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Vampires Reading Feuerbach: Catholic Orthodoxy and Lines of Flight in Abel Ferrara's *The Addiction*

Abstract: This paper examines Abel Ferrara's theological vampire film, *The Addiction*, through the development of what the author calls "crossroads theology" (*la théologie du carrefour*): the intersection of liberationist and postcolonial hermeneutics. The author argues that *The Addiction* is a horror film with a conservative theological agenda. However, using Deleuze and Guattari's notion of "lines of flight," he also argues that the film negotiates competing trajectories that subvert its own conservative agenda. Like many of Ferrara's films, this hybrid B-horror film is a good example of the crossroads, where elite classifications systems (auteur/artisan, A-list/B-movie, art house/drive-in) are destabilized and new monstrous births are provoked.

[1] A provocative enigma lies at the heart of Abel Ferrara's *The Addiction* (1995)—a hybrid B-horror film with a conservative theological agenda. A little-known film, *The Addiction* is a Catholic meditation on the nature of evil in the world. Shot in a neo-noir black and white style, the film invites the viewer into the halls of New York University where vampirism spreads like a plague. This viral spread is addictive; its intoxicating nature is underscored by incursions into Feuerbachian philosophical materialism. But what can release humanity from the grips of "the thirst"? Cult director Abel Ferrara and writer Nicholas St- John, both Catholics, utilize the vampire as a metaphor for intellectual hubris in the face of systemic sinfulness in the world. This paper will examine the competing trajectories of "Catholic orthodoxy" and "lines of flight" presented in *The Addiction* and also contrast its austere theology to Ferrara's earlier cult favorite, *Bad Lieutenant* (1992), which is characterized by a less pessimistic view of human nature. *The Addiction*'s theological austerity infuses its stylistic palette, characterized by shadowy Manichean textures with seemingly few grey areas. In this tale of vampiric hunger and addiction, you not only are what you eat, you also are what you read.

La Théologie du Carrefour and Lines of Flight

[2] I want to highlight the important gaps in theological scholarship that exist in the critical interrogation of the cinema of Abel Ferrara by focusing on *The Addiction*. While theological readings of Ferrara are wholly lacking in the critical scholarship on his work,¹ I will not simply advance a theological reading of his films, or critically engage the representations of Catholicism in them. I want to insist that the critical exploration of the cinema in the disciplines of religious studies and theology must move beyond the realm of cinematic representation of religions and traditions, and attempt to critically engage contemporary film theories, as well as the interdisciplinary field of cultural studies and other disciplines from the social sciences that help us to read the “signs of the times.”

[3] This critical reflection is deeply preoccupied with *both the necessity and the limits of ideology critiques* in assessing body-horror, a genre usually dismissed as either intellectually infantile or politically reactionary by scholars of religion and theologians. In her book *Seeing and Believing*, Margaret Miles argues for a theologically and politically engaged film criticism focused on an examination of the “values” being propagated in mainstream Hollywood cinema. For Miles this “approach refocuses the film as a text to the social, political, and cultural matrix in which the film was produced and distributed” (1996, xiii). I am sympathetic to Miles’ approach because she is serious about engaging popular culture through the lenses of feminist, racial, and sexual politics. As a theologian trained in the Catholic tradition within the school of liberationist hermeneutics, with a special appreciation for the work of social justice in its interconnection between gender, race, class, sexuality, anti-colonial, and ecological perspectives, Miles’ cultural studies approach to popular cinema resonates with my concerns. However, as a deeply passionate film spectator, whose tastes run the gamut of filmic genres—from the art house films of Pier Paolo Pasolini and Robert Bresson, the 1940s B horror movies of RKO, post-WWII film noir, 1950s melodrama, to the drive-in films of George A. Romero and the body horror of David Cronenberg—I would argue that Miles’ approach ignores what feminist theorist Carol Clover has called “low-end” films of genre cinema, such as horror (1992, 21). The films of Abel Ferrara remind us that the theological and religious need not be divorced from the so-called “low-end” body genres, but in fact it is the debased body that gives the transcendent any meaning in his films.

[4] Like too many theologians and religious studies scholars, Miles advances an elitist or bourgeois perspective on popular culture. In my research on the hybrid popular religious practices of subaltern peoples in Latin America,² I outlined what I called *la théologie du carrefour* (crossroads theology), which attempts to bring together liberationist concerns, such as the option for the poor and excluded, praxis, and a critique of oppressive ideologies, with postcolonial concerns, such as an emphasis on the everyday, pluralism, *bricolage* and hybridity. *Carrefour* is not simply a meeting place, or a place of intersection of two or more roads, as in its English usage. Its French meaning is more resonant with the notion of dialogic place, or more precisely, a place where opposed ideas meet and confront each other. I locate this theological *carrefour* at the intersection of liberationist and postcolonial hermeneutics, where the liberative option for the poor/excluded, with its critique of the workings of ideology, can meet the postcolonial emphasis on the everyday and its suspicion of totalizing utopias. In this manner, the proposed *carrefour* does not lose sight of the idea that liberation can happen in the mundane of the everyday, nor does it fall prey to an “eternal everyday” without any vision of broader liberations.

[5] Hence, my approach to cinematic texts insists on a critique of oppressive ideologies from the perspective of the margins that also allows for what Steven Shaviro, in his provocative book *The Cinematic Body*, calls “lines of flight” (1993, 11). Following Deleuze and Guattari, “lines of flight”

are a part of life's productions "where mutations and differences produce not just the progression of history, but disruptions, breaks, new beginnings, and 'monstrous' births" (Colebrook 2002, 57). In this way, ideological critiques, important as they are, cannot be deployed like a sledgehammer, in totalizing and monolithic ways, but are open to disruptions, contradictions, and breaks.

[6] I situate the *carrefour* theology developed here as a methodological "line of flight" in the disciplines of theology and religious studies, disrupting notions that postcolonial hermeneutics have overcome liberationist hermeneutics, which is, according to postcolonial biblical scholar R.S. Sugirtharajah, "still stuck with some vices of the modernist project" (2002, 103). Sugirtharajah argues that liberationist and postcolonial hermeneutics have become "rivals" in recent scholarship, the former falling into the camp of modernity (as if modernity were only one thing), with its utopias of universal liberation, and the latter in the camp of postmodernity (again in a monolithic way), with its eternalizing of liberation into everyday hybrid processes. My work is a kind of methodological *carrefour* where both liberationist and postcolonial hermeneutics meet, confront, and critique each other. Sugirtharajah rightly argues that postcolonialism "has helped us to go beyond thinking in contrasting pairs 'us' and 'them,' 'East' and 'West.' Such a duality reduces everyone to an undifferentiated entity" (2002, 40). If Sugirtharajah understands the colonizing ethos as one that sustains dualities and dichotomies, why does he re-inscribe these same dualities in his presentation of liberation hermeneutics as a rival to postcolonial hermeneutics? My intervention situates itself in the messy area of the in-between, where methodological *bricolage* is prioritized over paradigm shifts, and where contradictions, ambiguity, and doubt are held in balance with politically engaged critiques of power asymmetries.

[7] I will argue that a serious reading of hybrid horror texts, such as *The Addiction*, requires a shift in theoretical perspective; one that takes us into a much more body-centered and affective response to cinematic pleasures. In her groundbreaking book, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the Frenzy of the Visible*, feminist film scholar Linda Williams identified horror along with pornography as a "body genre." Williams argues that "what seems to bracket these particular genres from others is an apparent lack of proper aesthetic distance, a sense of over-involvement in sensation and emotion . . . viewers feel too directly, too viscerally, manipulated by the text" (1999, 144). Like a Cartesian nightmare, *The Addiction* is a warning to all who dabble too freely in abstract theoretical texts removed from the material world. Like so many texts from the horror genre, it is a work that disrupts the dominance of the cognitive in film spectatorship through its filmic spectacle of body-centered addiction and hunger.

Abel Ferrara in the Carrefour

[8] Considered to be a maverick of the avant-garde, or what has been labeled "indiewood" filmmaking, and among American underground cinema more broadly, Abel Ferrara's hyperbolic tales of religious redemption, drenched in the symbols of the immigrant southern Italian and Irish Catholicism of his upbringing, tend to be glossed over by critics untrained in theological perspectives or authors simply suspicious of religion. Correcting this lack is an endeavor for a larger project. In this paper, I will only point out a few aspects of Ferrara's work that are important for this *carrefour* theology.

[9] First, Ferrara has made films in almost every genre imaginable: neo-noir thrillers such as *King of New York* (1990) and *Bad Lieutenant* (1992); the personal auteur pieces *The Dangerous Game* (1993) and *The Blackout* (1997); the religious film *Mary* (2005); science-fiction like *The Body Snatchers*

(1993) and *New Rose Hotel* (1998); historical set-pieces such as *The Funeral* (1995); the rape-revenge exploitation film *The Angel of Vengeance* (1981); gritty Shakespearean romance like *China Girl* (1984); horror films including *The Addiction* (1995) and *The Driller Killer* (1979); and even pornography with *Nine Lives of a Wet Pussy Cat* (1976), his first feature-length film. This impressive list of very distinct genre incursions makes him a very difficult filmmaker to pin down: is he a genre filmmaker, or is he an auteur; do his films primarily address the mainstream, or primarily the underground; is he an independent filmmaker, or he is primarily working within Hollywood?

[10] Second, Ferrara does not only work in different genres, he mixes genres in his individual films. *Bad Lieutenant* (1992), probably his most critically successful film, mixes together a neo-noir thriller sensibility with high religious drama in what is conceivably an exploitation drive-in movie with a visual luridness reminiscent of 1970s pornography. The film's main theme is spiritual forgiveness, and this continues to be Ferrara's central thematic preoccupation. Kent Jones captures something of the category-bending quality of Ferrara's films:

There's a tyranny of consensus that rules the film business, where talent agencies, film magazines, studios, film critics and pretty boy wunderkind directors operate in perfect well-oiled synch. In Ferrara, there is finally something worth defending. His work is like a wrench in that machinery, busting all sorts of categories and expectations. The films don't obfuscate or dissemble in order to be liked, and have a logic that leads step by step to devastating outcomes...³

Ferrara's approach to filmmaking, like Martin Scorsese to whom his films are indebted, especially *Mean Streets* (1973) and *Taxi Driver* (1976), derives from a deep sense of cinematic pleasure for genre cinema, such as 1940s and 50s film noir, and the art house cinema of Italian neorealist Roberto Rossellini. This is not a coincidence. In fact, in the history of U.S. cinema, the first post-WWII films to leave the studio to be entirely shot on location in the streets (like the Italian neorealism of the WWII period) were the genre noir films of Henry Hathaway (*The House of 92nd Street*: 1945) and Jules Dassin (*The Naked City*: 1948). Film noir was thus the U.S. version of Italian neorealism in the post-WWII period, which mixed a German expressionist lighting style with the documentary newsreel form so prominent during WWII. Genre cinema was being radically influenced by the neorealist art house movement in Italy, while at the same time U.S. film noir radically influenced the development of the New Wave in France (Jean-Luc Godard, François Truffaut) and in Germany (Wim Wenders). Those who championed the art house New Wave in the 1960s (and snubbed the drive-in) tended to play down or even obscure its roots in U.S. genre cinema and B movies.⁴

[11] Following the work of Lawrence W. Levine,⁵ Joan Hawkins argues that there occurred a "sacralization" of high art during the late-nineteenth century. Before this period, there existed little cultural stratification between audiences and between cultural products: "opera could exist simultaneously as a popular and an elite art form. [It was] a time when American audiences might hear a soliloquy from *Hamlet* and a popular song in the course of an evening's entertainment at a local venue" (Hawkins 2000, 8). As this history testifies, there are slippages that disrupt rigid distinctions between the elite art and popular culture. Hawkins suggests that the horror genre is a place where the distinction between high and low art is routinely eclipsed. She argues that the French film, *Les yeux sans visage* (Georges Franju: 1960), was always perceived as an art house film in Europe. But in the U.S., released under the title *The Horror Chamber of Dr. Faustus*, the English dubbed version of the same film was paired in a double feature with a B-horror film entitled *The*

Manster (1962), a two-headed monster flick with the tagline, “Half Man! Half Monster!” Hawkins also offers the example of *Peeping Tom*:

Michael Powell’s art-horror masterpiece *Peeping Tom* (1960), which the *Encyclopedia of Horror Movies* calls, “one of the best and most disturbing films to be made in Britain,” not only shocked audiences but almost ruined the director’s career . . . The film disgusted reviewers. Derek Hill’s now infamous review for the *Tribune* perhaps best sums up the critical response. “The only satisfactory way to dispose of *Peeping Tom* would be to shovel it up and flush it swiftly down the nearest sewer. Even then the stench would remain.” Interestingly, the film is now shown in art houses as well as horror venues (2000, 26).

[12] But as Hawkins also suggests, “horror is not the only genre or category that is hard to pin down, nor is it the only genre or category that continually flirts with the possibility of existing simultaneously as high and low art” (2000, 28). All film continues to struggle between the classification of good and bad, between being “artistic” and or “just entertainment” (Hawkins 2000, 28). These notions are bound up with notions of taste, which are in turn closely bound up with issues of class. As Hawkins argues, “taste is never class neutral” (2000, 30). A quick glance at Ferrara’s genre-hopping career shows that his films tend to blur those narrow classical distinctions between high and low, the auteur and the artisan, between A list films and B movies, between the avant-garde and genre filmmaking, between the art house and the drive-in. Broadly speaking, Ferrara is himself a filmmaker of the *carrefour*, and his vampiric vision of sin, power, and knowledge in *The Addiction*, with its mix of neo-noir aesthetics, body horror sensibility, gritty hip-hop textures, and Bresson-like austerity, also embodies this *carrefour* sensibility, that meeting place where binaries can become dialogue partners.

Praxis and Grace in the Carrefour

[13] *The Addiction* is about a young doctoral student in philosophy, named Kathleen Conklin (Lili Taylor), who is bitten by a vampire. Contaminated by this new virus, Kathleen in turn attacks friends, professors, and street people, until she meets Peina (Christopher Walken), a vampire guru who tries to teach her how to control her thirst. Peina suggests she read William S. Burroughs’ *Naked Lunch*, and Baudelaire, to help her deal with her new addiction. But instead, Kathleen pushes forward with her studies of Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, and Ludwig Feuerbach and successfully defends her Ph.D. After the defense, she stages a blood bath at the doctoral defense party, infecting most of the faculty, especially the tenured class. But in the end, with God’s grace, she seems able to escape the dark recesses of the thirst.

[14] I especially recommend *The Addiction*⁶ to all Ph.D. candidates. I discovered it during my Ph.D. studies and found that it captured something of the excesses of the doctoral process. It is a film that has had difficulty finding an audience. Mainstream critics tend to dismiss it as pretentious while academics and intellectuals have critiqued what they saw as a simplistic perspective on Western philosophy. In the *Time Out Film Guide*, Tom Charity calls it “one wild, weird, wired movie, the kind that shouldn’t be seen before midnight . . . Scary, funny, magnificently risible, this could be the most pretentious B-movie ever—and I mean that as a compliment!” (1999, 7).

[15] *The Addiction* was written by Ferrara’s long-time collaborator and friend, Nicholas St-John, whose real name is Nicodemo Oliverio. They no longer work together and have parted ways due to

conflicting visions. St-John has left the film business and refuses to give interviews about his life as Ferrara's closest collaborator. In fact, their collaboration goes far back: they were high school students together, formed their first rock band together, and collaborated on Ferrara's first super-8 films. This is important to mention here, because Ferrara has frequently stated that *The Addiction* represents St-John's theological vision of the world. In fact, Ferrara declared on numerous occasions that St-John would not work on *Bad Lieutenant* because the film is an exploration of doubt rather than faith. In a 1997 interview for *Sight and Sound*, Ferrara said in typical Ferrara style: "[Lili] Taylor in *The Addiction* has a way out: *Our Father who art in heaven*. That's about the hardcore reality of Jesus Christ as the Son of God. With Nicky St-John there ain't no search for nothing. It's right in front of you if you get out of your own ego and your own bullshit" (Smith 1997, 9). When asked by the interviewer, "but you are interpreting Nicky's ideas," Ferrara captures something of the distinction between himself and St-John in this way:

Well, considering the fact that [Nicky is] on the set every day and in the editing room and wrote the script . . . The bottom line is, he's a believer, and it's a simple thing on the one hand, the hardest thing in the world on the other. I'm a believer, but am I a follower? **Question:** Is that the difference between you and Nicky? **Ferrara:** It starts there. (Smith 1997, 9).

[16] In a 1992 interview at the Cannes Film Festival about his non-participation on *Bad Lieutenant* after having scripted six feature films for Ferrara up until 1990, St-John stated that "Harvey [Keitel] and Abel ask very very tough questions. My problem is the answers. And if I am not ready to give an answer which I believe in 100 percent, I can't do it . . . And that's why I opted not to work on *Bad Lieutenant*, basically for Christological reasons" (Stevens 2004, 158). St-John's rigid Jansenist-like perspective is quite evident in *The Addiction*. For St-John, vampirism is a metaphor for systemic and individual sin in the world, represented by images in the opening scenes of the My Lai massacres in Vietnam and the Holocaust. For St-John, sin is highly addictive; it cannot be stopped by good works or praxis. Casanova (Annabella Sciorra) calls Kathleen a collaborator after she bites her. St-John's theology is deeply pessimistic about human nature's ability to overcome sin without God's grace.

[17] Unlike the Lieutenant in *Bad Lieutenant*, there are no struggles here, no doubts about faith, only God's grace, which in the end releases Kathleen from the grips of vampiric thirst. *Bad Lieutenant's* theology can be summed up by the radio and television broadcasts heard and seen throughout the film of the New York Mets vs. the Los Angeles Dodgers in the National League Championship series: namely, that even if you are down 3 games to 0, if you have faith, there is always hope to change things around. At the beginning of the film, the Mets are down 3-0. The Lieutenant convinces his fellow officers to bet on the Mets, except he bets a ludicrous amount of money on the Dodgers. Ignoring his own advice, the Lieutenant bets with the odds. He lacks faith in the Mets turning the series around; it has never been done before. But the Mets bounce back and win 4 games in a row to triumph in the series. The Lieutenant, however, has lost \$120,000. After having talked to a young nun who tells him that she has forgiven the young men who raped her, the Lieutenant unexpectedly seeks redemption. God's grace, Ferrara tells us, may be nearer to people who hit rock bottom, even if they have committed horrific acts. The sinful Lieutenant struggles with forgiveness and attempts to do good before his life is violently cut short (in a brilliantly executed final shot). In *The Addiction*, there is no room for good works, or praxis. Sin is undefeatable except through God's grace and mediated through official Catholic clerical intervention. The film's theology appropriates a conservative Catholic perspective. Hence, I

disagree with Brad Stevens' assessment that "[i]f *The Addiction* is in any way a religious work, it is so not because it subscribes to Catholic dogma" (2004, 215). As I will show, it does indeed subscribe to "Catholic dogma," but also allows for "lines of flight" within this framework. This, I would argue, is what makes *The Addiction* such a unique and singular cinematic ride.

Orthodox Catholicism, Liberation Theologies, and Freedom

[18] The conservative Catholic perspective advanced in *The Addiction* was deployed in the 1980s by the Vatican, for example, to critique what was believed to be overly praxis-based theologies of liberation, because these theologies were understood to put human freedom before God's grace. Hence, an ideology-based critique of *The Addiction*, utilizing as I do a framework shaped in part by liberation theologies, would condemn this film's theology as exclusionist and anti-pluralist. While my own thinking is shaped by a liberationist method, I also agree with the postcolonial scholar R.S. Sugirtharajah that ideologically-based critiques can be overly Manichean. Even if an ideology-based critique remains important, *The Addiction* is too complex and layered for such a framework. From a liberationist perspective, I would argue that *The Addiction* follows a trajectory in line with the theology of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) when he was the Prefect of Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. In its understanding of human freedom, *The Addiction* deploys a perspective very similar to the Congregation's 1986 anti-liberationist document called, "Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation."⁷ In Paragraph 27 of the "Instruction," Cardinal Ratzinger critiqued modern theories of human freedom and emancipation, such as Marxism for example, as being "profoundly erroneous." The document states:

In exercising his freedom, he decides for himself and forms himself. In this sense man is his own cause. But he is this only as a creature and as God's image. This is the truth of his being which shows by contrast how profoundly erroneous are the theories which think they exalt the freedom of man or his "historical praxis" by making this freedom the absolute principle of his being and becoming. These theories are expressions of atheism or tend toward atheism by their own logic. Indifferentism and deliberate agnosticism go in the same direction. It is the image of God in man which underlies the freedom and dignity of the human person.

The Congregation's "Instruction" argued that humans who put human freedom before God are not acting in the name of "authentic" freedom, but instead, are making an idol (absolute principle) out of freedom. In conjunction with the "Instruction," conservative Catholics⁸ have argued that liberation theologians, especially in Latin America, falsely believe that society can be transformed at any time only if it is armed with a proper modern rationality. This is an erroneous and facile understanding of liberation theologies, but one that has found some acceptance because of the caricatures promulgated by such perspectives. It is founded on the erroneous belief that liberation theologians pay too much attention to the social sciences (especially Marxism!),⁹ and not enough attention to God's grace.

[19] It is important to remember that liberation theologies are famously known for their emphasis on political activism, on the work of social justice in the world, or in more theoretical language, on "historical praxis." Many liberationists argue that Christians are called to follow Jesus in his ministry to liberate the poor and excluded from oppression. They would argue that this is especially important in a world where almost 1/2 of the global population lives on less than \$2 a day, and 1/5 on less than \$1 a day.¹⁰ Living in a context of extreme poverty, the Peruvian theologian

Gustavo Gutiérrez insisted that the classical definition of theology (“faith seeking understanding”) was in need of a practical component, a praxis. Gutiérrez defined theology as “critical reflection on Christian praxis in light of the word of God” (1988, xxix). In other words, Christians are called to critically reflect on their own context, read the “signs of the times,” and act to change the world as Jesus did in his own time, especially in relation to those people who were closest to him: the poor, the excluded, the disenfranchised—those who were literally made outcasts because of dehumanizing ideologies.

[20] For example, the Sri Lankan liberation theologian Aloysius Pieris understands Jesus to be God’s “defense pact,” or alliance, with the poor and excluded against systems of domination and empire (1996, 159). Liberationists define this alliance, or proximity, with the poor and excluded as God’s “preferential option for the poor.” Liberationists argue that the healing of wounds caused by stigmatization, the commensal sharing of food with outcasts, the creation of communities of resistance against empire, were all praxis-based strategies in Jesus’ liberating ministry. Jesus called this praxis-based ministry: working for the “reign of God.” The “reign of God” was central to Jesus’ ministry; it was the antithesis of the oppressive “reign of Caesar” of his own historical context, which he opposed. Liberationists argue that basic to Jesus’ vision of the reign, actualized in his commensal or table-sharing practices, was the idea that God willed those crushed by Roman rule (the last) to be first. Both Jesus and the emperor (Caesar) were understood to be divine agents with a reign. Yet Jesus’ presence as God’s agent in the gospels is in direct conflict with Caesar’s sovereignty and challenges the emperor’s divine claim to power. The Salvadoran liberationist, Jon Sobrino, famously described this conflict as a confrontation between the reign and the anti-reign “and above all the divinities that lie behind them: the God of Jesus or Caesar” (1993, 209). For Sobrino, this confrontation constitutes an “irreconcilable duality” in history (1996, 43). This “irreconcilable duality” underscores much Christian theology. In classical theological terms, this duality is the confrontation between grace and sin. Sobrino re-inscribes this duality in his theology, however for him, sin is not simply reduced to individual acts. Liberationists argue that sin is also embedded in systems of oppression, such as unequal class relations, colonialism, or white supremacy for example, and that these systems can be dismantled through historical praxis.

[21] Liberationists argue that all people, Christians and non-Christians alike, are called to heal the divisions and fragmentations that plague the world, (the effects of the anti-reign) and work for the “reign of God.” They call this healing work historical praxis. The implication, of course, is that people are “saved” by what they *do* to others, independently of how explicitly “religious” their intentions. But in order to do this, people of good will (whether they are religious or not) are called to critically interrogate the historical reality that is before them with the tools that are at their disposal, such as the social sciences. The social sciences help people to understand the world better and to prioritize what course of action to take in order to change it (“historical praxis”). In this sense, the famous epithet on Karl Marx’ gravestone, originally published in his “Theses on Feuerbach” (1845), speaks to liberationist concerns: “philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it” (Marx 1972, 145).

[22] Because of this emphasis on contemporary tools, such as the social sciences, certain curial documents, such as the already mentioned “Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation,” and other documents as the “Instruction on Certain Aspects of Liberation Theology” (1984),¹¹ bemoaned the fact that “liberation theology” (of course, in the singular—as if it was one thing) was much too invested in the modern rationality than in the traditions of the church. But in reality, the official Catholic church’s reactionary anti-modernism is very well known, and goes back to the nineteenth century, a time when the church saw itself as under siege because of the so-called

atheistic theories of emancipation, especially those developed by the so-called “masters of suspicion.” And this conservative Catholic critique of modernity’s so-called “masters of suspicion,” (Feuerbach, Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche) is clearly expressed in *The Addiction* in a scene where Kathleen bites a young anthropology student. As she looks at her bloody bite marks in a bathroom mirror, the student of anthropology, which by no coincidence literally means the “study of humans,” says this:

Anthropology student: Look what you've done to me! How could you do this? Doesn't this affect you at all?

Kathleen Conklin: No. It was your decision. Your friend Feuerbach wrote that all men counting stars are equivalent in every way to God. My indifference is not the concern here. It's your astonishment that needs studying.

[23] Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach, who was a philosopher and anthropologist, is invoked as an example of modernity’s so-called atheistic indifferentism, which according to conservative Catholic doctrine allows atrocities, like the Holocaust, to go on unimpeded in history. According to this view, “historical praxis” alone could not stop the Holocaust. As the “Instruction” argues, freedom is ineffectual without the *imago Dei*. In other words, freedom can only be effective, according to this view, if it is based in the freedom to love that only God can impart. Without it, humans worship themselves instead of worshipping the true living God. St-John’s antidote for sin, which is classically defined as *fragmentation from God*, is not historical praxis. In the final scenes of the film, a priest asks a seemingly dying Kathleen if she is Catholic, listens to her confession, and offers absolution. He then ministers the Eucharist to her. In the next scene, Kathleen is reborn into a new life. She deposits a flower on her own grave stone with an epithet from John 11: 25, “I am the Resurrection,” and walks away. Hence, St-John’s antidote for sin is quite simply God’s grace through the mediation of the Catholic church. Ironically, in an essay entitled “Concerning Spiritualism and Materialism” (1864), Feuerbach famously wrote the words “Der Mensch ist, was er ißt” (Man is what he eats). And in St-John’s Catholic understanding, Kathleen’s final Eucharistic feast transcends Feuerbach’s anthropocentric perspective by her “literal” eating of the body of Christ, which breaks the fragmenting power of sin and makes her whole again. But in *The Addiction*, you are not only what you eat, you are also what you read. And it is in the reading of alternative canons that we may begin to discern “lines of flight” from St-John’s exclusivist conservative Catholic perspective.

Lines of Flight in the *Carrefour*

[24] There is more to this “wild, weird, wired movie” than this conservative Catholic critique of Western modernity! There are “lines of flight” that circulate in the form of Ferrara’s hybrid B-movie conventions. An important disruption occurs around the usage of what Joan Hawkins calls “theoryspeak” in the film, the use of abstract academic language (2002, 19). We notice that Kathleen only begins to use “theoryspeak” after she has been bitten and infected. At the beginning of the film, when she is musing on the images of massacre at My Lai in Vietnam, she talks to her friend Jean (Edie Falco) in a matter-of-fact way. Kathleen’s “theoryspeak” becomes an embodiment of the presence of evil in the world. She argues at her dissertation defense that “philosophy is propaganda.” In the film, vampirism and abstract theorizing embody a sinful character that is ultimately death-dealing. Abstract theory is sinful insofar as it abstracts from history, experience, the material world, and more importantly, from human suffering. “Theoryspeak” is enfolded in the

very materialism of vampiric thirst. Because of its seductive power, it attracts and repulses in the same instance.

[25] A key moment in the film occurs when post-vampiric Kathleen suddenly finds the vampire guru Peina, who following Joan Hawkins, “provides an alternative canon and a deconstructive means for reading the old one” (2002, 20). By “old one,” Hawkins is talking about the “abstract theory” of the “masters of suspicion” mentioned above. Instead Peina tells her to read Burroughs’ *Naked Lunch* and Baudelaire, works of fiction and poetry based on an atheistic mysticism of excess, whose authors’ experiences of the mystic “dark night” are connected to the use of drugs and/or alcohol. Who better to help her control her own addiction? In these writings, bodily experience is privileged over theorizing, art is privileged over philosophy, risk-taking over right-thinking, excess over privation. Here lies another way out for Kathleen, a way to mystically temper her thirst and live in the world rather than in the shadows. “You learn,” Peina tells Kathleen, “like the Tibetans, to survive on a little.” This ecstatic mysticism is a way to control the thirst. Can this be a more experiential, body-centered, critique of exclusive religious truth seemingly endorsed by the film?

[26] Kathleen decides to follow her own path through the pursuit of the academic research. Her successful defense ends in a faculty bloodbath. The entire faculty is wiped out. The tenured class is no more. In this moment, Kathleen’s vampiric body, with its will to power, launches a class war on the tenured elite. Hawkins insightfully suggests that “Ferrara includes a doctoral dissertation defense party that plays like some vampiric reworking of May 1968” (2002, 17). Shot in and around New York University’s Washington square before mayor Rudy Giuliani’s authoritarian policing program, the film portrays the university as an enclave of entitlement within the reality of drug addiction on the streets. Hawkins suggests that “the class barriers between the University and the streets break down as soon as the underclass unmasks itself at Kathleen’s party, and begins drawing blood” (2002, 17). In this scene, the film spells out the most potent addiction to be *consumer capitalism*, which implodes under the ravenous impulses of underclass resentment and rage. As a spectator, I am seduced by Ferrara’s B-movie style, with its hyperbolic vampiric gestures and blood-lettings, and by its spectacle-like assault on institutional entitlement and privilege. And I am also seduced by Kathleen’s power, as a young woman making her way in what is essentially a patriarchal “old boy” preserve.

[27] Kathleen, both fascinates us and repulses. We cheer her willingness to take on a whole patriarchal structure, but are physically repulsed by the bloodbath. The style of the film, its passionate incorporation of low-end B-movie conventions championed by Ferrara, embodies within itself a parody of the critique of modernity’s elitism conceived by St-John and other conservative Catholics. Even if St-John’s theology has a curial flavour to it, the film’s “lines of flight” and its retreat into B-movie horror, make it very difficult for the Vatican to include this film on their list of best films with *Babette’s Feast* (1988) and *The Mission* (1986). The low-end conventions of *The Addiction* are considered too bodily, affective, and crass to be included in this list of so-called “thought-provoking” films. But as I have shown, *The Addiction* is both thought provoking and affectively and viscerally provoking. Hence, these “lines of flight” give the film an aura of subversiveness and contestation that has been appreciated by underground audiences who perceive it as a work of feminist revolt rather than Catholic orthodoxy. But it is in fact both! *The Addiction* embodies within itself a cinematic “*carrefour* of collaboration” between Ferrara and St-John. Yet, it would be wrong to simply reduce *The Addiction* to a work with two contrasting visions. *The Addiction* is a film that values excess: first, in its affective and thought provoking aspects, and second, at the level of both orthodoxy and subversion. In this way, contradiction, ambiguity, and fragmentation

become central to its political and theological horizons. The centrality of Catholic orthodoxy with the film's many "lines of flight" is a reminder that no ideology is air tight, and that flight is almost always a possibility.

[28] Another important "line of flight" occurs in the second-to-last scene and destabilizes the ending. The scene where a Catholic priest comes to visit the seemingly dying Kathleen in the hospital is replete with suggestive contradictions, especially if one places the film in its own mid-1990s context in the U.S.A. The Catholic priest is played by real-life Episcopal (Anglican) priest, Bobby Castle, who narrates the beginning of the film and who also appears as a priest in Ferrara/St-John's theological excursion into the gangster genre, *The Funeral* (1996). At this time, filmgoers may have been familiar with this man because his famous cousin Jonathan Demme, who directed the Oscar-winning horror film *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), made a documentary on him, called *Cousin Bobby* (1992). The documentary is a portrait of Bobby Castle's extraordinary praxis-based ministry in Harlem in the 1960s, especially his struggles within the Civil Rights Movement. In many ways, Castle's ministry epitomizes the kind of "Christian praxis" developed in liberation theologies. Black liberation theologies in the U.S.A., such as developed in the work of James Cone,¹² were deeply influenced by the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement, the works of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X. Bobby Castle's ministry in Harlem in the late-1960s (and later) can be understood within the trajectory of this praxis-based radical current for social transformation. His appearance here is not coincidental, especially considering the release of Demme's documentary on his life and ministry a few years before the release of *The Addiction*. Did Ferrara cast this priest in order to offset St-John's pessimistic view of historical praxis? No neat answers will do here. Yet Castle's presence is a quiet reminder of that this so-called pretentious B-movie is negotiating different trajectories that involve important breaks with, and disruptions of "orthodoxy."

Self-Revelation is Annihilation of Self

[29] A *carrefour* theology brings together a critique of ideology with an awareness of "lines of flight" that embody within themselves important breaks and disruptions of totalizing perspectives. In *The Addiction*, these "lines of flight" disrupt the elitist conservative Catholic perspective embodied in the final frames of the film. Peina, the vampire guru, wants Kathleen to get out of her head and follow him. Peina's atheistic mysticism ambiguously embodies within the film a kind of fracture, and because of this exclusivist understandings of religious truth are disrupted from within. In this light, the final lines from the film, seemingly written by St-John himself, "self-revelation is annihilation of self," pronounced as a voice-over by the newly "saved" Kathleen after depositing a rose on her own grave, seems to have an Islamic ring to it. "Annihilation of self" is not a concept generally developed in traditional Christian mysticism (such as John of the Cross' "dark night of the soul" for example). While some negative or apophatic theologies¹³ point to a similar framework of silence and darkness beyond all definitions and images of God, and while some Christian mystics developed concepts related to self-denial, detachment, ascent to God, and extinction of desire, they differ considerably from the concept of "annihilation of self." However, "annihilation" is a very well-known concept in Sufic Islam; it can refer to the annihilation in the spiritual guide "who functions as the representation of the Prophet [Muhammad], before [one] can hope to reach, if [one] ever does, *fana fi Allah* [annihilation in God]" (Schimmel 1975, 216). Is Kathleen returning to Peina to experience annihilation in the spiritual guide (the Sufic *fana fi'r-rasul*)? With "lines of flight" embodied in the film's B-horror conventions, the ending's deliciously excessive ambiguity will continue to provoke questions, and maybe even new monstrous births.

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¹ Brad Stevens' book is an important contribution to the life and work of Abel Ferrara. He attempts to read *The Addiction* as a "religious work," but his reading of the ending is unconvincing. See Brad Stevens, *Abel Ferrara: The Moral Vision* (215).

² See Mario Bellemare, *The Feast of the Uninvited: Popular Religion, Liberation, Hybridity* (2008).

³ Numbers are not assigned to paragraphs in this article. The quote appears at the beginning of the last paragraph of the article. See Kent Jones, "Abel Ferrara - The Man: Who Cares?" (1994).

⁴ It is often forgotten that Godard dedicated the New Wave classic, *A bout de souffle* (1960) to Monogram Pictures, a poverty-row film studio that made B movies. Godard has repeatedly said that the 1945 crime film, *Dillinger* (dir. Max Nosseck), produced at Monogram Pictures to be a main influence on him. Joan Hawkins notes that "Godard has consistently acknowledged his debt to the B-movies loved by paracinephiles. *Breathless* is dedicated to Monogram Pictures, a studio that occupies second place in Michael Weldon's list of production houses important to fans of what he calls psychotronic (paracinema) cinema" (2000, 17-18).

⁵ See Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*.

⁶ A DVD of *The Addiction* has not yet been released in North America. But the Polygram VHS tape boasts a good black and white transfer properly formatted to the original 1.85:1 aspect ratio (widescreen).

⁷ See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation,” http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19860322_freedom-liberation_en.html (accessed April 26, 2008).

⁸ See, for example, Pedro Morandé, *Cultura y Modernización en América Latina* (1984).

⁹ It would be more accurate to say that in the 1970s and 1980s liberationists in Latin America turned to dependency theories, which were critical of orthodox Marxism. For more on the history of dependency theories in Latin America, see Ramon Grosfoguel, “Development, Modernity, and Dependency Theory in Latin America” (2000). For a good discussion of the use (or desacralization) of Marxism by liberation theologians, see Otto Maduro, “The Desacralization of Marxism within Latin American Liberation Theology” (1988).

¹⁰ These statistics are from the World Bank, an organization well known for its rather conservative research results on global poverty. See World Bank’s *World Development Report (WDR) 2000/2001: Attacking Poverty*, <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTPOVERTY/0,,contentMDK:20194762~pagePK:148956~piPK:216618~theSitePK:336992,00.html> (accessed August 19, 2008).

¹¹ “Instruction on Certain Aspects of Liberation Theology,” http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19840806_theology-liberation_en.html (accessed August 20, 2008). For a Latin American liberationist response to this “Instruction” see Juan Luis Segundo, *Theology and the Church: A Response to Cardinal Ratzinger and a Warning to the Whole Church* (1987).

¹² See James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, originally pushed in 1970, or the earlier *Black Theology and Black Power*, originally published in 1969.

¹³ This form of theology is generally associated with Denys the Areopagite, or Dionysius (late fifth through early sixth century).