‘Misfortune’s Image’: the Cinematic Representation of Trauma in Robert Bresson’s *Mouchette* (1967)

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[N]othing is so rare as to see misfortune fairly portrayed; the tendency is either to treat the unfortunate person as though catastrophe were his natural vocation, or to ignore the effects of misfortune on the soul, to assume, that is, that the soul can suffer and remain unmarked by it, can fail, in fact, to be recast in misfortune’s image

- Simone Weil (1986, 213)

**Misfortune’s Image**

The experience of trauma is not just *reflected* by, but *constituted* in culture: in the specific medium considered here, in cinema. To represent a trauma cinematically is a means to reflect it, yes; but it is also a means of staging an essentially *aesthetic* encounter. Such an encounter constitutes both an *epistemological* and *ethical* act. In bearing witness to trauma’s representation – ‘misfortune’s image’ in Simone Weil’s felicitous phrase of our title (1986, 213; also Sontag 1987, 49 – 51) – we are driven towards the limit of what it is possible to ‘know’, what it is possible to ‘represent’, and what it is necessary to ‘do’ with unspeakable pain (cf. Rancière 2007, 109 – 138).

The *representation of trauma* has been one of the cinema’s central motifs almost since its inception, whether these representations have concerned the traumas of war (*Ivan’s Childhood* [Andrei Tarkovsky, 1962]), genocide (*Sophie’s Choice* [Alan J. Pakula, 1982]), sexual violence (*The Accused* [Jonathan Kaplan, 1988]), torture (*Death and the Maiden* [Roman Polanski, 1994]), homophobia (*The Hours* [Stephen Daldry, 2002]), or many, many others. The list of films that could be cited is almost as long as the manifestations of trauma itself. But with specific regard to the experience of trauma and its cinematic representation we would like in this article to pose the following questions: to what extent do such cinematic representations ‘fairly portray’ what Simone Weil called ‘misfortune’s image’ (1986, 213): the experience of trauma itself? Or, on the contrary, to what extent do they – through stereotypical cultural representations – *reproduce* the very forms of *structural power* which may, in the first place, be trauma’s generative cause?³ And, finally, to what extent – to deploy a

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³ On such representations, see Hall (1997).
late Foucauldian term – is it possible to problematize, through the medium of cinema itself, these stereotypical representations?

This article addresses such questions of representation by means of a cinematic encounter: specifically, via the representation of childhood trauma in the French director Robert Bresson’s 1967 film Mouchette. The experience of trauma lies at the heart of this film, constituting an epistemological and ethical prism through which reality is felt and perceived. For Bresson, the experience of trauma structures the perception of subject and world in a cinematic encounter: an encounter constituted as much by the film’s form as its content.

Why choose Mouchette? Cultural theorists need not work too hard to establish Bresson’s authenticity as a singular portrayer of trauma, mediated through a form which is as direct as it is minimalistic. His exquisite ascetism and ethical quality have been widely attested (see, for example, Cunneen [2003]; Hudson [2009]; McNeece [1991]; Reader [2000]; Schrader [1977]; Sontag [1987]). However, in analysing Mouchette we are not primarily providing a cinematic analysis; rather, we have a more generically philosophical and cultural intervention in view.

We focus explicitly upon the cinematic representation of trauma in a way which problematizes contemporary psychiatric perspectives. By this, we refer to the view that there is a ‘reality’ of childhood abuse ‘out there’, which psychiatric knowledge in the form of what Nikolas Rose has called ‘the psy-complex’ (psychiatry, psychology, forensics etc.) ‘discovers’ and which the cinematic encounter tries to reflect (see 1985, 1986, 1999). According to this perspective, the psy-complex ‘knows’ and ‘does something’ about childhood abuse, leaving the cinematic encounter positioned as the mere reflector of ‘fact’. Since the rediscovery of childhood abuse by C. Henry Kempe et al. in the early 1960s and its instantiation as ‘fact’ by the psy-complex, a plethora of films in the English-speaking world have testified to this knowledge-reflection relation, between, on the one hand, a ‘knowing’ and ‘doing’ psy-complex and, on the other, its passive reflection on film (Kempe et al 1962; see also Gillham 1994, 9 – 17). The classic expression of this would be certain Hollywood films in which the ‘discovery’ of childhood abuse functions as a form of teleological ‘cause’

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4 See Foucault (2001b).
5 There is a rich film-critical literature on Bresson, the question of his mode of representation and even whether his style could be said to be anti-representational. The salutary interventions here are by Gilles Deleuze (1986, 1989) and Jacques Rancière, (2006, 2007) and there is an interesting secondary literature (for example, Garneau 2004; Kafala 2007; Mai 2007). This article focuses, rather, on questions of general social theory, the comparative analysis between Bresson and the Hollywood-ized form, and cultural representations of trauma and the psy-complex.
6 The ‘psy-complex’ treats victims (Briere 1992; Gil 1988; Gold 2000); punishes offenders (Finkelhor 1983); establishes an ‘epidemiology’ of harm (Breslau 1998).
to explain a protagonist’s present behaviour. From within such a genre we isolate, for comparison to *Mouchette*, James Mangold’s Oscar-winning *Girl, Interrupted* (1999).

Against this stereotypical Hollywood-ized representation of ‘trauma’, we counterpose an analytical strategy of the following kind. First, treat the category ‘trauma’ as the classificatory schema *subsuming* that of ‘childhood abuse’, somewhat in the manner of Judith Herman’s *Trauma & Recovery* (1992; cf. Alexander et al. 2002). Then, contrast cinematic representations of trauma via an analysis which takes as its poles both the *heterogeneity* of representation – which is to say, the diversity of Bresson’s and Mangold’s content and form – and the relative *homogeneity* of traumatic experience itself. Without wishing to *universalise* trauma, the article nevertheless posits a *kernel* at the heart of traumatic experience, which the act of representation seeks to both grasp and direct. What is that kernel? We posit it as an ontological experience of *powerlessness* in the face of a *structural force*.

This relation is recounted incisively by Weil:

> [t]o define force – it is that *X* that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a *thing*. Exercised to the limit, it turns [a person] into a thing in the most literal sense: it makes a corpse out of [them] (1986, 183; original emphasis, cf. Marx 1977, 874).

Now, ‘that *X*’, in *Mouchette*, takes a particular form. For Bresson’s eponymous ‘heroine’, the adolescent Mouchette, ‘force’ cannot be subsumed beneath the classification ‘childhood abuse’; rather, it takes the form of a materially recalcitrant *poverty* and a painful awareness of her political and cultural *powerlessness*. Trauma (that political and cultural *powerlessness*) acts upon a subject who is in the process-of-formation: upon a childhood that tragically proves to be coextensive with life. For Mouchette, childhood turns out to be *all* of her life. Through the ultimate act of self-harm (suicide), ‘that *X*’, exercised, as it is, ‘to the limit’, succeeds in turning Mouchette herself into ‘a thing’.

The article’s primary objective is this: by deploying a cinematic encounter (via *Mouchette*) – which both *pre-dates* the embedding of contemporary discourses on childhood abuse with its stereotypical forms of representation (for example, *Girl, Interrupted*) – the article seeks a *problematising* perspective on trauma. In general terms, to problematize a

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8 See also Kayser (1994) and Mangold et al. (2000).

9 On such a strategy, see Andersen (2003).

10 Herman’s subtitle – ‘from domestic violence to political terror’ – signifies with precision the expansive cultural schema we wish to pursue.

form of cultural representation – or, indeed, any such ‘truth-claim’ (see Foucault, 2001b; also Collier, Lakoff and Rabinow 2004; Rabinow 2002) – is to call into question its status as ‘fact’. We want to call into question the status of certain cinematic representations of trauma as ‘fact’: especially those contemporary representations embodied in the ‘Hollywood-ized’ form. We want to track back instead to a certain ‘zero-point’, as Foucault once remarked (2001a, xi), not in order to experience an unmediated encounter with trauma but, rather, to problematize its contemporary forms of representation. Methodologically, we problematize such representations by comparing them to *Mouchette*, by absolutely refusing, through this means, to let the Hollywood-ized form function as ‘fact’.

This problematization is pursued in the following way, combining a comparative analysis with select exposition of certain key scenes. In particular, we consider two paired traumatic events uniting, respectively, Bresson’s *Mouchette* and Mangold’s *Girl, Interrupted*. These paired events, which are thematic to both films, are specified in terms of i) the rape of a child; followed by ii) that child’s subsequent suicide. We argue that, though the pairing of these events appears temporally homogeneous (that is, rape is followed by suicide), what remains heterogeneous is the mode of representation. In the process of problematizing *Girl, Interrupted*, we especially emphasise two core Bressonian themes:


2. Bresson represents no clear-cut personification of the ‘victim’ and the ‘perpetrator’ vis-à-vis the experience of rape, but emphasises, rather, how trauma’s causal mechanisms – that political and cultural powerlessness – acts upon the subject in the form of a structural force.\(^{12}\) It follows from this that one of Bresson’s signal achievements is the cinematic representation of what it means to be a ‘critical agent’ in a world of ‘structural force’.

To sum up the argument, then – contra *Girl, Interrupted* – i) against teleology, contingency; ii) against personification, structure. The next sections elucidate our two paired traumatic events and demonstrate how the cinematic encounter with Bresson problematizes, via the comparison with *Girl, Interrupted*, the contemporary Hollywood-ized form. We conclude,

\(^{12}\) On such mechanisms, see Bhaskar (1989).
finally, with some critical reflections upon Simone Weil and ‘misfortune’s image’.

**Trauma, Suicide, Rape**

In *Mouchette*, Bresson provides *a representation of trauma in childhood*. In *Girl, Interrupted*, Mangold does the same. On the surface, these representations appear homogeneous: in both, an act of *rape* occurs in childhood and, later, a *suicide* follows. The suicide is the victim of the rape. As a first thought, then, we are dealing with *two paired sets of representations*. Two suicides. Two rapes. As two traumas. And the question is: do they differ?

We may note at once that the *temporalities* of representation are by no means the same. In *Girl, Interrupted*, between rape and suicide there is an historical ‘lag’: the rape of Daisy, in childhood, is followed by suicide (hanging) *years after* the index event. In *Mouchette*, by contrast, where the action is telescoped into only three days, the act of rape perpetrated by Arsène – a local criminal – upon Mouchette is followed by her suicide (by drowning) *the following day*.

Further heterogeneities abound despite the paired traumas. Take, for instance, a series of discontinuities at the level of what we may call the concomitant ‘facts’. *Mouchette* is a teenage girl (fourteen); in *Girl, Interrupted*, the narrator Susanna and her co-patients within the psycho-complex (Lisa, Polly and Daisy) are all young adults. Mouchette is from a peasant background in post-War France; Susanna et al. are from the heart of American suburbia. Whilst Susanna, in the aftermath of an overdose precipitated by a transitional crisis, is quickly enfolded by the ‘welfare’ of the psycho-complex (hospitalization, ‘talking treatment’, pharmacology etc.), for Mouchette – main carer for a dying mother, drunken father and swaddling babe – not only is there a complete absence of ‘welfare’, she is herself the *sole* provider of care.

Heterogeneities persist as we move from *content* to the question of *form*. In temporal terms, Bresson plays it ‘straight’. We are offered *three consecutive days* in the life of Mouchette during the second of which she is raped by Arsène. The following day she drowns herself. A linear tale. But in *Girl, Interrupted*, Mangold presents Daisy’s suicide as the result of a retroactive dénouement: Daisy’s *prior* rape as a child, which has been hinted at but not yet disclosed in the film, is ‘discovered’ in the context of a dramatic confrontation in which Lisa – agent provocateur of the hospitalised ‘girls’ – forces upon Daisy a recognition of the ‘truth’. In the immediate aftermath of this revelation, Daisy’s self-hanging occurs.

Here we have, then, paired sets of ‘twos’. Two rapes. Two suicides. Two traumas. Yet not quite the same.
Against Teleology, Contingency

Let us pursue these heterogeneities of form via the opposition signalled above: Bresson’s refusal to represent trauma in the form of a teleological ‘cause’. That this runs counter to Girl, Interrupted is easily shown. For Mangold, the apparent sophistication of his retroactive manoeuvre – the ‘discovery’ of a traumatic ‘truth’ with direct and tragic result – belies an account of causal relations which is over-determined.

Consider the central event of Daisy’s suicide. The context is this: Daisy has been ‘released’ alone into ‘community care’ after a spell in Claymoore, a private psychiatric facility where she was incarcerated alongside Lisa, Susanna et al.. Following Daisy’s release, Lisa and Susanna go AWOL from Claymoore, heading south but stopping off to visit Daisy in her new home on the way. Actually, they are hoping to borrow some money. But, in the course of a fraught encounter during which Daisy’s newly-acquired ‘independence’ is ridiculed by Lisa, we arrive at the scene of Mangold’s Damascene retroactive disclosure. As Daisy protests her satisfaction with community life, Lisa draws back the sleeve of her (Daisy’s) dressing gown to reveal a forearm criss-crossed by self-lacerations. As Lisa cruelly observes,

here you are in so-called ‘recovery’ cut up like a Goddamn Virginia ham. Tell me that you don’t drag that blade across your skin and pray for the courage to press down. Tell me how your daddy helps you cope with that.

To which Daisy responds: ‘My father loves me.’ Now, that Damascene moment intrudes: Lisa replies, ‘I bet…with every inch of his manhood,’ and as Daisy attempts to dissemble (‘You’re just jealous Lisa…because I got better’), Lisa thrusts the point home:

They didn’t release you because you’re better. They just gave up. You call this a life?...You changed the scenery but not the situation…and the warden makes house calls. And everybody knows. Everybody knows that he (‘Daddy’) fucks you. What they don’t know…is that you like it. Probably all you’ve ever known.

In the face of this onslaught Daisy – in the language of the psy-complex – ‘dissociates’ (‘Have fun in Florida’) and shortly after retires to her bed. But the following morning when she fails to appear and Susanna investigates, Daisy is dead. Somewhere between the revelation and the dawn, Daisy has hanged herself. ‘You pressed her buttons,’ Susanna sobs. Lisa responds: ‘I didn’t press shit. She was waiting for an excuse.’ For Mangold, Daisy’s suicide constitutes an ‘absent presence’: hardly the act of a critical agent at all. Between the revelation and the dawn, Mangold inserts a ‘black box’ into which he secretes his teleological relation. His retroactive manoeuvre
invites us to track-back via a temporal sequence paradigmatic of the Hollywood-ized form (suicide>revelation>mental illness>rape) to a cause so hermetically sealed that no aspect of agency attends its reconstitution. That teleological relation is simultaneously linguistically sealed: ‘you changed the scenery but not the situation…everybody knows…you pressed her buttons…waiting for an excuse…probably all you’ve ever known…’.

The question to pose here is this: if, in Daisy’s suicide, critical agency is present only through its absence, how may it be reconstituted as a temporal relation for which the ‘paired traumas’ of rape/suicide are no longer hermetically sealed? How to preserve, not only the magnitude of the trauma – which no-one denies – but also a sense of the critical agent? In Mouchette, Bresson answers by means of a contingent rather than a teleological relation. The sequence is this: Mouchette has just nursed the local criminal Arsène, following an epileptic seizure. Arsène has been drinking copiously. When Mouchette attempts to go home, Arsène thwarts her path and then rapes her. Mouchette struggles at first but then embraces him.

On returning home the next day, Mouchette finds her mother in the death throes of tuberculosis. After her death, Mouchette walks through her village for the final time. People are suspicious of her dishevelled looks and of the fact that she smells of alcohol; they try to help her prepare for her mother’s funeral but their attitude is plainly judgmental. Mouchette reacts stoically and with fierce determination. She ‘falls out’ with a shopkeeper, an old woman and a local dignitary and his wife. Eventually, she wraps herself in a white muslin dress given to her by the old woman and rolls down a river bank towards the water. A passing farm-hand on a tractor diverts her attention and she waves to him without uttering a sound. The farm-hand turns his head towards her but then proceeds with his work. Mouchette ascends the bank of the river again and prepares to roll down. Her second attempt is obstructed by bushes. Wrapping the dress around her for a final time, Mouchette rolls down the bank unimpeded and the film closes with the sound of a splash. She has drowned herself.

What is revealing about this sequence – which closes Mouchette’s life and the film – is that, in contrast to Mangold, Bresson represents a temporal relation that could have been different. This is the import of the word contingency that we wish to stress. Semantically, ‘contingency’ evinces an ambiguity that serves our purpose: the Oxford English Dictionary defines it as i) ‘at the mercy of accidents’ but also as ii) ‘uncertainty of occurrence’. These two definitions must never be swapped because ‘a conjuncture of events occurring without design’, which is dependent upon ‘a condition that may be present or absent’ is not the same as a ‘happening by chance’. Of the two definitions only ii) possesses an affinity for the exercise of critical agency which Bresson, but not Mangold, preserves. Again, playing upon this ambiguity, we might say – juxtaposing
Mouchette’s suicide to Daisy’s – that they are both ‘contingent’ except that, in Daisy’s case, contingency – as in definition number i) – is compatible with teleology insofar as Daisy’s suicide is represented as ‘at the mercy of’ a prior trauma (her rape); whereas, in the case of Mouchette, contingency – as in definition number ii) – is antithetical to teleology insofar as events occur between the rape and the suicide so that, had some conditions been present which were in fact absent, or some conditions been absent which were in fact present, the suicide may not have occurred.

To specify this play of presences and absences is to specify the work of critical agency: and not only that of Mouchette. For, at each and every ‘conjuncture of events’ between the rape and the suicide, it could have been different. Take that final journey through the village, from the shopkeeper, to the old woman, and the local dignitary: any or all of them could have reached out to Mouchette rather than judge her. And Mouchette herself could have ‘played the game’ of the dutiful victim – which could have provoked empathy – rather than throwing the shopkeepers hospitality (a croissant) literally back in her face; or saying to the old woman ‘You are disgusting’; or reinterpreting her victimhood in the eyes of the dignitary’s wife, not as victimhood at all but as having voluntarily taken Arsène as a ‘lover’. But that she did not is also the mark of a critical agent.

The suicide itself is a wholly contingent event. Note that Mouchette rolls down the riverbank three times before she ‘succeeds’. Repetition really matters for contingency and Bresson demonstrates how each repetitive act in a rule-governed complex of acts is not isomorphic with the act that precedes it but is, rather, a variation on the very theme of the ‘roll’ (cf. Wittgenstein 1967; Laclau 2000, 77 – 78). The suicide sequence works in precisely this way. Mouchette first spies a bush by the riverbank. She chooses this spot for her roll, which is clearly ambivalent in terms of suicidal intent insofar as she could have chosen a place unimpeded. At the first roll, she stops well short. Following this attempt, she sees the tractor and the farm-hand, and waves. She fails to utter a sound but the farm-hand still ‘hears’ her because he does look around. But although his turn may be ‘present’, his attention is ‘absent’ insofar as he then simply gets on with his job. So, Mouchette rolls a second time and this time is physically stopped by the bush. Finally, she ‘succeeds’ through the force of extra momentum, by rolling over the bush into the water below. The bush snags the dress but, tragically, not Mouchette. Even then, although Bresson’s camera lingers over the pool in his closing shot, she might have arisen.

There is no teleological relation for Bresson because – unlike Mangold – everything is revealed, nothing is hidden. There is no ‘black box’, so nothing secreted. No psy-complex. No ‘mental illness’. Mouchette’s rape and subsequent suicide are mediated, instead, by a series of contingent relations which are cumulatively under-determined. Far from Mouchette
being ‘mentally ill’, we would rather suggest that her ultimate act of critical agency – her suicide – is a manifestation of *health*: with *mental* health here understood as a dialectic of contingency and agency in the terms of Georges Canguilhem, for whom ‘[n]othing happens by chance, everything happens in the form of *events*’ (1991, 198; emphasis added). According to Canguilhem, health is:

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\text{a margin of tolerance for the inconstancies of the environment...Because the qualified living being lives in a word of qualified objects, he lives in a world of possible accidents. *Nothing happens by chance, everything happens in the form of events.* Here is how the environment is inconstant. Its inconstance is simply *its becoming, its history* (1991, 197 – 198; emphasis added).}
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Or, to modify Marx (1937), Mouchette’s suicide ‘makes history’, unlike Daisy’s, which Mangold represents as necessarily ‘at the mercy of accidents’ but not in circumstances of her ‘choosing’.

**Against Personification, Structure**

Now, however, we encounter a problem. In stressing, with Bresson, her critical agency, it is not our intention to *romanticise* Mouchette’s suicide, still less to advocate *romanticism* as trauma’s preferential mode of representation. This, indeed, would be our critique of certain indictments of the psy-complex emanating from 1960s ‘anti-psychiatry’ (for example, Barnes and Berke 1973; Edgar 1979; Laing 1967). Nor should such an intention be attributed to Bresson. Nevertheless, our strategy seems to be running a risk: in reducing the representation of trauma to a series of ‘contingent events’ in Canguilhem’s terms – a play of ‘presences’ and ‘absences’ – we would seem, for the sake of preserving agency, to *elide* structure. The risk is of snaring ourselves on the horns of a dilemma insofar as we have posited as the kernel of trauma an ontological experience of powerlessness in the face of a structural force. If Mouchette is so utterly powerless how can she possess agency? How do powerlessness and agency inter-relate? Again, to paraphrase Marx, if we have shown how Mouchette (but not Daisy) indeed ‘makes history’, then we have yet to demonstrate that ‘structural force’ which pervades the ‘contingent event’. This is the problem to which we now turn.

A comparative analysis is instructive once more. Sticking closely to our paired traumatic events, we would observe that, whereas for Mangold the teleological relation expressed by the paradigmatic Hollywood-ized form (rape>mental illness>revelation>suicide) has the tendency to *personify* the identity of the ‘structural force’, for Bresson, by contrast, that force relates to a wider, *cosmic* relation which includes but is not exhausted by Mouchette’s poverty and her political and cultural powerlessness. Mouchette experiences her poverty – her ‘hidden injuries of class’ (see
Sennett and Cobb 1993) – as an awareness of ‘wanting everything’ (see Rowe 1992) and this experience, as Bresson depicts it, is a referentially real and mentally resourceful account of her world.

Let us test out this assertion by repeating our sequences over again. For Mangold, the only ‘force’ implicated within the ‘black box’ of Daisy’s suicide is the personified figures of ‘Daddy’ and Lisa, wherein ‘Daddy’ and Lisa are perpetrators and Daisy the victim. Indeed, it is not even a question of choosing which perpetrator to ‘blame’ for – as Mangold’s retroactive manoeuvre makes clear – they function in tandem as a revelation which reconstitutes a ‘truth’ which, as Lisa says, ‘everybody knows’. And this is why the hermetic seal which absolutely denies critical agency to Daisy is at once temporal and linguistic: Lisa accuses one personified perpetrator (‘Everybody knows that he fucks you’) even as she herself is accused (‘You pressed her buttons).

It may be objected at this point that we are in fact eliding the true identity of Mangold’s ‘structural force’. For, is it not the psy-complex itself, as it appears in its institutional form in the sequence ‘rape>mental illness>revelation>suicide’ that functions structurally to produce its personified effects? That such a claim is plausible arises from the evidence of ‘iatrogenesis’ (see Illich 1995) within the psy-complex and the discriminatory ramifications of psychiatric ‘treatment’ itself. Of course, Mangold liberally peppers Girl, Interrupted with irony, with swipes at lawful incarceration (see Szasz 1963), enforced medication, the inanities of ‘talking treatments’ (cf. Masson 1993), diagnostics (‘diagnonsense’) and health surveillance (room ‘checks’): the whole armamentarium of the psy-complex is there. Pursuing this line of thought, Girl, Interrupted may be viewed as Mangold’s feminist rendition of Milos Forman’s One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest (1975) so that the identity of that powerlessness-inducing structural force would provide nothing less than a ‘dual-systems’ account of the psy-complex and patriarchy acting in tandem (see Connell 1987; Walby 1990). That they can and do act ‘in tandem’ has been historically attested and hardly needs to be proved. Yet we are dealing here with the mode of representation, and at that level our argument holds. Far from indicting the structure of the patriarchy/psy-complex duopoly, Mangold may be said to have repeated Forman’s own representational flaws in which both perpetrators (Nurse Ratched in the earlier film, now ‘Daddy’) and victims (Billy Bibbitt, now Daisy) are personified and structure thereby reduced to its individualised forms. In Mangold’s and Forman’s representational worlds there are only...
personified perpetrators and (sometimes) idiosyncratic acts of resistance (McMurphy, now Lisa).

Similar critiques of *Girl, Interrupted* have already been made. Writing from the perspectives of feminist cultural theory and political activism within the psy-complex respectively, Barbara Jane Brickman (2004) and Louise Pembroke (2000) have argued that far from indicting the patriarchy/psy-complex duopoly, Mangold’s mode of representation instead reproduces it. And the question they raise about representation is ‘How?’

That question distinguishes Brickman’s analysis, for which the politics of the cinematic representation of trauma is precisely at issue (cf. Hall 1997). Though not an entirely unsympathetic critic of Mangold, Brickman nevertheless nuances what we have previously referred to as the ‘knowledge-reflection relation’: the notion that the psy-complex ‘discovers’ the ‘facts’ (for example, childhood abuse) which cinematic modes of representation then merely ‘reflect’. Effecting a feminist-Foucauldian move which deftly exposes the ‘speakers benefit’ implicit in Mangold’s professed radicalism (Foucault 1998, 6 – 7) – to insist that cinematic representations are found to be merely masquerading as an anti-psychiatric ‘counter-discourse’ (Brickman 2004, 104) – Brickman shows how discourses of the psy-complex, especially surrounding Susanna/Daisy and others’s self-injury/self-laceration, are always already imbricated with the representations of the Hollywood-ized form as ‘part of the same continuum, not a dichotomous pair’ (Brickman 2004, 90; emphasis added). Through its stereotypical cultural representations of the ‘delicate cutter’ (Susanna/Daisy, et al.) as necessarily young, white, female, suburban and sexually attractive, *Girl, Interrupted* perpetuates, for Brickman, the ‘medicalisation of the female body,’ the history of which is such an ignominious feature of aesthetics and the psy-complex (Brickman 2004, 89). Rather than indicting the patriarchy/psy-complex duopoly, Mangold unwittingly reproduces it precisely via his mode of representation.

With equal incision, ‘psychiatric survivor’ Louise Pembroke – a veteran critic of the patriarchy/psy-complex duopoly – has observed that the ‘the story progresses in such a trite and obvious manner it never shifts from being one-dimensional and predictable’ (2000, 26). In response to the ‘saccharine-sweet’ formulaic Hollywood ending – a ‘whitewash’ according to Brickman ‘as Susanna determines’, finally, ‘there’s no place like home’ (Brickman 2004, 105) – Pembroke’s riposte is uncompromisingly sharp: ‘pass me the vomit bowl…’ (2000, 26).

What is the import of such incisive critiques? We think it is this: it is exactly Bresson’s lack of personification, his refusal to represent the relations of subject and world – indeed, subject and subject – as one peopled

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solely by individual ‘victims’ and ‘perpetrators’ that renders his representational style so forbidding. Yet, it is wrong to misconstrue his mode of representation as ethically agnostic or, worse, to imply somehow complicity with the production of trauma itself. To see how that is the case, consider Mouchette’s rape-suicide sequence over again.

Bresson makes abundantly clear Mouchette’s ambivalent solidarity with Arsène, towards whose ‘outsider’ status she is powerfully driven.\textsuperscript{19} With respect to the local ‘law enforcers’ – who are hounding Arsène for personal gain – Mouchette stoically declares, ‘I hate them! I’ll defy them all!’ The rape scene itself is an exercise in the representation of ambivalence. Mouchette first resists, finally succumbs to Arsène (but, by then, she has been overpowered), subsequently effects her escape, yet, when questioned by local ‘respectable folk’ proudly announces, ‘Monsieur Arsène’s my lover’. We should be clear here about the arc of our thought: about what it is not. It is not our intention to suggest that this was not a rape, or to minimise rape’s after-effects as a species of trauma. It is not our intention to canvass the view that rape is not a crime, or psychoanalytically to over-interpret her solidarity with Arsène as ‘identification with the aggressor’ (see Ferenczi 1933). It is certainly not our intention to engage with the execrable practice of ‘blaming the victim’ (see Ryan 1971; also Herman 1992). But we do want to point to a representational strategy that finds no equivalent in the Hollywood-ized form. For the fact is, difficult as it may be to explicate, the notion of ‘blaming the victim’ is as absent from Bresson’s mode of representation as the notion of ‘blaming the perpetrator’. In order to grasp this correctly we have to beat an epistemological retreat both from the discourse of the psy-complex and its imbrications – as Brickman effectively shows – with the Hollywood-ized form: to seek a representation of trauma that is not predicated upon personification. How may that happen?

Simone Weil and ‘Structural Force’

The main arc of our strategy so far has been to address that question via Bresson. But, at this point, we would also return to another ‘zero-point’: one we identified earlier in Simone Weil’s remarks upon ‘misfortune’s image’ and her definition of ‘structural force’. If trauma, to recall, is an ontological experience of powerlessness in the face of a structural force, then everything turns, according to this definition, on the identity and mechanism of that putative ‘force’. This is the question that Weil addresses in her reflections at the start of the Second World War, ‘The Iliad – or the poem of force’ (1986).\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{19} See Becker (1997).

\textsuperscript{20} There are a number of translations of Weil’s great essay and we are here employing the version found in the Sian Miles edited anthology from 1986. A more recent translation is provided by James P. Holoka (2003), which also contains a useful commentary.
It is true that Weil is not concerned to identify ‘force’ in a sociological way: as either ‘patriarchy’ and/or ‘class’ or, in its institutional form as, for example, the psy-complex. Rather, she provides an account of ‘force’ as ‘destiny’ before which all mortals are equal and before which they must all equally submit (Weil 1986, 199). Force’s paradigm-cases are violence and war; its signal traumatic event, a city’s destruction (Weil 1986, 209). Nonetheless, what lies at its heart – whether as war, or in more everyday forms – is the objectification, or, rather, the thingification of subjects: hence, to repeat, Weil’s definition of ‘force’ as, ‘that X that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a thing’ (1986, 183; original emphasis). This process of ‘thingification’ is surely fundamental to capitalism’s and patriarchy’s causal mechanisms as structures of power relations and pervades their institutional incarnations, such as in the psy-complex. Yet it predates and subsumes them as such and is, for Weil, ‘today as yesterday, at the very centre of…history’ (1986, 183).

‘Force’, for Weil, possesses a double structure both in terms of its ontology and its ethical substance. Ontologically, it exists upon a continuum with its relation to violence and war at one extreme and its everyday manifestations at the other. Its nature is to ‘thingify’ subjects either literally – in its extreme form – by making a ‘corpse out of them’, or, in its everyday form in which it nevertheless hangs – Sword of Damocles-like – over the head of the subject in the form of an ‘in perpetuo’ threat (Weil 1986, 190). Hence, the possibility of critical agency, for Weil, first appears in the form of a Cartesian duality for which there is a ‘soul’ caged in a thingified body which, towards its ‘everyday’ end, is not dead matter at all – not yet – but, instead, a thing ‘still alive’.21

This ontology suggests an account of critical agency with which we may gloss Canguilhem’s. It suggests that the capacity for agency arises as the subject’s reaction to her own thingification, in response to her objectification by force. How the subject reacts to its thingification – with all the contingencies which accompany that reaction – becomes the critical question for agency. As we develop it here, this question pertains to the perils of personifying the world, à la Mangold, into victims and perpetrators or what Weil – followed closely by Albert Camus (1966; see also Rosen 1979) – called ‘victims’ and ‘executioners’ (Weil 1986, 199).22 Weil flatly denies that an ethical reaction to the traumas of thingification is to dichotomise the world in precisely that way. This peril has its roots in the misrecognition of force as residing in the possession of one party solely, because, as Weil notes, ‘[t]he truth is nobody possesses it. The human race is not divided up…into conquered persons, slaves, suppliants, on the one hand, and conquerors and chiefs on the other’ (1986, 191). The ethical

21 See Descartes (1993).
22 See also Lifton (1973).
promise then, according to this principle, lies in the subject’s potential to respond to the traumas of thingification in a way that refuses to dichotomise the world; critically to react in a way which recognises that victims and perpetrators ‘belong to the same species’ (Weil 1986, 193; emphasis added). As Weil concludes:

[t]hus violence obliterates anybody who feels its touch. It comes to seem just as external to its employer as to its victim. And from this springs the idea of a destiny before which executioner and victim stand equally innocent, before which conquered and conqueror are brothers [sic] in the same distress (Weil 1986, 199).

But do ‘victims’ and ‘executioners’ only belong to the same species? There is an Ariadne’s thread in Weil’s essay concerning the scope of her vision of ‘force’, which has a deep affinity for what we have called Bresson’s ‘cosmic’ conception of trauma. ‘Force’, Weil remarked – tending towards the more everyday end of its spectrum – ‘hangs, poised and ready, over the head of the creature it can kill, at any moment, which is to say at every moment’ (Weil 1986, 185; first emphasis added).

Grasping this thread, we may return to Mouchette’s rape-suicide sequence for one final reprise. During Mouchette’s final walk to her watery grave she is questioned by a local dignitary and his wife who suspect that she has been raped by Arsène. The dignitary, who has self-serving motives, opines that the rape is none of his business and that Mouchette’s father ‘can file a complaint’ to the police, at which point Mouchette responds, with characteristic defiance, ‘Monsieur Arsène’s my lover. Ask him. He’ll tell you’. After the subsequent encounter with the old woman – who Mouchette calls a ‘disgusting old thing’ – she proceeds through some woods to the banks of the river. In the middle of the woods she alights on some hounds scenting out rabbits and shortly after some hunters with shotguns appear. A group of rabbits are caught in a crossfire from which, having been scented out, they try to escape by darting across a clearing into the shelter beyond. Some escape: most are slaughtered. Mouchette lingers over one rabbit observing its death throes: the second living creature that has perished in one day under her gaze. Directly after witnessing this she proceeds to the river bank and those contingent, repetitive ‘rolls’.

Bresson’s and Weil’s achievement, we would suggest, lies in their refusal to separate the ontology of trauma from its mode of representation: their refusal to separate ‘the effects of misfortune on the soul’ from ‘misfortune’s image’ (Weil 1986, 213). For them, the nature of trauma and the ‘how’ of its representation exist in a state of symbiotic attachment. By virtue of each, we encounter that return to Foucault’s ‘zero-point’ for the sake of which we may problematise the contemporary Hollywood-ized form. Hence Weil’s valorisation of epic poetry (‘this poem is a miracle’ [1986,
and of Attic tragedy (‘the purest and loveliest of mirrors’ [1986, 183]) against her own contemporaneous forms; hence Bresson’s concern to avoid personification even to the extent of showing the objectifications of trauma and force in the non-human (rabbit) world.23

**Mundane, Reiterative Trauma**

With Weil’s achievement acknowledged, still, some problems persist. The lacuna for Weil's analysis – though some have thought it her strength – attaches to its metaphysical, mystical quality.24 This remark may be likewise applied to Bresson. It is not that Weil is not also a materialist, for she fully accepts that the ‘subjection of the human spirit to force’ is ‘in the last analysis’ a subjection ‘to matter’ (1986, 211; emphasis added).25 But, because her paradigm of trauma is the act of mass destruction in the context of war, she fails to cognize fully the everyday traumas at the other end of the scale. These the sociologist Beverley Skeggs – with a profound sensitisation to the combined depredations of patriarchy and class – identifies as, ‘not the singular but the unremitting emotional distress…the mundane reiterative everyday experiences of living degradation’ (1997, 166 – 67; emphasis added). Nothing could better describe Mouchette’s existence. During the course of Bresson’s succinct seventy eight minutes, Mouchette is subjected to: bullying at school (by the teacher); sexual abuse (by local boys); physical abuse (by her father); labouring for a pittance (most of which she has to then give up to her father); being an inappropriately young carer for her dying mother and a swaddling babe; rape; neglect by other adults (who should have protected her) and – finally – suicide.

These traumas of thingification – Mouchette is basically a punchbag for others – range across the spectrum of possible traumas subject to the full force of ‘force’. They are incarnated in rape, as they are in violence and war; they are not confined to them. As Skeggs points out, apropos of the ‘mundane’ lives of working class women, the experience of trauma cannot be separated from the causal mechanisms of structural force because ‘women were born into structures of inequality’ (1997, 161; emphasis added). Trauma, therefore, is not a ‘free-floating emotional experience;’ it is rooted in ‘systematic inequality,’ for which excessive personification, à la Mangold, reproduces that surplus of subjectivity which habitually

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23 Of course, one of Bresson’s greatest films – made in the year prior to Mouchette – is Au Hasard Balthazar (1966) which surveys the birth, traumas and death of the donkey Balthazar in a social milieu similar to that of Mouchette.

24 See Davy (1951); Dietz (1988); cf. Sontag (1987, 49 – 51).

25 The relation of Weil’s thought to Marxism and historical materialism is complex. In one of her best essays, ‘Analysis of Oppression’, she writes that the ‘Marxist view, according to which social existence is determined by the relations between man and nature established by production, certainly remains the only sound basis for any historical investigation’ (Weil 1986, 163 – 64). But she proceeds to suggest that ‘only these relations must be considered first of all in terms of the problem of power’ (Weil 1986, 164; emphasis added). The relationship is discussed at length in Blum & Seidler (1989) and Dietz (1988, 37 – 60).
misrecognises the location of structural force at the personal level: Lisa, ‘Daddy’, Nurse Ratched, etc. (Skeggs 1997, 167). ‘The project of the self,’ as Skeggs concludes, ‘is a Western bourgeois project’ (1997, 163). We could not agree more and would only add the objective correlative: Girl, Interrupted is a Western bourgeois film.

Skeggs’s remarks are salutary not only for the sensitisation to trauma in its ‘mundane, reiterative, everyday’ forms: for Skeggs, like Brickman, is simultaneously attuned to the depredations of the psy-complex and their imbrication with stereotypical representations. This, she suggests, positions women at a double disadvantage; for it valorises ‘singular difficult experiences’ at the expense of the everyday, the mundane, whilst positing the discourse of the psy-complex (‘psychopathology’) as the only ‘symbolically legitimate authorizing narrative’ (Skeggs 1997, 167). Such narratives are concurrently represented, as we have shown, in the Hollywood-ized form. That this is so should be no surprise: as Bresson and Weil knew so well, when it comes to a case of ‘fairly portraying’ trauma – of representing ‘misfortune’s image’ authentically – there really is nothing ‘so rare’.

This article asked questions about cinematic representation and its relation to trauma. Taking a lead from Simone Weil, we offered an expansive theory of what constitutes trauma and – again, following Weil – we worried about whether the cinema ever authentically represents trauma. We argued that stereotypical representations of trauma pervade contemporary cinema in its Hollywood-ized form and we offered the example of James Mangold’s Girl, Interrupted as our paradigmatic stereotype.

Without claiming that we have located the one authentic cinematic representation of trauma, we nevertheless ‘tracked back’ to what we called – following Foucault – a ‘zero-point’ of representation in the work of the French director, Robert Bresson: specifically, his 1967 film, Mouchette (1967). One consequence of Bresson’s mode of representation in Mouchette, we would suggest, is – again following Foucault – to problematize the stereotypical representation of the Hollywood-ized form. Thematically, we opposed Bresson’s stress upon the contingency of trauma – and, therefore, its preservation of critical agency – to the teleological and deterministic representations to be found in Mangold. We also opposed Bresson’s stress on ‘structural force’ as trauma’s causal mechanism to Mangold’s tendency to reduce trauma to a personification of ‘victims’ and ‘perpetrators’.

The theme of ‘structural force’ then led us back to Simone Weil, whose theory of the objectifying effects (the ‘thingification) of force similarly provided an account of trauma’s causal mechanism which avoided excessive personification whilst preserving critical agency. In this respect Weil’s reflections upon representation (‘misfortune’s image’) and Bresson’s mode of representation are complementary. Moreover, we thought that the
‘structural force’ that surrounded Mouchette’s trauma needed to be understood not just in its extreme forms (as rape and suicide) but in its ‘mundane, reiterative, everyday’ forms, which is to say as a materially recalcitrant poverty and her awareness of her political and cultural powerlessness. For a persuasive account of this latter impact we turned briefly to the work of Beverley Skeggs.

What are the political and cultural consequences of such an intervention? We think they are these: first, it problematizes the ways in which the knowledge of modern psychiatry – the ‘psy-complex’ – as it surrounds ‘trauma’ is imbricated with popular modes of cinematic representation (the Hollywood-ized form) in a way which reproduces and does not subvert stereotypical representations of trauma. This, also, was the import of Barbara Jane Brickmann’s analysis of Girl, Interrupted. This seems to have particular implications for the cinematic representation of women. For they may be simultaneously stereotyped – as vulnerable, self-harming, attractive – yet only permitted access to the subjective experience of trauma through what Skeggs calls the ‘symbolically legitimate authorizing narrative’ of the psy-complex and to which we would add, in representational terms, the Hollywood-ized form. The political task, then – and not only of that of representation – would now seem to be, moving beyond the level of problematization, to find new ways of representing trauma and new ways of resisting ‘structural force’.
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