

The Anti-Politics of Bertrand Bonello's *Nocturama*

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Abstract

With *Nocturama* (2016), Bertrand Bonello sought to capture a *zeitgeist* – the affective structure of France in the 2010s. He wrote a script about ten young people orchestrating a series of bombings in Paris, the film conveying the sense that something decisive could soon occur. Then, decisive things did happen: terror attacks at *Charlie Hebdo* (2015), Stade de France (2015), the Bataclan (2015), and in the city of Nice (2016). The release of *Nocturama* was consequently delayed.

Drawing on an eclectic range of writings by Lauren Berlant, Étienne de La Boétie, Jean-François Lyotard, and the *Comité invisible*, this article analyses *Nocturama* in view of understanding the French *zeitgeist* of the 2010s and the precariousness embodied by the film's young protagonists. Particular attention is given to the ways in which the film's abstraction and formalism shape our experience of violence and terror. The article argues that the film gives itself over to the ambiguities of our time, occupying a provocative position that can be called "anti-political".

Keywords: Terror; Affective mapping; Comité invisible; Cinematic formalism; Anti-politics.

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1 Introduction

It takes almost ten minutes before the first bit of dialogue can be heard in Bertrand Bonello's *Nocturama* (2016) ("Good afternoon, Miss"/ "Good afternoon, I have booked a room for Sophie Barrault for one night"), and more than twenty-two minutes before a conversation exceeding this merely transactional level takes place. At that point, we have been introduced to most of the film's ten young protagonists. After aerial shots of a sunny Paris, we have followed these characters as they walk down streets and travel through metro tunnels, sometimes meeting up, then separating, photographing with their mobile phones, seemingly receiving instructions, then dropping their phones in bins. These clearly choreographed actions play out to a pulse-like electronic score composed by Bonello himself, keeping the momentum going: this feels like a heist movie – something is about to happen.

It was precisely this feeling Bonello aimed for when he scripted and directed *Nocturama*. He wanted to capture a zeitgeist characterised by the sense that something disruptive and violent was about to happen: a terror attack, an insurrection, a revolution? He wrote *Nocturama*, imagining a diverse group of young people coming together, carrying out a politically motivated assassination and four synchronous attacks at symbolic sites in Paris: bombing the headquarters of a major bank in Paris's financial district (La Défense), orchestrating car bombings outside the historic stock exchange (la Bourse), setting fire to the gold-plated statue of Jeanne d'Arc, opposite from the Louvre, and bombing the Ministry for the Interior (Hôtel Beauvau). The script was written in 2010, but the project was put on hold when an Yves Saint Laurent biopic was offered to Bonello.¹

At the end of 2014, *Nocturama* (initially titled *Paris est une fête*) was almost completed and scheduled for release the following autumn. Then 2015 saw a wave of Islamist terror attacks sweep across France: in January, seventeen people were killed at the offices of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* and at a Jewish supermarket in Paris; in November, 137 people were killed at the concert venue Bataclan, at Stade de France, and in the streets of Paris. The film was postponed and its title changed. The following summer (2016), another major attack took place in Nice on the Bastille Day: eighty-six people died and almost five hundred were injured. Still, the film was released on 31 August 2016 to a highly mixed critical response: in *Positif*, Michel Ciment (2016) accused Bonello of being irresponsible ("By refusing all contextualisation to content himself with mere observation and the cultivation of artistic vagueness, Bonello has created an irresponsible film", 47), and in *Cahiers du Cinema*, Gaspar Nectoux argued that the film illustrated how "French cinema still struggles with its political vacuity" (2016: 48). On the other hand, in *Les Inrockuptibles*, Jean-Marc Lalanne (2016) celebrated the nuanced portrait of the young terrorists ("the film points to the great naivety of its protagonists, their absolute confusion about everything, without ever breaking with the absolute empathy that it maintains for their anger, their fragility, that part of their innocence that lies at the heart of their criminality"); and in *Le Monde* Jean-François Rauger (2016) wrote somewhat grandiloquently of the alchemy of great films:

A great film is recognised through its capacity to bring to a high degree of fusion several of cinema's essential and contradictory characteristics: rendering ideas sensible and filming bodies in movement, producing thought and capturing visible reality. The new work of Bertrand Bonello has succeeded in realising this delicate alchemy.

The present article analyses Bonello's attempt at capturing the affective structure of the 2010s. To do so, it places *Nocturama* in relation to a number of both filmic and critical intertexts, many of which played a role in the film's conceptualisation. Throughout the study of these intertextual relations, particular attention will be paid to the question of how the film's abstract and formalist aesthetic relate to its treatment of terror and violence. Often, form and abstraction are reductively played out against intense affects such as violence and eroticism – as if form and abstraction were antithetical to desire and the affective. *Nocturama* disturbs any

1. *Saint Laurent* (2014) resonates with *Nocturama*: focusing on the ten most groundbreaking years in the designer's career, Bonello explores what it means to be the crystallisation of a zeitgeist, and the price an individual artist pays to occupy this position. In addition to moving from an individual (*Saint Laurent*) to a group (*Nocturama*), a key difference between the two projects is that the latter is set in the present. This desire to work in and with the present was exactly what motivated *Nocturama* (which was originally conceived as a counterpoint to Bonello's unorthodox period drama *House of Tolerance* [2011]).

such dichotomy.² Here, it will be argued that in *Nocturama*, abstraction and violence interact in ways that reveal key contradictions in our contemporary “structures of feeling” (see Williams, Raymond (1977)). As we shall see (and as the quotations from the French critics suggest), the film allows for so many contradictions that it becomes challenging to place politically; still, the end of the article will introduce the notion of “anti-politics” to attempt precisely such a placement.

2 “An irresponsible film”

Nocturama consists of two distinct parts. The first takes place during the day and shows the build-up to the attacks. We see the young people (mostly in their twenties) visiting the sites of terror, preparing the attacks. Occasionally, we have flashbacks to planning meetings, but we mainly watch moving bodies and wordless interactions. Bonello alternates between panoramic shots of Paris, and Steadicam tracking shots of his characters as they walk through streets, metro-tunnels, endless hallways and corridors in office buildings.

The film not only borrows from the heist genre (showing strictly choreographed movements, offering a precise mapping of time and space through the use of time stamps and a metro map), it also takes inspiration from two *Elephants*. Firstly, Bonello draws on Alan Clarke's almost wordless made-for-television TV-film *Elephant* (1989), which shows eighteen murders during “the Troubles” in Northern Ireland, repetitively staged: typically, the camera follows a man who is walking; this man then meets another man, and he either shoots the newcomer or is shot by him. Then we move to the next murder. Bonello screened Clarke's film for his cast before they started filming. Clarke's film also inspired Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* (2003) about the 1999 killings at Columbine High School in Colorado. From Clarke, Bonello borrows the minimalism and the tracking of characters (often from behind); with Van Sant he shares the interest in young people, and the subtle deconstruction of the temporal and spatial rigidity found in Clarke's film. For whereas the effectiveness of Clarke's film largely results from how it mechanically marches on – murder after murder – Van Sant and Bonello create a more labyrinthine structure: their films folding back on themselves, showing the same events several times from different perspectives. In Bonello's case, the time stamps therefore repeat, generating a kind of stuttered advancement (15.15... 15.15... 15.30... 15.30...16.18...), punctuated by flashback sequences that have no precise temporal location. Spatially, the film also jumps between locations, often without clearly announcing these transitions. The effect is not only the production of a labyrinthine structure and an insistence on simultaneity, but also a blurring of mental and physical spaces, sometimes in the form of “free indirect style point-of-view shots” (Pasolini 2005: 176). The point, however, is not that *Nocturama* is undoing structure, rather there is an excess of structure, which suggests that it is possible to lose oneself through overzealous mapping. As Morari (forthcoming) aptly puts it, in this manner “[r]eality becomes abstract, the real world de-realized”. This first section then culminates in explosions and fires presented in a four-way split screen (Fig. 1).

After the attacks, the terrorists hide in the Samaritaine department store in central Paris. Customers are instructed to return to their homes as the city goes into lockdown.³ When the doors have closed, the young terrorists emerge from their hiding places. The second part of the film now takes place mostly inside the store, at night. The terrorists take advantage of what is on offer. Some dress up in the store's luxury clothes (Fendi, Issey Miyake, etc.), stealing jewellery or Montblanc fountain pens; they eat together, drinking wine and cognac from the delicatessen. Later, they watch news reports about their bombings on the giant TV-screens placed in the hi-fi section of the store, where they also play and discuss their music. As the night advances, they increasingly panic, realising that a SWAT (Special Weapons and Tactics) team is coming to get them. In a repetitive fifteen-minute ending, these special forces break into the store and shoot the terrorists, one by one. With one notable exception, these young people all appear ordinary: they are fascinated by the luxury goods

2. For a sustained critique of this dichotomy, see Brinkema, Eugenie (2014). *The Forms of the Affects*. Durham: Duke University Press and Brinkema, Eugenie (2022) *Life-Destroying Diagrams*. Durham: Duke University Press.

3. In her excellent chapter on *Nocturama*, Codruța Morari (forthcoming) pairs the film with *Zombi Child* (Bonello 2019) under the heading “Insurrection”; but she also more briefly brings it up in a chapter on “Lockdown” (which mainly concerns *L'Apollonide: Souvenirs de la maison close* [House of Tolerance, Bonello 2011] and *Coma* [Bonello 2022]).

Fig. 1. – *Nocturama* (Bonello 2016)

in the store, they are afraid of dying, they turn up their music.⁴ As we learn from the television reports playing on the flat screens, they issue no political statements or demands – they never even claim the attacks.

It is worth stressing that *Nocturama*'s second part has no counterpoint in either of the two *Elephants*. Elsewhere, I have argued that (for very good reasons) Van Sant's film does not explain the killings at Columbine High School (Lübecker 2015). I believe it would be equally reductive to say that Bonello's film explains the attacks. However, the explanatory vacuum is arguably even more disturbing in *Nocturama* than in *Elephant*, because the former spends half of its running time with the terrorists *after* the attacks (whereas in *Elephant* there is no *after* the attacks). Bonello's provocation lies in what the film (almost) does not do: it (almost) does not do sociology, it (almost) does not do psychology, it (almost) does not offer a moral or ethical framing.⁵ One way to approach it is to turn to the notion of precarity.

3 A cinema of precarity

As is well-known the idea of a "cinema of precarity" was first theorised in Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (2011). Berlant's argument was developed within the broader context of her title concept, which refers to the tragic situation in which people bind their desires to a goal that runs counter to their own interests. Analysing Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardennes's *Rosetta* (1999), Berlant emphasises that the protagonist craves normalcy: she wants to be a regular employee in a factory system that would, in the long run, destroy her. Rosetta is 16 years old, and youth plays an important role in Berlant's analysis.⁶ Youth is typically a moment when we are not (yet) fully part of the system but may desire to be so. In Berlant's theorisation, precarity is therefore not reducible to economic class thinking. Instead, she references Jean-Claude Barbier who goes as far as to "argu[e that] in the French case 'precariat' has become elastic, describing an affective atmosphere penetrating all classes" (2011: 201). Precariousness has to do with a "corrosion of security" (2011: 193), as Berlant writes with reference to Sennett, Hardt & Negri; an instability that "neoliberal economic practices mobilize" (2011: 192). Films such as Laurent Cantet's *L'emploi du temps* (2001) and *Ressources humaines* (2000), featuring relatively wealthy

4. The exception is Fred, who works as a security guard at the Samaritaine. He is meant to pacify four colleagues in the security team by tying them up, but – psychopathically – he goes off script and kills them.

5. All this is, of course, deliberate. We may wish for the film to explore identitarian categories such as race and sexuality, but to understand *Nocturama* we need to take seriously its refusal to do this. This is why I disagree with Malina Guha's (2021) critique of *Nocturama*. Guha first claims that Bonello is interested in intersectionality (I do not think he is), and then that he is no more adept on difference than multinational corporations doing Benetton politics: "Bonello's penchant for the abstraction and levelling of certain forms of difference undermines the film's attempts at intersectionality, transforming such gestures into a vague universalism" (2021: 264).

6. An important role, but not a necessary one. Berlant's following chapter focuses on Laurent Cantet's *L'emploi du temps* and *Ressources humaines*, two films centred on middle-aged characters.

characters, suggest that “the precariat must be a fundamentally affective class” (2011: 195). This affectivity manifests itself in bodily gestures, in proprioceptive patterns, and linguistic quirks, which Berlant analyses in detail.

Much of Berlant's analysis is pertinent to *Nocturama* also. There is just enough sociology in the film for us to understand that many of the young terrorists are in a precarious situation, suffering from a “corrosion of security”. Different scenes show their difficulties in finding a job or being students. As in Berlant's text, precariousness is affective and elastic, stretching across classes. One emblematic scene shows the most privileged group member, André, as he tries to deposit a cheque but ends up stuck in the double-lock entry system of his bank. Here, he speaks to a security camera, which responds in a robotic voice, while he suffers an attack of claustrophobia – trapped in the securitarian hell of modern capitalism.

As mentioned, Bonello's ambition was to capture a “structure of feeling”, and for him too, this structure manifests in bodily dispositions and gestures. In reference to Clarke's film, he speaks about the difference between a normal walk and the way one walks when about to commit a radical act of violence. More generally, he explains that he “worked a lot on movement and gesture [...] The film is meticulously arranged. Every movement, every angle, every change in angle” (DVD Booklet, 10-11). Furthermore, and again like *Rosetta*, *Nocturama* includes significant performance and dance scenes that briefly point to the possibility that human relations could be different (we shall return to a few of those moments later).

Still, it must also be said that Berlant's discussion of a cinema of precarity privileges an aesthetic that lies far from Bonello's stylisations. She associates the cinema of precarity with a “new realism” which melds melodrama and politics. In relation to this aesthetic, Bonello's ambition to “be entirely concrete and abstract” leans much more towards abstraction than any film by the Dardennes – and, to a lesser extent, Cantet – has ever done; consequently, Bonello's film is decidedly un-melodramatic (he since tried his hand at melodrama with *The Beast* [2023]). In bringing the notion of precarity to bear on *Nocturama*, I am then following critics such as Guido Kirsten (2022) and Francesco Sticchi (2021), who have studied under this label an aesthetically more diverse set of films. But if Berlant's analysis remains interesting in relation to *Nocturama*, it is not just for its argument about the corrosion of security in neoliberal economies (felt with particular acuity by young people), nor for the attention she pays to the ways in which this affective disposition manifests itself in bodily, gestural and linguistic signs – it is primarily because *Nocturama* speaks to her broader argument about cruel optimism, about tying oneself to desires that produce insecurity and affective dispossession.

4 Cruel optimisms

At first, the terror attacks seem to place the young protagonists firmly outside any Rosetta-like desire for normalcy – perhaps on the side of the revolution (as Samir says: “what we have done is a crazy thing, nothing will ever be the same again”). However, the second part of Bonello's film complicates this reading. Indeed, Bonello's provocation is to show how a form of cruel optimism dominates the young people as they turn to what La Samaritaine has to offer.

As mentioned, the second part shows how the terrorists take possession of the clothes, food, and other luxury items in the department store. The film's couple (David and Sarah) have sex in the bed section, Yacine drinks cognac in a bathtub in the bathroom department (offering a *tableau vivant* of Jacques-Louis David's famous painting from the Reign of Terror: “The Death of Marat” [1793]); and earlier in the film, he re-enacts the go-kart scene from Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) by driving a miniature, electric Formula One car through the department store. La Samaritaine, therefore, is not only an emblematic site of consumerist capitalism, but also something like a “cultural department store”, where Bonello recycles famous images and film scenes, including also references to Romero, Carpenter and de Palma. In doing so, he reduces the distance between the young people in the film (whose desires have been stolen by and shaped in capitalist machinery) and himself (whose images also – deliberately – appear as variations on other images). But the point is not only that these young terrorists take possession of what can be found in La Samaritaine, but also that the department store is already possessing them – shaping their desire. This is communicated most demonstratively in two scenes where Yacine and André meet their mannequin doubles: capitalism seemingly having anticipated their identities (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. – *Nocturama* (Bonello 2016)

In this second part of the film, the many scenes with music and dance are particularly significant. For instance, Yacine puts on lipstick and eyeliner, and then offers a drag-like performance of Shirley Bassey's "My Way" (1996). This song can be understood as a hymn to modern individualism, which the young terrorist both queers and confirms in a performance demonstrating the elasticity of the modern individualism – its availability to a wide range of identities: the white Italian American man (Sinatra), the Black British Caribbean woman (Bassey) and the young French North African drag performer (Yacine). What we all have in common is "doing it my way" (in exactly the same way).

Another significant music choice is Willow Smith's "I Whip My Hair" (2010). Fred and David discuss the track and its video. David finds the video morally reprehensible, as it shows a 10-year-old girl all MTV'ed up, sexualised in a manner that verges on child exploitation – arguably appealing to a paedophilic gaze. Fred (who previously shot his colleagues in the Samaritaine security team) is less concerned: he finds the track "awesome". The video (which is not shown in the film) is indeed provocative. It opens in a classroom full of robotic children/teenagers wearing white clothes in a sterile school/asylum/penitentiary environment. Then Willow Smith arrives with a ghetto blaster, she dips her hair (extensions) into pots of colour and whips it around, bringing everything to life, revolting against the repressive school system. She takes her revolt further into the school – wearing a T-shirt with the text "I love me" – and eventually gets the teachers to dance. In other words, revolt is here a ten-year-old girl who loves herself and splashes colour. Bonello plays the track (and the discussion between Fred and David) over TV images of the bombings, which the terrorists now see for the first time. As Sabina joins the two young men, these images become increasingly abstract, Bonello using "free indirect point of view shots" (Fig. 3) to show Sabina losing herself in the fire. The scene raises the question of whether *Nocturama* should be read as a critique of the young – of their desire to inhabit a capitalist world and to blow it to pieces. Is Bonello suggesting that the revolt of his protagonists is like Willow Smith's: completely devoid of politics, a purely gestural, self-centred "I love me" act?

No, Bonello is aiming for something more ambiguous. He is fascinated by the co-existence of terrorist and consumerist desires among the young. He therefore describes the intended viewing experience in the following terms:

We follow the first part easily because there is movement, because symbols are blown up. We do not desire to see the second part, because we think that they are not that organised, since they have been ensnared by consumer society. However, we finish by understanding them and feeling empathy for them, we do not wish to see them die. This is the entire difference between a social film and a political film. Social films are more pleasing because they only show one point of view, and we are always in agreement with the law of the weakest. The second part was necessary to

Fig. 3. – *Nocturama* (Bonello 2016)

show that these kids are a complete product of society. It is a mess in their heads.⁷ (Bonello in Burdeau 2016)

So, whereas Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* stays close to his young protagonists throughout, Bonello's takes half a step away from his. The idea is not to mock the young terrorists for their confusion (Bonello underlines that he has no desire to make them appear as idiots), but to show and explore this confusion.

To deepen the analysis of the complex double bind between terrorism and consumerism, we can add two more texts about destructive desires – both eventually disowned by their authors. The first, mentioned by Bonello in many of his interviews about *Nocturama*, is Étienne de La Boétie's *Discours de la servitude volontaire*. This text was written around 1548, at a time when La Boétie (as Bonello emphasises) was still in his late teens. Bonello reread this classic before the filming began and gave it to his actors.

Like Berlant and Bonello (but 460 years earlier), La Boétie is interested in our seemingly unhealthy psychic investments. He investigates these investments at the level of the state, asking: why is that we voluntarily – and even enthusiastically – submit ourselves to a single ruler (and his close entourage)?

La Boétie's text has been read in multiple ways: for instance, as a forerunner for Kant's *What is Enlightenment?* (Goyard-Fabre in La Boétie 1983), and as a radical anarchistic, anti-state provocation (which comes closer to Bonello's characterisation of the text as "a call to insurrection", DVD booklet, 10). If this range of interpretations is possible, it is largely because – as Pierre Clastres notes, more directly than most – La Boétie never really answers his own key question (in La Boétie 2002: 254). There is no social or psychological explanation for our fall into servitude, no hypothesis as to why we step back from the freedom that La Boétie presents as man's natural state. Indeed, the value and originality of the text – its ability to trouble our certainties – lies in raising this disturbing question, arguing for its centrality, and then leaving it partly unanswered. And, as Claude Lefort points out (in La Boétie 2002: 279), once the question has been raised, it is impossible to ignore its ability to destabilise power.

What La Boétie *does* explain is how a system of voluntary servitude (of cruel optimism) is allowed to endure. Here he emphasises the damaging effects of habits and customs – our desire to cling to what we consider commonly shared values and practices. Once we have fallen into servitude (a fall that is voluntary, and not the result of any master-slave dialectic), it is difficult to liberate oneself. There is a whole set of social practices which solidify what he calls the pyramidal structure of society. And yet – as La Boétie repeatedly insists – the paradox is that freedom is possible *here and now*. All it takes is an effort to refuse participation: "Be resolved to serve no more, and you are at once free" (1983: 139).

7. In the following part of the interview, Bonello establishes a distinction between the political discourse of young people in the 1960-70s, who had a clearer sense of what they wanted, and the young of today, who are "between political consciousness and unconsciousness"; this "between" was the space he wanted to explore.

Before returning to Bonello, let us consider a second, more explicitly scandalous approach to the problem of servitude and unhealthy psychic investments. This approach is found in Lyotard's (self-described) "evil book": *Économie libidinale* (1977) – a text Bonello does not reference.⁸ In some of the book's most famous passages, Lyotard emphasises that there is pleasure to be found in servitude. Writing about the English working class – miners, steelworkers, etc. – he provocatively argues that as they slaved away in hell, their bodies being destroyed by horrendous working conditions, they found pleasure:

[they] enjoyed the mad destruction of their organic body which was indeed imposed upon them, they enjoyed the decomposition of their personal identity, the identity that the peasant tradition had constructed for them, enjoyed the dissolution of their families and villages, and enjoyed the new monstrous *anonymity* of the suburbs and the pubs in the morning and evening. (Lyotard 2015: 123–24)

And as if this were not enough, Lyotard ups the ante in a direct address to his readers. The address suggests that his text – as much as reflecting on the continued relevance of Marx – is driven by an intense aversion to contemporary mainstream Marxism:

And here's the question: Why, political intellectuals, do you *incline towards* the proletariat? In commiseration for what? I understand why a proletarian would hate you, not because you are bourgeois, privileged smooth-skinned types, but because you dare not say the only important thing there is to say, that one can enjoy swallowing the cum of capital, its materials, its metal bars, its polystyrene, its books, its sausage pasta, swallowing tons of it till you burst – and instead of saying this [...] you say: ah, but that's alienation, that's not good, hang on, we'll save you from it, we will work to liberate you from this wicked affection for servitude, we will give you back your dignity. And in this way you situate yourselves on the most despicable side, the moralistic side where you desire that our capitalized's desire be totally ignored, forbidden, brought to a standstill, you are like priests with sinners, our servile intensities frighten you, you have to tell yourselves: how they must suffer to endure that! And of course we suffer, we the capitalized, but this does not mean that we do not enjoy. (Lyotard 2015: 128. Italics in the original, translation modified)

The tone of Lyotard's critique of moralising intellectuals lies far from anything we find in Bonello (Berlant and La Boétie). But Lyotard's text is helpful for two reasons. First, it draws attention to the enunciatory position of the social critic (Lyotard's intense dislike of those who speak from a moralist-progressive position, policing other people's desire and, in that process, objectifying those they claim to save). Second, it highlights the ambiguities of desire itself, showing how pleasure and pain intermingle within a capitalist economy and insists that any social critique must take such complexities into account. Bonello's film resonates with these texts in so far as it recognises the co-existence of pleasure and pain in contemporary society, the thrill of terror and consumerism. In doing so, it avoids the moralising position that Lyotard rails against. This avoidance rests, principally, on the film's nuanced embrace of a radical formalism.

5 The ambiguity of formalism

La Boétie's analysis brought formalism and servitude together (we continue to serve because we allow ourselves to become trapped in social forms and customs); Lyotard brought servitude, pleasure and pain together. Taken together, these texts suggest that our desires can find satisfaction in formalism and servitude. This is communicated throughout *Nocturama*.

The heist movie thrives on the pleasures of formalism – on precisely choreographed movements, symmetries, and patterns. This ambiguous (or perhaps, pharmacological) formalism can express itself as rhythm, dance, choreography, but it also connects to discipline, technocracy, and "cybernetic capitalism" (more about this term shortly). Importantly, these two realisations of the systemic – rhythm and technocracy – can be difficult

8. See also Mark Fisher's posthumously published lecture series *Postcapitalist Desire*. *Nocturama* arguably explores the contradictions of a certain form of postcapitalist desire.

to disentangle.⁹ And, as Lyotard (and David Graeber)¹⁰ might suggest, pleasure can be found both in rhythm and technocracy – by those who design the forms and by those who are formed through such designs.

The ambiguous pleasures of patterning are conveyed in many ways in the film; for instance, through another significant music choice which appears both within the film's diegesis and over its closing credits: John Barry's *Persuaders* theme from the early 1970s. This theme is constructed by layering: first a simple rhythmic pattern played on piano as a series of chords, then a bass ostinato played on a synthesizer, next a melody... Throughout, the tune remains gently melancholic, modulating between minor and major keys. Barry's theme communicates beautifully with the best-known version of the opening credits for the TV-series. These credits narrate the upbringings of the two main characters through newspaper clippings shown in a split-screen sequence: Tony Curtis's working-class childhood on the red side of the screen, Roger Moore's upper-class education on the blue side. Soon the class differences disappear, the split-screen dissolves, and the heroes begin working together. By placing lives into grid-like designs, the opening highlights the patterned nature of social existence. Bonello's film picks this up on multiple occasions – playing with split screen sequences and (as seen in Fig. 1) with four-way split sequences; sometimes offering CCTV-compositions to distance the spectator from the objectified protagonists (Fig. 4).¹¹



Fig. 4. – *Nocturama* (Bonello 2016)

What then is the effect of Bonello's formalism – his choreography? He communicates the allure of the dehumanising structures within which we are required to fit. The first part of the film, where the formalism is most prominent, places viewers alongside the young terrorists as we experience the sex appeal of the well-executed plan – an exceptionally rigid structure. Bonello's own fascination for form and patterning is crucial for the way it implicates him. The heist genre is one of the most meta-cinematic genres there is: heist films always implicate their directors. Essentially, they show how plotting is done, using maps and time codes, distributing roles among the plotters. Heist movies like *Nocturama* therefore (at least partially) turn filmmaking inside out, bringing film back to its storyboarded architecture. This allows Bonello to show the young terrorist's double bind without occupying the moralistic position that Lyotard derided: we see their desire to blow everything

9. It is possible to compare *Nocturama* to Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23, Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975). Like *Nocturama*, Akerman's film has a strong grid-like nature, not least because of the important role played by habits, repetitions and rituals. Of course, it also shows the disintegration of these formal structures, and, with Jeanne's orgasm and the murder that follows, the explosion of these norms. A typical way to read the film is to play desire against oppressive structures. A more Lyotardian reading would suggest that Jeanne's repetitions are erotically charged, and that the culmination at the end is propelled by the repetitions. Rather than a (comforting) thermodynamic reading that places desire on the side of vitality, we may suggest that desire and structure are entwined from the beginning, pushing each other on.

10. See Graeber, David (2016). *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy*. Brooklyn and London: Melville House Publishing.

11. Another example of this formalism – of Bonello's enthusiasm for patterning – is found in *Saint Laurent* (2014) where Bonello divides the screen to imitate the famous Piet Mondrian paintings from the 1950s – which Yves Saint Laurent had used as a Leitmotif in his 1965 collection.

to pieces, we see a fascination with consumer goods, so perfectly patterned that it produces scenes with dop-pelgänger (Fig. 2), and we participate in the pleasures of this structuration. Where does this leave the film politically?

6 Anti-politics?

To answer this question, let us consider a final intertextual relation: the writings of the radical leftwing groups Tiqqun and Comité invisible. Tiqqun was a collective organised around an eponymous journal, inspired, not least, by Guy Debord and the Situationists. The exact membership of Tiqqun is not known, but their major publications date from 1999 and 2001. It is commonly believed that this journal later mutated into the Comité invisible, another anonymous collective that published three influential volumes of social critique between 2007 and 2017 (before further mutations took place, leading to the *The Conspiracist Manifesto*, also published anonymously).¹² Particular attention was given to the Comité invisible in 2008 when the French state opened a criminal case against three men associated with the group, including Julian Coupat (often presented as the leader of both Tiqqun and Comité invisible), accusing them of terrorist sabotage against a TGV line. The prosecutors' case largely rested on a reading of the Comité invisible's tract *L'Insurrection qui vient* (2007, *The Coming Insurrection*), which therefore immediately became a national bestseller. Ultimately, the French state not only had to drop all charges but also found itself exposed when it became clear that certain pieces of evidence had been fabricated for the court case.

Bonello explains that some of the first-time actors in the film were recruited from leftwing environments in which Comité invisible texts were key reading: "they were very attached to *À nos amis*. For four or five of them it was their bedtime reading" (Bonello in Franck-Dumas and Gester 2016). In 2007, *L'Insurrection qui vient* (Comité invisible) had opened: "Everyone agrees. It's about to explode" (2009: 9). Seven years later, *À nos amis* (Comité Invisible 2014) takes stock:

The insurrections have come, finally. At such a pace and in so many countries, since 2008, that the whole structure of this world seems to be disintegrating, piece by piece. Ten years ago, predicting an uprising would have exposed you to the snickers of the seated ones; now it's those who announce a return to order who make themselves look foolish. (Comité Invisible 2014: 7)

These sentences bring us back to Bonello's motivations for making *Nocturama*, as described at the beginning of this text: his ambition was to make a film that conveyed the feeling that something decisive was about to happen. They also resonate with a significant moment in the second part of *Nocturama*, where David has left the Samaritaine and is walking the almost-empty streets of Paris at night. He meets a young girl (a cameo by Adèle Haenel),¹³ and, pretending not to know much, he asks her about the attacks. She answers that little is known about the perpetrators and their motivation, but "in any case, it was always going to happen". There is no doubt that Comité invisible and *Nocturama* explore the same zeitgeist.

Looking more closely at the writings of Tiqqun and Comité invisible, two key points are particularly interesting. First, the abovementioned idea of "cybernetic capitalism", as presented in Tiqqun's *L'Hypothèse cybernétique* (2020 [2001]) and again in Comité invisible's *À nos amis* (2015 [2014]). The point here is that our societies are dominated by hyper-technocratic structures. Caught in alienating feedback loops, human beings now exist solely for the system to run as smoothly as possible. To sustain this system, the state and supranational finance conglomerates produce a permanent crisis which induces individuals to sacrifice their desire for expression.

12. For an excellent overview of these writings, see Morrey, Douglas (2025). "Manifeste conspirationniste, Partie imaginaire, Comité invisible: a genealogy of radical critique in twenty-first-century France." *Modern & contemporary France* 33 (2), 209-224. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09639489.2024.2388707>.

13. The idea that it "had to happen" points back to an earlier scene, in which André tells Sarah how she can ace her exams at Sciences Po. He recommends that she propose a risky thesis, as he did himself, when he argued that democracy by necessity produces its own gravedigger. Retrospectively, the appearance of Haenel almost tips this scene towards the documentary register. She is not only well known for her many excellent performances (including one in Bonello's *House of Tolerance*), but also for her prominent role in the French #MeToo movement, and then for renouncing filmmaking at a moment when her "star" was shining exceptionally brightly: despairing of the capitalist film industry, she refused to play along and decided to devote her time to political activism and experimental theatre.

In Tiquun's analysis, there is no space for any Lyotardian pleasure of giving oneself over to such machinic logics. On the other hand, their analysis of our surrender to the system and its repressive violence has a distinctly Boétien tone. For instance, the Comité invisible repeatedly argues that current power structures persist because we allow them to, and that the most efficient thing we can do is to withdraw: "The population has never been the object of government without first being its product. It ceases to exist once it ceases to be governable" (2014: 114-115). But how does one cease to be governable?

This question brings us to our second point: Comité invisible is interesting for the solutions they propose. They distance themselves from any national or international organisation of life, instead pointing to instances of local, communal self-organisation outside the state. A recurring example is the improvised communities that emerged after the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina. As the American state went AWOL, people got together, helped each other, and organised life. There has never been, the Comité invisible insists, any need to organise people, they can do it themselves. Indeed, "the people" is what emerges when communities begin to organise themselves.

For such spontaneous organisation of collective life to occur, people must abandon traditional political structures, including conventional oppositional politics. Comité invisible frequently highlights the shortcomings of established left-wing politics. Most left-wing groupings respond to what is already in place, and their activities are therefore shaped by the very structures they oppose. Eager to escape this dialectic (and the inadequacy of oppositional tactics), Comité invisible opts for withdrawal, desertion, invisibility, and anonymity. They choose a tactical retreat – stepping away from the political field to destabilise the state. This move is described as a shift from politics to ethics: "almost all [...] contemporary revolts [...] are ethical before being political, or [...] they are political precisely to the degree that they're contemptuous of politics, including radical politics" (2014: 23).

The question, then, is whether the ambiguities and indeterminacy of Bonello's film – his refusal to bring a discourse or an ideology – can be understood along similar lines? Do the ambiguities and the darkness of *Nocturama* respond to the anonymity and invisibility of the Comité invisible?

In an interview cited above, we saw how Bonello differentiated between the social and the political film. He characterised the social film as pleasing, because it offers only one angle and always places the spectator on the right side morally (the side of the weakest). These are the kind of films that will appeal to Lyotard's priest-like, political intellectuals. Bonello did not define the political film, but it was implied that it does the opposite. For *Nocturama*, however, this the label ("political film") seems insufficient, too polite. It is worth remembering that the terrorist attacks do not come with political demands, that the event is not even claimed. A more anarchic dimension is found in *Nocturama*, one that comes closer to the tone of Comité invisible (and Tiquun) when they polemicise against politics. The film presents both a critique of contemporary capitalism *and* a desire to disturb the kind of leftwing politics that responds too directly, too symmetrically, to the violence of neoliberal economy. After decades of rising inequality under many different both conservative and supposedly leftwing Western governments, *Nocturama* refuses to take up a position within any political dialectic and instead conveys a frustration with the field of politics as it currently conceived.¹⁴

What about the more positive dimension of communal living that Comité invisible seeks to promote? A few instances of this communal feeling can be found in the film – the most notable being, as in Berlant's analysis of *Rosetta*, a dance sequence seen in a flashback (Fig. 5). After a preparatory meeting, the protagonists dance together, first individually, then coming together in a group hug (in which we may include Bonello, as the composer of the techno soundtrack heard in the scene). Because of the brevity of the scene (and because it precedes the attacks), there is a limit to how much optimism we can place on it. But then, other fleeting moments of tenderness and togetherness appear – for instance, when Yacine's "My Way" performance is met with a quiet approval by five of the youngsters watching from a couch. In such moments, Bonello hints that it is possible, here and now, to be together in meaningful ways and thereby shape our lives differently.

It is therefore tempting to characterise the film as "anti-political". This term does not mean that the film is a-political – that it does not deal with politics. Rather, the prefix "anti" signals a more active resistance to the

14. In the recent co-authored book with Pascale Cassagnau, Bonello writes of his admiration for the word "politics", whilst regretting how this word is mostly used today (see Bonello and Cassagnau 2025: 24).



Fig. 5. – *Nocturama* (Bonello 2016)

ways in which the political field is structured today. In this sense the film connects to a certain anarchy, a desire to undo the archē (the first principles) of contemporary political debate. Rather than contributing to debates, it communicates a desire to begin elsewhere – and to maximise moments of intimacy, such as the dance- and performance scenes, or the tender close-ups of the young crew. These – and the bite of the “anti” – are the elements through which *Nocturama* distances itself from nihilism. But is there a space for anti-politics in the context of the terror attacks of 2015 and 2016?

It seems logical to relate the film and the attacks, but what exactly might this relation be? Three answers are possible. First, it can be argued that Bonello's script was prescient, that it anticipated the terror that came. However, it is important to state clearly that Bonello's film – which brings together ten young people from both privileged and less privileged backgrounds, with different racial and religious characteristics – hardly connects to the kind of Islamist terror that swept across France in the mid-2010s. A second answer, then, is to say that the film gets it all wrong: the real-life terror had nothing to do with Sciences Po students with a fondness for Fendi. Despite the heterogeneity of the group, Bonello's film rather connects to the mythology of the well-educated, bourgeois terrorist who has become disenchanted with life (and is motivated by a desire to get back at his bourgeois family). This mythology is well-established in both literature and film (Paul Nizan's *La Conspiracy* [1938] and Jean-Luc Godard's *La Chinoise* [1967], for example), and it informed many journalistic pieces on Julian Coupat and the Comité invisible (which rarely failed to mention that Coupat is the son of a medical doctor and was a PhD student at the prestigious EHESS). This opens towards the third and better answer: a zeitgeist is always composite. Bonello's film connects less to the attacks of 2015 and 2016 than to intellectual stirrings found in other parts of French society. The dissatisfaction with – the revolt against – mainstream politics came (and continues to come) from many places. So, while it may be impossible to separate *Nocturama* entirely from (for instance) the Bataclan, establishing such a connection carries great risks of confusion. Still, this does not mean that Bonello's film failed to embody a structure of feeling particular to the 2010s. Nor does it mean that Bonello's film was inappropriate in the specific historical situation: in moments of crisis, there is (understandably) a tendency to look for answers, to limit complexity. Therefore, we turn to discourses seemingly conducive for immediate action, and as we do, we often marginalise complexities better expressed in art and culture. However, when a situation is complicated and critical, one would do wisely not to give up on the complicated, contradictory, and sometimes even “irresponsible” discourses of works such as Bonello's anti-political *Nocturama*.

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