

# 'I WOULD PREFER NOT TO' - ON THE VIRTUES OF ABJECTION IN CONTEMPORARY EUROPEAN CINEMA AND SOCIETY

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*This study complies with research and publication ethics.*

## Abstract

Shortly before his sudden and untimely passing, film scholar Thomas Elsaesser focused his attention on the concept of abjection, noting a pronounced shift away from liberal democracy in Western Europe, and calling for a new paradigm but also new attitudes to address increasingly invasive and controlling societal models. In the two years since, one of the most important contemporary thinkers on matters of states of exception, Giorgio Agamben, has also pointed to these new developments, and made very pronounced attempts in civil society to alert his fellow citizens to these developments and what he perceives as their disquieting implications. In this article, I take stock with the legacy of Elsaesser and with Agamben's recent remarks, and look at a film which eminently fits in a corpus of films dealing with abjection and states of exception, *Border* (2018). Through it, I reflect on the fates of the millions of Europeans who, in recent months, and for various reasons, have decided to refuse changes to the way civil society's freedom and functioning have been conceived hitherto -even as their progressive erosion has been undeniable at least over the course of the last twenty years or so. In so doing, these people who refuse the newly decreed (and ever modulating) social norms and prescriptions have literally entered a process of (self) abjectifying, which in many cases may have been latent to begin with. Ultimately, the fate of the two protagonists of *Border* suggests two of the various ways in which these new 'objects' can continue to live and operate in society or relegate themselves to its fringe -all the while remaining fully sentient and emoting beings worthy of our compassion and consideration.

**Keywords:** abjection, civil society, *Border*, film studies, Thomas Elsaesser.

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# 'YAPMAMAYI TERCİH EDERİM' - ÇAĞDAŐ AVRUPA SİNEMASI VE TOPLUMUNDA ALÇALMANIN ERDEMLERİ ÜZERİNE

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*Bu çalışma araştırma ve yayın etiğine uygun olarak gerçekleştirilmiştir.*

## Öz

Film kuramcısı Thomas Elsaesser, ani ve zamansız vefatından kısa bir süre önce, "abjection" (alçalma, iğrençlik) kavramına odaklanarak, Batı Avrupa'da liberal demokrasiden belirgin bir şekilde uzaklaştığını vurgulamış; yeni bir paradigma oluşturmanın yanı sıra, artan istilacı ve kontrol edici toplumsal modellere yönelik yeni tutumlar geliştirmek çağrısında bulunmuştur. Aradan geçen iki yıl içinde, "istisna hali (state of exception)" kavramı konusunda en önemli çağdaş düşünürlerden biri olan Giorgio Agamben de bu yeni gelişmelere işaret etmiş ve vatandaşları bu gelişmelere ve bunların rahatsız edici sonuçları olarak algıladığı durumlara karşı uyararak için sivil toplumda önemli girişimlerde bulunmuştur. Bu makalede, Elsaesser'in mirası ve Agamben'in yakın zamandaki görüşlerinden faydalanarak, "alçalma" ve "istisna hali" kavramları ile ilgili filmlerden biri olan *Border* (2018) filmi incelenmektedir. Bu vesileyle, sivil toplumun özgürlük anlayışı ve işleyişine dair günümüze değin süregelen değişikliklerin -son yirmi yıl içindeki ilerici erozyonlar yadsınamaz olsa dahi- son aylarda çeşitli nedenlerle milyonlarca Avrupalı tarafından nasıl reddedildiği ve bu durumun onları nasıl etkileyebileceği tartışılmaktadır. Bu doğrultuda, yeni belirlenen (ve sürekli değişen) sosyal normları ve yönergeleri reddeden kimi insanlar, kelimenin tam anlamıyla kendini "alçaltma" denebilecek ve çoğu zaman muhtemelen örtülü başlayan bir sürece girmektedir. Son olarak, *Border* filminde izleyicinin şefkat ve ilgisini hak ettiğini düşündüğü, duyarlı ve duygusal varlıklar olarak gördüğü iki kahramanın kaderi yeni "abjectler" in yaşamaya devam etme yollarından ikisini, yani toplumda yaşayıp gitmeye devam edebilme veya kendilerini toplumun kıyılarında sürgüne gönderme ihtimallerini göstermektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** alçalma, sivil toplum, *Border*, film çalışmaları, Thomas Elsaesser.

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*If you are confronted with two evils, thus the argument runs, it is your duty to opt for the lesser one . . . the weakness of the argument has always been that those who choose the lesser evil forget very quickly that they chose evil.*

Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility Under a Dictatorship*, 1964

The events of the past two years have procured new visibility -and conferred valence upon- the otherwise much maligned notion of being 'abject'. In just a manner of days, a portion of citizens of many European countries, who for a variety of reasons couldn't or wouldn't comply with a set of informal yet rather coercive governmental measures, have become excluded and marginalized from social life, including through being banned from restaurants and bars, from attending public events, and, in some occasions and in some countries, from the workplace. While some decided to reluctantly give in and comply with what is often not even a legal or mandatory measure, a minority of people has staunchly refused, sometimes at the cost of their livelihood. In the process, these individuals have undoubtedly acquired the status of an 'abject' in society (or, at best, semi-abject), although -at least for the time being- not necessarily a visible one, but one that they have internalized nonetheless. This situation -a rather extreme one considering the various factors at work, and in the face of Constitutions, human rights and universal laws still purportedly in effect in the European Union- has prompted one of the leading thinkers on the questions of state of exception and resistance through art, Giorgio Agamben, to denounce a form of 'techno-medical despotism', including in a punchy speech before the Italian Senate in October, 2021 (Quodlibet, 2022). In it, Agamben warned the Italian politicians, to precious little avail, of the dangers of a health crisis leading to an outright, full-blown society of digital control.

Long before the current crisis shed light on the deep-seated and ongoing crisis of liberal democracy in Western society, the notion of abjection had already been vastly encountered in contemporary European and Asian cinema and, accordingly, discussed in Film Studies, also in what way becoming abject could be surprisingly empowering or liberating when it allows one to break free from the clutches of a totalitarian project or mindset -think only of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, and how Mustapha Mond, the Leader of that totalitarian regime where pleasure rather than fear is inflicted on people, complimented Watson and Marx, ahead of their exile to the Falklands, where they would at last be with individuals with whom to think independently: abjects, no doubt, exiled on an inhospitable island, but, paradoxically perhaps, "free". Film scholar Thomas Elsaesser did combine and refine these two concepts -freedom and abjection- in his final book *European Cinema and Continental Philosophy: film as thought experiment* (2018, London: Bloomsbury). In light of the current developments in the news, I wish to write today about this late text, and expand its purview to at least one relevant film -and to the current political situation Elsaesser did not live to see.

As all readers familiar with his phenomenal output know well, Elsaesser loved to pick up a concept already in currency, cover the existing scholarship on the subject, find the best angle of approach, then update and refine it. In *European Cinema and Continental Philosophy*, and particularly in *chapter 5* ("A Cinema of Abjection?"), he did expand on an already richly laid conceptual ground, from Georges Bataille and Julia Kristeva<sup>1</sup> to Emmanuel Levinas and Peter Sloterdijk and Agamben (Elsaesser, 2018a: 137-138). Moving away from the works of Barbara Creed or Carol Clover on the horror film, where abjection is of a visceral 'substantive' (or representational) kind, Elsaesser was more interested in an abstract and structural approach to abjection, namely as a condition which promotes "the blockage of empathy, without it being replaced either with defamiliarization and distancing, or with horror and disgust" (Elsaesser, 2018a: 152). Furthermore, such abjection allows one to no longer be a victim, on the one hand, bypassing that condition and entering a state of marginality and free fall where one has nothing to lose, "at the bottom of what is human"; and, on the other hand, it allows for thought experiments about the becoming of Europe and European cinema (Elsaesser, 2018a: 133). Elsaesser was interested in abjection as it channeled and allegorized the European crisis circa 2016 (the moment of terrorist attacks in Europe and the 'migrant crisis' -which unlocked authoritarian and repressive measures in Western democracies that picked up speed with the Covid crisis), and the ethical implications and political stances to be detected in the phenomenon. Furthermore, he situated abjection, as a pervasive condition, on multiple levels (including a meta level): within the diegesis (the way characters are abjectified, marginalized, rendered irrelevant and confronted with an ethical dilemma), between film and viewer (the way the 'cinema of discomfort' of some filmmakers -Béla Tarr, Michael Haneke and Lars von Trier cases in point- creates an abject dynamic between viewer and film)<sup>2</sup> (Elsaesser, 2018a: 132), and for the filmmaker (the case he discussed the least, but one that harks back of course to his theory of 'serving two masters', first developed at length in *The Global Auteur* (2016) and later reproduced in this last collection).<sup>3</sup>

The notion of becoming abject to achieve a new kind of agency has acquired further resonance since Elsaessers's death -in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic and the often perplexing or opaque ways the health crisis has been

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<sup>1</sup> Elsaesser rightly reminds us Rosalind Krauss's distinction between Kristeva's abject and Bataille's *informe* (one recuperates, the latter doesn't -it scatters).

<sup>2</sup> The spectator must recalibrate "their own presence, oscillating between a kind of spectatorial of entropy and intense, trance-like involvement".

<sup>3</sup> "[...] *abjection* can be the state of characters or of the main protagonist; the director can be *an abject* in relation to the institution cinema (as 'servant of two masters' -see *Chapter 12*), but *abjection* can also be *the position that the spectator* is put in by a film's mode of address, which bars both the role of the voyeur (in fiction films) and of the witness (in documentary)". See *chapter twelve*, "Control, Creative Constraints and Self-Contradiction: The Global Auteur".

handled by nearly all Western European countries- also because of the damage caused to the social body by neoliberalism, the advanced state of decomposition of social democracy and universal healthcare resulting therefrom, the mutual abjectifying of more or less illegitimate or non-democratically elected governments, and an increasingly disenfranchised and vanishing middle-class. In view of this, I should like to propose a reading of abjection through one lens left aside by Elsaesser -queerness- one that, precisely, leads to a dialectic of imposed de-abjectifying and self-abjectifying. I will then return to the political implications of being or becoming abject in contemporary Europe, and the global north.

Elsaesser identified various instances of abjection in a vast gamut of European films,<sup>4</sup> and rightly pointed out many Nordic films dealing with the notion - perhaps in view of the crisis of social democracy there, such a staple of Scandinavian politics in the second half of the twentieth century, and the crisis, worldwide, of patriarchy. It is not by chance that the film which best combined the substantive and structural abjection levels in the scholar's eyes was Lars von Trier's *Antichrist* (Elsaesser, 2018a: 150).<sup>5</sup> Other recent examples -all heavily invested with notions of power and a crumbling patriarchy- include Joachim Trier's *Thelma* (Norway, 2017, about witchcraft and the empowered queer subject), Gustav Möller's *The Guilty* (*Den Skyldige*, Denmark, 2018, about infanticide and biased criminal profiling), May el-Toukhy's *Queen of Hearts* (*Dronningen*, Denmark, 2019, about incest and the abjectifying of an inconvenient family member), or, of course, Ruben Östlund's *The Square* (Sweden, 2017), and its satirical take on the art world and social inequalities, edging closer to what we may characterize as moral abjection (or the morally grotesque). The film I want to deal with, Ali Abbasi's *Border* (*Gräns*, Sweden, 2018), addresses abjection on the diegetic level in even more explicit and variegated fashion, but would not have fitted easily in Elsaesser's conception of structural abjection -at least upon first look. Indeed, while it does the exact opposite of 'blocking empathy', I want to propose that the film's take on de-abjectifying and self-abjection allows one to expand on the categories elaborated on by Elsaesser, adding another step to the dialectics of potential liberation contained in the concept of abjection itself. The film has also a lot to teach us about what feeling and looking at may become in what may soon be our post-neoliberal, posthuman, full-on control society (in Foucault

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<sup>4</sup> The trope is ubiquitous, as the books' multifarious examples attest, ranging from *Toni Erdmann* and *I, Daniel Blake* to the films of Christian Petzold, Aki Kaurismäki and the Dardenne Brothers -and finding their primary template in a filmmaker whose work Elsaesser knew so well: RW Fassbinder.

<sup>5</sup> "Insofar as von Trier's film fuses substantive and structural abjection, viewers found it near impossible to reconcile their experience with any particular set of genre conventions, and therefore remained unsettled in a way that makes the secret, collusive enjoyment of *Antichrist* as a horror film all but impossible".

and Deleuze's sense), addressing the empowering dimension of abjection in thought-provoking and productive ways, with a strong, affective queer lens: protagonists are queer(ed), one way or another, and treated as abjects, i.e. individuals who are not so much victims as beings with an ill-defined legal status, exactly along the lines of Elsaesser's redefinition of the concept.

*Border* is based on a story by John Ajvide Lindqvist, who had also penned the script for *Let the Right One In* (*Låt den rätte komma in*, Sweden, 2008, Tomas Alfredson), which shares with this more recent film the idea whereby queer people are in the eyes of traditional conservative society hyper-sensitive monsters, but monsters nonetheless. Abbasi, however, hints at the monstrous side of regular humans/non-objects: conversely, his protagonist, semi-object *Tina*, is a highly sensitive, empathic and resilient individual. While the film establishes her looks as striking, as she stands in the border control zone of her local airport and literally 'sniffs' the fear of incoming passengers carrying prohibited items, what we feel immediately is a sense of sympathy for her -thus corrupting the notion of her as an object in the viewer/character interface, at least. The attitude of discreet fear her co-workers display toward her immediately triggers a form of curiosity in the viewer for *Tina*, who stands at a border (literally and metaphorically) between object and subject status: her less-than-canonical looks set her apart from the others, but she does have a job, a status, and fulfils a clear role in society -yet one that is by definition liminal and unpleasant. When a disgruntled traveler calls her 'hideous cunt' after she has singled him out and found bottles of booze in his bag (a common practice among youth in Nordic countries, where liquor is heavily taxed), we can tell that *Tina* is not only accustomed to such a slur -she has also learned to display patient indifference to it. Under her apparently impassive, vaguely Down-syndrome face, hides a deep world of thoughts and sensations, however, as rich as the wilderness out there. After work, *Tina* returns to the woods, where she shares a home, with some trailer-trash lothario, *Roland* -a dog trainer and social pariah like *Tina*, but, unlike her, not a decent and upstanding citizen. *Tina* shares an uneasy relationship with *Roland*, part room-mate, part lover (it is quite obvious that he has sex with her to justify his presence in her home). *Tina* does not enjoy their intimacy, clearly divining it as fake. In this curious game of deception, it seems that it is she who shows *Roland* mercy, even as he seems to think he is doing her a favor by ingratiating her. *Tina* finds much more intimacy with the wild animals she meets in the woods, where she walks naked. From her hirsute body and the ease with which she interacts with the wilderness, the viewer must assume that *Tina* is no ordinary human being -even as, from underneath her dour demeanor, she masters the codes of human sociality and communication, and reveals herself to be a caring and dedicated daughter to her father, now in a retirement home.

A few days later, *Tina* intercepts a corporate businessman-type at the customs, carrying a well-concealed memory card containing child pornography footage. This opens a sub-plot of the film in which *Tina* assists the police in

dismantling the pornography ring, highlighting the implicit racism of Swedish people all the while showing the immanent monstrosity of human beings. At about the same time *Tina* meets someone like her, *Vore*. Where *Tina* has fully assumed the uses of Swedish society (she has a full-time job, drives a hatchback car, lives in a modest but well-furnished home that she owns...), *Vore* is a drifter, whose antisocial behavior betrays his foreignness and full-on abject status. When she meets *Vore* for the second time at border control, *Tina* asks that he be pulled over for a full body search. The inspection reveals no undeclared illicit goods, but rather that *Vore*, despite his burly looks and deep voice, lacks male genitalia -in an interesting game of hide-and-seek between projected and discovered 'abjection'. All the while helping the police uncover the child pornography ring, *Tina* becomes romantically involved with *Vore*. In the process, she discovers that they are both trolls, abducted at birth from their parents and mutilated -their tails severed- to resemble humans. In a graphic love scene in the woods, we see *Tina's* strange, Mandragora-root like penis grow out of her like an oversized clitoris, penetrating *Vore's* vagina, and impregnating him (who otherwise gives birth to non-viable, little imp-like creatures). The film ends with a dark twist: *Tina* finds out that *Vore* was part of the child pornography ring, abducting human children that were later subjected to unspeakable treatments. Still in her in-between state of subject/object, she helps the police apprehend *Vore*, but he manages to escape. Some months later, *Tina* receives their baby in the mail: her perfectly healthy troll child with an uncertain promise of a fairer upbringing. Somehow a promise emerges from this dialectics of imposed partial de-abjectifying and chosen self-abjectifying.

The reader may feel mystified by the summary of *Border's* plot: it sounds almost like some dark comedy, a tasteless fantasy melodrama, or a very mediocre horror film. Indeed, at the level of plot alone, Elsaesser's structural abjection may apply (and the 'substantive abjection' category definitely would apply). But the film is something else altogether -a rather clever allegory, doubled with a study in affect, playing in a rich variety of ways with the notion of abjection(s), and enabling the viewer to at one and the same time bypass and embrace the abjected, discover the suturing powers of identification, empathizing with and embracing *Tina* wholeheartedly, only to feel what it must be to a non-self-cognizant queer person (... but also a troll!). Not least in the scenes involving *Tina* and *Vore* frolicking in nature, the film bypasses the usual audiovisual modes of sight and hearing, highlighting textures -touch, taste and smell- with a clear goal of making the viewer into a more aware and open subject.<sup>6</sup> The film deals with the ambivalence of the contemporary audience to mainstream queerness, tackling queer rights (or lack thereof) through a

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<sup>6</sup> In an address to students in Venice, Giorgio Agamben recently encouraged people to resist by rediscovering thought as a dialect that can neither be formalized nor formatted. A film such as *Border* reminds us of the ways in which this utopian motto can find expression in other, not directly linguistic, dialects -potentials and cracks within the system and society as a whole.

thinly veiled allegory, through the mechanism of a semi -or full- on abjectifying of difference ('the other') by any given system, followed by an effort on the system's part to forcibly de-abjectify or 'straighten' the diverging body or inclination. But *Border* also more subtly deconstructs stereotypes about foreigners and non-ethnically Nordic people, only to better use them against the viewer. While 'prim and proper' Swedish citizens are shown flaunting the law (be it mildly -the young man smuggling in alcohol; or severely- the businessman carrying child pornography material), *Vore* is at first stigmatized not for any apparent wrongdoing, but for his striking looks and his lack of socialization skills (by Swedish norms, that is, as when he is shown devouring a whole plate of smoked salmon from the ferry boat's buffet to another passenger's shock and disgust). That he later appears to have actually collaborated with humans as an act of revenge against children of man is utterly revolting, but it could also be explained by *Vore's* earlier trauma. On this note, borrowing from Imogen Tyler on the term 'revolting' and its polysemousness, Elsaesser (2018a: 136) appropriately writes:

Acts of exclusion [...] are apt to produce empowered abjects only when such acts -or more often words- of racial or sexual abuse can be appropriated and turned into a badge of honor (as in 'black', 'punk' or 'queer'). This manifests the power of the abject in the social and political sphere, highlighted by the dual meaning of the English word 'revolting': an act of rebellion by some, it induces disgust in the others"

*Vore* is indeed wearing his abject status as a badge of honor, a provocation. He revolts and is revolting, abject to humans while at one and the same time incredibly arousing and attractive to *Tina* (and, through the identification process and cinematic suture, to at least some viewers, too). Writing further about the quality of the abject, Elsaesser (2018a: 134) adds: "What is most enigmatic (and most threatening) about them is that, by having lost or given up much, they gain a strange sort of freedom, which renders their pain less pitiable but also their character less likeable". And this couldn't be truer of *Vore*, especially when put in contrast with *Tina*, who easily garners the viewer's sympathy and moral adherence. She is still halfway between subject and de-abjectified other, between victim and self-abjectified. This stage can finally bring *Vore* and *Tina* to an odd equality step, even if equality cannot possibly apply in a category where all are outside of a system, thus equal in some abstract, but never in measurable, concrete terms, once they are "beyond victimhood, because she or he has no claims to make, which means that the abject commands a particular kind of freedom that probes the limits of both freedom and the law" (Elsaesser, 2018a: 140).

All the while, *Vore*-less resilient but more aware of his condition than *Tina* (he clearly has been an abject for much longer and is the more political subject/object of the two), reproduces the models of torture and mutilation that were inflicted upon him when he was taken away from his parents both as a pathological replay of earlier trauma (a victim state) and an embracing of the



power of being abject (which bypasses the victim state). The implication, here, of course, is that trolls as native populations were almost entirely exterminated by humans (and what greater de-abjectifying is there than outright genocide, the wiping out of the abjected people?), and that whoever remained was socially mutilated into a strange, painful hybrid of innate/genetic behaviors versus learned sociality, which may turn either into hyperadaptability (turning the handicap into a weapon, as it were, as in *Tina's* case<sup>7</sup>) or antisociality/delinquency -a pattern well recognized among children of immigrant workers in the Western world no doubt (Elsaesser, 2018b: 1-39). While queerness and sexual non-normativity are not merely celebrated but probed and identified with in order to question standards of normalcy, the social minority status is explored in its many facets, showing the inevitable entropy that may be generated by displacement, allegorized here in terms of mutilation -the trolls' severed tails a metonym for their severed familial ties and ethnic roots. *Tina* was adopted at birth from another race, another nation, and grows up in a lower middle-class environment (the suggestion is that her parents, not affluent enough, could not afford a 'normal' child). She can therefore never be more than a semi-abject agent, a lesser citizen, even as she is preternaturally sensitive and supremely qualified to do her job. She has filled a niche in this society, without any promise of upward or social mobility, but with the obligation of meeting the standards of a permanent process of de-abjectification. All the while, however discreetly, her fellow citizens keep on reminding her of her otherness and semi-abject nature, generating a psychosexual and social space in which she is practically isolated and alone, her relationship with her human adoptive father a paltry version of familial bonds (although benevolent, he always concealed her past from her). And her romance with the criminal, full-on abject *Vore* is struck with the seal of social prohibition. In the end *Tina* manages to reconcile these contradictions, but what fate awaits her and *Vore's* child remains subject for debate and speculation. The film's open ending seems to suggest that the infant will have to grow hidden (a genuine abject begotten of abjects, further abjectified from its own abject status before it can embrace it as an adult) if it is to survive unscathed. One thing is certain: if the child remains an abject in the eyes of society in the film, in the viewer's eyes the simultaneous process of embracing queerness and de-abjectifying the protagonist is complete. As a result, the edifying denunciation of social hypocrisy performed by the film is doubled with a grim account of Nordic social democracy, or any social system, that, to a greater or lesser extent, must always abjectify some of its components.

A complex network of substantive and structural abjection (perhaps, indeed, the single most important filmic exemplar of this phenomenon), *Border* may be the missing jewel in Thomas Elsaesser's crown on the topic. Not to mention that more (very real) abjection happens off-screen: in the diegetic reality of child pornography, or when the infant trolls are integrated and sub-

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<sup>7</sup> Another concept dear to Thomas, namely "productive pathologies".

jected to integration, perforce. Here again the critique of social integration (becoming one with the social body to the detriment of one's foreign identity) is doubled by a subtler critique, that of the dialectics generated by the intruder. Whereas in, say, the films of Michael Haneke or Lars von Trier the intruder dismantles and disturbs the established social order (sometimes with apocalyptic consequences), here he is absorbed and digested or violently expelled (hewing closer to Kristeva's conception of abjection). This 'digestion' could further serve interestingly as an allegory of the ways in which globalization has operated in Europe, particularly on smaller nations with large neighbors. This is where we touch on the 'meta-abjection' -encapsulated in the rapport between the viewers and the character, with whom they identify for as long as he is in his state of marginality or mild abjection.

Beyond the rather obvious critique of the status of minorities contained in *Border*, I would like to point to the dimension of affect that powerfully traverses the film. The way in which it fails to conform to certain models seems like a parapractical resistance to a homogenic (read 'commercial', or even 'Global', or 'Hollywood') industry -its own stolid, sturdy way of standing abject to the dominant model. As a function of its embracing genre, the film emphasizes -over traditional narration, dialogue and even the visual/descriptive- dimensions of textures and touch. This is very clear in the way the gaze carries a haptic, sometimes gripping, quality, and the sound mix is carefully executed. But this concern goes further than mere technical aspects of sound and cinematography, spilling into the motivic and thematic concerns of the films. *Border* deals with smell and touch in a quasi-haptic way, as when *Tina* walks on moss and mulch in the forest, or gleefully bathes in the cold waters of the lake near her home. All this suggests that when talking about minorities, sexual and otherwise, sight becomes a scrutinized and fraught mode: it is the dominant mode of patriarchy, the realm of the evident and visible, as in the visual obscenity of the Western media showing the unforgettable image of the dead Syrian child Alan Kurdi on the beach -overtaken by the tsunami that all but forgot about the migrant crisis to write about nothing more but the Covid19 pandemic, invisible yet also constantly rendered in visual terms by the media (numbers, graphs, 3D animations), generating unprecedented amounts of anxiety in the population. By contrast, smell and touch can be attached with more authenticity and provide the field that minorities and dogged communities can still rely on for new zones of dignity and, in the end, to reclaim the realm of the visible as a shared zone. Certainly, it is in the way the film enables us to appreciate that we are given, through it, not only to feel but also to look differently, that it becomes most productively political.

There is yet another level of (productive) abjection that can be delineated, which Elsaesser hinted at but did not name per se, in the introduction to his book, our "'being in the world', welcoming cinema as an ever surprising or startling encounter" (2018c: 5). It is very clear that through this lens, *Border* is a film allegorizing the status of European cinema and proposing a thought ex-

periment of being on this liminal, marginal path where the encounter (Elsaesser may or may not have borrowed the word from Cesare Zavattini's definition of neorealism, which in its own ways articulated an early form of cinema of abjection by way of ethics). As for contemporary European cinema, Elsaesser (2018c: 7) saw its 'apparently fatal weaknesses' (not least of being kept alive artificially through government subsidies), as a way toward "a special kind of freedom ... having little or nothing (else) to lose". This notion of having little to lose is, of course, a view of the mind. While European cinema has by and large lost a lot of its prestige, its functioning ensures the livelihood of thousands of professionals -artists and technicians- some who honestly trudge through, others who cynically abuse a system of subsidy -inverted allegories of *Tina* and *Vore*. In both cases, abjection comes to the fore, and, with it, beyond the microcosm of European cinema, it is Europe in crisis which emerges. *Border*, in this sense, fits in perfectly with Elsaesser's schema, "testing Europe's political values through states or moments of abjection". Yet while *Vore* is an embodiment of abjection, *Tina* is at once other, abject, and filled with humanity, thereby containing at once abjection and its opposite, in both the psychoanalytical and political/ethical dimension.

Yet abjection is not, in Elsaesser as in *Border's* sense, 'resistance' or 'critique'. It is really quite strictly about a freedom to assert, and "inhabit a position of extreme marginality" (Elsaesser, 2018c: 14-15), and, we may add, it figures as the freedom to assert -and to inhabit- a position of extreme marginality and exclusion, imposed by the Other. The film's politics may thus only be those of the abject fully shedding their previous status of victim and ushering in a new era of post-abject agency, beyond the corpse of patriarchy, the European welfare system, and social democracy. In this sense, this narrative of abjection serves as a sobering lesson of both, as Elsaesser pointed out, "what neoliberalism does to human beings and the social contract" (2018a: 129) and, more specifically, of the fate proposed to any form of minority or precarious groups. For if finding fellow nationals or people of the same religion or even sexual orientation can generate bonds, this process is stricken by the stigma of withdrawing into minority (i.e. peripheral, socially abject) status. Although minorities and the precariat are protected by some laws, they can also be violently reduced to bare lives (the Agambenian 'state of exception' (2005) not so far removed, again, from the 'state of emergency' implemented by several European states after the terrorist attacks of 2015-2016 and again after the outbreak of Covid19) and excluded from the state where they sought refuge, without having committed any crime and without any solid protection, not to mention the untenable legal and psychological limbo they are maintained in for lack of a clearly defined legal status -often being, literally, outside the law. Foreigners or minority representatives are encouraged to integrate, to de-abjectify themselves: to learn the language of the 'host' country, a trade, go to school, adapt to the local norms and rules. Spuriously enough, a will to become integrated into the social body, which germinates in many a minority

representative's mind, is concomitant with something that constitutes perhaps an even greater violence bestowed upon them, even as it is validated by the host states and compensated with a modicum of increased social rights, namely a shedding of one's own 'old' identity that can at best be negotiated by the hybridizing of necessities. In other words, beyond the semi-abstract or de-abstractified 'norm' which will necessarily always hamper them either way, minority subjects are confronted with a rather impossible choice between abstract or victim status: the former undesirable yet with an undeniable disturbing, disruptive quality, and perhaps power; the latter apparently more desirable but ultimately threatening to dissolve the self's very essence and seat of political agency (however immanent and un(ac)countable (for)). This is a predicament that many in the host countries, even those on the left and in the center, fail to recognize for lack of imagination or empathy. And lo and behold: in 2020 and 2021, this impossible choice is now being expanded to the European population as a whole: to accept the often absurd, ever modulated and arbitrary rules of a new form of sanitary authoritarianism (with regulations limiting freedom of movement and private liberties, but also freedom of speech), or to suffer consequences (many contravening consumers' rights, human rights and the Nuremberg law and Oviedo convention). Strikingly, in a speech filled with dark foreboding, president Emmanuel Macron, in December 2021, announced that people's rights were no longer more important than their civil duties.<sup>8</sup> What these 'duties' may be, apparently, remains unclear to a point -determined, redefined and modulated by the government, sometimes from one month to the next, a citizen being now at risk of lapsing from good and dutiful to irresponsible and therefore no longer worthy of full civil status (i.e. becoming abstract) at the whims of an executive power, ironically more than ever detached from its own duties and responsibilities by and for the People. *Liberté, égalité, fraternité* (Freedom, equality, fraternity) -the three key tenets of the French Republic now resonate with a different echo indeed.

Abjection became such a central concern to Thomas Elsaesser, because -and he anticipated on this clairvoyantly- the new authoritarian instantiation of capitalism would abstractify those values of European Enlightenment (however monstrously the latter had miscarried previously in Nazism and Stalinism), and imply a negative dialectics therefrom as only way out or safe-conduit. For Elsaesser (2018c: 128), abjection was a mode that could save or redeem a failing social democratic system:

Abjection defines this negative relationality as a form of agency and it is such abstract agency that may 'reboot' Europe, in the sense of returning us to the roots of

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<sup>8</sup> "Être un citoyen libre et toujours être un citoyen responsable pour soi et pour autrui; les devoirs valent avant les droits" - 'To be a free citizen and always be a responsible citizen for oneself and the others; duties take precedence over rights. (Presidential allocution, December 31, 2021). Just a few days later (on January 4, 2022), Macron told journalists of *Le Parisien* that he very much wanted to 'piss off' the unvaccinated ("Les non-vaccinés, j'ai très envie de les emmerder").

democracy, reviving it and keeping it alive, at a time when democracy does not seem to be the form of self-government either needed by the dominant economic model of global growth-oriented capitalism, or supported by an absolute majority of citizens.

"If we can no longer believe in progress", he writes further (Elsaesser, 2018a: 159):

if the efforts over the past sixty -odd years to make of Europe a community of freedom, social justice and good neighbourliness have become imperiled or are being undone, then maybe we need to go low rather than aim high, find equality at the bottom rather than expect it at the top, find fraternity in acknowledging the spaces that separate us rather than endlessly seek what unites, and redefine freedom not as 'I do as I please' but as the negative freedom of having nothing to lose, that is, a *divested, disjunctive* freedom (freedom from) rather than an *invested, acquisitive* one (freedom to).

Freedom (Elsaesser, 2018c: 15),

not in the French sense, which asserts that everything is permitted, so long as it does not harm another, nor the freedom that artists usually claim for themselves, when insisting that their work is responsible to no one other than their desire for self-expression -is not as 'freedom from', nor 'freedom, in order to', but another (Kantian) model, which is also that of Kafka, or Herman Melville's *Bartleby The Scrivener*: 'the freedom to choose not to'.

The various developments in Western Europe since the beginning of the health crisis have thus left some citizens with little other choice but to subscribe indeed to Bartleby's motto 'I would prefer not to' -an ethics of withdrawal which alas remains the only option to safeguard one's dignity, in the absence of any real and positive militant resistance or open refusal, which are in turn either criminal or criminalized. Which brings us back to the beginning: people may become objects, and objects remain people too. They may not always be likeable, they may be revolting, but they find and understand the virtue of giving up so much, to gain perhaps what was elevated by liberal democracy as a supreme virtue ('freedom works') and must now be eradicated at all cost as soon as oligarchic global capitalism has seized the full rein of power and will implement a system of control predicated on a constant and real-time calculation of the economy, wherein 'freedom' and privacy will be a thing of the past.

What is certainly at hand, comparable, to, say, the neoliberal shock doctrine in post-Communist Poland but on a much greater and sinister scale, is the rendering object of all former modes of existence: prohibition of gatherings, infantilizing of the population as a whole, social credit score, compulsory need for all citizens to perform absurd rituals, massive swathes of media narrative discrediting any dissenting voice, and well-nigh Orwellian reinvention of the language (with corporate capitalism perversely turning vice into virtue, as when the term 'links of interest' now officially replaces 'conflicts of interest'; or when a world health institution changes the definition of 'herd

immunity' on its platforms to better conform to an agenda congenial to the interests of some global financial conglomerates). Deleuze had foreseen this, in his *Post-script to the Societies of Control* (1990), and the shifted emphasis from a more traditional collaboration of the workforce to a competitive asymmetrical dynamic (the fluidity and precariousness of the neoliberal subject also analyzed eloquently by Hardt and Negri), and the concept of modulation taking over in the economy. We are seeing this exemplified before our very eyes with the pandemic response, and its endless adjustments and modulations, which generate an environment which almost automatically generates, in turn, abjection, sometimes by the self from the other, and the other from self. One abjection stemming from another, one to the other, which a film such as *Border* allegorically reminds us: total and complete abjection in a living being can only be very transient or a view of the mind. Every abject, if they are to survive, will go on creating their own networks wherein they are not entirely abjected, not entirely bare lives -the question being: how long will the abject subject even be allowed to retain the ability to marginalize themselves in order to reinscribe themselves into livable networks? How long before they, like Bartleby, are thrown in jail, or worse? And what when force majeure -invasion, war, i.e. moral abjections begotten from previous moral abjections- leaves one with no choice at all? Will people even have at all the right to *think* 'I would prefer not to', then? Dramatic times and tectonic-like changes in society do not make such interrogation unwarranted, even as there is always utopian potential, even in the most dystopian scenario, if only in man's -abject or not- gift for resilience and taste for a measure of self-preservation, past the unhealthy pandemic and globalist rush.

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