

In my End is my Beginning
Dialectical Images in Times of Crisis
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Navigating an Eco-Material Apocalypse with *TITANE* (France/Belgium 2021)

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Abstract Embedded in petromodernity and the automotive industry, our history is permeated by fossil and metallic materialities. Chemical traces cling to the corpse, the living and the not yet born, indexing the interconnectedness between them, between the earthly and the mechanical. With the figure of the pregnant posthuman (Rodante van der Waal), the paradigm of placenta politics (Rosi Braidotti), and the concept of systemic crisis (Lauren Berlant), the film *TITANE* (Julia Ducournau) shows the ecological, technological, and social world in an apocalyptic dance of pulsating endurance.

Keywords *TITANE*. Petromodernity. Pregnant posthuman. Placenta politics. Systemic crisis.

Morbid vocals and synthesizer elements echo through the dark hall where Alexia leads us past illuminated cars, exposed engines and hostesses draped over them. Our gaze glides along the flame pattern depicted on the polished body of a Cadillac. The camera rises from the radiator and Alexia, lying on her back on the hood, spreads her legs in neon yellow mesh tights. As if the vehicle had been set on fire and she were part of the blaze, the athletic young woman dances to the song “Doing it to Death” from the album *Ash & Ice* by The Kills (2016):

Baby save it, we're wasted
I know we gotta slow it down
But when the waves come you face them



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And you know we can't stop it now
Heads up we're in a dead club
Put your hands up and do your dipsy and dropsy
And line up, we're hanging up
We're double sixing it, night after night
Doing it to Death
Doing it to Death

With pulsating endurance, Agathe Rousselle as Alexia swirls and twists the visual regimes in the hall and on the screen. Focusing on the audience next to and behind the lens of the camera, she repositions herself “from the object being gazed at to the subject acting” and “controls her own narrative”, as director and screenwriter of *TITANE* (2021, France: Diaphana Distribution; Belgium: O'Brother Distribution) Julia Doucurnau (2021) explains in an interview.

As a child, Alexia mimics the sounds of the combustion engine in order to behave and become similar. By imitating and resembling the vibrating machine, the girl merges with the car.¹ The noises are accompanied by the band 16 Horsepower with their song “Wayfaring Stranger” from the album *Secret South* (2000) issued by the Peugeot's sound system. To drown out her humming, her father turns up the music. Immediately, Alexia changes her means of expression, translating and amplifying the car's jerking on the road by kicking her feet against the backrest of the driver's seat. Her father admonishes her with a repeated “Arrête!”. After a while, she indeed not only stops her kicking, but also causes the whole vehicle to stop. She unbuckles her seatbelt and turns around. “I'm only goin' over home” (16 Horsepower 2000). Trying to grab his daughter, the driver loses control of the car. As if in a mechanical and metaphorical translation of her turning away, the steering wheel releases from his hand and causes an abrupt turn. The vehicle comes to a halt facing backwards on the road after colliding violently with a white concrete block beside it.

From the very beginning, history seems to race towards the end like an automobile. But this movement is, according to Hannah Arendt ([1958] 1998, 246), more than an automatic process determining the course of life: There is hope in stopping and restarting. At full speed an accident occurs. On the threshold of survival, something remains, something is lost – and something is added.² The im-

¹ On the mimetic faculty of childhood see Benjamin ([1933] 1977) or Lyotard, according to whom infancy “knows something about *as if*” and “the real openness to stories” ([1991] 2023, 44).

² Raising the question of responsibility and asking what is lost or forgotten and what remains or is passed on in survival, Lyotard ([1991] 2023) refers to Arendt's notion of natality and the possibility of political action to describe the transformative power of acting *as if* life has a purpose whereby birth becomes something more than just the postponement of death.

pact leaves a mark on the car's windshield and on the child's skull. A titanium plate is implanted in her head. After being discharged from hospital, the seven-year-old nestles her face against the window of the repaired car in an embracing gesture of reunion. A shot from the inside shows the stapled skin above her ear, a mark by which we recognize the young woman years later. Then, against an black screen, glowing cyan X-ray images of little skulls hover within the form of the letters of the title: "TITANE". As the bodily implant and the films' title graphic, "TITANE" creates a visual connection between the flattened profile of the shorn child at the parking lot and the side view of the adult at the entrance to the car show, the girl and the woman, the actresses Adèle Guigue and Agathe Rousselle.

At an airport terminal, stages of life and representations of identities are framed and united on an illuminated panel. One side of the public LED display shows an appeal for witnesses. A search is being conducted for Adrien Legrand, who disappeared at the age of seven. The photograph of the boy morphs into a digitally aged portrait of a seventeen-year-old, with the computer simulation substituting the ten years that have passed. The calculated transposition of Adrien's face corresponds to the cinematic shift in Alexia's story. In addition to this analogy of temporal bridging, the double-sided panel also holds a sort of spatial connection. For on the one side of the LED frame there is the morphing portrait of Adrien and on the other side or back-to-back, so to speak, there is a sketch of the adolescent Alexia who is the subject of a search warrant. Because she is classified as dangerous, in the instructive text below the image people are warned of intervening themselves if they come across her. On the run from the police Alexia, however, intervenes immediately when she recognizes herself in the identikit picture and a moment later mentally projects herself into the missing boy. Aiming to impersonate Adrien, a drastic modification of her body once again ensures her survival. Now, to escape the legal consequences of the murders she committed and to leave the phantom image behind her, she appropriates the computer-simulated image of the lost person, translating it into a physical simulation based on her own body. In pretending to be the reappeared and meanwhile adolescent man, she first and foremost must take control of her female, pregnant body.

The scenario of giving birth to parts of a car engine has been a recurring nightmare for Doucurnau (2022), who developed the film's narrative backwards from this idea for the final scene, embedded in the continuum between dead metal and new life. After having sex with a car, a hard and polished metallic ball grows in Alexia's belly and motor oil leaks from her breasts and vagina, before she ultimately gives birth to a child with a metallic, shimmering spine. Her T-shirt, featuring the image of a robot and the words 'WOMAN INSIDE', is a premonition of herself as a pregnant posthuman and the

new being inside of her, which only little later is clearly announced by the two vertical lines in the window of a pregnancy test.

The cross of a pharmacy glows above her head, wrapped in a black hoodie, as she walks along the corridors of the airport, trying to leave her former appearance behind. A pack of bandages and clanking instruments fall into the sink of a public bathroom marked with a wheelchair. The sound of the scissors cutting her hair is followed by the friction of the razor on her lathered brows, the unrolling and tightening of the bandages on her breasts and belly, and the moaning and gagging as her organs are squeezed. In rapid cuts, we follow this plastic metamorphosis, the results of which she inspects in the mirror. Then she feels her face with her fingers, clenches them into a fist and strikes herself. The bones and cartilage of her hand and face collide without consequence. She then examines the white cuboid washbasin and, after a few tests, hurls her nose against it. The collision causes the intended swelling. The 'Original Pirate Material', which labels Alexia's body in tattooed lettering under the skin and quotes an album title by The Streets, points to the physical nature of the simulation, its embedding in cultural contexts, and its creative potential to undermine the hierarchical dualism between original and copy, archetype and reproduction.³

After identifying Alexia as his missing son at the police station, fire captain Vincent, played by Vincent Lindon, takes her home. There she removes her bandages and goes to lie down in Adrien's bed. The bedroom appears to be unchanged since Adrien disappeared ten years ago. A poster on the wall depicts the cover of the Queen record *News of the World*, showing a giant robot playing with humans. Frank Kelly Freas had adapted one of his paintings replacing the dead body in the robot's hand with the four band members.⁴ To prevent the father from noticing that his son has been replaced, the substitute child shrouds her body with the blanket and tells him to turn away. Keeping her eyes fixed on him, like the metallic robot with the spherical belly, Alexia hastily gets out of her clothes, which Vincent wants to wash and replace with a firefighter's uniform.

To what degree Vincent at this point or whether he at all believes in the reappearance of his son is kept open in his behavior and statements. But those around him do not hide their vehement rejection of Alexia or at least their skepticism regarding her identity and her

³ According to Deleuze (1983, 53) in his overthrow of Platonism the simulacrum "contains a positive power which negates *both original and copy* [...]. The nonhierarchical work [of the simulacrum] is a condensation of coexistence, a simultaneity of events".

⁴ Queen (1977). *News of the World*. UK: EMI Records; USA: Elektra Records. See, for example, <https://thepressmusicreviews.wordpress.com/2022/04/07/queen-news-of-the-world-1977/>. The original version of Freas's painting was also printed to illustrate "The Gulf Between" by Godwin (1953). See Rowe 2022, 132-3.

role. In any case, as the single parent of an adolescent child, Vincent cares for Alexia as if she were Adrien, whose parents have obviously separated and whose mother has moved out. In the parents' former shared bedroom, Alexia finds a photograph of Adrien on his father's shoulders and one that indexes his presence by depicting his heavily pregnant mother. She tries on a yellow dress and looks at the contours of her own body in the mirror. When Vincent comes home, she hides in the closet, but he finds her and shows her pictures of Adrien as a young boy wearing the very same dress. "They can't tell me you're not my son", Vincent says. During a short visit Adrien's mother unexpectedly walks into the heavily pregnant Alexia and expresses a different concept of care:

Whatever your twisted reasons for exploiting his fucking folly, I don't care, just take care of him. Look at me. You take care of him. He needs someone, you or another.

Seeking a connection with Adrien, Vincent approaches Alexia in soft twists and turns. She reciprocates those movements on the dance floor at a party with the other firefighters.

And this is where we were
When I showed you the dark
Inside of me, in spite of me
On a bench in the park
And this is where we are
In your bed, in my arms
Outside of me, in spite of me
I showed you the dark
And you said to me
You know
What you know is better, is brighter
(Future Islands, "Light House", *Singles*, 2014)

Alexia takes Vincent's hands and dances with him. Vincent takes Alexia horizontally on his shoulders and spins with her to "Light House" by Future Islands. Immersed in warm floods of light, the two of them find the same pulse in another scene. When responding to a call Vincent intubates a drugged man lying in his vomit, the man's mother faints next to Alexia, who then is tasked with resuscitating the woman by performing chest compressions and mouth-to-mouth. After a quick briefing, Vincent sets the pace. While he squeezes the son's resuscitation bag at regular intervals, Alexia presses on the mother's chest.

Follow me. Press as hard as you can, okay? Da, dadada, dadada
Macarena
Da, dadada, dadada, cosa buena
Da dadada dadada Macarena, oh Macarena! Blow or she dies!
Blow!
Go again: Da dadada dadada Macarena
Da dadada dadada cosa buena
Da dadada dadada Macarena, oh Macarena! Blow!
Go again: Da dadada dadada Macarena
Da dadada dadada cosa buena, da dadada dadada Macarena.
He got her!
(Monge; Perigones, "Macarena", performed by Vincent Lindon,
1993)

Vincent also supports Alexia with the frequency and duration of her contractions when she goes into labour. "My name is Alexia", she replies firmly when he addresses her as "Adrien", encouraging her to push and holding her body with all his strength. But when the child is born, Alexia's strength deserts her. His attempt to revive her fails, accompanied by the overwhelming opening chorus "*Kommt ihr Töchter, helft mir klagen*" from Johann Sebastian Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* (1727, BWV 244, no. 1, chorus I/II). While the mother dies in the glistening black puddle of liquid discharged from her mouth, her vagina, and her abdomen, the oil-smeared infant survives.

[It] initiates, in the death of what was there, the miracle of what is not yet there, of what is not yet identified. (Lyotard [1991] 2023, 47)

Vincent cuts the umbilical cord and takes the newborn in his arms. The petrochemical traces cling to the corpse, the baby, and Vincent's hands as an index of the interconnectedness between them, between the earthly and the mechanical. This final scene reverses the opening. The close tracking shots of the crashed vehicle's propulsion system were accompanied by 16 Horsepower, as well as mechanical blasts of air and a tinny dripping sound. The parts of the machine had shone a deep red, drenched in dripping blood. Alexia had survived the accident, but the scar ripped open while giving birth, as does the abdominal wall over the metal bulge of her oil-pumped and leaking body. Embedded in petromodernity and the automotive industry, the course of life is permeated by fossil and metallic materialities.⁵ The control over the narrative and the physical transformation make these limits even more palpable. Circumventing the legal

⁵ On petromodernity and the automotive industry in relation to *TITANE*, see Engemann 2021.

consequences does not mean to escape the biological, ecological, technological, and social world which one is part of.

When the consequences of the automobile entanglements tear Alexia apart from within, nothing can help her. But before applying the much-used bandage one last time, she looks down at her belly, and responds to the movements inside her with a caress and apologizes. Then she mingles with the crowd of her pogo-dancing colleagues in the festively decorated fire station, who welcome her into their midst, and then lift her onto the ladder of a fire engine. In the spotlight, she looks down at the muscular men, who expectantly chant “A-drien, A-drien, A-drien”. The soft and slow vocals of Williams’ “Wayfaring Stranger” performed by Lisa Abbott for the *Original Motion Picture Soundtrack* represent a departure from the fast and harsh music from the audio system of the car she resembled as a child:

I’m goin’ there to see my father
Said he’d meet me when I come
I’m only goin’ over Jordan
I’m only goin’ over home
I know dark clouds gonna gather ‘round me
I know my way’ll be rough and steep
Yet beautiful fields lie just before me

Alexia’s dance echoes the movements that transformed her from an object being stared at into a controlling subject. Her body wrapped in her bandages and concealed by the firefighter’s uniform given to her by Vincent, she fluidly and performatively moves between identities. She takes new directions, embedded, enclosed, and bound to her surroundings. Relationships and protective belts are loosened, and new ones are forged. Strapped into her father’s Peugeot as a child, she unfastened the black three-point buckle of the seat belt.⁶ During sexual intercourse with a Cadillac, she bound her arms with its red straps. In white bandages she protects herself against identification and slips into another life covering the new one that is emerging. At the end, she removes the stretched and oil-stained bandages. Like a simulacrum that breaks its chains to claim its rights alongside the archetypes and images.⁷ Alexia writhes as a dancer in the fire and as a dancing fireman, she somersaults as a mimetic human-machine and

⁶ The three-point seat belt serves the paradigm of ‘passive safety’, in that it does not prevent accidents, but is intended to make them survivable”. In traffic accidents, people and machines collide as does responsibility and failure, whereby external interests determine the allocation and the connection between the human and the machine. (Beckman 2010, 118 and 126).

⁷ Having been repressed and “chained in the depth” (Deleuze 1983, 48) simulacra can “ris[e] to the surface” (48) and raise up “to assert their rights over icons or copies” (52).

original pirate material and flits between the prodigal son and the mother-to-be. Creating space and making room for the new Alexia as a pregnant posthuman, an entity which “intuitively and intimately understands change and becoming”, captures “the movements of matter and the borders of life within herself” (Van der Waal 2018, 368).

She is in a singular plural state and in intimate experience with the new, the relational, plurality, [...] and engages [...] with the world-to-come in the depths of [her] being, in the darkness of [her] flesh. (368-70)

Uniting “critical reflection and [...] radical imagination” (369), she

capture[s] the movement of new materialism right inside of [her]: the affectionate, intimate relation with matter, with objects that determine who [she] become[s], maybe even more than [she] is able to determine their becomings, [she] live[s] inside their history as they live inside of [her]. (370)

Rodante van der Waal’s description of the pregnant posthuman shifts the focus to an intimate “embodied and embedded” (369) relationship with the wayfaring stranger, unknown within the immanently transgressed self. Relying on the paradigm of placenta politics as “a model of generative relationality” suggested by Rosi Braidotti (2018, 316), posthuman subjectivity is split

from within, in a non-dialectic process of internal differentiations that predicates the primacy of the ‘other within’. (315)

Braidotti (2006, 9) describes the placenta as an assemblage and figuration that conceptualizes the subject as hybrid, in transit and fluid, and she emphasizes the cooperative and co-creative forces of “affirmative relationality and multiple becomings” (2018, 317).

The jointly created narrative between Alexia, her child, and Vincent unfolds with reciprocal impulses and gliding perspectives after being announced with two lines in the window of a pregnancy test and as a computer-generated, two-dimensional sketch on a double-sided LED screen. The two faces on the information panel correspond to the two vertical lines of the pregnancy test, each of which interrupts the course of the story like a pause sign, containing the past and the now, and pointing to the new as “possible radical alteration [...] of what is not yet identified” (Lyotard [1991] 2023, 47).⁸ “I am here. I’m here”,

⁸ “[M]y birth is always only recounted by others, and my death told to me in the stories of the death of others, my stories and others’ stories. The relationship with others

Vincent whispers echoingly, holding the oily creature skin-to-skin, while the shimmering metallic spine and head hold it from within.

Throughout the film the entanglement of dead metal and new life, the scenario of birth and death, the collisions of human and machine with the concrete and ceramic cubes, or the two lines in the lateral flow test flash up like dialectical images of crisis. But all those apparent clashes are embedded in the continuum of biological, cultural, ecological, and technological worlds as well as in “the ordinary as a zone of convergence of many histories” and “stories about navigating what’s overwhelming”, to quote Lauren Berlant (2011, 10). Given that “environmental, political, and social brittleness” (11) have increased and asymmetrical axes of othering and discrimination have intensified the “structural contingency” (11) of existential inequality, it seems even more necessary to shift away from the historical and personal narrative of an exceptional form of shock as a specific rupture. In this sense, a temporally and spatially expanded concept offers Berlant in terming the “systemic crisis or ‘crisis ordinariness’”, where “[c]atastrophic forces [...] become events within history as it is lived” (10).

Like the back of a light box, a white rectangle with the title functions as a closing bracket to what was opened at the beginning of the film with the hovering skulls glowing cyan against a black background. Now, fetuses float on the surface of the capital letters as petrol-coloured sonograms. “TITANE” refers to the transitional generation of gods in Greek mythology, whose name derives from the verb *titaino* ‘to stretch’, and to the transition element in the periodic table named after them. Against the background of our relational posthuman subjectivity in a “nature-culture continuum” (Braidotti 2018, 318), and pregnancy as “an act and a state” (Van der Waal 2018, 369) of constant change, *TITANE* stretches the dialectical images into the bodily performances of the cinematic continuity. A lateral flow assaying intended to detect the catastrophic circumstances that are swimming into and within the body, where the floating “dance with unfolding matter takes place” (370) between the title fade-ins, making visible the transformative path into the future, where ecological, technological, and social worlds require new courses.

is, therefore, essential to this relation with the nothingness of its being that is reported to me (whence I come and where I am going), and also essential to the presence of the absence of which the relationship with *others* (this presence of absence) comes *back* to me. Essential, too, is the *fabula* to which the pulsation of beginning and end lends rhythm” (Lyotard [1991] 2023, 43).

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