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Beyond a carnival of zombies: the economic problem of 'aliveness' in Laurent Cantet's *Vers le sud*

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Abstract

Laurent Cantet's film *Vers le sud* (2005), based on three short stories by the Haitian-Canadian author Dany Laferrière, explores the problems of 'aliveness' and 'deadness', both physical and psychical, questioning the systemic and emotional methods by which these states become racialised and concomitantly commodified. Central to the film's living potency is the acuity of its politicised analysis: from start to finish, *Vers le sud* shines an unswerving spotlight on the simultaneous precariousness and over-exposure of certain kinds of Black (in this case poor Haitian adolescents' and children's) lives. The film's politics, grounded in a lucid presentation of the material and ideological conditions of racialised inequality on which neo-colonial, neo-liberal (and, in this case, sexualised) tourism takes place, are combined with a specifically cinematic critique of the gaze of the wealthy, White female subject who buys the power not only to look at this life, but also, vampirically, to ingest its perceived qualities of vitality. Politics and aesthetics come together in the film to deconstruct a set of (frequently masked and insidious) operations formed at the disavowed crossroads of capitalist, racist and child-abusing phantasies of corporeal and emotional appropriation.

Keywords: tourism; neo-liberalism; neo-colonialism; biopolitics; racialisation; 'aliveness'

Voilà que les zombies chantent un chant, mais c'est celui de la vie [...] Entre la mort apparente du dedans [...] et la mort définitive du dehors [...] les nappes de vie intérieure [...] se précipitent¹ (Deleuze 1985, 272).

Laurent Cantet's film *Vers le sud/Heading South* (2005), based on three short stories in a collection by the Haitian-Canadian author Dany Laferrière (1997), explores, in cinematic terms, the problems of 'aliveness' and 'deadness', both physical and psychical, questioning the systemic and emotional methods by which these states become racialised and concomitantly commodified. Central to Cantet's film's living potency is the acuity of its politicised analysis. As Martin O'Shaughnessy (2015) puts it in his monograph on Cantet, the film 'challenges any preconceptions that we may seek to bring to bear, and makes us question our own privileged position as western/northern consumers in relation to what we see. Importantly too it includes the director himself in the circle of critique' (121).² From start to finish, *Vers le sud* shines an unswerving spotlight on the simultaneous precariousness and over-exposure of certain kinds of Black (in this case, Haitian) life. The film's politics, grounded in a lucid presentation of the material, ideological and affective conditions of racialised inequality on which neo-colonial, neo-liberal (and, in this case,

sexualised) tourism takes place, are combined with a post-spectacular critique of the gaze of the White subject who buys the power not only to look at this life, but also, vampirically, to ingest its perceived qualities of vitality. Politics and aesthetics come together in the film, then, to deconstruct a set of (frequently masked and insidious) operations formed at the disavowed crossroads of plutocratic and racist phantasies of corporeal and emotional appropriation.

What I want to demonstrate in this article is the way in which Cantet's film version of *Vers le sud* is able to put on cinematic display a series of essentially deathly economic, political, sexualised and racialised mechanisms of power and control, carefully unpicking and revealing their mutual inter-dependence, whilst at the same time dynamising the representation of those processes via the viewer's exposure to aspects of unprecedented (within the universe of the film itself) 'aliveness'. Whereas the emotionally 'cut-off' protagonists have, for the majority of the film's diegesis, appeared to subscribe to the hyper-capitalist notion that aliveness can be bought, whilst at the same time manically denying their own and others' pain and vulnerability, the film itself manages to bring surprising representations of spontaneous grieving and unprecedented relating into the frame. These new states of mind subvert, in what I would argue is an emotionally radical manner, the narcissistic status quo which gets acted out throughout the film at the level of both state and individual. The viewer is invited to occupy a position beyond satire or social critique. Whilst this new position is, of course, only ever provisional – it must jostle for survival, right to the end, with the protagonist Brenda's renewed commitment to 'undead' tourist-mania and the spectatorial fascination which that perhaps inevitably provokes – it nevertheless remains present, at least for this viewer, beyond the end credits, facilitating a continued engagement with the question of how metamorphosed modes of feeling, allied with further reflection and potential action, might be deployed to transform a context of death-driven, racialised capitalism into something altogether different.

The reader may well ask herself at this point what I am trying to convey with my repeated use of the potentially mystifying term 'aliveness'. Am I interested in how the film under discussion represents the *physical* living and the dead, how the state of a human being's biological heartbeat becomes bound up in 'race', economic inequality and power relations? Or am I concerned rather with the film's representation of emotional states of vitality and blankness, and the passage between two distinct *psychical* positions? I am, I think, using Cantet's film in an attempt to explore *both* these things: to argue that, in many of the situations depicted in *Vers le sud*, a character's bio-political relationship to the market-driven state cannot be thought about separately from the context of that same character's capacity to experience her or himself as vital, living, relational and real. Aliveness is a concern that is, for me, at once bio-political, psycho-existential and cultural. Theorists as dissimilar as the British psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott and the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, both of whom I draw on in my attempt to derive new ontological insight from Cantet's *Vers le sud*, resist the temptation ever to offer a total definition of what they might mean by 'aliveness'. But in some of their most canonical writings about the concept (e.g. Winnicott 1960; Agamben 1998), they make it clear that it certainly stands in opposition to the zombifying horrors of compliant, conformist and coerced functioning. If, for Winnicott, the arena *par excellence* for the thorough exploration of such phenomena is the dyadic relationship between baby and mother, for Agamben it is in the tyrannical dynamic created between a dehumanised individual and the 'sovereign' state. This article attempts to filter both Winnicott's and Agamben's ideas about the

'management' of the more vulnerable partner's capacity for living through three different levels of film and cultural analysis. Moving from a consideration of the specifically political assaults of state-sponsored structures on both the White and the Black characters in the film *Vers le sud* and their subsequent power to remain under the umbrella of biological life, I turn to the characters' emotional metamorphoses, via inter- and intra-psychical processes of enlivening and deadening, especially as they are mediated by the racialised and commodified gaze of the camera. Over the course of my discussion, I attempt to create links between the different levels of aliveness and deadness which are brought into the viewer's consciousness, asking which kinds of lives can be said truly to 'matter' within the hyper-racialised logic of the film's plantation-like spaces, before tentatively pointing towards the film's potential psycho-political transformation of the spectatorial consciousness itself.

The plot of *Vers le sud* is relatively straightforward, despite being a composite of three different stories by Laferrière.³ It is summer in Port-au-Prince, at the end of the 1970s. Jean-Claude Duvalier, nicknamed 'Baby Doc', son of the late dictator 'Papa Doc' François, is unelected President of Haiti. Brenda (Karen Young), a blandly pleasant, blonde, forty-something American divorcee from Savannah, Georgia, arrives alone to pick up where she left off three years ago with the poor but handsome teenage Haitian beach boy, Legba (Ménothy César). Although she easily manages to renew the physical relationship in exchange for the money, food and gifts she is able to offer, she finds that she must compete for Legba's time and attention with Ellen (Charlotte Rampling), an attractive, caustic, 55-year old British teacher of French literature, who lives in Boston. The two women spiral into increasingly acute states of hostile anxiety, while Legba himself becomes more and more exposed to the casual – but extreme – violence of the totalitarian Duvalier regime. All three characters are casually observed by Albert (Lys Ambroise), the stern Haitian hotel manager, and Sue (Louise Portal), a cheerful, middle-aged Québécoise factory-worker, who is enjoying a summer fling with another Haitian teenager, Neptune (Wilfried Paul). Legba is eventually slaughtered by the henchmen of a powerful colonel whose young mistress (Anotte Saint Ford) he has made the mistake of getting involved with. Brenda is briefly distraught, before pulling herself together and resolving to tour the rest of the Caribbean indefinitely, while Ellen, superficially the more brutal of the two women, returns to Boston in a state of unexpected grief.

Cantet's film, to an even greater extent than the three witty short stories by Laferrière on which it is based, presents, from its outset, a series of disturbingly commodified and sexualised Haitian bodies, both male and female. Objects of potential sale because of their simultaneous poverty, vulnerability and beauty, these bodies, carriers of neglected and seemingly negligible life, are depicted in dangerous proximity to violence and death.⁴ Watching Cantet's film and reading Laferrière's stories, a viewer familiar with twentieth-century Haitian literature and culture cannot help but think of the terrifying writings of the great, exiled author Marie Vieux-Chauvet. Vieux-Chauvet's fiction is relentless in its mission to demonstrate the all-consuming perversion at the core of the two Duvalier regimes. In her monumental triptych *Amour, colère et folie* (2015 [1968]), Vieux-Chauvet had explored the various ways in which, under the dictatorial presidency of François Duvalier, the Black (and especially 'Mulatress') female body underwent a series of increasingly painful and sexualised experiences on its way, via state-sanctioned rape, to eradication.⁵ Vieux-Chauvet's three loosely-linked texts must be read not as hallucinatory fantasies, nor as dystopian satires, but rather as alarmingly accurate, albeit highly literary, reflections of a dreadful historical truth.⁶ Vieux-Chauvet's reader is presented with a

landscape saturated in violence of every imaginable kind. Flippant massacres of peasants occur in all three stories, alongside the ritualistic sexual mutilations and murders of various young women and the makeshift executions of troupes of hapless artists and poets. The situation of Haiti under both Duvaliers was one in which entire villages could be wiped out in a day, and where one might have to carry on selling one's blood (as happens in Vieux-Chauvet's posthumously published 1986 novel *Les Rapaces* [2016]) until one was literally sucked dry, a barely sentient cadaver.⁷

Beyond her indisputable talent as a novelist, one way in which Vieux-Chauvet remains of crucial cultural importance is the way in which she unflinchingly sexualises – like the Marquis de Sade before her – the deranged logic of the abusive Law. In Vieux-Chauvet's world, there is no thirst for slaughter without a concomitant commitment to rape. Laferrière's stories of Haitian life under Duvalier *films* extend Vieux-Chauvet's feminist analysis of state-level sexualisation, making the observation that *any* vulnerable life – and this can include men and small boys – can become sexualised in a way that is both totalitarian and deathly. Fascinated by the way in which Baby Doc's regime managed to present a surface appearance of increased relaxation and liberalisation underneath which nestled a reality as bloodily violent as anything presided over by his father François, Laferrière's fiction teases out the relationship between the commodified-sexualised body and the expendable-death-bound body, with an uncannily destabilising wit. Reading from the opening text of *La Chair du maître*, the collection of short stories from which Cantet's film is principally drawn, Laferrière (2003) remarks, à propos of Jean-Claude Duvalier's 1970s Haiti that 'le fils, lui, ouvrait les portes de la maison à la musique étrangère (le jazz, le rock), à la coiffure afro, au cinéma porno, aux films violents (les westerns italiens) et à la drogue'⁸, thus creating an atmosphere of neo-liberal 'fun' which could all the more effectively mask an ongoing reality of generalised corporeal expendability. He goes on:

C'est simple: un petit groupe de gens possède dans ce pays tout l'argent disponible. Et, comme on le sait, avec l'argent on peut tout acheter: les êtres et les choses. Alors les filles (et les gars) se servaient de leur corps pour se payer des trucs (vêtements, repas dans les restaurants chics, soirées dans les boîtes de nuit de Pétienville, drogues, bijoux, voyages). Le sexe comme monnaie d'échange (Laferrière 2003).⁹

For the wilfully blind outside world – for the North American and European tourists – beginning to peer excitedly now into this previously closed island, Haiti emerges as a newly 'open' space, a pleasure-ground in which people are free to do what they want, where desire is 'different', where *their* desire can be 'different'.¹⁰ But this is merely a pseudo-transgressive landscape: the same repression exists under 'Baby' as it did under 'Papa', only now it is channelled efficiently and effectively into an exchange scheme in which the poor Haitian body, instead of being played with and/or killed only by other, stronger Haitians, will be played with and paid for, before perhaps being handed back to be killed, by innocent-ignorant Whites with dollars, propping up a system of slaughter akin to what the philosopher Giorgio Agamben (1998) designated 'bare life'. Bare life is the name Agamben gives to the kind of human existence that is consigned, in the wake of the law's suspension, to casual extermination, the kind of human existence that does not – and can never – deserve truly to live, or be helped truly to live.¹¹ The *homo sacer* – 'sacred man'¹² – is the bearer of an existence that has been stripped quite bare in this specific sense, an existence that is deemed irrecoverable for any social function whatsoever. In the first volume of the

homo sacer project (1998), before he focuses, in the later *Remnants of Auschwitz* (1999), on the specific phenomenon of the European death-camps, Agamben uses the concept in a peculiarly versatile manner. *Homo sacer* is variously evoked as a kind of living statue, a being who, incompatible with the human world, has an intimate symbiosis with death but is not yet properly deceased, and, with reference to Marie de France's *lai* 'Bisclavret', as a bestial creature in the throes of a peculiar metamorphosis, not properly distinct from the non-human animal. When he shifts his attention to concrete cases, Agamben alludes not only to the Nazi camps, but also to the outlaws of ancient Rome who could be killed by anyone with absolute impunity (these were the original *homines sacri*), to present-day asylum seekers, to Americans on Death Row. The field of applications is wide, then, perhaps problematically so; it provides us, however, with a provocative range of scenarios to be examined through the lens of one clear theoretical concept. When Agamben puts this concept in the most general terms possible we understand simply that the *homo sacer* is 'the human body [...] separated from its normal political status and abandoned, in a state of exception, to the most extreme misfortunes' (Agamben 1998, 159).

The opening scene of *Vers le sud* visually whispers the obscenities of which Chauvet's fictions verbally shrieked, but this whisper is remarkable in its power to unnerve the unprepared viewer. The middle-aged Port-au-Prince hotel-keeper Albert has gone to the airport to collect Brenda, when he is approached by a woman who asks him to take her 15-year old daughter off her hands. She wants him to keep the child safe from unspecified harm: for there are those, she says, who would, all-powerful, seek to possess the girl and make her their own, even if it means killing the mother. The girl – we catch a brief glimpse of her, small, child-like, in a yellow dress – is apparently a kind of sexualised *thing*, a being with no agency whatsoever, to be given by one adult, her mother, to another, Albert; in the background hover rapacious figures, whose intentions and potential actions we can only guess at. The viewer, like Albert, is thrown into a kind of nightmare. What *is* this hell we have landed in? Brenda's arrival – blonde hair, hesitant smile, friendly demeanour: the quintessential innocent American abroad – would appear to 'normalise' the situation. And yet we will find out before long that Brenda is in Haiti to grab at her own sexualised child. Legba, fifteen and starving when she first had sex with him three years previously, is eighteen now, but he is still starving, and she will still exploit that fact in order to enjoy his flesh. In *Vers le sud*, then, the stench of cannibalisation, rendered in Vieux-Chauvet's fiction or in Agamben's critical theory as an essentially Sadeian process of biopolitical mass extermination, is deftly 'made over' – in precisely the fashion outlined by Laferrière in his overview of the Baby Doc 'turn' – dyed, perfumed and 'Brenda-fied' until it becomes something superficially sweet. Albert's airport interlocutor, the mother of the vulnerable young girl in the yellow dress, will leave him with a cryptic declaration – 'il y a des bons masques et des mauvais; mais tous portent un masque'¹³ – and it is to the work of systematic unmasking that Cantet's film will subsequently devote its entire energy.¹⁴

The viewer must actively participate in this work of unmasking in order, firstly, to gain the essential insight that 'bare life' and a sexualised death drive are cloaked, in this 1970s neo-liberal tourist hotspot, by the appearance of pleasure and liberation, and secondly, that a more genuine experience of aliveness can only potentially arise on the other side of narcissistic disavowal. Throughout the film, the beach operates as a striking metonymic image of neo-colonial capitalism's capacity to disguise deathliness with the appearance of venal happiness. Ellen, Brenda and Sue eat and drink on the beach; they chat there, swap confidences and life stories; and it is on this same beach that their young

Haitian escorts must beg their White mother-lovers for a share of food, or face starvation. Legba frolics and sleeps on the beach; he flirts and has sex there; and it is on this same beach that his dead body, and that of his Black female friend, will be dumped once they have been despatched by the colonel's executioners. In Cantet's film, the beach is never a space of carefree play; it simply masquerades as that. We come to see it instead as the sunny market-place of economic and corporeal exchange, a space which quietly accommodates the over-exposure and eventual erasure of the Black lives that work hard for their sustenance on it. Whatever economic and sexual autonomy the three White women have managed – in a context of North American feminist partial-liberation – to appropriate for themselves, this is quickly revealed to be dependent for its functioning on a phantasmatic, plantation-like setting, in which poor, Haitian bodies can be bought. O'Shaughnessy makes the point well: 'Representatives of a post-feminist rather than a feminist mind-set, Cantet's women are unable to make common cause either with each other or with oppressed Haitians. Instead, they are used to show the illusions and exploitative nature of apparently empowered consumption' (2015, 121).

The neo-liberal gaze of these women is scarcely a liberating one. If, as Jane Gaines (1986) has argued, White women are only able to enjoy the subjectivity of their own gaze by projecting it onto non-White or colonised others, the dynamic of the interaction retains something fundamentally violating and abusive. Nowhere is the simultaneously penetrating and deathly quality of the women's interactions with the young men illustrated more neatly than in Ellen's delight in photographing the naked Legba while he lies on his stomach, playing dead, his buttocks exposed to her lens, to Cantet's camera, and to the viewer's gaze. The White woman pays to play *voyeuse* to the safely passive young, Black Haitian male; hers becomes the directing gaze of the scene, a gaze seeking to domesticate, to pin down, to master. Throughout the film, this violent logic of sexual-visual domination is repeated, as the camera approaches Legba, via either Brenda or Ellen's gaze, from behind, whether he is lying face down on the beach, or on the bed; frequently a deathly effect is created – are we beholding a corpse, the viewer wonders? – until, of course, Legba's final beach scene, the one in which he has really, definitively, physically died. The extent to which Ellen's – and particularly Brenda's – 'liberated' desire assumes a violence that can be seemingly visited only on starving Black bodies is underlined by the ease with which the young boy Eddy (Jackenson Pierre Olmo Diaz), not more than nine or ten, metamorphoses into a sexual object for the women, another young body to be potentially bought. Not only does Brenda, under the influence of marijuana, seem close to initiating a sexual encounter with the child, but even Sue, at many other moments the ethical compass of the film, sanctions the potentially child-abusing transgression with the delighted cry: 'Everything's different here!' Her cry appears to convey something resembling joy; but beneath this simulacrum of joyful aliveness is a sanctioning of destructive, sexualised intrusion.

The women's treatment of both the adolescent Legba and the child Eddy cries out to be explored not only within the context of a racist and capitalist space of corporeal appropriation, but also through a psychoanalytically-inflected lens of psychological vampirism. Both these boys become receptacles for the sexualised narcissism of the middle-aged tourists and, as a result, we might speak of the progressive 'deadening' of both children as taking place on simultaneously economic and emotional axes. Winnicott, whilst never exploring in any detail the implications of specifically sexualised or racialised abuse of the child by what he calls the 'facilitating environment', nevertheless offers a very useful theoretical framework for understanding the process whereby the child's sense of both

'realness' and 'aliveness' is eroded by the narcissistic adult's implicit or explicit demand that she perform the false role which has been dictated to her within the abusive interaction:

[T]he infant gets seduced into a compliance, and a compliant False Self reacts to environmental demands and the infant seems to accept them. Through this False Self the infant builds up a false set of relationships, and by means of introjections even attains a show of being real, so that the child may grow to be just like mother, nurse, aunt, brother, or whoever at the time dominates the scene. (1960, 145)¹⁵

Developing this idea, and building on clinical research carried out by André Green (1983), who himself was deeply influenced by Winnicott when elaborating his own paradigm-shifting work on narcissistic psychical 'deadness', Christopher Bollas writes of the ghastly, deadening 'interject', an

internal object that arrives in the internal world either due to a parental projective identification, interjected into the self, or to a trauma from the real that violates the self, or both [...] An interject is an interruption of the self's idiom by the forceful entry of the 'outside'. Differing types of hesitation, uncertainty, blankness, and stupor reflect the presence of an interject which as the work of the other (or real) bears no internal sign of unconscious meaning: it simply 'sits' inside the self, its ideational content bounded by seizures of thought or behaviour. (1999, 94)

Nothing loving or human can survive for very long within this space of systemic violation. As Fanon so memorably puts it, describing his own experience of a racialised psychical interjection: 'J'explosai. Voici les menus morceaux par un autre moi réunis'¹⁶ (1952, 88). The developing psyche forced to endure the various interruptions of the interject is rendered stupefied and blank, slowly bled of its dynamic aliveness. Little Eddy is psychically deadened by his boundary-breaking white mamas Brenda and Sue at the same time as he is physically over-exposed to the rupturing violence of the larger 'facilitating environment' that is the murderous Haitian state. In a later scene, the boy will come close to being annihilated by a local government bully (a so-called *tonton macoute*, perhaps), whose random act of cruelty against a street-seller incenses the empathic little boy. Legba comes to his rescue, just as he does at Eddy's moment of near-violation by Brenda (see Figure 1); but the scene serves to establish a link between the various different butchers at work in the society. Brenda may wear a different mask from that of the terrifying *tonton*, but they are connected by their equal readiness to treat Eddy as an object, whose rights over his own body may be suspended with impunity.

INSERT FIGURE 1

Figure 1. Brenda takes advantage of Eddy (Soda Pictures).

Cantet's film suggests, again and again, that the 'innocent' desiring-fantasies of the White protagonists of *Vers le sud* need to be read and revealed in the context of the forms of physical exposure, trafficking and violence that they prop up economically. The film is an exercise in unmasking the pleasantly false and self-deceiving faces brought to Haiti by Baby Doc's dollar-worshipping zeal, keenly examining the human damage upon which these permanently frustrated tourists' desire insouciantly feeds. The film can be read as one of a

number of French films from the 2000s in which the camera is turned on the agreeable façades behind which essentially vampiric forms of post-colonial White fantasy shelter. Not unlike the White Parisian couple played by Daniel Auteuil and Juliette Binoche, whose smugly bourgeois life, built on the corpses of dead Algerians, finds itself intruded upon in Michael Haneke's *Caché/Hidden* (2005); not unlike Isabelle Huppert's earnestly romantic – but perfectly deranged – White coffee-plantation owner in Claire Denis's *White Material* (2009); not unlike the well-meaning White teacher struggling to bring the imperfect subjunctive to his 19th *arrondissement* pupils in Cantet's more-celebrated film adaptation *Entre les murs La Classe* (2008), it is the White subject's desire, not only to gaze on his or her neo-colonised inferiors, but to receive a gaze of adoration and gratitude in return, that is so effectively exposed and shredded within this intriguing sub-genre. In all these films, the narcissistic – psychoanalysts like Jean-Luc Donnet and André Green (1973) might call it 'blankly psychotic' – post-imperial gaze is destabilised, unseated from its position of uncontested sovereignty by a multiplication of fragmented alternative cinematic gazes, which scrutinise the mask worn by the White gazer with such spectral heat that the mask has no choice but eventually to melt.

Throughout *Vers le sud*, Brenda is shown to have a certain intellectual awareness of the racialised injustices which structure life and relationships within neo-colonial Haiti. We witness her legitimate outrage at Albert's unsuccessful attempt to ban Legba from joining the women for dinner at the hotel restaurant, as she cries out to her amused White women companions: 'They can be so racist!' She is aware, then, of the apartheid-like mechanisms around which her own White privilege is organised, aware too of the generalised contempt for Black Haitian life that flows all around, practised by Haitian Blacks on other Haitian Blacks. After a fruitless search for the briefly missing Legba at the police station, she remarks to Sue that the police have treated her as if she were a mad person, being, as she is, 'a White woman who's worried about a Black guy'. Brenda's anti-racist indignation with regard to practices and utterances she rightly regards as morally unacceptable emerges in stark contrast with Ellen's often deliberately provocative expressions of racism and cultural snobbery. Where Ellen dismisses Haiti as 'un tas de fumier',¹⁷ disdains Port-au-Prince's souvenir markets, and sneeringly refers to the American Blacks as 'nègres de Harlem',¹⁸ Brenda, appalled at Ellen's insulting discourse, enthuses positively about the Caribbean island and its men's soft skin. What Cantet's film manages to do so vibrantly is to rip to shreds the mask of anti-racism worn by Brenda, the better to explore the way in which her discourse of liberalism is the very thing that allows her to objectify and oppress in a more truly death-driven way than anyone else in the film. Brenda's romantic pursuit of Legba as putative love-object is gradually revealed to be a blood-chilling enactment of narcissism, its heartfelt 'sincerity' structured merely by a more elaborate phantasy of domination than that of the camera-wielding Ellen, a phantasy according to which Legba, ultimately, may be substituted for any other 'othered' man.

The film's final sequences serve to underline more starkly than ever the anti-relational dimension of the feelings Brenda has attempted throughout to present as essentially loving. Following Albert's discovery of Legba's dead body on the beach, Brenda stares more and more deeply into her own reflection in the hotel bathroom mirror. While Brenda is staring at herself, Sue tries to communicate with her from the other room. The scene has a baldly horrific quality: if, up to that point, Brenda's emotional vampirism was only hinted at, here it becomes almost literalised, as if she were truly an un-dead entity, struggling to find herself in the glass. Sue struggles to reach her 'friend', but is met only with

coldness and contempt. The idea, floated by an ever-optimistic Sue, that Brenda might try to ‘make peace in [her] heart’, is flatly derided. ‘Les touristes, ça ne meurt jamais.’¹⁹ This is the sentence which, just moments before, the police inspector investigating Legba’s death has just tossed at Ellen. And here, as we watch Brenda watching herself in the mirror (see Figure 2), a passage into uncanny deathlessness really does seem to have taken place. Brenda has crossed over into a journey with no conception of ending: sexual tourism unlimited, across a boundless plantation-archipelago. Just before the end credits roll, we hear Brenda narrating her determination to travel on through the Caribbean, to discover island after island, to fall in love anew with exotic name after exotic name, exotic space after exotic space, each one – true to the tantalising promise at the heart of capitalist phantasy – somehow more exciting than the last, yet bearing the stamp of essentially unthreatening novelty.

INSERT FIGURE 2

Figure 2. Brenda lost in the mirror (Soda Pictures).

Vers le sud exposes narratives of White emancipation and progress within the Haitian context, fragmenting these hypocritical notions at both a discursive level (e.g. ‘feminism’, ‘anti-racism’) and a psycho-geographical one (‘the beach’). But in its most radical development of the already satirical basis of Laferrière’s stories, the film manages to ‘explode’ the desiring gaze of the neo-colonial tourist, exposing it not only as complicit with forms of extreme anti-poor, anti-Black violence, but also as inherently, quasi-psychotically narcissistic, dependent upon the adoration of poor Black others in order to feel alive or real. Much earlier in the film, for example, the viewer is offered a glimpse of Brenda’s ‘tourist-self’ potential for slipping, almost ontologically, it would seem, into a semi-fantastical plane. Dancing with Legba after the two of them have defied Ellen at the dinner table, she appears to pass into a kind of trance, seemingly provoked by the musicians. As the camera pans around the dancefloor we see that everybody is staring at her – young, old, Black, White, male, female – with looks ranging from amusement to confusion, embarrassment to fascination. Brenda (still dancing, oblivious) exudes frenzied, uncontrolled energy in this scene, an energy which seems to emanate not from her but from some external source: it is as if she has become the ‘horse’ (to use the Haitian *vodou* metaphor) of some kind of *Iwa* (a Haitian *vodou* deity). But her conversion is not straightforwardly transcendent, liberating or appropriating: this is no ‘Like A Prayer’ moment, and Brenda is not the pop star Madonna, dancing merrily among a gospel choir and burning crosses.²⁰ The scene is actually a more remarkable one than that polemical 1989 music video. For in it we do nothing less than witness Brenda lose control not only of her buyer’s power to gaze at others, but also of her (later explicitly stated) control over the way in which she is gazed at. The scene refuses to repeat either the misogynist paradigm of woman as knowable object ‘to-be-looked-at’ (cf. Mulvey 1975) or the revisionist paradigm of (White) woman as bearer of a neo-colonial, objectifying gaze (cf. Gaines 1986). Instead, we are offered a scene that spins – somehow, inexplicably – out of control, a proliferation of multi-gendered, multi-racial, multi-generational gazes, criss-crossing around the strange, unexpected, dancing spectacle of Brenda, but impossible to domesticate or to reduce to the binary logic of either ‘classic’ or ‘subversive’ sexualised or racialised identifications. Brenda fails, in this strange scene, on the suddenly magical dancefloor, to be either the subject or the object of a coherent or identifiable gaze – and therein, I would argue, lies the scene’s exciting potential for a

vulnerabilising spontaneity beyond the dictates of the predictable exchanges of the tourist marketplace. It is impossible to say whose desire drives the narrative of this particular scene, or in whose interest the fantasy unfolds. Like Jessica (Christine Gordon), the blonde female spectre at the centre of Jacques Tourneur's Caribbean film melodrama *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943), like the fantastically hybrid, sometime-sow narrator of Marie Darrieussecq's controversial 1996 novel *Truismes* (set partially within a dystopian Antillean plantation paradise named Aqualand), Brenda has started, in this scene, to incarnate a non-identity which echoes Giorgio Agamben's (2000) concept of a 'form-of-life': that which escapes the prescription of conventionally understood attributes of category or belonging. Something resembling unplanned aliveness can be glimpsed in this scene.

We might talk of the emergence – albeit both nascent and ephemeral – of some form of 'true self' functioning: being beyond categorisation. As Winnicott puts it, with his characteristically elliptical plainness: 'The True Self comes from the aliveness of the body tissues and the working of body-functions, including the heart's action and breathing' (1990, 147). Whilst Brenda's usual *modus operandi* is fundamentally narcissistic, she being both internally deadened and unconsciously intent on projecting that deadness into the minds and bodies of the sexualised Black children around her, in this startling scene the viewer finds her miraculously enlivened by an energy which seems to come *from outside her own zombified ego*. Jed Sekoff, in a brilliant analysis of some of the implications of André Green's (1983) theory of the 'dead mother complex', remarks that

the complex is a kind of death march within the mind, or more specifically, a kind of war in the mind against the self, against the soma, and against the affective resonances of the psyche. All spontaneous uprisings of the emotions, of the body, of phantasy, represent a threat to the regime of the dead mother (1999, 119).

If, both prior to and following this remarkable scene, Brenda is characterised by a kind of predictable, internal, sexualised death-march named perversion – we can almost imagine her preconscious mind muttering robotically dictates to itself: *must get back to Haiti/must find Legba on the beach must seduce him/will feel beautiful again/try not to say anything racist* – here the narcissistic television script gets ripped up: there is a spontaneous uprising within her; and 'she' is not at its helm. The incoherence of Brenda's trance-dance, the strange, awkward energy it releases, and the multiplicity of gazes it facilitates, could all be said to reflect the most 'alive' aspects of the entire *Vers le sud* project. The film offers no solutions – how could it? – to the problems either of pathological, sexualised, paedophilic narcissism or of cannibalistic, neo-colonial neo-liberalism. What it does manage to put on display is a series of energising breaches in a pseudo-carnavalesque system, a system which might otherwise appear unassailable in its postmodern simulacrum of pleasure. Revealing the essential deathliness underpinning Brenda's dealings with Legba (and with the Caribbean in general), the film goes on to offer the viewer visions of that deathliness spinning out of control, losing its capacity to pin down colonised subjectivities, no longer able to be looked at in precisely the way it would like to be.

Even if we leave Brenda, in the film's final moments, to pursue a still more manic programme of self-affirmation through tourism, Cantet facilitates the viewer's exposure to the intrusion of things that are emotionally real, beyond the carnival of zombies: the disruptive images of the dead bodies of Legba and his friend; the unexpected grief and humanity of Rampling's Ellen; and the almost intolerably painful mourning of little Eddy. It is

this vision of little Eddy, refusing comfort in the wake of Legba's death, refusing to look at anyone, tears streaming down his face, that stays most with me once the film is over. If the figure of Eddy has been used by the film, up until this point, to hint menacingly at the Haitian child's proximity to violence and death (at the hands of the state), and to sexualised assault (at the hands of Brenda and, potentially, the other women), here he functions as a vehicle of emotion more powerful than trade. His capacity to weep – to reveal, in the face of his dead protector's meaningless suffering, depths of pain and despair which so many other characters are unable to access – rises above the soulless structures of the island on which he has been born (see Figure 3). The viewer is reminded – if s/he needed any reminding – that no matter what zombifying conditions appear to hold sway, in any given regime: Black lives matter.²¹ More important than the film's aesthetic deconstruction of real and symbolic violence (cf. Bourdieu 1988), then, are these threateningly 'alive' aspects inherent to its own existence as a cultural object, characteristics which undercut the represented processes of post-imperial *thanatos* with something arguably resurrectional. The film succeeds – albeit in a sporadic and sometimes inconsistent manner – in creating psychical links in the mind of the viewer to potentially disavowed, lost or 'dead' objects, links which, at times, run counter to the narcissistic – at times frankly psychotic – functioning at work in the characters and social structures privileged by the narrative. Whilst these characters and structures often find themselves unable to mourn – as they are not able to acknowledge having lost anything in the first place – the viewer is offered some capacity for grieving, feeling and thinking more generally.²²

INSERT FIGURE 3

Figure 3. Eddy weeps (Soda Films).

Returning, by way of conclusion, to Winnicott, whose concerns about the transmission of emotional health between mothers and babies in post-war Britain might seem a long way indeed from either contemporary French cinema or the racialised death-beaches of Baby Doc's 1970s Haiti, we might say that – despite all the physical and psychical deadness that surrounds him – Eddy has, in that moment of helpless weeping, found a way of accessing an aspect of *his* 'true self', a simultaneously somatic and psychical energy capable of putting him in touch with his own subjective feelings, rather than with the narcissistically projected desires of a gang of faux-maternal North American tourists. In so visibly and movingly identifying with his own grief rather than with the sexual and economic demands of the white mamas or the thuggish State, Eddy points the way, via his tears, to a radical break with organised, systemic deadness, whether relational or political. Near the end of *Homo Sacer*, Agamben writes that 'it is on the basis of these uncertain and nameless terrains, these difficult zones of indistinction, that the ways and form of a new politics must be thought' (1998, 187). And whilst Eddy, in the emotional state in which he is empathically framed by Cantet, most certainly does *not* resemble the dissociated, barely sentient beings whom Agamben evokes on the threshold of the 'new politics' beyond *bios* and *zoe*, what he *does* resemble is a form of life that cannot be pinned down. It has traversed both falseness and dissociation to emerge on the other side, as something that feels more real than the zombie-structures of murder and manipulation which have produced, violated and nearly killed it. By allowing this image of one Haitian child's fleetingly non-commodified, non-sexualised psyche to supervene in the mortiferously venal landscape we have hitherto had to witness, Cantet's film places itself – and the spectator – ecstatically on the side not only

of post-colonial aliveness, survival and resurrection, but also places us, whether we like it or not, and if only for a moment, in the potential position of being a new, non-narcissistic mother to Eddy. *Look at this child; look at him weeping*. We are, in a way, returned to precisely the same ethical exhortation we overheard at the film's perplexing opening, when Albert, the hotel manager, was begged by the terrified Haitian mother to take in her young daughter in danger of rapture by various sexual vultures. Albert declined to take up any kind of parental position. My sense, though, is that the viewer has an agency, a potential capacity for relationality, beyond that of the characters on screen. We may, like Albert, prefer (literally) to mind our own business; or, we may, like Brenda, prefer to remain adrift in a world of mirrors. Like so much in this age of neo-liberalism – or so they tell us – 'we' are free to choose.

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Entre les murs, 2008, Laurent Cantet, France.
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Vers le sud, 2005, Laurent Cantet, France/Canada.
White Material, 2009, Claire Denis, France/Cameroon.

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¹ 'Hence zombies sing a song, but it is that of life [...] between the apparent death from inside and the definitive death from outside [...] the sheets of internal life extend with increasing speed' (Deleuze 2005, 201).

² O'Shaughnessy's unexamined question of who exactly 'we' spectators are assumed to be (in either gendered, economic or racialized terms) is, of course, enormous, and cannot be satisfactorily unpicked in the space of this article.

³ For a helpful discussion of the complex relationship between Laferrière's original stories (1997) and Cantet's film (2005), as well as the added layer of intertextual complexity introduced by Laferrière's post-film novel, itself entitled *Vers le sud* (2006), see Brangé (2009). O'Shaughnessy (2015, 98–106) also provides a wonderfully comprehensive analysis of the implications of some of Cantet's choices when adapting Laferrière.

⁴ For a useful discussion of the way in which the White characters are shielded – and shield themselves – from this regime of violence, see de Raedt (2008).

⁵ Laferrière writes the 'postface' for the 2015 edition of Vieux-Chauvet's long-inaccessible classic novel. When I spoke to him in Paris in 2003 of my doctoral research on Vieux-Chauvet, he told me that he considered her to be one of the most important Haitian authors of all time, living or dead.

⁶ For comprehensive sociological accounts of Haiti under the Duvaliers see Trouillot (1990) and Hurbon (1987).

⁷ As Trouillot (1990) explains in the fifth chapter of his book, Duvalier's rule normalised the state of emergency, instituting a new everyday reality in which nobody, no matter how high up the social ladder, was safe from being labelled as a dangerous, guilty enemy of the country. Whilst victims were frequently perceived as belonging to a particular kind of group – women, peasants, 'Mulattos' – they were just as often indefinable in strictly political terms: for example, Boy Scouts, relatives of former victims, even people sharing the same *first name* as an undesirable would find themselves targeted.

⁸ 'As for the son, he opened the doors of the house to foreign music (jazz, rock), Afro hairstyles, porno cinemas, violent movies (spaghetti westerns) and drugs.'

⁹ 'It's simple: one small group of people owns all the available money in the land. And, as we know, money can buy anything: people and things. So girls (and boys) used their bodies to pay for stuff (clothes, meals in smart restaurants, evenings out in the night-clubs of Pétionville, drugs, jewellery, trips). Sex as currency.'

¹⁰ For a reading of *Vers le sud* which remains, to some extent, sympathetic to the tourist characters in their quest for new experience, see Michelmann (2011).

¹¹ The original Italian for 'bare life' is 'nuda vita', and has been rendered by some English translators as 'naked life' (e.g. in Agamben, 2000).

¹² *Homo sacer* is 'sacred' not because he is holy or worthy of veneration, but in the more ambivalent sense of the Latin term *sacer*: outside both social and worldly categorisations, untouchably 'post-human'.

¹³ 'There are good masks and bad ones, but everyone wears a mask.'

¹⁴ My discussion expands on and converses with that of de Raedt (2008), who is also interested in this question of the mask and its various functions in Cantet's film.

¹⁵ Winnicott seems influenced here by Ferenczi's (1932) pioneering work on children's widespread emotional (and indeed sexual) exploitation by narcissistically perverse adults.

¹⁶ 'I burst apart. Now the fragments have been put together again by another self' (Fanon 2008, 82).

¹⁷ 'a dungheap'.

¹⁸ 'Harlem niggers'.

¹⁹ 'Tourists never die.'

²⁰ For a brilliant critique of the singer Madonna's 1989 pop video in racialised terms, see hooks (1992).

²¹ This statement is, as I write, one which finds itself being contested – at an ideological, physical and psychical level – on an everyday basis, throughout the world, a world in which a star like Charlotte Rampling, commenting on the absence of Black nominees for the 2016 Academy Awards (see Child, 2016), is able to suggest that entrenched structures of institutionalised, anti-Black racism simply do not exist. A film like *Vers le sud* offers powerfully living forms, affects and representations (including, ironically, those incarnated in the film by Rampling herself) in the service of thinking, feeling and acting against the violence of deadening, racialised privilege.

²² Freud's 1917 essay 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1957) has been crucial in helping to develop a body of theoretical literature (often Kleinian in orientation) devoted to the psychical and social problems caused by the refusal or inability to mourn.