female Cannibal in French Films *Grave (Raw, 2016)*, *Dans ma peau (In My Skin, 2002)* and *Trouble Every Day (2001)*” in *Gender and Contemporary Horror in Film*, Ed. Samantha Holland, Robert Shail, and Steven Gerrard (United Kingdom: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2019), 64.

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