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Towards a "Perverse" Brechtianism: From Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* to Verhoeven's *Elle*

In 1990, Thomas Elsaesser wrote that Brechtian aesthetics are toothless in a hyperreal image culture. Thirty years on, this essay reworks the notion of distanciation by asking: what if we cannot decide whether the unnatural behavior of characters on screen is the product of Brechtian alienation or of the character's own perversion, but rather is caused by both (and therefore neither)? To chart the transition between orthodox and "perverse" Brechtianisms, this essay compares a film by a director whose melodramas are often read as examples of Brechtian cinema, Douglas Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), and a film by a contemporary director whose work is often misread as the very thing it satirizes, Paul Verhoeven's *Elle* (2016). This essay argues that, in the absence of a world "out there" to represent, the techniques of Brecht become perverse, a Sadean laboratory for the rehearsal of illicit forms of pleasure.

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> ... we see that conscience is distinct from all other maladies of the soul; it dwindles away to nothingness as more is added to it.
>
> Marquis de Sade (Klossowski 1991, 95)

Pervert Pervert Pervert

The expiration, or at least the mutation, of any model of realism is a good place to begin looking for dystopian imaginings. Although it would be reductive to describe Brechtian aesthetics as straightforwardly pursuing a Marxist critique of capitalist society, we might do well to examine this particular trajectory of realism as it fails, yet fails eloquently, to account for the new set of circumstances peculiar to contemporary capitalism. Such a critique is modelled on Baudrillard's understanding of capitalism's paradox; namely, that we encounter a system that "swallows up the real more quickly than it manufactures it" (Baudrillard 1993, 184), a shadow that outruns the body which casts it. What Baudrillard calls "completely aleatoric processes" displace connections of cause and effect, leading the philosopher of the hyperreal to declare the supersession of modernity's critical distance by strategies of irony and hyperbole (1993, 82). Such a view cannot be reconciled with the dialectical methods of Brechtian realism, yet in this essay I propose to show how Brecht, in an amended form, continues to function as a key point of reference when reading contemporary film and media. In the prologue to *Brecht and Method*, Fredric Jameson rejects the notion that there is something fundamentally un-Brechtian in the attempt to "reinvent and revive some 'Brecht for our times'" (Jameson 1999, 8), yet, as Thomas Elsaesser writes in "From anti-illusionism to hyper-realism: Bertolt Brecht and contemporary film," it is also certainly the case that "not all Brechtianisms in postwar cinema [...] are true to the spirit of Brecht" (Elsaesser 1990, 171).

One such un-Brechtian Brechtianism is the one that I shall propose in this article, whose contours are defined by Baudrillard's writings on hyperreality: what I call a "Perverse" Brechtianism.

My argument focuses primarily on the technique of repetition, which is perhaps the most rudimentary of all alienation devices. Whether lightning struck twice or not, in the play it should happen only once: this is how an Aristotelian defense of verisimilitude would run. In Brechtian aesthetics, however, repetition transforms an act into a *gestus*, and it thereby acquires parabolic significance. Brecht proposes in "A Short Organum for the Theatre" that "Just as the actor no longer has to persuade the audience that it is the author's character and not himself that is standing on the stage, so also he need not pretend that the events taking place on the stage have never been rehearsed, and are now happening for the first and only time" (Brecht 1948, 10). It follows from Brecht's presentation of the two techniques in tandem that an event or action, occurring more than once, becomes an isolable, quotable gesture that dispels the illusion of the actor's transformation into a character. This serves to illuminate the different contexts—historical, political, social— in which the gesture is performed. By way of illustration, this could be said for the gestures which were first performed by Jørgen Leth's "perfect human" in the 1968 film of the same name before being repeated in five discrete remakes for Lars von Trier's 2003 film *The Five Obstructions* (*De fem benspænd*). The bourgeois who consumes haute cuisine in the late 1960s is not the same bourgeois who eats salmon from a silver platter in the early 2000s. However, in this film, Trier does not use the repeated gesture to test the social forces that make it possible so much as he tests the individual who is compelled to reiterate

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it; indeed, Jørgen Leth complains that it would be "deadly" to reattempt the second obstruction after Trier has sought to chastise him for infringing the rules of the game. Simply put, Trier is more interested in psychology than in politics. Repetition poses a mental hurdle, just as it did for the Abraham of Kierkegaard's _Fear and Trembling_, who must reconcile himself to having Isaac back after he had resolved to sacrifice him.

This neat distinction between the psychological and the political begs the question upon which the following discussion will turn: namely, what happens when repetition on the level of presentation cannot be separated from repetition on the level of a character's behavior? In some cases, this distinction may arguably be made simply enough. For instance, we understand that the washerwoman who climbs a flight of stairs repeatedly in Léger's _Ballet Mécanique_ (1924) is not deranged. As Kracauer writes, through Léger's reiterative technique, "She turns from a concrete person into the pale carrier of a specific kind of motion" (Kracauer 1997, 184–85). The alienation effect directs the audience to find the meaning of the image beyond a psychologizing approach. But, in contemporary visual culture, should we be so quick to dismiss repeated actions as occurring solely on the level of presentation, rather than also acknowledging their significance as the behavior of ostensibly insane or perverted characters?

This essay, growing from the germ of that thought, will examine the political potential of perversion in cinema. I will begin by setting out a theoretical framework, following which I will consider a case study. However, before taking up the texts of Sirk and Verhoeven that will be the subject of my analysis, I would like to briefly continue thinking about repetition in the films of Lars von Trier.

In Trier's _Nymphomaniac_ (2013) films, incremental repetition—of sex acts—is the basis for a picaresque tale, much as serial killing is the episodic pretext of the Danish director's most recent film, _The House That Jack Built_ (2018). In these films, perversity is as much a formal necessity as it is a component of their protagonists' psyches. In a scene from _Nymphomaniac Vol. II_, Joe (Charlotte Gainsbourg) scolds her interlocutor for his clichéd, inauthentic reaction to her sympathetic treatment of a pedophile. The pervert has been initiated into a world of knowledge from which the non-pervert is excluded, and this knowledge, in Sartrean terms, could be described as authenticity; the freedom from bad faith. Bad faith and inauthenticity are necessary to support the dominant group's image of itself, and Joe's articulate rejoinder throws light on the vacuity of his sexual politics. It is in this way that Trier plays with the Brechtian tenet that audience identification is undesirable. By having a character express the consensus view of pedophilia, a reflection of the dominant group's image of itself, he invites the audience to take the character's side in the argument, and thereby identify with him. However, Seligman (Stellan Skarsgård), a middle-aged virgin who considers himself asexual, is shown to be in bad faith, not least because his sexual advance at the film's conclusion shows that his identity to that moment had been predicated on a delusional asexuality. The audience, through his example, is forced to confront the fearfulness and vacuity of its own inauthenticity. Trier's dramatology thereby functions very much along the lines described by Lionel Trilling, for whom "The authentic work of art instructs us in our inauthenticity and adjures us to overcome it" (Trilling 1972, 100).

However, it is somewhat ironic to deploy a concept like authenticity—whose history, as related by writers

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like Lionel Trilling and Charles Taylor, involves a moral injunction to self-realization and expression over and against society's demands and commonplaces—in an essay informed by the ideas of a thinker whose "fatal strategies" adopt the aristocratic gameplay and ceremony of societies that predate the very concepts of authenticity and sincerity. This irony could feasibly be formulated according to the Baudrillard's concept of ecstasy, an "immoral" form that dispenses with oppositions such as the beautiful versus the ugly—in our case, authentic and inauthentic—and instead "rais[es] things to their 'N'th power" (Baudrillard 1993, 82). In other words, in Perverse-Brechtian filmmaking, "authenticity" could be said to mean: *the more inauthentic than inauthentic*. For instance, there is a strong sense of the authentic-inauthentic opposition in Paul Valéry's critique of cinema, which (summarized by Kracauer) holds that "By featuring the outer aspects of inner life, the cinema all but compels us to copy the former and desert the latter" (Kracauer 1997, 286). Does the cinema compel us merely to mirror techniques, to act out parts with the mechanical facility of Sartre's famous example of the waiter? Might we not counter that the cinematic mode of mirroring techniques might, with a certain strategic application, become not merely inauthentic but *more inauthentic than inauthentic*?

The root of Valéry's anxiety is that language as a medium allows the reader to "see" the inner and the outer life equally, by the same means, whereas cinema is able to represent only the latter, to the detriment of the former. I would contend that reading/"seeing" the consciousness of a character cannot be the objective of political audiovisual media, rather, such a project seems to have more in common with the aims of the bourgeois novel. Instead,

a contemporary film aesthetics might, like Trier's *Nymphomaniac*, use the medium to *combine* distanciation and identification: *that is, to use alienation effects not as a means of exposing social reality, on the one hand, or to use psychological realism to show the alienated consciousness of a host of characters on the other, but rather to make the aesthetics of alienation integral to the reality of experience*. In other words, this Perverse Brechtianism constitutes a form of realism in which alienation effects on the level of presentation form a Gordian knot with the alienated or perverse antics of the characters within the narrative. "Is she mad, or is it just a device?" becomes "She is mad and it is also a device." Perhaps Léger's washerwoman is deranged after all.

There is no shortage of examples, Trier's work included, as a basis upon which to construct the theory of a Perverse Brechtianism. Another obvious choice of filmmaker would be David Cronenberg. In J.G. Ballard's novel *Crash* (1973), Cronenberg chose to adapt the work of an author who was an avowed detractor of the bourgeois novel and whose literary aesthetics erred on the side of the filmic. Speaking of his preference for scientific vocabulary over the evocative turn of phrase, Ballard explains how one may describe a car crash "in a kind of Mickey Spillane language with powerful adverbs and adjectives. But another approach is to be cool and clinical and describe it in the way that a forensic scientist would describe what happens, or people working, say, at a road research laboratory describing what happens to crash test dummies. Now, you get an unnerving window onto a new kind of reality" (Ballard 1997).

Of course, the sentiment expressed here—that art should implement the techniques of science—is a conviction professed already by Brecht in his "Short Organum for the Theatre"

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(Brecht 1948, 2). What is new here is that the efficacy of Ballard's aesthetic method is not attributed to its didactic power, as a hermeneutic tool with which to expose the contradictions of society, rather, Ballardian distanciation is an aesthetic that operates directly on reality to create a *new* reality. This may smack of avant-gardism, but as Ballard himself acknowledges in the introduction to the 1974 edition of *Crash*, the mediated nature of contemporary reality had already converted the world into "an enormous novel. [...] The fiction is already there. The writer's task is to invent the reality" (Black 2002, 87). Gone is the pretension of the avant-gardist to steer the course of history by means of culture; instead a new experimentalism emerges which hacks into the unprecedented forms of pleasure to be had by an (almost invariably bourgeois) individual living in a society whose demand for imagery and spectacle runs at its own dizzying pace, irrespective of the unfolding of the real events which the media purport to communicate.

This realization points us in the direction of Thomas Elsaesser's essay, written in 1990, "From Anti-Illusionism to Hyper-Realism: Bertolt Brecht and Contemporary Film." Gerd Gemünden summarizes Elsaesser's critique of Brechtian realism, a system which analyses the world from without, referring to a master narrative of history that is "based on an understanding of the 'real' which our media culture has rendered obsolete" (Gemünden 1994, 64). As I have already suggested, in the paradigm of the hyperreal, the aesthetic distanciation from reality which permitted Brecht to grasp and critique it has now entered the marrow of reality itself: the more real than real of simulation. As Baudrillard puts it, our perversion lies in our desire to be seduced by the spectacle of the real event rather than to be empowered to change things as

they really are (Baudrillard 2008, 102), and this power of seduction crystallizes in the clinical, scientific imagery of Ballard and Cronenberg.

Films like *Crash* (David Cronenberg, 1996) or *Videodrome* (David Cronenberg, 1983) tend therefore to create a multiplicity of readings and divide critics and audiences: many viewers who expect a classical narrative with character development and coherent, motivated action will be able to read very little; those looking for a thesis or an unambiguous political commitment of some sort or other will also be disappointed. One film from recent years that has achieved this effect is Paul Verhoeven's *Elle* (2016). Verhoeven, like Cronenberg, and, to a lesser extent, Trier, is a filmmaker who has succeeded in working within the mainstream while producing films that are politically challenging. (It is worth bearing in mind that the ambition to marry popular entertainment with social critique is another hallmark of Brechtian aesthetics.) *Elle* has been described variously as a "black comedy" (Bradshaw 2017), a "provocative psychodrama" (Kermode 2017), a "very grim thriller" that at moments turns into "one of Luis Buñuel's barbed, surrealist comedies" (Macnab 2017), a "rape-revenge-ensemble-comedy-thriller-stalker-mashup" (O'Malley 2016), and a "psychological thriller, a strangely dry-eyed melodrama, a kinky sex farce and, perhaps most provocatively, a savage comedy of bourgeois manners" (Scott 2016). Patently, although journalists were largely impressed with the detachment and cleverness of the film, they struggled to define quite what it was they were watching. Praise for Isabelle Huppert's performance was almost unanimous, although, again, there appears to be some confusion here as well. Verhoeven himself described Huppert as a "pure Brechtian actor," yet also relates an incident in which

after shooting a scene, Huppert began to writhe around on the floor: "It was so clear that there was an exorcism" (Verhoeven 2016). Brechtian acting technique would ordinarily not only imply distanciation _vis-à-vis_ the audience but also requires the actor to _present_ her character rather than immerse herself in it.

In the case study that follows, I will use my theory of a Perverse Brechtianism to improve upon the genre "mash-up" description of _Elle_ and illustrate the coherence of Verhoeven's choices within an aesthetic framework. This framework consists of three parts: Brechtian distanciation, Brecht in the era of hyperreality, and a final element which I have not yet introduced but which resonates with the theme of repetition: the Sadean concept of apathy. Furthermore, to give a clearer sense of how the transition from a more straightforward Brechtian aesthetics to a Perverse Brechtianism might come about, I propose to undertake an experiment. I will read _Elle_ as a remake of Douglas Sirk's _All That Heaven Allows_ (1955), a film which thematizes many of the same concerns as _Elle_ and whose politics make an interesting counterpoint with those of Verhoeven's film.

Elle as an "Inverted" Melodrama

What is _All That Heaven Allows_ about? A widow who falls in love with her young, handsome gardener and as a consequence must reckon with the opprobrium of her circle of friends and acquaintances. What is _Elle_ about? A divorcee who is raped repeatedly by her young, handsome neighbor and declines to make this a concern for her circle of friends and acquaintances. The thematic similarities thus far may be encouraging, but their relationship on the level of aesthetics—with which this essay is concerned, after all— is more significant. Barthes, in his

essay "Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein," makes the point that "the subject is a false articulation" (Barthes 1974, 38), which is to say, the "what is it about?" question which the film reviewer is obliged to answer is the wrong one to ask. Rather, he argues, "The work only begins with the tableau, when the meaning is set into the gesture and the coordination of gestures" (1974, 38). In other words, we are dealing here with an aesthetics in which the whole is not greater than the sum of its parts: what counts are scenes, gestures, beats, that are pregnant with significance and ask to be cut out, considered and rearranged. This accounts for some of the generic confusion among critics: the fact that _Elle_ is so readily divisible into gestures could lead the audience to read the film as a thriller, composed of moments that refer to other moments and red herrings that refer nowhere. However, I would argue instead that the tableaux which make up the film are not intended to create a self-enclosed whole, rather, as Barthes claims of epic theatre, "all the burden of meaning and pleasure bears on each scene, not on the whole" (1974, 35). Bearing this in mind, Richard Brody's critique of _Elle_ should be flipped on its head: "_Elle_ exists not to be watched but to be described, summarized, pieced together, because in terms of its action, its characters, its situations, it doesn't exist except as a pile of tropes and clichés that have neither a material nor a symbolic identity but solely a string of simplistic causes and programmed responses" (Brody 2016). It is precisely in its divisibility that _Elle_, in the tradition of epic theatre, gains its political potency.

The tableau as the unit of dramatic action is, of course, pictorial and dependent on composition for its effects. Peter Brooks writes that "In the tableau more than in any other single device of dramaturgy, we grasp melodrama's primordial

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Fig. 1: Externalization as a technique of melodrama

Top: *All That Heaven Allows* (Douglas Sirk, 1955)
Bottom: *Elle* (Paul Verhoeven, 2016)

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concerns to make its signs clear, unambiguous, and impressive" (quoted in Doane 1991, 284). In melodrama, excessive clarity often takes the form of the externalization of feelings, the seepage of the protagonist's emotions into the *mise-en-scène*. This aspect of melodrama has been given perspicacious treatment by Thomas Elsaesser who observes how "commercial necessities, political censorship and the various [Hollywood] morality codes" (Elsaesser 1991, 77), on the one hand, and a generic shift away from the "linear externalisation of action" characteristic of other genres (1991, 81), on the other, lead to symbolic displacement onto the *mise-en-scène* in melodrama. The overt, signifying effects of melodrama are also reflected in a melodramatic acting style, which, again, is legible and transparent, in defiance of any attempts to read it according to psychological realism. Jane Wyman's performance as Cary in Sirk's film (Fig. 1, top), typifies this pictorial approach. Huppert (Fig. 1, bottom) and Verhoeven, meanwhile, conspire to create a radical inversion of the melodramatic tableau. Where Wyman presents the predicament of her character with perfect legibility, Huppert makes her Michèle resolutely illegible. We read that there is nothing to be read; or rather, the gesture appears in the degraded form of posture, whose effect is merely rhetorical. Furthermore, she is pictured on the other side of a pane of glass no less than five times over the course of the film. In *All That Heaven Allows*, the distanciation effects remain on the plane of representation: the image, a kind of diorama, helps the audience to read a social and psychological reality. As Doane remarks, "It is not the psychical dimension which is negated by the films but interiority which is eschewed" (Doane 1991, 285). By contrast, in *Elle*, distanciation is both an aesthetic device and a negation, or

at least, a distortion, of the psychical dimension of the characters. The image obstructs, or interferes with, reality. As a further example, consider Thomas Schatz' description of Wyman's co-star: "Rock Hudson is ultimately nothing more than an evocative cardboard cut-out in Sirk's films" (Schatz 1991, 159). In *Elle*, on the other hand, Laurent Lafitte's equally Madame Tussauds-esque performance as the laconic rapist-neighbor, Patrick, gives us an image turned reality; distanciation incarnate; a pervert.

Films whose aesthetics adhere to a Brechtianism of Perversion are highly conscious of the media and their own status as media objects. In the order of transgression, this tendency would rank highly if we were to follow Severo Sarduy's argument that bourgeois society is, to a pathological degree, inured to self-reflective thought. Thinking of Georges Bataille, Sarduy claims that eroticism and death are assimilated by the bourgeoisie with relative ease, unlike Bataille's third transgression, which is thought itself. "The one thing the bourgeoisie will not tolerate, what really drives it crazy, is the idea that thought can think about thought" (Sarduy 1989, 13). Pier Paolo Pasolini, similarly, writes that "explicit metalinguistic awareness" is the primary hallmark of "unpopular cinema," and those directors who demonstrate such an attitude in their work are committing "an infraction of self-preservation, [...] the exhibition of an autolesionistic act" (Pasolini 1988, 268). According to Pasolini's theory, the spectator derives enjoyment from vicariously experiencing the freedom of the masochistic filmmaker, who by making a film about film "chooses death" (1988, 267). And so, again, this notion follows very closely Trilling's definition of the authentic work of art as that which "exists wholly by the laws of its own being, which include the right to embody painful, ignoble, or socially

inacceptable subject matters" (Trilling 1972, 99–100). But although _Elle_ is a film about film and media, transgression is rather too "hot" a passion to name as the film's overall tenor, relative to the "coolness" denoted by Baudrillard's concept of ecstasy. Rather, we might argue that the tableaux of _Elle_, which, to paraphrase Baudrillard, function in their blankness as a chain of appearances that do not make sense but rather obey a hidden rule (Baudrillard 2007, 90), create the effect of fascination. A "cold form of ecstasy" (Baudrillard 1993, 77). For Baudrillard, fascination is a condition produced by the media, which "is a place where meaning disappears, where significance disappears, the message, the referent disappear. It is a way of making things circulate so quickly that they are made to disappear" (1993, 85).

The means by which things "appear" in _Elle_ often are Brechtian alienation effects; pointed instances of presentation that disrupt the diegesis. However, the fact that they are without meaning, arising in fatal coincidences according to a rule that by its hiddenness succeeds in seducing us, simultaneously spells their "disappearance" (i.e. their manifestation not as real but as realer than real: hyperreal). Alienation effects in the film are at times extra-diegetic, yet they also appear within the diegesis. For instance, the film begins with a Brechtian "separation of the elements": we hear the rape but do not see it. Later, the initial rape is replayed—at which juncture the audience cannot be sure whether it takes place in flashback or later in the narrative sequence—and this decision by Verhoeven is mirrored within the story itself when Michèle asks for a gesture in a game sequence (an orc graphically murdering a woman) to be replayed on the big screen for closer analysis. Furthermore, the techniques of film and game media production

are shown to have been adopted by the wider media in general. The documentary about her father (which, in another separation of the elements, she watches with the sound muted) is repeated on television to coincide with his parole hearing. Also, a short exchange in which a group of men are asked whether a game sequence makes them feel afraid or angry—once again, in the interests of creating and honing a desired effect—foreshadows an unsolicited phone call Michèle receives from a journalist, who gives her a list of options of how she might feel in the wake of her father's suicide. In these examples, alienation techniques do not facilitate critical distance, as in Brechtian realism, by signaling how gestures are produced by the dialectical relationship of contingent social facts that are never simply natural. Rather, occurring in both the story and the film's own mode of representation, they demonstrate our complicity in the media's "fascinating imagination of a universe entirely ruled by a divine or diabolical chain of _willed_ coincidences" (Baudrillard 2008, 197). In other words, the alienation effect is a media effect, whose pervasive presentation of pointed, overdetermined details and gestures creates in the individual a perverse sense of fatality.

How does this compare with the representation of the media in _All That Heaven Allows_? Cary resists entreaties from all sides that she should purchase a television; ultimately, her son buys her one as a Christmas present. In another revealing inversion, in _Elle_, Michèle's son asks her to buy him a television set instead of an oven as a housewarming gift, a request to which we know she accedes, as we see him watching a boxing match later in the film. The purchase of the television is of such trifling importance here that it does not occur on-screen (indeed, the tacit rather than explicit exposition of

Fig. 2: The Sadean concept of nature

Top: *All That Heaven Allows* (Douglas Sirk, 1955)
Bottom: *Elle* (Paul Verhoeven, 2016)

the consequences of a prior scene is typical of the tableau technique). This is to be contrasted with Cary's acquisition of a television, the great significance of which is revealed by Sirk's juxtaposition of two tableaux: on the one hand there is the television, symbol of bourgeois conformism according to which her sexuality must be suppressed, trapping her in the front room, reflected in the screen; on the other is the picture window which Ron (Rock Hudson) installs in the old mill. The window looks out onto nature, taking in a vista in which, in Ron's words, "the sun comes up over the pond." To frame this in the terminology of Sartre or Trilling, in _All That Heaven Allows_, nature is equated with authenticity whereas the television is synonymous with inauthenticity. Such is the fantastical, innate purity of Ron's commitment that he is said to live Thoreau's _Walden_, without ever having read it. Moreover, animals (such as the pigeon in Fig. 2, top) are the benevolent witnesses to love's fulfilment at key moments in the film.

That the legibility of Sirk's tableaux have an ironic eloquence—as has been observed by filmmakers like Fassbinder and Haynes (Goldberg 2016, 35)—should not detract from the fact that the marriage of authenticity and nature still features within the diegetic world occupied by Ron and Cary as a plausible object of affective attachment. Nature in _Elle_, by contrast, does not offer its characters the sanctuary of an unalienated reality. In much the same way that the opposition of authenticity and inauthenticity is replaced by Baudrillard with the raising of a trait to its superlative power "as if it had absorbed all the energy of its opposite" (Baudrillard 2008, 27), the distinction between the natural and the unnatural ceases to operate in _Elle_. As opposed to Sirk's benign beasts, Michèle's cat is the indifferent witness to her owner's rape (Fig. 2, bottom), and it would not be implausible to read

the scene in which this domesticated animal kills a wild garden bird as an allegory for Baudrillard's dictum that the image has murdered the real. The country club in _All That Heaven Allows_ indicates a similar prospect, but Sirk's film ultimately steps back from the precipice. Whereas Cary's enclosure within the television set (Fig. 3, top) leaves the real intact, merely outside, when Michèle sees herself as a child in the documentary, "The Accursed Will Rise" (Fig. 3, bottom), a different sort of imprisonment is played out. As Elsaesser writes, "any terrain outside visual discourses becomes non-existent, because non-representable" (Elsaesser 1990, 180). In other words, the real in this paradigm—or, to be precise, the more real than real—consists of that which passes through the media. The image of the child possesses the persuasive power of reality, even an irresistible kind of determinism, in spite of the resistance offered by the adult Michèle. Moreover, is it not this image which makes the behavior of Michèle, the fictional character, credible? Is this not the reason why we, the audience, do not reject as implausible the subsequent actions written for her by the scriptwriter? Michèle's mother takes recourse to precisely the same means in order to persuade her that her father is not the monster whom the media make him out to be, but a man, her father, after all, whom she personally knows. To achieve this, she asks Michèle to look at a photo of him on her mobile phone, which, with some reluctance, she does, but only in order to prove that she has no superstitious belief in the power of her father's image. This is compelling evidence for the argument which Elsaesser makes on Fritz Lang's behalf; namely, that images are a reality in themselves, and that "the search for truth can only be the play of the different _mises-en-scène_ of falsehood" (1990, 184).
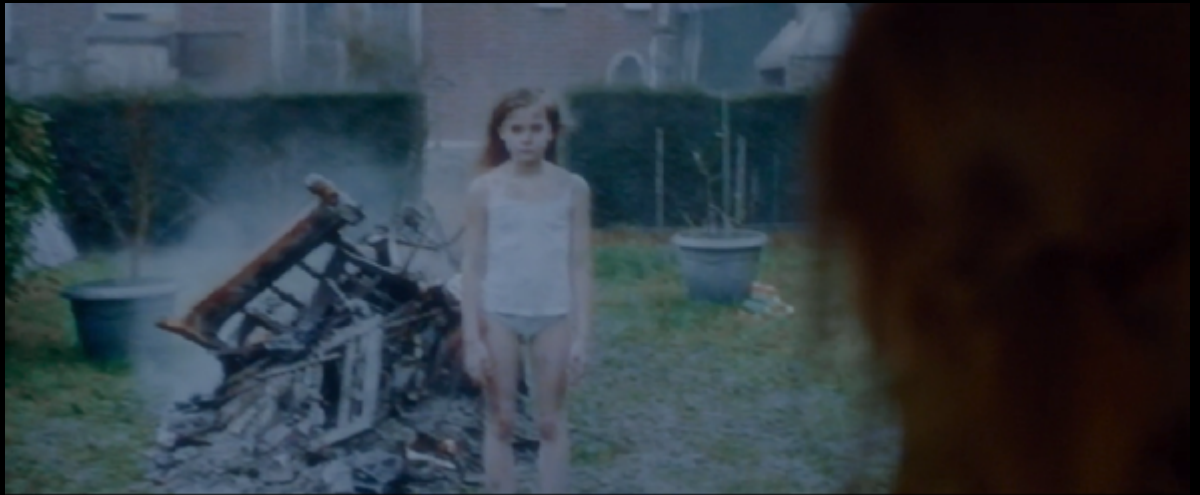
Fig. 3: Trapped in the Television

Top: *All That Heaven Allows* (Douglas Sirk, 1955)
Bottom: *Elle* (Paul Verhoeven, 2016)

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Sadean Strategies

What, then, is the picture painted by *Elle*? What does she look like? In the first instance, Elsaesser's description of the image in Brecht—"Images, it would seem, are always in excess of the narratives they serve" (1990, 182)—has been taken to such an extreme that the protagonist, and the audience, are left profoundly suspicious of the truthfulness of the world that appears before them. Michèle cannot rid herself of the suspicion that her mother has faked an aneurysm, even after she has had a CT scan interpreted for her by a doctor. Whereas the tableau in Brechtian aesthetics had been a dialectical freeze-frame, an image of a contradiction that requires interpretation, in *Elle*, the tableau is hyperreal, perhaps even hallucinatory. The deer that miraculously appears at the picture window at the conclusion of *All That Heaven Allows* is imbued in *Elle* with the more sinister overtones of Baudrillardian "appearance": here it becomes a computer-generated, non-playable game character that runs out in front of Michèle's car (Fig. 4). And just as this image precipitates a car crash, media of communication are shown at every turn to endanger and menace Michèle.

This being so, what are the strategies offered by *Elle* in reply? If it is a film, a series of tableaux at that, which does not so much teach us to be suspicious of images as it depicts suspicion as a part of life, then it makes commonplace that most Sadean of dispositions: suspicion. In fact, insofar as my use of Baudrillard has been guided by his statements on the "cold" ecstasy of fatality and gameplay, it would appear that the Sadean elements of the philosopher's thought are those which are most pertinent to any discussion of the strategies of the hyperreal. Indeed, Baudrillard's prose frequently assumes a Sadean profile, as exemplified by the gnomic observation in *Cool Memories* that only a second-rate libertine commits an obscene act at irregular intervals; "the true obsessional or libertine has to accomplish them at a set hour" (Baudrillard 1990, 32–33). The apparent irony of a "fatal strategy" is not lost on Baudrillard, who argues that fatality does not disqualify strategy. In his understanding, the object "mocks the laws we attach to it" (Baudrillard 2008, 227), imposing its own *rules* which are both unknown to the player and can change without notice, thus initiating a game that can carry her to an unanticipatedly extreme scenario. As Baudrillard writes, "All strategy in the sphere of the game is aimed at provoking a de-escalation of rational causes and an inverse escalation of magical linkage" (2008, 188). Such a definition of strategy certainly rings true in the case of Michèle, who coolly plays along as a fatal sequence of events unfolds according to a set of rules that remain obscure.

According to Baudrillard, seduction is the principle whereby random occurrences are interpreted as instances of fatal election, and it is therefore not surprising—even if it remains shocking—that Michèle, a woman who is transfixed by the image of her childhood trauma, is seduced by a pervert. In this perverse relationship, affect and laws are substituted by the gameplay of seduction, which "is based [...] on the pact, the challenge and the alliance, which are not universal and natural forms, but artificial and initiatory ones. It is therefore frankly perverse" (2008, 130). We might observe that affect, or love, is also absent in the bourgeois couplings that occur within Michèle's circle of friends. Accordingly, her "pact" with Patrick could be read as a Baudrillardian escalation of these games of seduction to their "Nth power."

As I have argued in this essay, *Elle* is a series of tableaux which, like the CT scan, seem to require interpretation. However, by bothering to interpret an
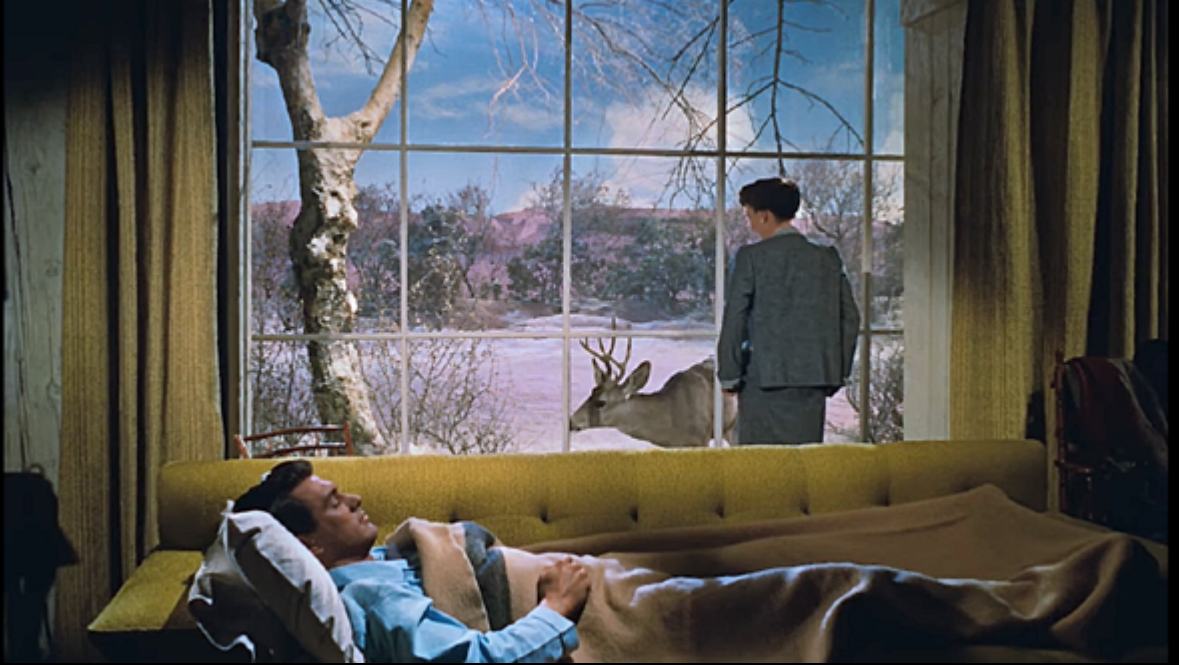
Fig. 4: A real deer versus a hyperreal deer

Top: *All That Heaven Allows* (Douglas Sirk, 1955)
Bottom*: Elle* (Paul Verhoeven, 2016)

image, one presumes it refers to reality, which is a disingenuous presumption in a culture of suspicion where punditry proliferates around images of scenes which themselves could not have existed were it not for the fact that they were to be made into images. Focalized by Michèle, the film proposes that the rapist is also the source of the tableau-like structure of her reality. On the one hand, then, Michèle remains committed to pursuing the author of the doctored video circulating the office, who is a social peer, just as Patrick is just another bourgeois when she chastises him during the car ride home from a party. On the other hand, by an imaginative leap which she alone makes, the rapist is also a proxy for the imaginary centre of image production which characterizes the film's tableau style and the quality of her experiences. The debaucheries within her regular social circle (consisting of the friends who meet in an early restaurant scene) are facilitated by the eclipse of any real sphere of reference, but, crucially, they are also sustained by the disavowal of the fantasy that Patrick represents: an embodiment of the non-human source of imagery that menaces her sense of reality. The police, to whom her friends encourage her to turn on hearing news of the rape, may be equipped to arrest a cybercriminal or a sex offender, but Michèle knows to equip herself with the tools of fantasy—an axe that wouldn't be out of place in the game designed by her studio—for a bodily encounter with a non-human: a pervert. In other words, her dalliance with her best friend's husband is perverse, a cynical flirtation, but the game she plays with Patrick is, to adapt Baudrillard's terminology, more perverse than perverse. Through this hyperbolic maneuver—by discounting affect and the law to play an arbitrary game with her assailant—Michèle partially succeeds in avenging herself upon her bourgeois peers, who are made to appear uninitiated, inauthentic.

Such a technique is also consistent with Paul Verhoeven's record of making films, including *Robocop* (1987) and *Showgirls* (1995), whose powers of satire lie in their amplification of mainstream tendencies without thereby pitching the material into the realm of parody.

Finally, then, the solution to Michèle's predicament is a Sadean one. By instigating, to some degree, the third rape of the film, she offers a demonstration of Sade's practice of apathy, which "consists in doing immediately in cold blood the same thing that, done in frenzy, was able to give us remorse" (Klossowski 1991, 97). In Pierre Klossowski's account of apathy, "As soon as our impulses intimidate us by creating fear or remorse through the *images* of actions to be undertaken or of actions committed, we must substitute acts [...] for *images* of acts" (1991, 95, my italics). Repetition, that Brechtian distanciation effect, mutates in the pause-rewind-replay media landscape of *Elle*, into a perverse distanciation, whereby the only means of beating the system is to pile crime upon crime in order to annihilate the conscience. Furthermore, as neither nature, nor reality, appear to be recoverable, Rock Hudson (or rather, his cardboard cut-out substitute, Laurent Lafitte) now lives by a bible written by Sade rather than Thoreau— one in which nature is governed by the law of perpetual motion: "As soon as a body appears to have lost motion by the passage from the state of life to what is improperly called death, it tends, from that very moment, toward dissolution; yet dissolution is a very great state of motion" (1991, 81).

In a jarring literalization of this principle, Michèle deposits the bird killed by her cat in the recycling bin. In Sade, bodies race to their dissolution via the law of perpetual motion, and organic matter is thereby rendered indistinct from inorganic matter; in Baudrillard, the media convert the real

into imagery at such a pace that the distinction between the two breaks down. Following these pragmatic thinkers, for whom philosophy is designed to offer us strategies and techniques rather than descriptions that correspond to reality, we could conclude that the most appropriate response to a hyperreal culture—certainly the one offered by filmmakers such as Verhoeven and Cronenberg—is to enjoy our "disappearance": to play games. A Perverse Brechtianism twists the German playwright's conviction that the theatre should first and foremost prioritize pleasure, deploying distanciation techniques to offer new, perverse forms of pleasure.

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