

## **A Texture in the Desert of the Real: The Heterotopic Fold of Denis Villeneuve's *Un 32 août sur terre***

Alanna Thain

Voyage in place, that is the name of all intensities,  
even if they also develop in extension. To think is to voyage.  
The mode of spatialization, the manner of being in space, of  
being for space. Voyaging smoothly is a becoming, and a  
difficult, uncertain becoming at that.  
–Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (582)

### **I don't feel at home anywhere else**

The mutability of water is our most intimate everyday experience of molecular transformation, the passage from one state to another, beyond a metamorphic fluidity. Water signals the intensity of a body in a change of state: tears, sweat, saliva make leaky our contingent boundaries. Water reminds us of our variable relation to the environment in which we live. In the small corpus of Denis Villeneuve's three feature films, extensive transformations of water signal intensive alterations of subjectivation. *Maelström* (2000), his first major success, is drenched in almost every scene. Narrated by a talking fish out of water, the film repeatedly submerges characters in a watery milieu (showers, dammed rivers, downpours, icy fishmongers, carwashes and steamy saunas) that resists a singular moment of rebirth, to focus instead on the experience of becoming other. In *Polytechnique* (2009), a long aerial shot along the frozen St. Lawrence river slows the flow of water to an icy crawl before touching down at the scene of a character's suicide, signaling his inability to regain movement after the paralyzing events he has witnessed, the condensation of breath in the frozen air of his car instead the poisonous fumes of exhaust. In that film, frozen water holds potential in reserve, and a Montreal snowscape suspends a memory that is frozen in time yet is cuttingly alive with the necessity of retelling. In *Un 32 août sur terre* (1998), Villeneuve's first feature film, the memory of water parches the landscape via the smooth space

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of Utah's Great Salt Lake desert. Generating a surface tension of the now, the work of memory and duration makes change creaky, difficult yet insistently present. In this film, the desert functions as what Michel Foucault calls a heterotopia, a counter-site of as-yet unactualized potential. Inflecting Foucault's heterotopia with Gilles Deleuze's analysis of the outside in Foucault's thought, I will read Villeneuve's film through the heterotopia of the desert as a mise-en-scène of Deleuzian desire, a counter-site in which the pleasures, limits and potential of the body are negotiated. Such a reading seeks to bring out the temporality of Foucault's counter-site, the durational cartographies of desire.

As in *Maelström*, an accident in *Un 32 août sur terre* initiates a spatio-temporal fault line in the world. On August 31, Simone drives to Mirabel for a modeling assignment. She falls asleep at the wheel and crashes; when she wakes up it is August 32. This irrational temporality continues until almost the end of the film, each impossible new date announced by intertitle. A man stops and brings her to a hospital, confirming the impossible date without remark. She is treated and released. Simone abruptly quits her job at the modeling agency and goes to meet her friend Philippe. Simone reminds him of a pact they made, that if they had not found anyone by a certain age that they would be together; impetuously, she asks him to create a child with her, no strings attached. «C'est super raisonnable», she points out. Philippe, dumbfounded, plays for time, but finally agrees («I haven't said yes, but I will say yes», he tells her, a formulation typical of the film's temporal suspense of the present) on the condition that they make love in a desert. Philippe's whim becomes a practical challenge for Simone, who finds the closest desert: Utah's Great Salt Lake desert. When Philippe stops at home to collect his passport, he lies to his girlfriend Juliette and tells her he is going on assignment. Still conflicted, he wakes his roommate to ask for advice, who wearily reminds him of the past consequences of his unrequited love for Simone. Philippe leaves with Simone.

Upon arriving in Utah, they take a taxi to the desert, as neither has a driver's license. They ask the driver to leave and come back in an hour, and head out into the glaring white expanse of the space. However, they are unable to make love, waiting and wandering in silence, and the driver fails to return, leaving them hot and suffering. He finally arrives and demands more

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money; when they refuse, he injures Simone and drives off, and they wander out of the desert. They stumble across a burnt, blackened, and handcuffed body. They mark the spot, call the police, and eventually make it back to the airport. Having missed their plane, they check into a «capsule hotel» and get drunk on tequila, but not before Philippe writes a long letter to Simone about why he cannot make love with her or ever see her again. Although it would be «le plus beau moment de ma vie», he knows that she does not love him as he loves her. When a drunken Simone tries to seduce him, he is prepared and hands her the letter instead. They return to Montreal and go their separate ways. Philippe tries to reach Juliette and heads out into the night to see her, but stops en route to call Simone. His letter in hand, she tells him: «viens-t'en». As he hesitates, a car speeds by and spins out on the crosswalk. As he investigates the burnt rubber, the car returns, and three men get out and brutally attack him. At the hospital, Simone learns that he is comatose and may never awaken. She goes home and dreams that they return to the desert. To this point, the film's impossible calendaring has progressed from August 32 through 36, but now this fantasmatic time reverts to normal: we are now September 5. The final scene of the film is September 9; Simone goes the hospital, and announcing herself as Philippe's «blonde», pulls up a chair to wait.

Upon its limited release, Villeneuve's debut film enjoyed a generally positive critical reception, screening at Cannes and receiving several Jutra nominations. Although cinematographer André Turpin's gorgeous shots of the desert were praised for their aesthetic precision, Villeneuve's use of the desert was gently critiqued as too literal a representation of the relationship between the film's emotionally wasted characters (Muckle 68). The desert's force as symbol and aesthetically effective setting drained it of life as a real place, the desert sequences dragging the narrative to a halt. But I will argue that the desert functions in Villeneuve's film as a heterotopia, a site of exchange between the virtual and the actual. To read it simply as symbolic misses the point of the desert's insistent illusiveness. In interviews, Villeneuve consistently cites Jean Luc Godard's idea that «You have to confront vague ideas with clear images»; in *Un 32 août sur terre*, however, I argue what happens is less confrontation than the clarity of an image creating space for a different

vagueness—as the hyperacuity of an extreme close-up both reveals detail invisible to the naked eye while shifting habitual perception: a «doubled vision».

Villeneuve's film is part of a small corpus of Canadian films, including Jean Marc Vallée's *C.R.A.Z.Y.* (2005) and Frank Cole's *Life without Death* (2000), that generate the desert as a heterotopic imaginary of a Canadian snowscape, both simulating a clichéd extreme of the Canadian landscape and dehabituating the cliché to allow something else to emerge. The desert deterritorializes the border via an intensity of bodily experience for the characters, enabling them to renegotiate their relation to the problem that brings them to the desert, but also forcing them to acknowledge the affective force of fantasy as simulation, the virtual felt as though fully real. As a *mise-en-scène* of desire—Simone's desire to conceive a child with her platonic best male, Philippe's desire to see his love reflected in Simone—the fantasmatic space of the desert is first imagined by the characters as a blank page for rewriting themselves but becomes instead a textured place of surface-tension that tears and pulls at the body. From a *mise-en-scène* of desire, the desert becomes a *mise-en-jeu*, desire as the productive force of the assemblage. Texture here is meant to emphasize a «becoming molecular», a prerequisite to creating a smooth space of a voyage in place, an intensive change. The desert becomes a site where the virtual and the actual enter into an exchange via the body, giving simulation its due by calling attention to setting—both material and imaginary—as fully part of desire, not merely its support.

### **I will have seen this film before**

In her essay «Heterotopia, heterochronia: place and time in cinema memory», Annette Kuhn parses the heterochronic temporality of cinema, noting that «cinema temporality exists where the cinema in the world conjoins the world in cinema—a world that is radically different yet localizable» (109). We might think of this claim through the temporality of cinematic homage. Reviewers frequently noted Villeneuve's debt to Godard, a rite of passage for a certain type of auteur. Heterotopias can also function as spaces for such rites of passage, and Villeneuve's effort is read as a one-way street of referentiality, with a Québécois twist. Stephen Cole writes: «Québec director Denis Villeneuve makes it clear that his

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debut feature...is a tribute to the brave days of European art filmmaking» (B2) Specifically, the Godard of *Breathless* (1960) is interpolated here, the New Wave not so much a discreet historical event as a tamed and predictable model of a recurring cinematic temporality. Indeed, the film wears its allegiance on its sleeve; although Godardian jump cuts are frequent, the film is sometimes criticized for the way that the energy trails off with the increasing use of long shots that, in distinction to the abrupt displacements of jump cuts, root characters too much in place and dull the narrative's momentum. Such alterations are typical of *Breathless*, as in the long sequence in Patricia's bedroom, an ametrical rhythm that is part of the New Wave's derangement of cinematic time [1]. Jean Seberg's iconic performance is echoed in Simone's instantly recognizable haircut and Seberg's image on a poster in Philippe's apartment. This poster hangs next to postcards of the desert, a pre-assemblage of the heterotopic space of desire at the heart of Philippe's home, and the first hint of the iconic quality of Philippe's love for Simone. Villeneuve's explicit citation of Godard is often treated indulgently in reviews: he's good enough to get away with this derivative weakness in a first feature, not a fatal flaw, but a set of cinematic training wheels.

Thinking about heterochronic cinematic temporality, however, spins these instances of homage differently. The New Wave occupies an ambiguous temporality in film history, both localizable in time but also with an imaginative mobility that lends itself to repetition and, sometimes, renewal. Villeneuve's film catches a sense of uncertain wandering in his citations of Godard and François Truffaut, the deviance of direction that, for Deleuze, signaled New Wave cinema as a sign of the crisis of the action image («Cinema 2» 9). In Villeneuve's film, this occurs specifically around the heterotopia of cinema itself, where cinema meets world. One example of cinematic time rendering space heterotopic is Philippe's post-Utah moment of decision. Sitting in his apartment with the discrete images of Seberg and desert postcards behind him, having lived through their montage, Philippe calls Juliette but gets her answering machine: «I'm here but I'm not here» she trills. He hangs up without leaving a message; as he ponders his next move, Jean-Loup's anthemic «Isabelle», about a faithless yet irresistible heartbreaker, plays on the soundtrack. The citation of Godard is folded into a sense of lived time; any Québécois

audience would recognize not only the song, but James di Salvio's popular video from 1991 featuring Leloup as Belmondo as Michel in an homage to *Breathless*. A fixed, iconic memory image is explicitly routed through remaking. Like desert postcards deterritorializing the image of Seberg, new routes for connection begin to emerge.

Villeneuve has said of the desert: «I don't feel at home anywhere else in the world» (Alioff 29). In displacing a Canadian snowscape onto the desert, Villeneuve renders home itself a heterotopic site. In *Maelström*, when Bibi brings home the man she wants to seduce (the son of the man she accidentally killed) she brings him into her apartment and races him through the place, naming everything around them—this is my fridge, these are some curtains, this is a sofa—as though she needed to remake her home around the possibility of their love making. On the plane ride to Utah, Philippe, panicked, crouches in the airplane toilet and repeats «Je m'appelle Philippe Despins» over and over. Echoing Antoine Doinel in Truffaut's *Stolen Kisses* (1968), who repeats his name endlessly in the bathroom mirror as he tries to fix an identity sliding away on all sides, Philippe's repetition aims for fixity but gains instead an estranging mouthfeel—a texture—at the expense of univocal signification. His hunched posture evokes the nausea that permeates the bodily affect of the film, signifying modes of bodily change: drunkenness and vomiting, pregnancy, etc. Leaud himself is a character that elides cinematic and real world time, his changing and growing body a counterpoint of lived time against, and alongside, the cinematic time of his characters. Gilles Deleuze characterizes Leaud as a «professional non-actor» or «actor-medium»; such a citation evokes not only character but also a commentary on the heterotopic effects of cinema itself, its virtual reality (186). Philippe does not need a mirror to unhinge his slipping identity as it converges with a fantasy world, as the line between cinematic time and lived time becomes less certain; a textured materiality presents itself not to stabilize the «real», but to make felt the impinging presence of the virtual. The home slipping away here is Philippe's sense of himself. His actions before leaving are a spasmodic mix of hyperkinetic speeds and slownesses, fits and starts, suggesting how the mechanical functioning of his own body is jamming as it enters into relation with other forces. His home is literally turning itself inside out. To be at home in the desert requires a deep sense

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of the self as an incorporative fold of the outside, an intensive contraction.

### **En/counter-sites**

The image of the desert in Villeneuve's film has always seemed absurdly out of place, disproportionate in scale, effect and screen presence to the main characters and the thrust of the narrative. Such excess is what prompts this consideration of the desert as an example of heterotopia. Foucault develops the concept of heterotopia in his 1967 essay, «Of other spaces», when trying to understand what we might call—to borrow from Deleuze and to tweak Foucault's terminology here—places where the virtual and the actual enter into an exchange. Recall that, for Deleuze, the virtual is completely real; the desert in Villeneuve's film is a real space in which the virtual reworks the border of every actuality. As a heterotopic *mise-en-scène* of desire, I understand *mise-en-scène* here as a milieu of folding an outside to recreate an interiority, a productive assemblage generating a differential beyond the value of its individual parts, of the felt duration of desire as the experience of the body becoming something else [2]. In Deleuze, desire is never for an object or person, but for the assemblage, desire for a state or mode of the body, intensity, or a «voyage in place». *Un 32 août sur terre*, like *Maelström*, is a detoured romance, an errancy through milieu that understands romantic relation not simply as existing between two subjects, but as the intensive experience of the in-between itself. The heterotopic desert is the shifting staging ground for such potential transformation. As counter-sites, we can think of heterotopic spaces as folds registering as such, rather than fixed and delimited sites defined by boundaries. As Deleuze describes this: «The outside is not a fixed limit but moving matter animated by peristaltic movements, folds and foldings that altogether make up an inside: they are not something altogether other than an outside, but precisely the inside of an outside». («Foucault» 96-97)

In part due to Foucault's inclusion of the cinema as an example of heterotopic space, this concept has been taken up within film studies. The space of the cinema itself has been thought of as a site that meets Foucault's criteria, of being a real space that is adjacent to the larger social order and yet potentially transformative of such order, as in Annette Kuhn's

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approach. It has also been used as a way of analyzing spatial and social relations within films. Tom Waugh, in *The Romance of Transgression in Canada: Queering Sexualities, Nations, Cinemas*, devotes a chapter («Passages») to exploring the heterotopia within Canadian cinema as «other place» in queer cinema: as «temporary spaces», in particular of the non-urban, to which queer characters «momentarily (go) back to or flee» (100). Waugh notes in this context that «the notion of (heterotopia as) other place is ...most relevant to the history and practice of a cinema that addresses the experience and desire of 'other people'» (98). Here, he acknowledges a crucial feature of heterotopias: their inextricability from the constraints and forces of a larger social order which, Foucault claims, they «represent, contest and invert». As Steven Shaviro describes this: “Heterotopias...are never exempt from the power relations and constraints of the societies that spawn them. Indeed, heterotopias express these relations and constraints even to excess... they twist the social forms of which they are composed into strange new ungainly shapes» («Pavel Curtis»).

In my own reading of heterotopia in relation to Villeneuve's film, I am especially interested in the question of how we might become Other to ourselves. In Foucault's essay, he offers as one example of heterotopia—a failed heterotopia, I would argue, one whose power of transformative passage has been dimmed—the American motel room as the site of infidelity, «where a man goes with his car and his mistress and where illicit sex is both absolutely sheltered and absolutely hidden, kept isolated without however being allowed out in the open» (Foucault). In making the desert the *mise-en-scène* of infidelity in his film, Villeneuve inverts the managed heterotopia of the motel to ask how, and where, such infidelity could happen otherwise, and what that infidelity could be. The blinding white space of the desert is linked by this whiteness to Simone's hotel room, where she conceives her plan to become impregnated by Philippe early in the film, and latterly to the capsule hotel room they share, where it becomes clear that they will not make love. The infidelity we witness in the film becomes that of an infidelity to the self, that felt transformation that is our most everyday experience, becoming-other as a faithlessness to an *idée fixe* of how an encounter should be. Villeneuve's film does not shy away from the possibility that



becoming Other to ourselves can be dangerous and even deadly.

My particular concern here is to draw out Foucault's heterotopia in dialogue with Gilles Deleuze's reading of Foucault in his book of the same name. Specifically, I'm interested in the figure of the ship as it addresses the heterotopia in relation to the body. The desert as heterotopia becomes a site for taking the body to a kind of zero-degree of desire, open to liminal experiences (both of dramatic bodily states such as pain, thirst, and exhaustion as well as to the intensive experience of duration itself, which can appear as boredom or «nothing happening»); in doing so, the film articulates an understanding of the body that calls attention to its fundamental propensity for affective engagement via techniques of disproportion and decomposition. In considering the work of the heterotopias in relation to Simone's and Philippe's potential for becoming other, I will draw together two points: Foucault's remark at the end of his essay that the ship is the «heterotopia» par excellence, and Deleuze's association of the ship in Foucault's thought with the critique of interiority, and a remapping of interiority as a folding of the outside as a way of thinking about ethical subjectivation. As Deleuze describes this in his chapter «Foldings, or the Inside of Thought (Subjectivation)»: «The inside as an operation of the outside: in all his work, Foucault seems haunted by this theme of an inside which is merely a fold of the outside, as if the ship was a folding of the sea» («Foucault» 97). Deleuze's reading of Foucault will take this from a haunting to a positive reading, in which care of the self is auto-affection of the self.

### **A detour through Foucault**

Foucault's short essay begins with the claim that we are living in an era of space, not time. However, as spaces that pull against the conditions of actual existence, the habits and norms of social order, heterotopias are intimately linked to experiences of aberrant time. The current era, Foucault writes in 1967, is that of the site: «The site is defined by relations of proximity between points or elements; formally, we can describe these relations as series, trees, or grids» (23):

The space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our

time and our history occur, the space that claws and gnaws at us, is also, in itself, a heterogeneous space. In other words, we do not live in a kind of void, inside of which we could place individuals and things...we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another. (23)

Here, sites are defined in terms of discretionary relations, rendering them connectable and classifiable. Relation functions as a way of structuring space, of determining connection. But his real concern is how heterotopias, as what he terms «counter-sites», put movement back into these relations, in part by bringing in the element of virtual relations that obscure the rational mappings of social order. The work of the heterotopia is, fundamentally, making the reality of relation itself felt. Crucially, this is always in relation to the actually existing world: «But among all these sites, I am interested in certain ones that have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invent the set of relations that they happen to designate, *mirror*, or reflect» (24, my emphasis). These are counter-sites, consisting of both utopias and heterotopias; however, the «no-place» of utopia holds little interest for Foucault here. Counter-sites both link with and contradict «other sites»; this double circulation of relation will be crucial for explaining the importance of the heterotopia as a site which is perfectly real, yet makes manifest the exchange between the virtual and the actual. As Foucault describes: «counter-sites (are) a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously *represented, contested, and inverted*. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality» (24). Counter-sites are thus linked to the outside, and I will argue that we can understand this paradoxical siting (place outside of place) as the fold of the outside.

Foucault explains the work of counter-sites via the example of the mirror, a utopia where we see ourselves where we are not:

But (the mirror) is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a

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sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am. (24)

The mirror's heterotopic quality lies in the simultaneous juxtaposition of real and unreal in the passage through the mirror image. Foucault does not elaborate on the effect of this double movement; although he aligns the virtual with the unreal here, I argue that we should understand the virtual as perfectly real, because it produces real effects. The mirror is a site of exchange between the virtual and the actual. It makes Foucault's very siting of their respective places understandable only in terms of the reality of the relation of exchange and re-assemblage, a voyage in place. In lieu of a lack generated by desire, a Deleuzian desire here produces subjectivation, a mise-en-scène turned mise-en-jeu of desire that does not ignore material support but is the desire for the assemblage itself.

Villeneuve's films are always about a «what if» of desire emerging after the accident, as if accidents open a crack in the world that demands a reconstitution of the self. But the accident lacks an explanatory force—it makes action uncertain, disrupts habit and reinscribes the random. This desire is a yearning that stretches not only towards the future but towards what Henri Bergson would call the «pure past», not just an archive of what has actually happened but the «in-itself» of the past [3]. In *Un 32 août sur terre*, the Great Salt Lake desert is chosen pragmatically, zeroed in on by Simone after being plucked from Philippe's imagination/memory via cartographic images. She flips through her atlas, randomly opening on the image of Québec before finding Utah's desert, creating not only a relation of situated proximity where distance equals time and money, but also a relation of the indifferent interchangeability of Québec and Utah, a displacement that initially does not need to be marked by relation. It is in the differential of this space that Simone and Philippe's relation will be remapped. Temporal

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displacement is managed in the same way—as the daughter of a pilot, Simone has the flight schedule at hand («fille de pilote», she remarks, «on n'a pas de père»), and their window of opportunity is determined as much by Simone's bodily mechanism (her self-described «Swiss clockwork» of a reproductive cycle) as by Philippe's sense of what Juliette will tolerate as an absence. In other words, their plan, absurd as it seems, is hatched only in the realm of the possible, what they already know they can do and endure. Restricted to a slice of time, this micromanagement will be constantly renegotiated in the film via a series of further exchanges (negotiations over taxi fare as  $\text{time} + \text{distance} = \text{money}$ , how long it will take to get to Utah, the inflexibility of flight schedules, etc.). In each instance, the body seeks to put moving vehicles at its service; left to its own devices, the shifting ground beneath their feet becomes all too evident.

Foucault's final image, his heterotopia par excellence, is that of the boat:

a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea...The ship is the heterotopia par excellence. In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates. (27)

Deleuze picks up this theme of the ship, ending his book about Foucault with it as the image of ethical action—forcing oneself to think via the outside:

To think means to be embedded in the present-time stratum that serves as a limit: what can I see and what can I say today...We will then think the past against the present and resist the latter, not in favour of a return, but 'in favour, I hope, of a time to come' (Nietzsche), that is, by making the past active and present to the outside so that something new will finally come about, so that thinking, always, may reach thought. Thought thinks its own history (the past) but in order to free itself from what it thinks (the present) and be able finally to think otherwise (the future). («Foucault»119)

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The struggle in *Un 32 août sur terre* is about how to live an impossible present and how to imagine another future into existence. Both Simone and Philippe will have to ignore or selectively sample their own past in order to slice a moment out of time for an encounter that literally has no future, except the prefigured one of the child. They attempt to resist a present determined by their personal past (Philippe's memory of the pain caused by his love for Simone, Simone's dissatisfaction with her shallow existence) precisely in order to ignore the past in itself and prescribe a future built in the image of the possible, constructed out of the shards of the already actual. This is not unethical due to problems of morality (e.g. cheating on Juliette), but because they resist the idea that anything will truly change as a result of their encounter. The desert is initially conceived of as a utopic no-place, no-time, the site of a series of quantitative negotiations of what they can afford in terms of time (24 hours), distance (proximity to the everyday life of Montreal), and money (the negotiations with the taxi driver who realizes there is no rational limit to the cost of such an endeavor). But the desert is also a heterotopia, a real space that «twists and folds» its relations to actuality through the felt force of the virtual. A tension emerges as rational clock and calendar time keep progressing, as the attempt to measure what has been demasured, as what happens when you feel time in a space unfolds against the impossible impersonal memory of water in the dried lake of the Great Salt Lake Desert.

### **Sailing the sand waves**

In tracing the double in Foucault's work, Deleuze argues that interiority in Foucault is a fold of the outside, like the «ship as a fold of the sea». In staging Simone and Philippe's encounter, Villeneuve arranges it so that these two bodies are always being overwhelmed by their environment. Relation here is not simply between subjects; the milieu is as much a part of this relation as the two terms. In essence, the demand exerted here is for an ethical encounter. If the ship is a fold of the sea, the effect is precisely such a «voyage in place» as the relation between interior and exterior is continually reconstituted in movement—the «difficult» movement of becoming. We see becoming at work in this film as the heterotopic space of the desert twists and folds relation, and characters struggle to

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press out of their habits, to resist the present in a way that allows for another future to emerge. The extent to which it will be possible for such change to be registered and lived, however, remains ambiguous. Such a process of ethical subjectivation, Deleuze writes, means that «the most distant point becomes interior, by being converted into the nearest: life within the folds...Here, one becomes a master of one's own speed and, relatively speaking, a master of one's own molecules and particular features, in this zone of subjectivation: the boat as interior of the exterior» («Foucault» 123). Are Simone and Philippe such ships, sailing on the memory of water in the desert? Will their bodies regain the fluid movement of folding, or will they parch themselves like the desiccated figure of the handcuffed corpse they encounter later on?

Following Foucault's skeletal outline of heterotopias, the desert becomes heterotopic in three ways, each reflecting its function of passage between states or the felt reality of relation itself. First, the desert is as a zone of deferral or delayed reaction to a major life event, of death and violence, what Foucault refers to as a «heterotopia of crisis». Second, the desert is a place cordoned off from everyday space and time, marked by openings and closings. Third, the desert is a heterotopia of bodily transformation, connection and exchange. The desert becomes an opportunity for characters to break out of their habits, to find a different way of acting and moving—a suspension of knowing what to do that is the basis, Deleuze argues, for ethical action.

In *Un 32 août sur terre*, the desert is associated with passage between states. It is the space in the film where nothing happens, a long sequence of little conversation and shots saturated with emptiness, yet it becomes a site of intensity. Initially, both Simone and Philippe imagine it as an ultra-rationalized slice of time—in essence, a «day out of time»—but it becomes a counter-site of the distorted time of intensity, a sense shared by the film's viewers. The relations of speeds and slowness that compose a body are made manifest here, in the long scenes of waiting and errant wandering, of witnessed heat and thirst, and of disproportionate scale that makes it difficult to get our bearings as viewers once the taxi driver leaves. The indifferent whiteness of the desert plain challenges our ability to register scale, and many shots omit

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the horizon. A shot of the empty plain, impossible to place as a long shot or a close up, leaves us suspended until the tiny figures of Simone and Philippe finally enter from screen left. The sharp precision of the frame around each desert take only enhances the inability of these human form to provide a regularized scale of temporal or spatial measure. The human body as the centre of perception fails to hold. Sound and image break apart, with distant figures speaking in closely-heard intimacy. At each sighting, the desert refuses to become site. We do not see a moment of decision for Simone and Philippe; their movement through the desert is a feeling-out of potential, or perhaps a substitute of feeling-for the present in order to avoid the overwhelming sense of duration. The taxi returns. They turn their attention away from each other, towards the taxi. At that moment, the lack of scale in the desert shifts away from a milieu of becoming to a more immediately threatening place, a danger to their lives and to their relationship as they rehash their past and start to fight. The heterotopic force of the desert is written in the threat to their bodily integrity—this second phase of the desert starts when the driver smashes the car door into Simone's face when she tries to stop him from leaving. The blood stains the whiteness of the salt sand.

The «other place» of the heterotopia has always had a relation to the uncertain geography of the body itself, in its ancient meaning of tumours or displacements of the body due to accident or illness, such as an amputated limb. In Foucault's account pregnancy is such a state, and the desert becomes an alluring site for the controlled deviation of conception. In Villeneuve's film, though, the desire for a child is almost exclusively imagined through the mutability of pregnancy itself; Philippe reminds Simone that she will not be a very desirable model if she is pregnant (and indeed, part of Simone's motivation seems to be the attempt to live her body for herself and not in the image of others), and comforts Simone when she is ill by reminding her that when she is pregnant, she will vomit everyday. Simone initially thinks of pregnancy as a mechanical act (her «Swiss Clockwork»). Hence, while pregnancy might be a way for Simone to emerge from the modeling industry, she nonetheless thinks of her body in a regulated way. The sense of the productive machinic displacing the mechanical reproduction of the same only emerges in Simone and Philippe's failure to make love [4].

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For Foucault, the heterotopia of crisis (such as the birthing hut for pregnant women) shifts in modern times to a heterotopia of deviance (such as the mental institution) when altered states are no longer regulated events to be passed through, but managed in zones of indeterminate confinement. The trip to the desert ambiguously combines these two senses. The illicit encounter there is not sanctioned by law or social order and will have no place in the life that results. Likewise, the desert marks the failure of bodies to stay in their place, to be unambiguously sited. When Simone and Philippe leave and stumble upon the corpse rotting in the open air, they have no means to respond to the out-of-place-ness of the body, its insistent and excessive presence. When Philippe calls the police and they ask what kind of shirt he used to mark the site, he replies «I dunno, a Canadian shirt?» Such an absurd and out of place siting signals the failure of the heterotopic to simply stay in place, and the way it pushes relation to excess.

Indeed, the heterotopia is a site that reorganizes social relations and permits other modes of passage. At the beginning of the film, after her accident, Simone is shown to be unusually susceptible to the interference of the urban landscape—cars whizzing by are unnaturally loud, visuals of electrical towers render sensible the undercurrent of electrical energy buzzing in the air. Even when she walks to the edge of town to gather her thoughts, she is dehabituated in her relation to her surrounding. We get shots of what she sees in extreme detail, but instead of a typical reverse shot of her face in close up to marry these to her subjective perception, we see Simone from a high angle: a vertiginous sense of self. This altered state is explicitly linked to a problem of memory, her inability to form «memory-images» that keeps the past useful but «in its place». In the white hospital examining room—a white space which recurs (an unnaturally antiseptic hotel room, the salty desert, the Japanese capsule hotel in Utah)—a doctor warns Simone that she will likely experience short-term memory problems as a result of her accident. He tells her a few facts about himself, and then asks her to repeat them. That she is at a loss is signaled not by her reply but by a cut, the gap in the smooth flow of experience that fails to relegate the past to its place. This white space is the visual equivalent of white noise—an only apparent blankness of sonic texture raised to conscious attention. Just as white light contains all colours to

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the point of sensible imperceptibility, so too does white noise function here. *Mise-en-scène*, landscape, sonic textures gain a power of expression that Simone is simultaneously a part of and struggling to understand. The world is reimbued with a sense of mystery and significance, but it is nothing other than the potential of the virtual. Simone's clichéd response to this renewed potential of life is to create another new life, but the film is instead concerned with creating oneself anew.

The heterotopia, as a counter-site of re-creation, is in some ways unlivable, cordoned off from everyday space and time and marked by openings and closings. Not the bleached gold of most deserts, the Great Salt Lake Desert in its vast whiteness both simulates a clichéd extremity of a Canadian snowy plain and dislocates the cliché to allow something else to emerge. Its blinding whiteness repeatedly sparks a kind of cognitive dissonance at each instance of contact, and senses of heat rather than cold. In Foucault the sense of opening and closing is linked to the de-sacralization of space. Where in previous eras, such openings and closing were managed by rite and ritual, in contemporary times, these spaces, such as the hotel room, are likely to remain adjacent to the social order, proximate but not incorporated. While this may diminish the heterotopia's ability to contest the real sites they mirror (the motel room and the family home), it might also make the feedback into the social order more disruptive because harder to predict, less amenable to a one-to-one mirroring. Simone and Philippe attempt to ritualize their love making by setting it in the desert, a constraint that both acknowledges and diffuses the danger of encounter. At the same time, their desert makes the space of their encounter heterotopic not by taking it outside of the constraints of everyday romantic and sexual relationships, but by reinscribing them to excess, in relations of quantifiable measure. When Philippe returns home to get his passport, the apartment space becomes a mini-drama of enclosures and overlap. Juliette is there, taking a bath, and we see her and Philippe framed together in a two shot, separated by the wall. Juliette, throughout the film, is ambiguously both the real space of everyday life which Philippe must return to, but the feedback of the desert heterotopia is registered in the double valence characterized as such throughout, her chirpy phone message «I'm there, but I'm not there» a condensation of her hesitant state between virtual and actual, her contagion by the heterotopic space, which «suspect, neutralize, or *invent*

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the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect» (my italics).

While Foucault argues that the heterotopia is defined by openings and closings, the force of the heterotopia, I argue, is not determined by fixed points of passage, especially if we think about the space of the heterotopia in term of the fold. Boundaries become a necessary fiction in this instance, a contraction of forces. As counter-site, the heterotopia is unlivable as such, hence its association with such temporary spaces such as the festival and the cinema, or the cemetery, which «begins with this strange heterochrony, the loss of life, and with this quasi-eternity in which her permanent lot is dissolution and disappearance» (Foucault). This is also the reason for the heterotopia's association with the ship as a kind of mobile home. Simone and Philippe's arrival into the desert signals that they are entering a counter-site, as they drive to the end of a road to nowhere—an overhead shot reveals the frayed edges of a paved road, which pokes into the desert then simply stops. Here in the middle of the film, in its fold, so to speak, we have the negative image of the black tire tracks that bookend the film (Simone's accident and Philippe's attack) with the white tracks dragged in from the sand scarring the asphalt. The desert is not a place to be passed through, but a place of an intensive experiencing, a leaving behind of the road. By heightening our perceptions of the competing speeds and slownesses in the assemblage, the desert in this film functions for both the spectator and the characters as a heterotopia of the exchange between virtual and actual.

The paved road into the desert is littered with traces of sand. This both calls attention to the material composition of the grainy desert itself, fraying its edges via the trace of passage, and serves as a visual emblem of the disjunctive nature of the heterotopic space. The road itself becomes the site of straying from the path that releases violent change in the film. Simone's accident occurs when she falls asleep at the wheel and drifts onto the wrong side of the road; when she finally finds the road after awakening, it is only by seeing the burnt tracks that she realizes it was in plain sight the entire time. It is when she leaves the road to return to the airport that she finds the body. And the end of the film, which is often described as «senseless» or off the rails, Philippe strays from his movement between two points—Simone or Juliette—into the middle of an

intersection, the always enchanted crossroads. He examines the smoking tire tracks left by a group of joy-riding thugs, who circle back to attack and beat Philippe, a graphic representation of the fact that his choice is not between two women, but between two modes of the body. These alternate mappings mark decompositions of time, space and body, pointers generated by the contact creating something new, as yet uncertain.

This uncertainty stems, I argue, from the way that the heterotopia of the desert is generated by the body's desire to become something other, the desire for assemblage. A third characteristic of the desert is that it is a heterotopia of bodily transformation, connection and exchange. While a car accident initiates the movement to the desert, and pregnancy is the desired consequence, other bodily changes come to pass instead. As a liminal experience, the time in the desert reorients the bodies of Simone and Philippe, and the viewer as well. The texture of the desert—its salty, granular composition, the dramatic pull of the memory of water between white sand and blue sky inverting the space of the world—produces a minor molecular displacement of the body that resonates in the no-place of the long wait in the airport. There, they experiment with the lingering effects of their heterotopic encounter by timidly exploring other modes of moving and being. In the «space capsule» of the hotel, Philippe allows himself to be carried away in a simulation of zero gravity, miming a release from the forces that hold him down, and simulating the movement of matter itself—interacting equally with all lines of force as he bounces around. Unable to sleep, Simone procures a bottle of tequila, and they get drunk, but again, they both displace and resist one image of the future—Simone feels like she will vomit, and Philippe comforts her by noting that when she's pregnant she'll vomit all the time—while drawing on the temporary alteration of alcohol to allow them to make love. It almost happens, but Philippe has his cartography of the future in his goodbye letter on a customs map, and forecloses the transmutation of the hotel room into a scene of infidelity—in this instance, infidelity to himself and the image of the «plus beau moment de ma vie» holding him in its thrall. Critics have read this point as the film losing its trajectory, but it is as much Simone and Philippe losing their nerve to own their experience, to live in the fold the counter-site of the desert has created.

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Creation and change first result only from the process of decomposition and disintegration, and the texture of the desert in these films implies much the same thing—that bodily integrity is ruptured in the heterotopic space. The fact that Simone and Philippe do not come together does not invalidate the experience of violent bodily change they undergo, rubbed raw by the virtual force of the heterotopic desert. A final scene illustrates the potential of this encounter with the desert and what they have resisted. As Simone and Philippe find the road and begin walking towards town, cars passing by their pleas to stop «as if we were ghosts», they begin to fight over the weight of their unmentioned history. Simone storms off the road to urinate, she crouches down, and we see an expression of terror come over her face. She races back to Philippe but cannot articulate her fear. He goes to look, and she cries out «stay here, Philippe». He finds a blackened corpse. A montage of shots and aural cues that follow are positioned ambiguously between a quick survey attempting to make sense of the scene, and a revelation of the speeds and slownesses of the other bodies at play in the desert assemblage. Flies buzz, snakes rattle, desert plants are mute witnesses to the violence of the scene, amplifying that violence in their indifferent duration. We are reminded here of other presences in the desert that pull against the tiny drama Simone and Philippe have been playing out, their personal history suddenly stretched out against the textured landscape. Here, we get a visual sense of the encounter with the desert as part of an assemblage. Philippe wants to stage his lovemaking with Simone in the desert as part of an idealized fantasy stemming from his unrequited love for her. Simone wants a mechanical encounter to produce a predetermined effect, a baby as a response to her near death encounter. Philippe's reaction and the interrogation of the desert witnesses that follows the shot of the body, the attention that we as viewers are asked to pay to the texture of the landscape as an invitation to sensing and becoming inflected by other durations, is something Philippe is both sensitive to and resistant towards.

### **In the fold of fantasy**

The desert functions in *Un 32 août sur terre* as a space for fantasy as outside of everyday life, but in arguing for a textured desert, I want to show how that kind of demarcation

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fails because of the disruptive force of the heterotopia. The violence of the random attack on Philippe at the end of the film shares the desert's excess, at once too random and too literal. However, the ending makes sense as an examination of desire and its frustration by the limits of habits and fearfulness. In a conventional romance, both Simone and Philippe would come to recognize that they are meant to be together. The heterotopic mirror, however, defers recognition in favour of enduring recomposition. Both Philippe and Simone are locked into fixed images of the other that makes their future simultaneously impossible and unnecessary; they have preconditioned the real. The desert becomes an opportunity to for them to break out of their habits, to find a different way to act and move—a suspension of knowing what to do that is the basis for ethical action, producing a different kind of love. When Philippe is attacked at the end of the film, he has just phoned Simone who says one word to him—come. He hangs up the phone, still hesitating, and sees the men in the car go by, spinning out in the intersection to leave a circle of smoking rubber on the ground. He bends down and touches it. Here at last is the delayed contact with the blackened body in the desert, transposed to another heterotopic space (the crossroad) that brings the desert back into the present with an untimely force. This delayed contact transports Philippe to a floating space between life and death—he's there and he's not there in the hospital bed. The film ends with what seems to be a dream of Simone's, where the staging of bodies in space renders their shared experience implausible. Climbing a bluff, Simone and Philippe split up—Simone circling behind the camera, which stays with Philippe until she meets with him again. We cut to a two-shot as they look into the distance, the Great Salt Lake Desert only a glimmer of white far on the horizon. «I can't think of a single reason to go down there», Simone says, to which Philippe replies, «You shouldn't try to think of one». There is a cut to a shot from behind Simone as she turns to look at him, but he is already in front of her, halfway down the slope. «Stay with me, Philippe» Simone whispers from off screen. Here, the desert's heterotopic potential seems contained as a space of death and passage away, not connection, but I would argue it is precisely in this potential as site of assemblage that the desert retains in its power. After this dream, calendar time rebegins on September 5. Time has passed without proper accounting; it is literally lost time here.

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In spring 2009, Denis Villeneuve found himself at home again, in the deserts of Jordan shooting *Incendies*, an adaptation of Wajdi Mouawad's play. The textured desert is *Un 32 août sur terre* forces thought, dehabituating action for Simone and Philippe to mark their difficult, uncertain becomings, and the threat of failure that accompanies the productive force of desire lived small. The memory of water in the desert that was a lakebed saturates the environment for characters in a heterotopic, heterochronic space, and the urge need for water driving them out of that space is left unquenched at the films end. Back in the capsule hotel, Simone pulls out a bottle of water from the mini-bar in disgust. «C'est plate quand on soit alcoolique», later giving in to the altered state of drunkenness but fearful of fluidity of water as environment.

The film's structures folds together Simone and Philippe's accidents, connected by the defaced roads and the settings, glimpsed outside of Philippe's hospital, of the electrical towers in green fields which surrounding Simone's hospital as well— intrusive symbols of communication and connection. This mismatched chime of their encounter could suggest two things: firstly, that the entire film has been Simone's fever dream, that it is she who «floats between worlds» after her accident in a delirious temporality trying to dream her back into life. A strictly subjective reading, however, does violence to the liminality of subjective perspective in the film itself. In describing a «liquid perception» in cinema that shows the possibility of moving between an objective and subjective pole of perception, Deleuze asks: «what could be more subjective than a dream, a delirium, a hallucination? But what can be closer to a materiality made up of luminous wave and molecular interaction?» («Cinema 1» 76) Such a movement recalls the desert, where Simone and Philippe's perception are drawn towards the molecular play of matter. Yet another reading of the ending, though, suggests that Simone and Philippe have somehow swapped places, his random accident the delayed force of the violence of her crash, Philippe the unseen lover now become the loved one, Simone whispering to him in his hospital bed «I want you to keep your eyes closed when we make love». But what feels unsatisfying in the failure of a mutual recognition between Simone and Philippe is what makes the film itself an experiment in provoking thought. Villeneuve's heterotopic cinema is at home in the difficult becomings of a textured desert.

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### Notes

[1] See for instance, Deleuze's discussion of the trip/ ballade of French New Wave cinema in the chapter "Beyond the Movement-Image" in *Cinéma 2: The Time Image*.

[2] Foucault's sense that desire is a hopelessly compromised term is well known, but Deleuze argued for the importance of desire as productive assemblage that he and Guattari conceived as a way to reopen Foucault's thought. See, for example, Deleuze's essay «Désir et Plaisir», first published in a special issue of *Magazine littéraire* devoted to Foucault's work, now reprinted in *Deux régimes de fous* (112-122).

[3] See, for instance, "On the Survival of Images" in Bergson's *Matter and Memory*.

[4] Deleuze and Guattari differentiate between the mechanical as reproduction of sameness and the machinic as a synthesis of heterogenic elements producing difference.

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