

## **“I’m in Love with my Car”: Revisiting the Aesthetics of Petroleum in *Crash* (1996), *Death Proof* (2007), and *Titane* (2021)**

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### **Abstract:**

Building on Stephanie LeMenager’s work on petroculture, this paper reflects on how cinema can reorient the dominant aesthetics of petroleum not against, but through our affective attachment to cars. By reading Julia Ducournau’s *Titane* alongside David Cronenberg’s *Crash* (1996) and Quentin Tarantino’s *Death Proof* (2007), I show how the film unpacks the petrocultural identities while making oil not only visible but also palpably material and embodied. *Titane* playfully inhabits the dominant fossil imaginaries and, in the process, redraws the aesthetics of petroleum in intriguing ways. Ultimately, and perhaps somewhat unexpectedly, Ducournau’s film creates space for more sustainable futures based on new forms of kinship and the ethics of care.

**Keywords:** aesthetics of petroleum, car movies, horror cinema, petroidentities.

### **Introduction: Living/Loving Oil**

Music writer Tom Reynolds once described “I’m in Love with My Car,” a 1975 song written by the British band Queen’s drummer Roger Taylor, as “one of the greatest and most passionate love songs [...], which offers more real devotion than a thousand Mariah ballads” (2008, 249). The music video features the footage of vintage cars, Formula One racing, and Taylor himself chanting about his “automo-love.” At the end of the video, revving sounds play from a recording of Taylor’s car, an Alfa Romeo. Exactly a decade later in 1985, Aretha Franklin releases a music video for her song “Freeway of Love,” filmed in Detroit and interspersed with footage from the assembly lines for manufacturing automobiles, the General Motors building, sky shots of the maze of highways, and dancers featured in and around cars. Franklin sings: “City traffic’s movin’ way too slow / Drop the pedal and go, go, go [...] Wind’s against our

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backs / We're goin' ridin' on the freeway of love / In my pink Cadillac." The closing shot shows her in the vehicle riding into the iconic sunset, the car being driven by a man. Three decades later, Julia Ducournau makes history at the 2021 Cannes Film Festival by becoming the first solo female director to win the Palme d'Or for *Titane*, a film about a serial killer and automotive show dancer (Alexia) who displays an affective and sexual attraction to cars.<sup>1</sup> In one of the most discussed scenes Alexia has intercourse with her beloved vehicle, a flame-streaked vintage Cadillac. In an unexpected turn of events, she then becomes pregnant.

Building on Stephanie LeMenager's (2014) work on petroculture—in which she explores different aspects of “living oil,” what she also describes as “loving oil”—this paper sheds light on how Ducournau's *Titane* reimagines the prevalent aesthetics of petroleum through the protagonist's excessive devotion to cars. For LeMenager, the petroleum aesthetics is closely interrelated with American masculinity, with car cultures, and with “loving media dependent on fossil fuels or petroleum feedstock from the early to mid-twentieth century” (2014, 66), cinema included. Deriving meaning of “aesthetic” from its etymological root as relating to perception and sensibility, and from what LeMenager calls “ideologies of the aesthetic,” that is, “forms of representation and value expressed by means of display, spectacle, concealment, and stealth,” she shows not only how we are dependent upon petroleum, but also how it enables forms of social relations and perception (2014, 6). If in 1992, in the wake of the first Gulf war, Amitav Ghosh lamented that literature does not address “oil encounters,”<sup>2</sup> notwithstanding that petroleum saturates geopolitics and our day-to-day living, LeMenager underscores the often-unrecognized embodied pleasures of living/loving oil: “We experience ourselves, as moderns and most especially as modern Americans, every day in oil, living within oil, breathing it and registering it with our senses” (2014, 6). The scholar explicitly focuses on the role of petroleum in the US context, but as she clarifies, the petroleum aesthetics enlivened “much of the world” (2014, 66).<sup>3</sup> Arguably, in the twenty-first century, our continued dependence on the oil economy suggests that petroleum aesthetics still envelop our collective imagination.<sup>4</sup>

Taking LeMenager's insightful comments as a starting point, in this paper I seek to reflect on cinema and living/loving oil today. I explore whether films can reorient the aesthetics of petroleum toward more sustainable modes of being—not *against*, but *through* our affective attachment to petroleum-fueled cars. This article stems from my own affective investments in car movies and, more broadly, in a representational regime underlying a profoundly unsustainable energy system—this is what LeMenager calls “a destructive attachment, bad love” (2014, 11), and Lauren Berlant “cruel optimism” (2011). Berlant famously argued,

“Aesthetics is not only the place where we rehabilitate our sensorium by taking in new material [...] it provides metrics for understanding how we pace and space our encounters with things” (2011: 12). Drawing on this understanding of aesthetics, I pose the following questions, aiming to contribute to the emerging petrocultural film studies<sup>5</sup>: Can films about cars rehabilitate our (petro)sensorium? What if loving oil-dependent cars becomes excessive, messy, and obscene? If, as Ghosh proposes, petroleum is “unspeakable” in arts because it is “viscous, foul-smelling, repellent to all the senses” (2016, 48), then what happens when the deep-hidden oily substance comes to the surface? And finally, if car cultures (re)produce hegemonic petrocultural identities in relation to gendered discourses on automobility, can cinema resist such discourses and engender new subjectivities?

In order to address these questions, I read *Titane* in close connection with other films about cars, with a special focus on *Crash* (1996), David Cronenberg’s adaptation of J. G. Ballard’s 1973 novel of the same name (a film to which *Titane* was frequently compared after its release),<sup>6</sup> and Quentin Tarantino’s *Death Proof* (2007), a tribute to 1970s exploitation cinema that merges the slasher film and car movies. Filmed in Toronto, *Crash* is replete with aerial shots of highways and car parks like those found in Aretha Franklin’s Detroit. Yet Cronenberg’s focus on lethal accidents departs from the cheerful tone of Franklin’s piece and, in this aspect, it evokes *Death Proof*, a film that gleefully exaggerates and ultimately challenges the association between masculinity, open roads and speed that permeates popular culture, as illustrated in Taylor’s “I’m in Love with My Car.” Both films are concerned with cars, the act of driving and petroleum infrastructures—which, as LeMenager observes in her discussion of the petroleum aesthetics, became the focus of particular attention in the 1950s and 1960s road novel, when the American petrocultural scenery “reached its classic form”: “the now ordinary U.S. landscape of highways, [...] fast food and gasoline service islands, and shopping centers ringed by parking lots or parking towers” (2014, 71, 74). Even though *Crash* is set in Toronto (and Ballard’s source novel in London), the geographical location seems to have a limited significance. What really matters is the world of roads, high speed and car crashes.

In contrast to *Crash*’s and *Death Proof*’s ostensible celebration of the thrill of acceleration and the pleasure of driving (and crashing) a car, *Titane*’s focus is on an often strikingly immobile automobile. What initially seems like a deadly tale about a female psychopath on the run shapeshifts into a tender, if outlandish, love story between a body-building macho firefighter and the protagonist masquerading as his long-awaited son. But despite these differences, much like Cronenberg and Tarantino, Ducournau is interested in the bodily vulnerability, car crashes and the relationship between gendered automobility, desire,

and death. I argue that *Titane* builds on *Death Proof*'s and *Crash*'s petroaesthetics, but it pushes it in a new direction. By staging “strange” encounters between humans and cars, *Titane* opens the notion of kinship beyond heteronormativity and the frontiers of humanity and, in doing so, it unpacks and queers the petrocultural identities that populate car movies.<sup>7</sup> The film playfully inhabits the dominant fossil fuel imaginaries and, in the process, redraws the aesthetics of petroleum in intriguing ways: it not only makes oil visible but also gives it a palpable, visceral presence through the protagonist's embodiment of it.<sup>8</sup>

Though not explicitly, *Crash*, *Death Proof* and *Titane* engage with the issues surrounding oil consumption, and they do so through their almost idolatrous worship of cars. Putting these films in dialogue not only expands and refines our understanding of petrocultures in the varied generic forms, but also illuminates something of the affective and aesthetic potential of the halted automobility. As I show, all three films incorporate the petroleum aesthetics in distinct ways, whether through the depiction of highways, stylish petrol-fueled vehicles or recognizable petroidentities, but their focus on the car crash and their simultaneous engagement with the horror genre conventions invite a different sort of questions than those posed by the genre of the petroleum-based mobility *par excellence*, the American road movie—a genre which has attracted the most attention to date from critics of petroculture.<sup>9</sup>

While much existing theoretical work on petrocultures centers on the US, this article extends and adapts LeMenager's line of argument to other settings, aiming to help disentangle the varied affective and aesthetic forms of oil culture. The French context is particularly interesting due to France's history of the automobile in cinema and its relationship with the US tradition. As Kristin Ross shows in *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies* (1995), French postwar filmmakers often displayed a deep fascination with American automobiles and other American mass-produced goods. Some examples include the cars featured in films such as *Mon oncle* (Jacques Tati, 1958), *Lola* (Jacques Demy, 1960), *La belle américaine* (Robert Dhéry, 1961), *Adieu Philippine* (Jacques Rozier, 1962) and perhaps most prominently in Jean-Luc Godard's *Weekend* (1967), which includes the critically acclaimed 8-minute tracking shot through a traffic jam, culminating with images of a dreadful accident and bodies lying around the blood-stained road. Via the automobile is how filmmakers grappled with the Americanization of French culture and the mechanization of modern life in general—due to the shift to Taylorist and Fordist manufacturing methods and the historically unparalleled production of cheap energy—often featuring the car accident as a narrative closure. Decades later, Ducournau's film also displays such influences and tensions, for instance, through her interest in car crashes and the choice of the Cadillac. The latter is particularly revealing: while produced by the

American manufacturer General Motors, the Cadillac was named after Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac (1658–1730), a French explorer and trapper who later founded Detroit, a city best known as the heart of the US automobile industry but more recently evoked mainly in the context of the industry’s spectacular decline and the remaining decimated landscape.<sup>10</sup> Yet even if the fantasies of freedom and the “good life” (Berlant 2011) brought about by car manufacturing (i.e., upward mobility, steady jobs, and the possibility of buying cars) might have been fraying for a while, the aesthetics of petroleum in film and in life continue to thrive. As LeMenager puts it, “although oil may be running out, imagination is not” (2014, 67).

In what follows, I explore the persistence of the aesthetics of oil in the Euro-American imagination as manifested in films concerned with car cultures, with a special focus on *Crash*, *Death Proof*, and *Titane*. Reading these films through the petrocultural optics might be counterintuitive at face value. Petrofiction and petrocinema are commonly associated with images of drilling platforms, deadly oil spills, and/or extractive colonialism. *Crash*, *Death Proof*, and *Titane* are not necessarily readable as films about oil, at least not in the conventional sense of films like *There Will Be Blood* (Anderson, 2007), which is addressed by LeMenager in her discussion of the aesthetics of petroleum. But petrocultural readings are concerned with more than just texts about oil. They are also about, in Graeme Macdonald’s words, “the relation between the oblique and surface world of fuel: an everyday world reliant on oil consumption but far removed from its backstage processes of extraction, refining, and delivery” (2017, 164).<sup>11</sup> In other words, petrocultural readings often grapple with what is hidden from sight. In exploring *Titane* and other films from this perspective, I share with other petrocritics the “methodological curiosity” in “modes of inquiry that can perceive the pressure that energy exerts on culture, even and especially when energy is *not-said*: invisible, erased, elided, so ‘slippery’ (as in Ghosh’s account of oil) and ubiquitous as to elude representation and critical attention” (Wenzel 2017, 11).<sup>12</sup> Further, thinking about cinema and petrocultures presents a challenge in that it must also be attuned to its complicity in sustaining unsustainable cultural practices in what Jussi Parikka (2014) calls the Anthrobscene. In his important rethinking of the Anthropocene, Parikka probes “the geological underpinnings” of contemporary media culture and the resulting “obscenities of the ecocrisis” (2014). LeMenager also reminds us that film is “oil media” in the sense that “film stock [...] is essentially petroleum” (2014, 100). Although digital technologies seem to be more “eco-friendly” in their promise to disentangle the materiality of film from petroleum, in fact, “the intensive use of fuel oil, tires, and diesel generators for set lighting will keep the film industry an environmentally high-impact business for years to come” (2014, 100). Given the entanglement of movie making and oil, it could be

argued that all cinema is, in fact, petrocinema. In a similar vein, Carolyn Fornoff proposes in her discussion of Mexican cinema as petrocinema that we need to redirect our attention from the question of cinematic representation towards the film industry's funding, its material footprint and infrastructures, as well as its "inextricability from the ideology of energy surplus as the driver of modernity" (2021, 377).

While recognizing the importance of the materiality of film production heavily dependent on petroleum, this article focuses on the questions of cinematic form and representation rather than the relationship between the oil industry and the film industry. I address the cinematic aesthetics of oil, in conjunction with its attendant petrosubjectivities, guided by both my initial questions about loving cars and the conviction that the entrenched binary thinking that has kept us apart from the environment must be undone. Put simply, the question is not only how we, as humans, affect the environment by extracting and consuming oil, but also how the environment generally and oil in particular affect us. Or rather, how both are already part of us. Such an approach deviates from the conventional eco-cinematic focus on film as a "respite" from the modern world but retains the call for "retraining our perception" (MacDonald 2004) through cultivating "the arts of noticing" (Tsing 2015),<sup>13</sup> especially in relation to human/oil mutual constitution. As Buell observes, with the development of the petrochemical industry, our "bodies became literally oily" (2012, 290), in what we eat, in the cosmetics we use, in the clothes we wear, and even in what we think.<sup>14</sup> I build on this idea in the following section to address the gendered workings of the oil culture in car films as part and parcel of the aesthetics of petroleum. Next, I focus on *Death Proof* to show how the film uses petroaesthetics, and car cultures in particular, to celebrate and eventually unravel the gendered discourses on oil and automobility. The essay then turns to the discussion of the radical potentialities *Titane* opens up in relation to both undoing the fossilized petroidentities and making oil visible. I will show that, much like Cronenberg in *Crash*, Ducournau stages bizarre relationships with cars to create posthuman subjectivities, in which bodily fluids, metal, and oil come together. I conclude that *Titane* rewrites the aesthetic of petroleum to offer a generative counterpoint to the more familiar paradigm that routinely aligns the automobile with the fantasies of adventure and freedom, as well as a sense of autonomous self-making. Ultimately, and perhaps somewhat unexpectedly, *Titane* creates space for more sustainable futures based on new forms of kinship and the ethics of care.

## **On cars and petroidentities**

The human fascination with cars has a long and convoluted history. Cars are inextricably linked with the ideological promise of automobility: freedom of movement, independence, speed, and adventure on the mythical open road, unbound by the restrictions of a rail track or fixed schedules (Flink 1988; Featherstone 2005; Urry 2005). As Lindsey Green-Simms reminds us, such discourses on automobility often obscure the fact that “automobile ownership is the privilege of the few who depend on both the labor of the many and the energy that has caused social and environmental degradation in places like the Niger Delta, the Persian Gulf, and the Louisiana coast” (2017, 59). Ironically, the car was initially expected to reduce the problems for which it is blamed today, such as air pollution, traffic jams, and road accidents. The automobile was applauded as “a great sanitary improvement” in comparison to horse-drawn transport, “replacing the thousands of animals which had daily deposited millions of tons of waste in the streets—and therefore also the atmosphere, as dried dung particles were swept into the air” (Buell 2012, 284). Further, the newly invented automobile was not uniquely dependent on oil industries: from 1890 to 1905 cars were fueled by “steam, electric batteries, alcohol, diesel, and biodiesel fuels, as well as gasoline, and it was not obvious which fuel would come to dominate the market” (Sayre 2017, 54). The current entanglement between the pleasures of driving and the forms of oppression and environmental degradation resulting from oil extraction was thus not inevitable.

More recently, scholars have considered our addiction to and desire for cars to fall within “petromodernity,” which refers to modern life based around the consumption of the cheap energy and commodities made possible by petroleum products (Szeman, Wenzel and Yaeger 2017; Szeman 2019). For Stephanie LeMenager, “the embodied intensities of petromodern consumer culture” involve not only driving cars, but also “using petroleum-based plastics, walking on asphalt, filling our teeth with complex polymers, and otherwise living oil” (2014, 68-69). However, she sees a close correlation between the aesthetics of petroleum and car cultures, in particular, the development of the US landscape of highways, the 1950s shifts in automobile production that privileged style over engineering, as well as “kinesthetic thrills” of driving itself (2014, 86). In effect, one of the key challenges of decoupling culture and oil entails the examination of our affective, kinaesthetic and aesthetic dispositions generated by automobility: “The petroleum infrastructure has become embodied memory and habitus for modern humans, insofar as everyday events such as driving or feeling the summer heat of

asphalt on the soles of one's feet are incorporating practices" (LeMenager 2014, 104). As other scholars have also argued, any debate over car culture and oil must take into account the complex psychology of driving (Pearce 2016) and the larger affective geography of automobility (Sheller 2004).

More needs to be said about how fictional texts envision and shape our understandings of petrol-based automobility. As already mentioned, for LeMenager, living/loving oil is intimately related with loving oil-dependent media that emerged from the early to mid-twentieth century, "when oil became an expressive form, although often hidden as such, in plain sight" (2014, 66). These media include the paperback book, television, and Hollywood films, which often operate as expressions of "the road-pleasure complex" (2014, 81), as manifested in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957), Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), and more broadly, the cultural phenomenon of driving Route 66, celebrated again and again in the genre of the road movie. Much like the road novel discussed by LeMenager, the road movie engages in recording phenomenological experience of driving, and in the process, it also records "sensory and emotional values associated with the oil cultures" (2014, 67-68). Film scholar Neil Archer (2017) sheds light on how the ideological operations of the "car-petroleum complex" are naturalized in the American road movie, which celebrates "motorized mobility": "the American road movie in its most classical form of the late 1960s to early 1970s, emerging out of an era of mass automobile production and suburbanisation, relies on the ideological premise that roads exist solely for the pleasure of the driving protagonists" (2017, 513). As he observes, even those road movies that are often read in terms of counter-cultural rebellion, such as *Easy Rider* (1969), *Two-Lane Blacktop* (1971) and *Vanishing Point* (1971), still tend to implicitly reaffirm the "car-consumption nexus" and the value of petroleum-based mobility (2017, 512-513).

While the road movie's "wind against our backs" trope has been historically attached to white masculinity—including the focus on the heterosexual couple and the buddy film variant—in the last decades, the trope has been extended to other subjectivities as well, from a female couple in *Thelma and Louise* (1991) to a group of drag queens in *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994) and *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar* (1995), a male homosexual couple in *The Living End* (1992), two Indigenous men in *Smoke Signals* (1998), and more recently, a trans woman in *Transamerica* (2005), just to name a few. Certainly, these films complicate the conventional gendered and racialized discourses on automobility, yet, it could be argued, they do not necessarily challenge our deep affective attachments to cars specifically and fossil-fueled capitalist modernity more broadly.



However, the analysis of films like *Crash*, *Death Proof* and *Titane*, which display a peculiar attraction to deadly collisions rather than to open roads and an unknown horizon, raises a different set of questions. While the road movie, and our modern car culture in general, is based on “a persistent association of driving with being alive” (LeMenager 2014, 80), these three films remind us that automobility is intertwined not only with the pleasure of driving, but also with vulnerability and death (of the driver, passenger or other individuals involved in the crash). For Karen Beckman, the crash—“the traumatic and uncertain moment of inertia that comes in the wake of speed and confidence”—provides a fruitful metaphor through which to consider other closely interrelated concerns: “fantasies and anxieties regarding speed and stasis, risk and safety, immunity and contamination, impermeability and penetration” (2010, 15-16). While Beckman carefully avoids reading the visual trope of deadly accidents as necessarily traumatic, or as something that can be neatly categorized as conservative or subversive, she does consider the images of halted automobility as the complication to the paradigm of movement and modern progress—and, one could argue, they might also be regarded as the complication to the value of petroleum-based mobility.<sup>15</sup> Further, as Beckman shows, in addition to challenging the relationship between speed and power so closely bound up with modernity, the figure of crash may “lead us into spaces of hybrid identity and non-normative sexuality” (19). The latter is particularly at stake in petrocultures given that, as several researchers have observed, they produce certain types of hegemonic petroidentities.<sup>16</sup>

Interrogating the relationship between masculinity and fossil fuels, Stacy Alaimo and Cara Daggett unpack the aggressive, extractive, and supposedly impenetrable masculinities specifically in the American context. In her book *Exposed*, Alaimo uses the term “carbon-heavy masculinities” (2016, 2) to refer to a type of hypermasculinity promoted by US nationalism during the Bush regime and later reinforced with the advent of Trump’s presidency, which she argues is inextricable from racism, xenophobia, and misogyny (13, 95). Emphasizing the co-implication between fossil-fuel dependency and “white patriarchal orders,” Daggett coins a related concept, “petro-masculinity” (2018, 28). In her feminist reading of the climate change denial on the part of new authoritarian movements in the US, she highlights the ways in which the performance of violent hypermasculinities can be understood as compensation for both gender *and* climate anxiety. “Taking petro-masculinity seriously means paying attention to the thwarted desires of privileged patriarchies as they lose their fossil fantasies” (44), she writes. Such “oil desires” based on cheap energy—including driving a car, living in the suburbs, and forming a nuclear family, all associated with the so-called American way of life—require intensive fossil consumption, which can, in turn, operate as a performance

of masculinity (32). While Daggett centers mostly on Trump's supporters, petromasculinities have been proliferating in film for quite some time: from the extractive virility in *There Will Be Blood* (2007), visually reinforced by the fetishized images of oil erupting from the earth, to the extreme versions of fossil authoritarianism and toxic, coal-rolling<sup>17</sup> antagonists in *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) and in its aquatic precedent, *Waterworld* (1995).<sup>18</sup> All these films thematize white colonial fantasies of control over self, other bodies, and lands, invoking the capitalist drive to own and consume petroleum.

As is the case with petromasculinities, petromodernity drives the performance of specific female identities (Wilson 2014; Allan 2020). Of particular interest is Cecily Devereux's (2017) examination of the ways in which petroculture has contributed to the formation of "the petrocultural feminine" in relation to car cultures. The term captures how women have been conceived of as petrocultural commodities, often being made synonymous with automobiles as seen in advertisements for cars and music videos where a vehicle and a woman become an interchangeable fetishized object of desire. In her reading of these images, Devereux puts forward a thought-provoking argument about the historical entanglement between the automobile and "the cosmetically constituted woman" (2017, 176). The material with which femininity is made—hair-coloring products, skin lotions, mascaras, and other cosmetics that rely on petrochemicals—is the very same that sustains car cultures. Therefore, perhaps even more pervasively than petromasculinity, petrofemininity is a product of the oil industries. By probing this intertwining between cars and cosmetics in the constitution of petrocultural identities, Devereux points to what is usually not seen: women, just like cars, "cannot be 'automobile'" (165) and when they are, they are rendered monstrous. Examining Stephen King's 1983 pulp horror novel *Christine* (adapted to cinema by John Carpenter in the same year), Devereux concludes that the fear of woman's automobility is one of patriarchy's repressed fears, "a Freudian castration horror based, as in Luce Irigaray's account of the Oedipal, in the 'horror of nothing to see'" (171). As Tarantino's carsploitation slasher *Death Proof* and Ducournau's body horror *Titane* show, horror film conventions turn out to be particularly productive in illuminating these fears.

### **Undoing petroidentities: *Death Proof***

The fear of a woman who can drive herself is an underlying theme in *Death Proof*, a film about a road psychopath, Stuntman Mike, who uses his car to assassinate young females in high-speed crashes. The two parts of the film, each approximately 52 minutes long, tell a similar

story where the killer chases and assaults a group of young women, driving his black muscle car with a skull on the bonnet (a 1970 Chevy Nova in the first part and a 1969 Dodge Charger in the second; in both cases, the vehicle is a stunt car reinforced with an additional metal frame to protect the driver in the crashes). However, in the second part of the film, the girls are more than capable of defending themselves. Two of them, Zoë and Kim, are professional stuntwomen and therefore excel in controlling speeding cars.

The film draws on two genres traditionally conceived of as male, at least in the ways in which they were thought to appeal to male viewers: the slasher film (especially in its rape-revenge variant) and the carsploitation film (which revolves around car racing and crashing). Examples of the latter include *Vanishing Point*, *Gone in 60 Seconds*, and *Dirty Mary Crazy Larry*, all of which are explicitly referenced in *Death Proof*.<sup>19</sup> Tarantino's use of the carsploitation format most evidently correlates to petrocultures, as well as to what LeMenager describes as "petromelancholia," that is, "the grieving of conventional oil resources and the pleasures they sustained" (2014, 18). Stuntman Mike longs for the days in which "real cars smashed into real cars," crashes that have been replaced in cinema by computer-generated imagery since the 1990s. The 1970s carsploitation films that he feels nostalgic about were partly made possible due to concerns over gas prices and safety on the road, which led to the intervention of the US government and "a rapid reengineering of American cars from large powerful 'gas-guzzlers' to compact fuel-efficient 'econobox' cars" (Read 2016, 98). The resulting devaluation of the less-efficient muscle cars meant that low-budget film producers could buy them for *en masse* destruction (98). Meanwhile, many automotive companies stopped producing the muscle cars, such as the original Mustang or the iconic Dodge Charger, marking the end of an era (100). As Robert J. Read observes, "The choice of cars represented within the carsploitation film was not a critical statement with regard to the relationship between consumers and the automotive industry, nor was it intended to mark the demise of the muscle car. But these films did incorporate these social changes into the *mise-en-scène* by representing the destruction of the everyday objects of mass-produced and mass-marketed cars" (100). As a result, the extended car chases and accidents took precedence over the narrative and characters, who in turn were increasingly replaced by stuntmen—the very changes to which Tarantino is paying tribute. *Death Proof* is also nostalgic for the grubby feeling of low-budget B-movies: the materiality of the film is made visible through the digitally simulated appearance of celluloid damages, such as scratches, blotches, "missing reels," poorly executed edits, jumping frames, and so on. These alterations in post-production make it look like an artefact from the past. In addition to this ostensible celebration of cars, speed, and the

petrol-based film stock, *Death Proof* was originally released alongside Robert Rodriguez's *Planet Terror*, as *Grindhouse*, to pay homage to the 1970s drive-in cinemas. These dynamics further magnify the film's entanglement with oil cultures.

However, in a postmodern fashion, Tarantino critically revisits this past, paying special attention to gendered petroidentities. The structure of the film is crucial in this revision, particularly the way in which *Death Proof* transitions from the one-dimensional petromasculinity to the rewriting of the petrocultural feminine. The first part of *Death Proof* seems to follow the typical slasher film plot where the killer, armed with phallic weapons (knives, chainsaws, machetes, etc.), annihilates his victims.<sup>20</sup> In *Death Proof*, the psychopath uses his vehicle instead of a machete. One of the girls, Arlene, is marked as the final girl: she presages danger when she spots Mike's car in front of a bar, in a direct allusion to *Halloween* (1978) when Laurie observes Michael Myers's vehicle. Eventually, though, all the girls die in a head-on collision, even Arlene, whose face is grotesquely torn open (probably due to the lap dance she performed earlier for the killer since—according to the traditional slasher film conventions—the final girl needs to remain “innocent” until the end of the film). Not incidentally, one of the victims (Pam) dies in the killer's car. Ricarda Vidal (2013) observes in her reading of the film that “the blond hippie girl” is modeled after the typical naïve B-movie victim, but she also resembles the “muscle car babes” used to advertise these cars in the 1960s and 1970s. In particular, the way she leans over Mike's car, caressing and brushing the bonnet with her breasts, is reminiscent of the Dodge Charger 1969 “Mother warned me” advertisement that reads as follows: “Mother warned me that there would be men like you driving in cars like that. Do you really think you can get to me with that long, low, tough machine you just rolled up in?” (in Vidal 2013, 178). In this sense, the scene could be understood as staging the petrocultural feminine, which, as argued by Devereux, is closely intertwined with the “perils for women in car culture” narrative: “petroculture as a frame of reference and a pervasive system of signs [...] reinforces ‘women's subordinated status’ [...] by denying women automobility and affirming their function as objects in a commerce between men” (2017, 166). If “death proof” for Mike, the car is extremely unsafe for Pam. As Mike puts it, “To get the benefit of it [...] you really need to be sitting in my seat.” The stuntman ends up assassinating Pam by speeding and abruptly slamming on the brakes, smashing her skull on the dashboard.<sup>21</sup> Although *Death Proof* does not contain scenes of rape, the film interrelates sexual violence with vehicular homicide, as evidenced by the highly aestheticized “orgasmic” frontal collision scene in which Mike repeatedly smashes into the girls' car, killing them one by one (fig. 1).<sup>22</sup>

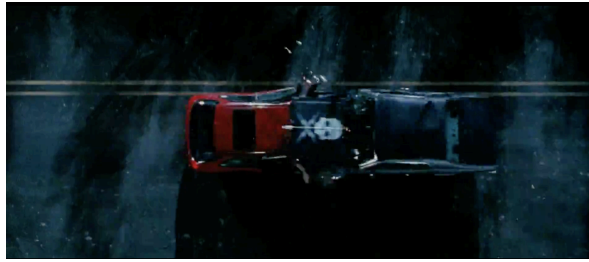


Figure 1. Head-on collision in *Death Proof*.



Figure 2. The car as a mechanical extension of Mike's body.

Armed with his muscle car, Mike represents a potent, hypermasculine entity akin to that described by Daggett as “coal-rolling” petromasculinity (2018, 40-41). Mike asks Arlene before the car crash if he frightens her. When she silently nods, he wants to know whether it is his scar that frightens her, to which she responds: “It’s your car.” In both parts of the film, he makes contact with the girls from inside his vehicle by revving the engine and screeching his tires to impress them. The car, like the typical weapons in the slasher film, is a mechanical extension of his body. This is exaggerated in a parodic image of a duck ornament, which at some point covers the killer’s bulging genitals as he watches his future victims through binoculars (fig. 2).

The film thematizes the victimization of women on several levels: they are victims in car crashes but also part of the Hollywood film tradition that frames women as objects of the gaze rather than characters controlling the action (Mulvey 1975). One of the protagonists, Jungle Julia, is introduced reclining on her sofa with her legs stretched out in a pose similar to that of Brigitte Bardot on a poster for *Les bijoutiers du claire de lune* (Vadim, 1958) that decorates the living room. The camera also centers on a poster of the western *Soldier Blue* (Nelson, 1970), reinforcing the character’s objectification. Female bodies are dissected visually, for instance, in the first image of the film featuring Jungle Julia’s feet, but are also dissected quite literally during the horrifying car crash when the protagonist’s legs are ripped off her body (figs. 3-5). Mike, on the contrary, is the bearer of the look (fig. 6), resembling the “Peeping Tom” psychopaths typical of *giallo* cinema—for instance, *L’uccello dalle piume di cristallo* (Argento, 1970). Mike watches his victims not only through binoculars but also from

behind the windscreen of his car while the girls appear in freeze-frames via his photographs. Thus, the gendered economy of looking correlates with gendered automobility. As Vidal also observes, “while the girls’ car is mainly shot as an interior, this is contrasted by the quantity of shots through the windscreen of Mike’s car” (2013, 181).



Figures 3-5. The “girls” framed as fetichized objects of the gaze.



Figure 6. Mike as the bearer of the look.

These dynamics of the gaze are reworked in the second part of the film as the girls are the ones who chase Mike and are therefore allowed to look through the windscreen. They use their own vehicle to neutralize the killer by catching and beating him to death in a sequence that combines the slapstick aesthetics with frozen frames, imitating the fight scenes in spaghetti westerns. They drive the mythical white 1970 Dodge Challenger, featured in *Vanishing Point* (Sarafian, 1971), which stands in marked contrast to the little red Honda owned by Shanna in the first part of the film.

While *Death Proof* can be understood as a mere reversal of the female-victim/male-aggressor narrative in relation to cars, such a reversal becomes even more interesting against the backdrop of the films directly quoted here. For instance, the scene with the “ship’s mast” that precedes the final car chase is relevant, as it references *Fair Game* (Andreacchio, 1986), an Australian rape-revenge film in which, as Alexandra Heller-Nicholas observes, the rape victim (Cassandra Delaney) is stripped naked and tied to the front of the car “as an act of sexual violence, symbolizing her complete powerlessness in the face of male aggression, power and

misogyny” (2021, 81). In *Death Proof*, Zoë climbs onto the bonnet of the Challenger and begs her friend Kim to drive at top speed, thus underscoring the female pleasure of driving. Mike interrupts their pleasure by smashing into their car from behind, but Zoë survives. The roles are then inverted: the hunted become the hunters. In this regard, Zoë’s wide-spread legs on the bonnet invert the phallic economy of the car, evoking a *vagina dentata* (fig. 7) that will devour the male killer (inverting the way in which Mike’s car was chasing after “virgins,” much like he was consuming “virgin” drinks at the bar).



Figure 7. Inverting the phallic economy of car cultures: Dodge Challenger as *vagina dentata*.

But something more than simple revenge is at work here. The film reconfigures, according to Heller-Nicholas, “the entire symbolic language of gender in relation to car culture” (2021: 81), and in this sense, it also constitutes a rewriting of the petrocultural feminine. The final girls embrace the car (associated with phallic masculinity, speed, and white patriarchal power) but, in the process, alter its meaning and create human-machine alliances. Pointing to the queer tendency of the slasher film—that is, its capacity to devise new genders not simply through a mere inversion but by creating new categories—Jack Halberstam (1995, 143) argues that the femininity of the final girl is recycled and transformed into new gender regimes.

Like the potentially radical energy of the imagined violence in the slasher films, images of car crashes have the potential to generate new spaces for non-normative gender identities. Drawing on Janet Wolff, Beckman observes how metaphors of movement and mobility, which are often called forth in radical projects that are meant to destabilize power relations, are markedly gendered, “with mobility frequently cast as masculine, and stasis as feminine” (2010, 32). Beckman reads the figure of the crashing car “as a wry counterpoint” to these ideological operations, as it presents “scenarios and spaces defined by that which male travelers have tended to flee: touch, penetration, vulnerability, emotion, stasis, and radical uncertainty” (33). While, as feminist scholars have demonstrated, the cinematic crash all too often relies on misogynist foundations that enact violence on the female body, the sexual politics of collisions

result complex and contradictory (33-34). In *Death Proof*, the collisions serve as a catalyst for the reinterpretation of petroidentities and car cultures. *Titane*, as I show in the next section, further explores some of the questions raised by *Death Proof*. In the former, however, gender not so much “splatters” (Halberstam 1995, 143) but rather spills, continuing with the oil metaphor, and advances a more profound rewriting of petrocultural identities.

### **Gender that spills: *Titane***

Heavily tattooed Alexia—on her sternum, “love is a dog from hell” quote references the title of Charles Bukowski’s 1977 poetry book—is a likely candidate for a tough girl archetype dramatized in the second part of *Death Proof*. However, after her transformation into Adrien, which entails cutting her blond dyed hair short, binding her breasts, and disfiguring her face by breaking her nose on a sink, Alexia comes closer to the androgynous Furiosa from *Mad Max: Fury Road*, a film set in a post-apocalyptic wasteland where petrol and water are scarce. Furiosa has been read as an embodiment of feminist resistance to a regime of fossil fuel dependency, but also as an example of “ecomobility” in the Anthropocene (Pesses 2019). Her fusion with machines, especially her car, is crucial in her survival: Furiosa uses her prosthetic arm, along with a rifle and her impressive vehicle, the War Rig—a tanker truck originally used to extract gasoline—to successfully combat the coal-rolling petromasculinities led by Immortan Joe. Alexia’s name seems to indicate that she will perform a similar narrative function. Deriving from the Greek verb *aléxein*, her name means “to ward off, avert, defend” and relates to Alexander (*aléxein* + *andrós*, “defender of mankind”).<sup>23</sup> The title of the film itself, *Titane*, is not only the French word for titanium but also a feminized form of Titan, one of the twelve pre-Olympian gods who, according to Greek mythology, were created by Uranus (Sky) and Gaia (Earth). As a very strong metal highly resistant to heat and corrosion, titanium is used in the automobile industry, especially for engine parts and chassis, but also as medical prostheses due to its biocompatibility. The title of the film might seem to imply, then, that Alexia will become a superheroine whose power involves metal. Like Furiosa, Alexia has a titanium prosthesis and a car, but does not use them as a weapon, not even to defend herself. As the film progresses, she becomes increasingly vulnerable, despite her disguise helping her avoid the consequences of her past murders.

Perhaps somewhat paradoxically, especially when considering the protagonist’s violent tendencies, *Titane* appears to confirm the “perils for women in cars” (Devereux 2017, 166) narrative. Alexia is repeatedly shown moving on foot rather than driving a car, often hunched



and advancing with difficulty due to her pregnancy. When filmed with a vehicle, she is either dancing atop it or being driven by a man, initially by her birth father and then by Vincent. Her first car ride as a little girl leads to a horrific crash and a serious injury, though it seems to be provoked by Alexia herself as a response to her emotionally distant progenitor. Just before the accident, the girl emits motor noises and kicks her father's seat while he turns up the radio to drown out her revving noises. The young Alexia then removes her seatbelt in a defiant gesture, akin to that found in Cronenberg's *Crash*; her father turns around to reprimand her, causing an accident that ultimately requires Alexia to have a titanium plate implanted in her cranium. In the subsequent car ride with her new father, Vincent, the protagonist removes her seatbelt to get out of the car in motion, perceiving that she is in great danger. She finally manages to escape later in the film, but does not drive a car; instead, she boards a bus. This segment is where the gendered (and racialized) politics of mobility are most painfully articulated. Alexia/Adrien sits opposite a young black woman, who is being harassed by a group of white men sitting in the back of the vehicle. The sexist and racist offences intensify as the men boast about their sexual conquests and then detail how they would penetrate all her orifices (anus, vagina, mouth, and ear). "Hey girl, I'm talking to you. You hear me?," one of them shouts as the film cuts between the young woman and Alexia/Adrien, implying that the latter is safe only if she does not shed her disguise and become a "girl" again.

In one of the earlier scenes, however, *Titane* does play on the familiar rape-revenge trope on which *Death Proof* also relies. The protagonist is stalked and then harassed by an overly insistent fan (fig. 8). She uses a phallic object—a long, sharp hairpin—to stab her aggressor through his ear orifice, leading to his gruesome death.<sup>24</sup>

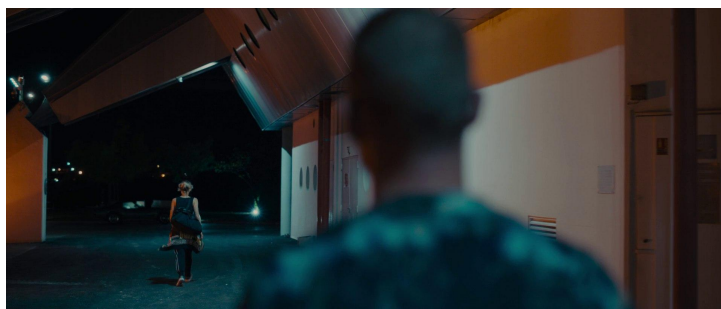


Figure 8. Alexia as a girl in peril who can defend herself from the assault.

In a later Tarantino-style killing spree sequence that blends gory violence with moments of comedy, Alexia stabs several people while "Nessuno Mi Può Giudicare" ("Nobody Can Judge Me") by Caterina Caselli plays. The song gets drowned out for a moment when Alexia

thrusts a stool leg into a man's mouth and sits down to have some rest but then starts playing again when she proceeds with the slaughter. This scene differs, however, from the retaliatory killing of Mike in *Death Proof* or another vengeance-ridden film by Tarantino, *Kill Bill*, to which the scene in *Titane* was compared by critics. The bodies pile up, but the victims are random.

In this regard, *Titane* is neither a revenge tale relying on the reversal of power relations nor a story of female empowerment—and if it was such a story, it would be directed backward given Alexia/Adrien's trajectory toward an increased vulnerability and ultimate death. Much like Tarantino, Ducournau spends significant time unpacking the fossilized petroidentities, yet she executes this not through the images of excessive speed but during the more contemplative dance scenes (thus, interestingly, placing Alexia/Adrien in the position of to-be-looked-at-ness that freezes the narrative flow, in line with Laura Mulvey's [1975] remarks on the visual pleasure). During these dance scenes is when the gendered aesthetics of petroculture in relation to cars most manifestly comes to the forefront. After the prelude with the car crash, the long tracking shot meanders through a tuner car show, capturing various women in tight clothes performing sensual moves along the vehicles for a (predominantly male) audience, bearing resemblance to similar scenes in the early films in *The Fast and the Furious* franchise concerned with illegal street racing. In *Titane*, the camera follows Alexia as she strides through the vehicles to briefly stop to apply her (petroleum-made) lipstick, thus metaphorically reconfirming the relationship, identified by Devereux, between the traditionally female-marketed goods, cars, and women all being treated as commodities (fig. 9). In the hypersexual world of auto shows, gender roles and looking relations are clearly defined.



Figure 9. Alexia as a petrocommodity.

Alexia removes her jacket and performs a dance atop the car emblazoned with flames, writhing and twerking against the chrome, even licking it at some point. The sensual moves evoke *Death Proof*'s lap dance, which leads to the killing of the dancer (Alexia, as noted earlier, can defend herself from the aggression). Indeed, the relentlessness alluded to by the song to which she performs, "Doing It to Death" by the English-American band The Kills, humorously expresses ambiguity: Alexia's being-towards-death while also being a relentless murderer.<sup>25</sup> The dance scene reproduces the sexualized clichéd images of women groping cars, but there is something magnetic and eerie in Alexia's performance, especially if read against the backdrop of earlier scenes. In the opening sequence, the young Alexia, recently released from the hospital after the accident, throws her arms around the car and kisses its window. This shot mirrors yet contrasts with the later shots from the tuner show of women pressing their bodies against windows while washing cars, as seen in a similar composition of the frame (figs. 10-11).



Figures 10-11. Alexia's affective investment in her car echoes the clichéd images of women in car shows.

Thus, while evoking the gendered discourses on automobility—in which the relation between women and automobiles is sexualized in ways that reconfirm stereotypical gender roles—*Titane* queers Alexia's affective investment in her car. Relevant here as well is that, while performing, she is looking challengingly at the camera, but for the most part there are no counter-shots of the looking males. Alexia is engulfed in her dance, and the heterosexual politics of the gaze are disrupted, and not only because she is attracted to a girl (Justine) whose desiring look is the only one highlighted earlier in the scene. In fact, the film is quick to subvert this homoerotic plot. Alexia's interest in Justine is only piqued upon spotting the piece of metal in her nipple; significantly, Justine is the first victim in the massacre sequence mentioned above.

Alexia's first dance scene is mirrored later in the film when, transformed into Adrien, she dances atop a fire truck (just like in the previously commented dance scene, she will end up having sex with the vehicle afterward). Here, the film twists the commodified petrofemininity even further. The sequence starts with the mosh pit in a fire house, lit with a

strobe light and decorated with French flags. A group of shirtless firefighters violently smash against each other, visually emphasizing the connection between hypermasculinities, turbo-energy, and nationalistic discourses. The firemen lift Alexia/Adrien and force her to perform for them, and so she does, dancing to “Wayfaring Stranger” by Lisa Abbott (fig. 12).<sup>26</sup> Framed in a low-angle shot, Alexia/Adrien defiantly looks at her audience, and this time, the film offers several counter-shots of their looking back. As if transported back to her days in car shows, the protagonist performs the same sexualized routine, which is now met with incredulity, repulsion, or an uncomfortable looking away. Even Vincent looks away when he enters the building.

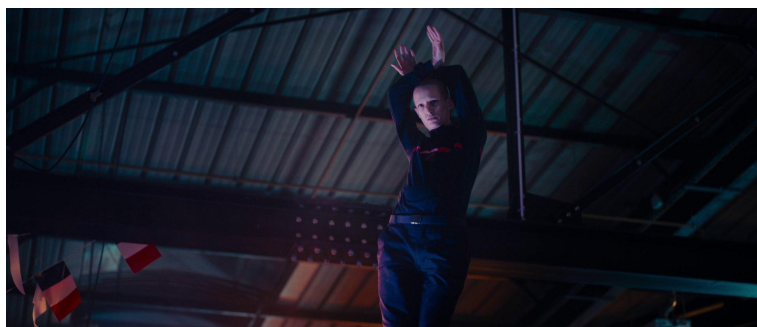


Figure 12. Alexia interrupts the performance of hypermasculinity at the fire station.

The violence of looking and not looking is one of *Titane*'s central themes. Earlier in the film, a bodyguard at a car show lashes out at one of the clients who is about to grope Justine: “Hands off, sir. Touch with your eyes.” What makes the men avert their eyes during the firehouse scene is, presumably, their homophobic disgust and their compulsion to abject what they perceive as a threat to their own masculinity.<sup>27</sup>

In the context of petroleum cultures, Daggett observes how the performance of petromasculinity is often associated with “fascist desires to secure a *lebensraum*, a living space, a household that is barricaded from the specter of threatening others, whether pollutants or immigrants or gender deviants” (2018, 44). Such petro-performances are perhaps more prominent in films that directly address oil—for instance, in the already mentioned *Waterworld* and *Mad Max: Fury Road*—but a womanless squadron of macho firefighters dressed in their identical uniforms looks, indeed, like an army in a micro petrocultural universe of the fire station. “Petro” signifiers penetrate the mise-en-scène: the fire engines consistently shown in the background, the performance of masculinity “firing on all cylinders,” so to speak, and the recurrent images of burning that bring to mind the oil combustion. Further, the fire station is led by an authoritarian, body-pumping captain who makes his subordinates call him “god.”

Vincent's struggles to maintain an illusion of invulnerability evoke the grotesque characterization of Deacon in *Waterworld* and Immortan Joe in *Mad Max*. Vincent does not hesitate, as implied in the film, to eliminate one of the insurgents—the firefighter who dared to ask questions about the origins of his “son.”

Yet just like Alexia/Adrien's dancing both reveals and rips at the seams of petrofemininity, Vincent's gender performance is also rendered visible. There is a symmetry in the way the film presents their struggles to control their changing bodies as they frequently gaze at the mirror. The camera repeatedly focuses on Vincent injecting himself with steroids to retain muscle mass, thrusting the needle into his bruised bottom—images that contradict his façade of impenetrability. He often manipulates his doses, and we see him fainting or having a seizure. The fact that he tells baffled Alexia that he is not sick but old can be read as a metaphor for the “increasingly fragile Western hypermasculinity” (Daggett 2018, 29). The neon lighting envelops his body with a distinct reddish-pink glow, which emphasizes the bulging veins around his muscles and gives him an almost cartoonish quality (fig. 13). Vincent looks like a pink Hulk, making his surname of Legrand almost parodic. His first name, Vincent, is of Latin origin and marks him as a conqueror: he is ceaseless in his attempts to conquer Adrien's body and love. He shaves Adrien's head, provides him with a uniform and teaches him how to become a “real” fireman (figure 14).

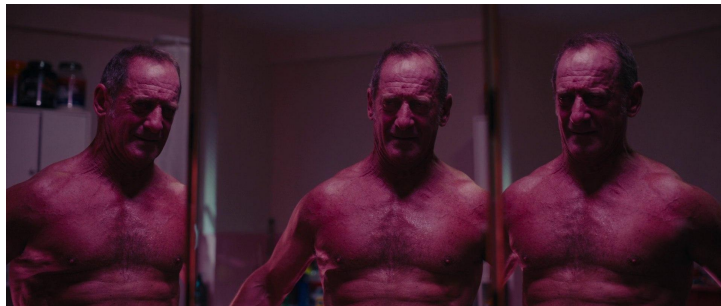


Figure 13. Vincent presented in neon lighting, struggling to maintain his façade of impenetrability.



Figure 14. Alexia/Adrien becoming a “real” fireman.

However, as the peculiar neon lighting suggests, there is something more complex at work in the film's staging of Vincent's masculinity. Notably, between the first and second solo dance performance, Ducourneau included two more dance scenes, similarly symmetrical, but this time between Alexia/Adrien and Vincent. When Alexia attempts to leave Vincent's home at some point, the latter coerces her into dancing with him to the 1964 The Zombies song "She's Not There." The scene initially looks like a moment of ballroom dancing, reaffirming heteronormative gender roles in which a man (Vincent) leads a woman (Alexia), but then suddenly turns into rough play when he slaps Alexia/Adrien's face, wrestling with her like a father and a son would conventionally do. When Alexia intends to attack him with her hairpin, Vincent mocks her: "You're in a knitting club? [...] Fight like a man." The soundtrack is, once again, used to a comic effect: "She's Not There," the ballad of a man who feels betrayed by an alluring woman, operates here as a playful allusion to gender performativity and Vincent's desperate need to recover his long-lost son at all costs.

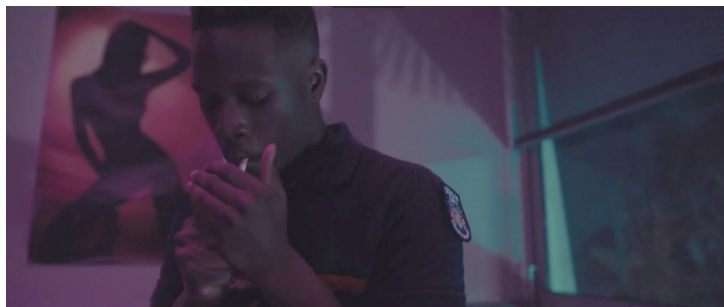


Figure 15. (Un)regulated desires in *Titane*.

In the second dance scene between Vincent and Alexia/Adrien, they finally enjoy a moment of being together. Film critic Jonathan Romney compared the dreamy dance to “the Rihanna moment in Céline Sciamma’s *Girlhood*, but with muscle boys” (2021a), but also suggested the dance was a tribute to the homoerotic characterization of the Foreign Legion in Claire Denis’s *Beau Travail*. Indeed, even though heterosexual desires are hinted at by the background poster in *Titane* (fig. 15), the soft neon pink lighting and the use of slow-motion fuel this scene with queerness while Vincent lifts Alexia/Adrien over his arms and joyfully spins them around. Daggett observes the following in her discussion of rigidity as an omnipresent trait of authoritarian petromasculinity: “*Petro* connotes both hardness and flow: it is from the Greek for rock or stone, but as petroleum, it is the liquid produced by pressurised decomposition of plant and animal matter over millions of years. It is both death (fossils), and life (energy, wrought from death), both compression and escape” (2018, 36). Building on Klaus

Theweleit's study of the proto-Nazi *freikorps*, Daggett asserts that the "soldier-male dam [...] seeks to guard [...] against all that flows," which include "queer desires" and "unregulated desires for women" (2018, 36-37)—precisely the kind of desires articulated in *Titane*. The second dance scene between Vincent and Alexia/Adrien, which emphasizes their fluid and curvilinear motions, is all about flow not hardness. In this sense, Adrien's gender-neutral name, which comes from the river Adria (from the word *adur*, meaning "sea"), is also relevant.

Viewed in this light, Vincent's refusal to look, which happens after this "bonding" dance scene, acquires additional complexity. As soon as Alexia presents herself as his son, Vincent blindly accepts her, refusing to undergo a DNA paternity test to determine Adrien's biological identity. He continues to accept her even as the deception becomes evident when her pregnancy comes to term. Throughout the film, this refusal to look is marked visually by his bodily posture; he is often framed with his head down. While it might be interpreted as not wanting to know the truth to avoid interrupting his fantasy of being related to Adrien by blood, it may also refer to, conversely, his inclination to extend beyond the kinship based on an economy of blood that has defined Western family relations for centuries. On the one hand, Vincent is petrified with fear, desiring to congeal his own masculinity and that of his son to protect them from dissolution; on the other, he refuses to petrify them, to convert them into a rigid stone, and instead opens up to a more fluid relationality. The recurrent images of fire suggest the latter: Alexia sets fire to her home, doing away with traditional kinship arrangements; Vincent induces the firefighter who knows the truth about his "son" to explode himself; finally, toward the end of the film, as if to destroy the illusion, Vincent burns his own muscle-covered chest, on which Alexia will soon rest her head. "I don't care who you are. You're my son. You'll always be my son. Whoever you are," Vincent says at some point. The vocabulary of "care" arises repeatedly. When Vincent's ex-wife arrives to see their "son," she decides not to reveal Alexia's secret and asks her to look after Vincent: "I don't care, just take care of him." In another scene, Vincent says, "I take care of you. Not the other way round." The film concludes with Vincent's "I'm here", that is, with the promise of taking care of the newborn, half-metal, half-human child. Ultimately, the film's ethics of care invites us to "transcend the human for something 'more than,'" as María Puig de la Bellacasa puts it (2017, 2).

Pointing to the arbitrariness of traditional definitions of kinship, Frances Bartkowski (2008) coins the term "kintimacy" to refer to the type of relationality that defies easy categorization. She discusses *Gattaca* (1997), a dystopian science-fiction film that bears, perhaps incidentally, several similarities to *Titane*. Vincent Freeman, a man with a heart defect,

struggles to bypass society's genetic discrimination to fulfil his dream of going to Saturn's moon Titan. To conceal his genetic identity, he masquerades as a "Valid" using blood, urine, and skin samples from a former athlete, Jerome, who ends up in a wheelchair after being hit by a car. As Vincent and Jerome "obsessively master this regime of sharing bodily substances" (Bartkowski 2008, 131), a new brotherly love develops between them: "While the intimacy practiced by these two men is initially contractual and conflictual, it is finally a 'kintimacy' where each has dreamed the other's dream and saved the other's life" (137). In *Titane*, Alexia and Vincent do not similarly exchange bodily fluids—though these abound in the film, as I will show in due course—but they do form a new "malleable arrangement" that, in Barkowski's words, "might suggest models of kinship for this century, models where permeability creates a demilitarized zone of kinship that could displace the familiar logics of blood" (138).<sup>28</sup> In this sense, the film arguably traces Vincent's and Alexia's "kinwork," which makes them "fluent" in caring, "through trial and error" (154).

For all its violence, *Titane* is a strikingly intimate film. The tenderness of the final scene stands in stark contrast to Vincent's earlier performance of impenetrability in an exaggerated macho world of firefighters, suggesting that bodies, human and non-human, with or without a titanium plate inside, are extremely fragile. In effect, with this final gesture, the film unpetrifies petroidentities, making space for new forms of kinship and new subjectivities, which are not pure, but instead oily and—as I will show in the following section—holed.

### **Oil that spills: *Titane* and *Crash***

For Julia Ducournau, *Titane* is a film about unconditional love: "Love is capable of making you see someone for who they are, no matter what social constructs you could have put on them, no matter what representation or expectations you had for them" (in Page 2021). While the filmmaker is referring to the relationship between Alexia and Vincent, I now return to the film's fascination with cars and LeMenager's initial question about "why the world that oil makes remains so beloved" (2014, 69). LeMenager aptly calls our attachments to oil energy "ultradeep" (2014, 102), drawing on a phenomenon of ultradeep drilling, that is, an increasingly expensive and environmentally perilous extraction of oil deposits under the ocean floor. The drilling rig creates holes in the earth's crust, with most platforms reaching the depths of 1 kilometer (3,000 feet), but new technology can extend operations to as far as 3,500 meters (11,500 feet) below the surface. The notion of "ultradeep" is a fitting affective metaphor to approach "the energy unconscious" (Yaeger 2011) and our attachments to oil, as well as the



modes of life and literary and film production that oil makes possible.<sup>29</sup> However, instead of drilling, one could redirect attention toward holes, which are a particularly meaningful trope in *Titane*. Like most horror films, *Titane* revels in bodily perforations, and in this sense, it is akin to Cronenberg's *Crash*, yet another film accused of staging “perverse” relationships with cars. And indeed, the film was initially labeled as “beyond the bounds of depravity” by *London Evening Standard*.<sup>30</sup> The focus on holes, bodily fluids, and oily substances is something both films share.

Ghosh, who is credited with developing the concept of petrofiction in the 1990s, takes up the question of our dependence on oil in general and on cars in particular in his later book entitled *The Great Derangement*, which grapples with “the unthinkable” of the climate change: “For the arts, oil is inscrutable in a way that coal never was: the energy that petrol generates is easy to aestheticize—as in images and narratives of roads and cars—but the substance itself is not” (2016, 74).<sup>31</sup> About our love for cars, he writes the following:

Culture generates desires—for vehicles and appliances, for certain kinds of gardens and dwellings—that are among the principal drivers of the carbon economy. A speedy convertible excites us neither because of any love for metal and chrome, nor because of an abstract understanding of its engineering. It excites us because it evokes an image of a road arrowing through a pristine landscape; we think of freedom and the wind in our hair; we envision James Dean and Peter Fonda racing toward the horizon; we think also of Jack Kerouac and Vladimir Nabokov, of a quintessential narrative whose very setting is the road. (2016, 10)

But what happens when the love is not for speed, but instead for the oily substance, for “metal and chrome”? *Titane* does not indulge in the images of cars racing toward the horizon. In the opening sequence, the camera goes “ultradeep,” below the surface of the car's frame, to reveal and aestheticize the workings of the engine—where everything is, like oil, black, slick, and dripping. As film critic Brian Eggert wrote, “The metal shimmers with grease and droplets of oil, and its curves look almost fleshy in the way they bend and give way to the rolling shapes in the undercarriage” (2021). The camera lingers on the engine while it vibrates and hums, and this is responded to by little Alexia's guttural humming in concert with the sound of the motor. The materiality of the car becomes not only visible but also embodied by the protagonist.

Importantly, Alexia's bizarre attunement to automobiles precedes, rather than gets generated by the accident. Several reviewers wrote that she becomes a psychopathic killer after

the crash cracks her skull, but the film seems to suggest that she wanted the car to smash in the first place. As one of the few exceptions, film critic Beatrice Loayza observes that, after the accident, Alexia “lovingly embraces the vehicle, not in spite of its traumatic associations, but because of them” (2021). Ducournau’s earlier work, *Raw* (2016), a coming-of-age cannibal horror film, opens with a similarly disturbing scene: the protagonist’s sister, also named Alexia,<sup>32</sup> jumps in front of a car, causing it to crash into a tree (the film later reveals that she is planning to feast on the crash victim because she is craving human meat). The preludes to both films engage in dialogue with Cronenberg’s *Crash*, which follows a group of people—led by a former scientist, Dr. Robert Vaughan—who have developed an obsession with the sexual possibilities of car accidents, as well as the wounds and scars caused by them.<sup>33</sup> Throughout the film, the characters drive back and forth on highways in search of accidents and sometimes occasioning them on purpose. Vaughan, like Stuntman Mike in *Death Proof*, stages the scenes of car wrecks and then obsessively photographs them. In both films, the metaphor of colliding cars seems to reaffirm the gendered power relations. In one scene, Vaughan’s dirty black convertible pursues Catherine’s immaculate silver sports car, threatening to smash into it from behind and force it off the road. Vaughan embodies the sort of engine revving, tires screeching, predator petromasculinity that Mike stands for (fig. 16).<sup>34</sup> Catherine, meanwhile, is left unsatisfied after the car crash at the end of the film when her husband, James, whispers to her: “Maybe the next one.”



Figure 16. The sexual politics of the car crash.

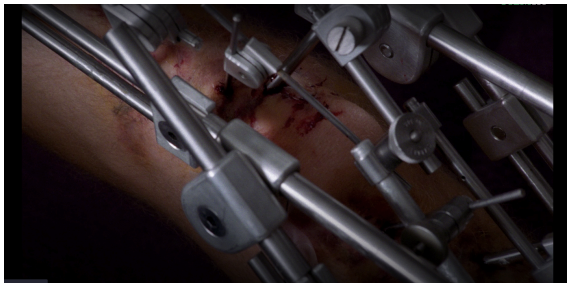
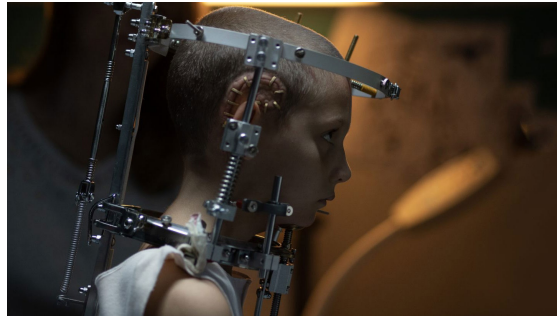
*Titane* inverts the sexual politics of speed and “muscle” automobiles featured in these films not through the protagonist’s appropriation of the steering wheel, but through her “kintimate” relationship with the car. In the much-discussed sex scene, Alexia wraps her hands in the seatbelts, almost like Zoë when playing the “ship’s mast” in *Death Proof*, but here

reaffirming her pleasure in a much more explicit way. The choice of car, a lowrider, is important. Popular in the United States, lowriders are a type of customized vehicle with a lowered body and individually painted ornaments. If tuner vehicles are usually modified to improve their speed, the modifications in a lowrider serve no such purpose. Interestingly, Ducournau stated that she chose a lowrider because “the car is feminine” (in Weinstein 2021). In this sense, *Titane* is reminiscent of Carpenter’s *Christine*, a story about a teenage boy who grows overly attached to a murderous female vehicle, which is very much alive and ends up killing anyone who stands between them. But Ducournau’s treatment of the Cadillac also evokes a late 1950s cultural shift in the dominant car culture in France described by Roland Barthes in his *Mythologies*, in which he famously compares cars to “the great Gothic cathedrals,” appropriated by an entire population as “a purely magical object” to be venerated (1973, 88). Writing on the occasion of the presentation of the new Citroën DS at the *Salon de l’automobile*, Barthes emphasizes the car’s spirituality and curvy, smooth, and less aggressive design compared to the earlier bulky cars that belonged to “the bestiary of power” and “an alchemy of speed”:

In the exhibition halls, the car on show is explored with an intense, amorous studiousness: it is the great tactile phase of discovery [...] The bodywork, the lines of union are touched, the upholstery palpated, the seats tried, the doors caressed, the cushions fondled; before the wheel, one pretends to drive with one’s whole body. (Barthes 1973, 89-90)

Like Alexia in the first dance scene, people at the car show engage with the “déesse” (the “Goddess”) in a highly tactile and amorous way, caressing the metal bodywork and its curves, and pretending to “drive with one’s whole body,” which suggests a deeply embodied relationship, or even a sort of erotic merging, between human and non-human bodies.

Perhaps what binds *Crash* and *Titane* is less their staging of the bizarre sexual relationships with a car—in the former, the characters have sex *in* it, in the latter *with* it—and more a creation of new, posthuman (petrocultural?) subjects through the fusion of body and technology, which in both cases are born violently because of a car crash. In *Crash* and *Titane*, flesh, blood, and metal come together (figs. 17-19). This merging is what Rosi Braidotti (2002, 228) calls, in reference to *Crash*, a “meta(l)morphosis,” whereby the bodies that undergo it lie within the in-between space of the body-machine dichotomy.



Figures 17-19. Meta(l)morphosis in *Titane* and *Crash*.

In this context, the accident is associated not with trauma or paralysis, but with the potential for transgression and bodily transformation. It is notable that both *Crash* and *Titane* complicate the “driver-car” assemblage, which Tim Dant distinguishes from the term “hybrid”:

The word hybrid refers to the offspring of two species that are usually unable to reproduce whereas the driver-car is an assemblage that comes apart when the driver leaves the vehicle and which can be endlessly reformed, or re-assembled given the availability of the component cars and drivers. The driver-car is not a species resulting from chance mating but a product of human design, manufacture and choice. (2004)

If in *Death Proof* the car becomes an extension of the human body, in *Crash* and *Titane* the human-machine hybrid is produced—and in the case of *Titane*, quite literally a new species is born when Alexia’s pregnancy comes to term.

In her book *Death and Desire: Car Crash Culture*, Ricarda Vidal similarly argues that Ballard’s novel and Cronenberg’s film witness “the birth of a post-human identity,” which results from a fusion of the Bataillean state of animality, associated with “disgusting elements like smell, shit, vomit or the dead body,” and “machinality,” which she links to “the development of a keen sexual interest in the ordered stylization and artificiality of the car” (2013, 144). This fusion, whether or not one agrees with such a contraposing of the animal and

the machine, seems the furthest advanced in *Titane*. Bodily fluids and flesh coalesce with metal and oil in the horror-like image of the surgery, to the point that what we see no longer resembles a human body (fig. 20).

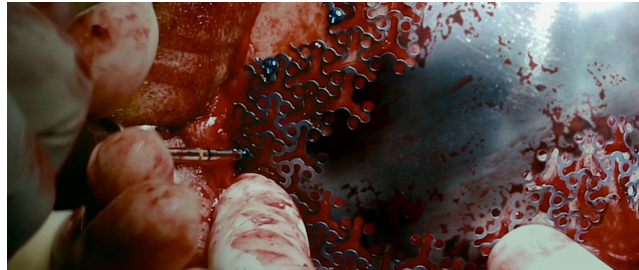


Figure 20. Excess and impurity: blood, tissues, metal, and oil coalesce in *Titane*.

The gendered dimensions of substances that issue from bodily orifices deserve further attention. Blood, urine, feces, sweat, and vomit have been traditionally associated with the abject and what Barbara Creed (1993), drawing on Julia Kristeva, famously called the “monstrous-feminine.” In a psychoanalytic reading of horror films, women are considered monstrous in connection to their sexual and reproductive functions (Creed 1993, 7), and these functions are precisely what aligns them with animality. Yet male bodies can also become abject. In relation to *Crash*, Vidal points in part to this reading when she observes that Vaughan’s body is “shown as [an] animal body, [...] oozing sweat, blood and semen” (2013, 150), though she does not contemplate the gendered implications of these images. Further, as Karen Beckman argues, it is mostly semen that is positioned at the center of *Crash*: men are “seminiferous bodies,” and they “produce prodigious quantities of bodily fluids” (2010, 162-163). Drawing on Elizabeth Grosz, Beckman observes how semen differs from other bodily substances like vomit, sweat, or blood in that it “is understood primarily as what it makes, what it achieves, a causal agent and thus a thing, a solid: its fluidity, its potential seepage, the element in it that is uncontrollable, its spread, its formlessness, is perpetually displaced onto its properties, its capacities to fertilize, to father, to produce an object” (Grosz in Beckman 164). However, such “seminal fluidity” does not necessarily “leave patriarchal hierarchies unchanged” (165). For instance, Beckman points to James’s sexual longing for Vaughan and to how the text’s formal innovations destabilize its ostensible misogyny.

*Titane* adds motor oil into the equation, which further complicates the merging of the animality and the machine: oil, it is suggested, “inseminates” Alexia even though, as already stated, the car is devised as female. For LeMenager, oil transcends its usual positioning as an

inanimate object: “Oil challenges liveness from [an] ontological perspective, as a substance that was, once, live matter and that acts with a force suggestive of a form of life” (2014, 6). In her chapter on the aesthetics of petroleum, she writes: “We have learned to expect of oil maximum motility and liveliness, as if it were blood” (101). In Anderson’s *There Will Be Blood* (2007), for instance, such liveliness is captured in the “mysteriously thrilling” images of oil gushers, in which the aesthetic properties of the black substance, such as sight, sound and smell, are highlighted (LeMenager 2014, 93). Oil becomes alive in *Titane* in more than one way, acting as semen, milk, and blood. As Alexia’s body undergoes a horror-like transformation, oil starts to leak from her nipples and vagina. When she ravenously scratches her pregnant abdomen, it rips, revealing metal and black liquid underneath. The frequent close-ups of Alexia’s body create a haptically charged surface, which emphasizes the materiality and the sensuous qualities of oil.

While often hidden from sight, oil is everywhere, becoming the “lifeblood” of the film, and a rich visual metaphor in its broader project of “troubling the waters of kinship” (Bartkowski 2008, 121), here based on a substance other than blood. It is also key in Ducournau’s rewriting of the images of the monstrous mother that have populated the horror genre for decades (Creed 1993). In line with other contemporary women filmmakers, such as Jennifer Kent or Alice Lowe, Ducournau revisits abjection, which—according to Creed’s most recent work on the return of the monstrous-feminine—points to the frailty of the unity/identity of the rational, anthropocentric subject, but it can also inspire feminist revolt (Creed 2022). The scenes in which Alexia stares in terror as her stomach bulges out are both humorous and raw, and they question the traditional images of “proper” motherhood. However, unlike the rape-avenger that pierced her victims’ hermetically sealed bodies in the first part of the film, the pregnant Alexia becomes “a holed body” herself (Segarra 2014) that appears to lose its threatening power (even if, as an embodiment of the monstrous maternal femininity, Alexia can still inspire revulsion and fear for some of the viewers, as attested by the critical reception of the film).<sup>35</sup> Such exploitative images link *Titane* to the “body horror,” of which David Cronenberg is perhaps the most celebrated exponent (figs. 21-22). In *Videodrome* (1983), which features similar imagery, the filmmaker puts forward his concept of the “new flesh,” which is particularly salient here: “Death is not the end [...]. Your body has already done a lot of changing but that’s only the beginning, the beginning of the new flesh. You have to go all the way now. Total transformation.”



Figure 21. Alexia's growing abdomen rips, revealing metal and oil underneath.



Figure 22. A screengrab from *Videodrome*.

Writing about bodily transformation and mutilation in *Crash*, Baudrillard theorizes on the incisions, scars and body holes caused by technology's capacity for violation:

Every gash mark, every bruise, every scar left on the body is an artificial invagination [...] these few natural orifices which we are accustomed to associate with sex and sexual activities are nothing in comparison to all these potential wounds, to all these artificial orifices [...], to all these openings through which the body turns itself inside out. (1991, 316)

In reference to these remarks, Beckman observes that Baudrillard bothered a number of readers due to his all-too-casual disregard of the body's pain and to "what was perceived as an uncritical and 'obscene' celebration of the sexual possibilities opened through the (usually feminized) site of the wound" (2010: 162). However, I concur with Beckman's assessment that, while certainly problematic, Baudrillard's essay does offer insights on the decomposition of the (Western) subject—in line with Braidotti's (2002) remarks on meta(1)morphosis—and, perhaps more interestingly, on the movement between inside and outside, and what is usually hidden from sight.

Marta Segarra offers further clues on other possibilities of reading bodily perforations in relation to *Titane*. In her theory of “holed bodies,” she argues that “all physical and imaginary holes [...] are connected to the human bodily orifices, which is reflected not only in scientific discourses, but also in mythological narratives and in popular culture” (2014, 10). Segarra offers a revealing reflection on the etymological origins of the term “hole.” In Spanish, the word “agujero” comes from the Proto-Indo-European root \*ak, which is also the root of the English word “heaven.” In English, “hole” derives from the Proto-Indo-European root \*kel- (to cover, conceal, save), related to the Latin term *celare* (to hide), which interestingly points to the secret and the sacred. From the root \*kel- also derives the word “hell,” literally “a concealed place,” thus paradoxically linking heaven and hell. Further, the French term “trou” comes from the popular Latin *traucum*, which referred to an opening that traverses the body—later a deep wound, which will be associated with female anatomy—as well as a cavity in the ground (2014, 11). The notion of “ultadeep” comes to the forefront again, as Alexia’s bodily cavities evoke the holes in the earth’s crust made to extract oil. Being mindful of the dangers of drawing analogies between the cavities of “mother Earth” and its abilities to provide fossil fuels on the one hand, and female reproductive functions on the other—analogs that often served as permission for the exploitation of land and women (Merchant 1983, 25)—one might nevertheless venture to read Alexia’s holed, oil-soaked body as a horror-like resurfacing of petroleum, of the unseen, that is already part of us in many ways, as previously noted.

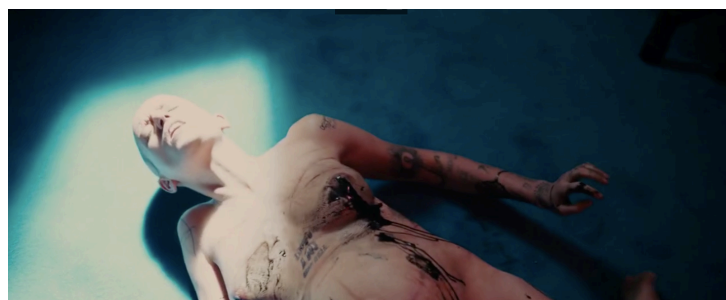


Figure 23. The specter of the car in *Titane*.

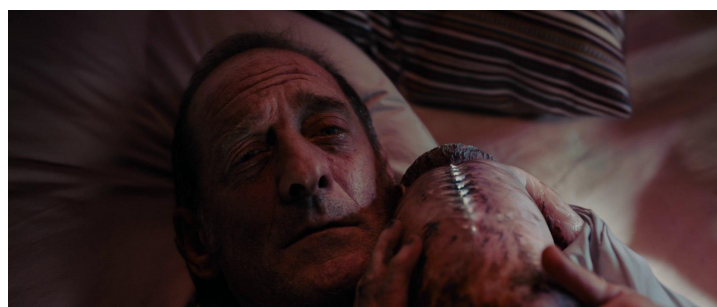
Despite seeming to diminish as the story develops, the importance of the car remains hauntingly present throughout the film, for instance, in the image of Alexia bleeding oil from her bodily orifices while the shape of a windscreen illuminates her upper body in a way that makes her resemble a sacred icon (fig. 23). As Beckman observes in her reading of Ballard’s novel, and in reference to James’s careful penetration of Vaughan’s anus, “throughout the



novel, the word *care* grows out of *car* and *scar*” (2010, 169). Ducournau employs the trope of the car to trace a similar trajectory, from the violent disintegration of the (petro)subject and (petro)world toward the permeability and the ethics of care—the willingness to be affected by an encounter with the other, even if it means death.

## Conclusions

The love for car movies might speak to, as LeMenager (2014) proposes, the difficulty of leaving behind the twentieth-century oil media, cinema and automobiles included. In its fascination with cars, *Titane* reproduces, but also perhaps inadvertently, or unconsciously, resists the predominant energy culture. Not incidentally, *Titane* is replete with shots of devastating fire and what looks like a post-apocalyptic imaginary. In a queer gesture, the film seems to suggest that, before we can think that “another world is possible,” some “unworlding” (Halberstam 2022)<sup>36</sup> needs to be done. Ducournau stated, in reference to both *Raw* and *Titane*, that monstrosity can be particularly liberating in this sense because “it’s about debunking all the normative ways of society and social life” (in Bunbury 2021). When the jury gave *Titane* the Palme d’Or, she thanked them for “recognising our hungry, visceral need for a more inclusive and fluid world, and for letting monsters in” (in Romney 2021b). As Kristeva (and later Creed) has argued, the “powers of horror” carry not only “a disturbance of identity, violence, meaninglessness, and a collapse of boundaries,” but also “the possibility of revolt and rebirth” (in Creed 2022).



Figures 24-25. The new is born in *Titane*.

“The old is dying and the new cannot be born,” argues Nancy Fraser (2019), quoting Gramsci, in reference to the current political, economic, ecological, and social breakdown. Our petromodernity might be fracturing, but in the arts, as has always been the case, something new is constantly emerging. In *Death Proof*, an antiquated petromasculinity is replaced with women who can drive and take pleasure in doing so. The film rewrites the petrocultural feminine, founded on the premise that women, like cars, cannot become “automobile.” In *Crash*, Vaughan, like a Christ-like figure, hails the arrival of a new being, a combination of a human and a machine, which seems “perfectly adapted to this new, accelerated world of high-tech” (Vidal 2013, 158). *Titane* also resorts to religious symbols—though in a consistently ironic way—to welcome a new, monstrous, posthuman subjectivity (figs. 24-25). It does not depict the vehicle as a mere extension of the driver’s body but envisions a completely new hybrid species. Instead of offering fantasies of women who can drive, it brings the car to life, making it “automobile.” Not casually, *Titane* is released when car culture is undergoing one of the most significant shifts since the 1950s-1960s due to the rise of electric vehicles and self-driving technology. New fictions and discourses on cars and automobility, and on the blurring of the borders between human beings and machines, are likely to emerge.

However, rather than forging new narratives of automobility or the posthuman subject that would seem to be “more adapted” to petromodernity, the film’s radical potentialities lie somewhere else. *Titane* builds on and expands the aesthetics of petroleum found in *Death Proof* and *Crash*. All three films share a deep interest in the convergence of vehicular fetishism and gendered discourses on automobility. They draw on the road movie’s fascination with cars as an expression of petrofueled modernity, yet they challenge its tendency to privilege movement and speed by staging car crashes. They show the ways in which the figure of the car crash as a crisis of automobility can be both traumatic and generative, and how it can be used to complicate the road-pleasure complex and petroidentities attached to it.

Despite these similarities, *Titane* offers further opportunities for rethinking the aesthetics of petroleum. While Ducournau’s film continues with the tradition of *Death Proof* and *Crash* of staging non-normative encounters with cars, it rewrites their discourses on gendered movement, speed and mobility. The car excites the protagonist not because it evokes the kinesthetic thrills of acceleration, but because of her genuine “love for metal and chrome” (Ghosh 2016, 10). *Titane* pushes *Crash*’s interest in reshaping the human body through technology in a new direction through Alexia’s “kintimate” relationship with her Cadillac and the resulting pregnancy. The film queers the petroidentities bound up with car cultures, while

making oil visible, material and embodied by the protagonist. Even though petroleum may initially seem only a marginal material in *Titane*, it persistently rises to the surface in surprising ways. As I have shown, through the horror genre conventions, the film illuminates, if only momentarily, the oil unconscious—something that is ubiquitous, yet often utterly elusive as an object of aesthetic contemplation.

Certainly, *Titane*'s project is not to bring about hope for a post-oil society. Nor does it explicitly critique the pervasiveness of petroleum. Instead, the film inhabits the dominant fossil fuel fantasies, while tentatively creating space for more sustainable futures. Here, “sustainable” is understood not as related to discourses of conservation, which tend to radically exteriorize the matter and “render the lively world as a storehouse of supplies for the elite” (Alaimo 2016, 169), but rather as holding ourselves accountable “for the lively relationalities of becoming of which we are part” (Barad 2007, 393). In the (ultra)depths of the film’s “bad environmentalism” (Seymour 2018) animated through the excessive devotion to cars and strange encounters with them, one can also find an invitation to consider an emergent ecology—one that is not bounded by the narratives of freedom, (auto)mobility, or individualism, so central to petromodernity, but rather makes space for fostering demilitarized zones of kinship and the ethics of care.

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<sup>1</sup> In 1993, Jane Campion's *The Piano* shared the award with *Farewell My Concubine*. Like Kathryn Bigelow (another "first" woman to win an important award, a best director Oscar for *The Hurt Locker*), Ducournau and her filmmaking have been described as "muscular" (Page 2021), an adjective that points to the cultural gendering of genres.

<sup>2</sup> In his influential essay "Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel," Ghosh offers a critique of the failure of literary fiction to address what he dubs the "oil encounter," which makes reference to the American oil interests in the Middle East. Yet, as Ghosh suggests, it is not only in relation to this particular encounter that literature has failed to sufficiently express oil.

<sup>3</sup> As she writes, "'oil' has become synonymous with the world, in a large, Heideggerian sense of the human enframing and revealing of earth, thus the world we know" (LeMenager 2014, 68). However, as LeMenager and other scholars emphasise, not everyone has equal access to oil and its products. What is more, we do not suffer from the risks involved in the fossil fuel extraction and consumption in the same way.

<sup>4</sup> If a demonstration of this were needed, one could mention Putin's invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent stifling of European fossil fuel supplies which seriously affects the oil prices. On Europe's democracies as carbon democracies, see Bruisch and Beuerle (2012). As LeMenager stated in a recent interview, her 2014 book "eerily predicts the Trump era, in its fascination with how the emotional dimensions of extractivist culture, the dependence of that culture upon narratives of lucky strikes, upon hyper-masculinity, upon mediation and speed, continue to hijack the present moment" (in Ramuglia 2018, 157).

<sup>5</sup> In effect, oil is everywhere, in cinema and in life, and yet, surprisingly, film studies has had little to say about it to date. Some recent exceptions include, in addition to LeMenager's work, Carolyn Fornoff's article on petrocinema in the Mexican context (2021) and Belinda Smail's (2021) work on oil documentaries.

<sup>6</sup> Several critics drew a comparison between the scene depicting Alexia's car accident in *Titane*, after which the protagonist gets implanted a metal plate in her head, and the representation of car crashes in Cronenberg's film, in which many of the characters require metal prosthesis. In both cases the collisions seem to trigger carnal impulses and non-normative sexualities.

<sup>7</sup> I use the word "strange" in the sense of its frequent use in queer ecology (see, for instance, Nicole Seymour's *Strange Natures*) to critique "natural" categories of gender, sexuality, the natural world, etc. Such an orientation, as L. D. Mattson and Jeremy Gordon observe, can help us "attend to the strange, essential vibrancy of human and more-than-human relations and, maybe, foster monstrous kinships and nonnormative futurities" (2022, 36). On queering kinship, see Judith Butler's "Is kinship always already heterosexual?" (2002), in which she extends the notion of kinship beyond patriarchal heteronormativity and consanguinity to consider what she calls "modes of intimate alliance."

<sup>8</sup> Cinema—and films about cars in particular—can make oil palpably material and embodied for the viewers as well, as phenomenological film theories and the framework of the haptic could demonstrate. Yet, for the purpose of this article, in my reading of *Titane* I am not as concerned with how the film affects the viewer at a sensorial level as with how the film's aesthetics can be read in respect to petrocultures and (auto)mobility.

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Archer (2017).

<sup>10</sup> Importantly, Detroit is also one of the many sites plundered by Europeans, who decimated local populations and paved the way for extractivism and Western modes of accumulation. Addressing the immense human costs of "the emergent petrosphere," Stacey Balkan observes how "the influx of former slaves to Detroit in the form of cheap labor would allow for its material prosperity and eventually lay the foundation for Henry Ford's empire wherein emergent forms of labor solidarity aligned with a newly conceived American dream" (2019, 13).

<sup>11</sup> As Belinda Smaill also argues in her investigation into historical petrofilm culture, "oil cinema" or "petrofilm" does not necessarily need to "visually evoke oil" as "a material substance" to be considered as such (2021, 59). However, Smaill's focus is specifically on films produced by oil companies, and the resulting film and circulation practices. In my discussion, I do not wish to claim that *Titane*, *Death Proof* and *Crash*, as films about cars, are representative of the emergent category of oil cinema, but rather consider the critical possibilities that arise from reading these texts from the petrocultural optics.

<sup>12</sup> As Wenzel puts it, the "great paradox of fossil fuel imaginaries," in life and in the cultural texts we produce, is that oil is "at once everywhere and nowhere, indispensable yet largely unapprehended, not so much invisible as unseen" (2017, 11). The task of the cultural critic, then, would be to uncover, or to "unearth," the role that oil plays in literature and film, at the social, political and aesthetic levels.

<sup>13</sup> See also Paszkiewicz 2021.

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<sup>14</sup> As LeMenager writes, “Perhaps the insight here is that the human body has become, in the wealthier parts of the world, a petroleum *natureculture*, to use Bruno Latour’s term for the inevitable intermixture of the self-generating (organic) and the made” (2014, 69).

<sup>15</sup> The cinematic crash is one of the earliest and most recurrent tropes in film history: from the cinema of attractions to slapstick comedies, as well as experimental films and videos. Even the 1960s-1970s road movie occasionally engages with car accidents, complicating the road-pleasure complex. LeMenager observes in reference to road fiction: “Road novels of the 1920s, such as *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and even *Oil!*, are as interested in car accidents as are the road novels of the 1950s and the 1970s, when the oil crisis coincided with postmodern meditations on grisly road death such as J. G. Ballard’s *Crash* (1973)” (2014, 90). It is also worth mentioning that car accidents are still a leading cause of death in the US, “forcing questions about human consumption, the price of the mediated self, made possible by cheap fuel” (2014, 92).

<sup>16</sup> For a more detailed account of the scholarship on the gendered nature of petroculture, see Allan (2020), in particular, her reflections on how the global and colonial workings of petrovioence are closely intertwined with the gendered violence.

<sup>17</sup> The term “rollin’ coal” makes reference to causing exaggerated pollution through the use of car for pleasure or as a form of conservative protest against environmentalism. As Daggett explains it, it “means retro-fitting a diesel truck so that its engine can be flooded with excess gas, producing thick plumes of black smoke. Coal, which is not actually burned, functions as a symbol of industrial power expressed as pollution” (2018, 40). Daggett draws a connection between petromasculinity, excessive pollution and climate denial.

<sup>18</sup> See, for instance, Mattson and Gordon (2022).

<sup>19</sup> “Most girls wouldn’t know these films,” says Kim in *Death Proof*.

<sup>20</sup> *Death Proof* includes direct references to *Friday the 13th* (Cunningham, 1980), *Wolf Creek* (McLean, 2005), *Dawn of the Dead* (Snyder, 2006), *Scary Movie 4* (Zucker, 2006), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Beginning* (Liebesman, 2006).

<sup>21</sup> Her horrid death brings to mind *Star* (2001), Guy Ritchie’s six-minute ad for BMW, in which the driver (Clive Owen) carries an arrogant star (Madonna), eventually punishing her by driving at high speed through the city, tossing her all around the backseat. As Devereux argues in reference to this video, the gendered space of the car operates as the “violent affirmation of women’s subordination” (2017, 165). Sarah S. Jain comments in her in-depth analysis of the same video that the dreadful ride can be understood as a rape scene, which is meant to “curb women’s physical, economic, and social mobility” (2005: 194). It also illustrates the well-known discourse that “every woman knows not to get into a strange car with a man she does not know” (199), which stems from the histories of violence against women, but which also reaffirms the “perils for women in cars” narrative.

<sup>22</sup> *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) is an early example of this association between sexual violence and car crashes, in which a man is aroused by watching a woman being hit by a car.

<sup>23</sup> However, the word “alexia” also points to the inability to read or to speak as a result of a mental condition. It comes from Greek *a-* (“not”) and *lexis* (“speaking” or “reading”).

<sup>24</sup> The scene evokes the New French Extremity *Baise-moi* (2000), Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi’s mix of the road movie and rape-revenge film that shares with *Titane* its interest in female agency, gendered vulnerability and penetrability of the bodies.

<sup>25</sup> The music video for the song features the lead singer sitting on a car in a funeral procession.

<sup>26</sup> The song, which is also scored in the opening sequence, but performed by 16 Horsepower, tells the story of “a poor wayfaring stranger, traveling through this world below.” The song thematizes Alexia’s journey and her being-towards-death.

<sup>27</sup> Another reading of that scene could be that the men look away because Alexia/Adrien’s dancing reveals the men’s homoeroticism, which can be deduced from their hypertrophied homosociality and their worship of their father, Vincent.

<sup>28</sup> Kinship’s equivalent term in French (*parenté*) is etymologically related to the Latin verb *pario* (to give birth), and thus seems to emphasise the “biological” forms of kinship. Interestingly, during the birth scene, Vincent is soaked in Alexia’s fluids (mostly motor oil, which in the film replaces blood), an image that could imply that their kinship is based on the exchange of fluids and ultimately, at least metaphorically, on blood ties. As Marta Segarra argues, all “intimate bonds are always blood ties, although not in the usual, heterosexual sense that has defined family relations” (2021, 122).

<sup>29</sup> Patricia Yaeger coins the term “energy unconscious,” building on Fredric Jameson’s “political unconscious,” to interrogate the simultaneous omnipresence and absence (or silence) regarding oil within a given text (2011, 306 and 309). The term has been further elaborated by Graeme Macdonald (2013). Roman Bartosch (2019) has more recently introduced the “petroleum unconscious” as a further critical concept to underscore “the difference between the positively connotated notion of energy and the nearly invisible, often displaced workings of oil retrieval and its political and (post)colonial implications” (132).

<sup>30</sup> See <https://www.bfi.org.uk/interviews/crash-david-cronenberg-jeremy-thomas>.

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<sup>31</sup> As Ghosh adds: “Its sources are mainly hidden from sight, veiled by technology, and its workers are hard to mythologize, being largely invisible. [...] Oil refineries are usually so heavily fortified that little can be seen of them other than a distant gleam of metal, with tanks, pipelines, derricks, glowing under jets of flame” (2016, 75).

<sup>32</sup> *Raw* tells the story of Justine (Alexia’s sister) during her first year at veterinary school. Initially, the narrative suggests that Justine develops a craving for human flesh when forced to eat a raw rabbit kidney. But toward the end of the film, it is revealed that the craving was transmitted to her and Alexia by blood, through their mother.

*Titane* also suggests that the protagonist’s craving for cars precedes her traumatic event.

<sup>33</sup> However, Ducournau’s *Titane* takes a step further: it binds the emergence of non-normative sexuality and vehicular fetishes with childhood.

<sup>34</sup> At first glance, the sexual politics of Cronenberg’s car crashes are similar to those in *Death Proof*. However, in contrast to Vaughan and other characters in *Crash* who yearn for the ultimate death on the road, Mike does not want to die. In the final car chase he breaks down in tears and assures that “he was only playing around” when he realises that he is overpowered by women.

<sup>35</sup> It has been reported that 13 people fainted during the film’s premiere at the Sydney Film Festival (Moran 2021). Writing for *BBC Culture*, Nicholas Barber calls *Titane* “the most shocking film of 2021” (Barber 2021).

<sup>36</sup> See Halberstam’s 2022 lecture on “Unworlding: An Aesthetics of Collapse” at the Wallach Art Gallery (Columbia University): <https://wallach.columbia.edu/events/wallach-talks-unworlding-aesthetics-collapse>.