"Eastern Promises": the (De)Colonisation of the Body of the (M)Other in *Eastern Promises*

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Abstract
This essay investigates the colonisation of the female body caught in the tension between anxiety about contamination and painful assimilation of the Other in the film *Eastern Promises* by D. Cronenberg (2007). Drawing on the critical instruments of cultural studies and gender studies, the possibility of cultural exchange and appropriation between the British and the Russian culture is analysed by looking at how the body of the mother becomes the permeable surface where the scars of the violent invasion of the Other are made visible and at the same time the medium through which a traumatic but nonetheless possible cultural encounter can take place.
Key words: colonisation, body, motherhood.

The body is the unquestionable protagonist of *Eastern Promises* by David Cronenberg (2007). Set in late 2000s London, the film presents the shady dealings of a Russian criminal gang, the *vor v zakone* (literally "thieves in law"), and displays the ways in which the organisation penetrates into and spreads through the city while being in turn infiltrated by Scotland Yard. More specifically, the plot revolves around the lives of three villains, Kirill (played by Vincent Cassel), son of the Russian Boss of London, Semyon (Armin Mueller-Stahl), their chaperon Nikolai (Viggo Mortensen), and Anna (Naomi Watts), a midwife who works at Trafalgar Hospital. The characters come across each other by chance, as Anna happens to deliver the son of a Russian teenage prostitute, Tatiana, who dies soon after. Since she has recently undergone a miscarriage, Anna feels empathy for the girl and does her best to find her family. Her investigation starts from a clue that she finds in Tatiana's diary: a card of the restaurant owned by Semyon. As the midwife manages to translate the diary, she discovers that the girl was forced into prostitution and drug abuse by the Russian criminals who smuggled

her into the UK, and, worst of all, that she was raped and left pregnant by the boss himself after being beaten up by his son. Of course, Anna's involvement with the *vor* is dangerous to say the least. Luckily, however, unbeknown to herself, she is helped by Nikolai, who happens to be far more than a body-guard-like chaperon. He is in fact an infiltrated Russian policeman who works for Scotland Yard, and whose cover is so well-built that not only is he officially made into a *vor*, but eventually even manages to become the new boss of the gang.

As the following analysis attempts to show, the body occupies a privileged position within the film, both for its numerous symbolical associations and for the significance of its substantial physical presence. It is the body of the victim of film *noir*, unmercifully caught while torn apart, bleeding out, its abject inner parts exposed. It is the body pictured during a fight, shrinking, falling, striking, backing off, being hurt and bruised. It is an anonymous body, maimed and thrown into the Thames to drift away with the stream and emerge unpredictably on forgotten shores. And, conversely, it is an intentionally individualised body, whose surface is marked in order to be identifiable and identified, its meanings forever tattooed on its skin with signs, images and words which tell its story and prophesise its destiny. Significantly, it is also a sexed body, whose history depends first and foremost on the agency with which its gendered attributes are invested. Last but not least, it is the body of a nation which is violently penetrated by foreign, alien bodies, whose organism ultimately needs to come to terms with – that is to digest and assimilate – them.

Notwithstanding the more or less conventional representation of gendered roles and performances in the film, this work scrutinises a specific function of the female body in *Eastern Promises*: the body of the mother in its conflation with the body of the nation. It is argued that the film establishes powerful and suggestive parallels between one of the most problematic functions of the female body and the equally controversial notion of national identity through their physical as well as symbolical disruption. More specifically, the main issue at stake and under scrutiny is the representation of the – public – invasion of the British nation by the foreign, disturbing and proliferating body of a Russian criminal organisation by means of – private – stories of traumatic and disrupted maternal experiences.

Interestingly and controversially, the parallel representation of the invaded nation and the colonized female body is also used to open up possibilities for cultural exchange, integration and absorption through the maternal function, which are nevertheless kept provisional and troubled by the bigger criminal puzzle of which the mothers are but small pieces.

The topic of invasion, at times weighty, at times only implied, functions as a sort of background to the different storylines, and is reinforced by that of infiltration in the criminal plot. As the – threatening – other invades the country and circulates within its boundaries by contaminating its blood and impregnating its body, likewise the police manages to infiltrate the criminal organisation, although as a result the borderline between good and evil is even more blurred, since good needs to be absorbed into evil in order to be able to defeat it from within. The character played by Mortesen best expresses this unresolved polarisation, because he is a policeman and thus belongs with "good", but nobody is ever allowed into the know. As a matter of fact the credibility of the role he acts within the mob family depends on ambiguity: he must seem irrelevant, the prototype of the typical, reliable sidekick in order to keep Kirill's trust, but at the same time he must subtly show the boss that he is far more than that, so that he can advance his career in the criminal organisation. For these reasons, he can never stop pretending nor reveal his real intentions to Anna and her family, whom he protects covertly.

Male and female bodies are signified in different ways to embody different aspects of the dialectic between invasion and integration, contamination and healing of the body of the nation through the body of the other. The noir plot, then, emphasises that these tensions are never fully resolved, as ongoing negotiation is shown to be always necessary and never final. The investigation of these conflicting forces through the body of the mother and the redefinition of the maternal function[1] against the backdrop of a difficult and violent

[1] The expression "maternal function" used throughout the paper refers to its different nuances (i.e. conceptions, functions, identities and performances) as described – among others – by Arendell (2000); Hansen (1997); Stephen (2011); Stone (2012); Addison, Goodwin-Kelly, Roth (2009), which reject the assumption that motherhood is a condition shared by all women or, even worse, a more or less

cultural exchange is carried out here under different angles. First, issues of otherness, colonization and infiltration emerging from *Eastern Promises* in relation to and symbolised through motherhood are tackled by disclosing the ways in which the female characters embody meaningful examples of contemporary British and Russian identity. In the following section, then, the representation of the abject body as conceptualised by Kristeva (1982) – e.g. a wounded, bleeding body, which defies boundaries and is open to incorporate the other bodies – is analysed in its tensions between anonymity and identification, traumatic violation and healing. Special attention is given to the body, in particular to the female maternal body, and to the tattooed body of the male criminal, which I readin this essay through the metaphors respectively of the map and of the text.

1. Weaving and unravelling the urban/human fabric: the (dis)integration of national and maternal identities

From the beginning, *Eastern Promises* proves to be a film about otherness and the troublesome coexistence of different cultures in a territory which is already marked by a strong national identity, even if its cornerstones are experiencing a growing crisis. The opening scene, indeed, is set in a Turkish Barber Shop, "Azim's Barber", where a Russian customer is killed by a supposedly Turkish young boy at the behest of his uncle. A multicultural atmosphere also reigns over the subsequent sequences, as it becomes clear that the protagonists of the film are the members of a Russian criminal organisation – thus the characters usually speak Russian and more often than not English is spoken with a strong Russian or Eastern-European accent. Accordingly, among the main locations one can count a Russian restaurant and dim, marginal places in the multi-ethnic urban peripheries where shady deals take place. London, which is the actual setting of the film, is not immediately explicitly represented, but it materialises only later, when Anna, the protagonist, is riding on a bridge and Tower Bridge can be spotted far in the distance. Paradoxically, at the beginning the setting seems to be almost unremarkable, and the British capital claims its identity

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biological practice which involves a woman "nurturing, protecting and training" her children (Arendell 2000: 1194).

only every once in a while through small glimpsing details, like the quick flash on the name of the hospital where Anna works, the Trafalgar Hospital, or some shots of the Thames which, however, do not make the river easily identifiable. Other clues suggesting London are some typically British cultural elements, like a football match between Chelsea and Arsenal and, obviously enough, the accent of the few British-born characters.

The apparent neutrality of the setting, however, is subtly played with by Cronenberg, and its actual pivotal role is in fact emphasised through some small but meaningful remarks. Among the most revealing is the resigned claim of the Russian boss, who complains about the unacceptable but unequivocal queerness of his son: "London is a city of whores and queers. I think London is to blame for what he is". Whatever the reasons for this perceptive statement, it nevertheless powerfully draws a tight, entangled relationship between bodily performances, space and identity, which are not specifically tackled here, but which surely underline the importance of place for Cronenberg's representational choices. In the film "the body and the city" are engaged in a productive relationship, since both are represented as "cartographies of meaning and identity" and "intensified grids of power, desire and disgust" (Pile 1996: 178). This, in turn, enables one to draw parallels between the female body and the body of the nation based on the dialectic self-other which is produced, enforced and possibly modified by the understanding of and the relations between the body and space:

> The way in which space is organised affects the perception of the 'other', either as foreign and threatening or as simply different. The construction, maintenance and policing of spatial boundaries is not just a question of political economy, it relates to the ways in which people develop boundaries between self and other. (Pile 1996: 89)

Cronenberg's strategy of representing London's urban geographies rather covertly, so that the association of the setting with this specific landscape is not immediate, finds some analogues in contemporary European cinema. As Yosefa Loshitzky points out in her study on the representation of immigration and the redefinition of national identity in contemporary film (2010):

> The European films about migration and diaspora are very compelling in depicting landscapes of postmodern alienation. They persistently

deconstruct iconic images of the classical European cities that make for easily consumed picture-postcard views. The famous monuments and landmarks of these cities are either absent from the films or stripped of their traditional cultural capital, assuming the role of post-icons in an impoverished urban fabric, a non-place. (Loshitzky 2010: 45)

Rather than a "non-place" London as it is evoked in *Eastern Promises* is a city which needs to re-define its – already questioned, hybridised, transformed – national and cultural identity in order to cope with a new, ambiguous kind of otherness – that introduced by the particular type of criminal Russian migration represented in the film. Paraphrasing Loshitzky's analysis of the filmic image of the "barbarian Balkans", Cronenberg's Russian *vor v zakone* could be understood as the import of an alien kind of violence as well as "the mirroring of British violence through its projection onto the […Russian] other" (Loshitzky 2010: 53).

The dialectic self-other in the representation of the British identity and, conversely, the attempts made by the migrant other(s) to describe their identity within and in relation with the British one deserves a short digression in the light of the long literary, cinematic and artistic tradition which developed around and was devoted to this topic during and after the Empire. Due to its political as well as symbolic position as the centre of the Empire, London has become a fictional(ised) city, a space increasingly represented through different media and from numerous and diverse perspectives, not least through the eyes of different generations of immigrants whose relatives came to what they did not cease to consider their Motherland from newly independent countries[2]. This course of action foregrounds the impression that it is impossible to describe contemporary London faithfully, its most accurate portraits being those drawn through the subjective, even fictional representations sketched by the people who live in the intricate, multifarious spaces of the metropolis. As time passes, the disparate images of the city created through first-hand experience, literature, poetry, visual arts, photography and the cinema partly overlap, stratify and influence new ones, so that it is more and more difficult to fully

[2] The numerous examples in contemporary Anglophone literature and theatre include the work of Zadie Smith, Hanif Kureishi, Monica Ali, Kwame Kwei Armah.

grasp and account for the supposed *reality* of the city (see Vallorani 2003).[3] In other words, any representation of London seems to be necessarily influenced by the fictional representation of the city, which is entrenched in the individual as well as collective image of the metropolis. Needless to say, this process becomes even more complex when it comes to the other(s) coming from abroad, as their ideas about the city are the product of imagination and idealisation, of tales they have been told, of cinematic and televised representations, or of the shiny, promotional portraits made by travel guides. Not least, their lack of an actual grasp on the slippery, ever changing and tangled urban reality is dangerous, as they can be easily tricked into believing in the idealised portrait of the city that may serve to attract them and trap them in a spiral of violence and exploitation. This is the situation denounced by Cronenberg through the characters of Tatiana and of all the other Russian or Eastern European prostitutes. Deceived and smuggled into the UK by criminals with dreadful intentions, these guileless women are easily misled with the treacherous promise that London is the place where their dreams will come true.

In a similar but specular fashion, the other(s)' idealised image of the country/city corresponds to an equally fictionalised, and often biased perception of their presence on the part of the British people. This could be blamed on the negative portrait of the other drawn through its rhetorical and/or fictional descriptions as a scaring, contaminating presence, which plant and stimulate the fear of invasion (a particularly sensitive issue for the British population due to its traumatic experiences of actual destruction and invasion). Since the end of the XIX century, indeed,

> tales of invasion were endlessly told and re-told in popular literature and theatre [and later through other media] […], and they hinted at what the common Londoner certainly thought: the Barbarians from the colonies were coming to London, to take hold of the city and make it theirs. (Vallorani 2012: 83)

[3] Tellingly, these considerations could be engaged in a productive dialogue with Loshitzky's stance on the loss of identity of the city in contemporary films about immigration. As Vallorani remarks with reference to London as it is described in the works of Angela Carter, Martin Amis and Ian Sinclair, indeed, it seems that the city no longer has a precise geographical collocation, and besides it could be any city at the end of the millennium (Vallorani 2003: 62).

At the beginning of the XXI century, the British cultural identity depicted by Cronenberg is scared of another, possibly subtler cultural contamination: that brought by a kind of other who does not come from former colonies nor is so physically different from the British. Indeed the Russians are white and stereotypically consider themselves superior to other ethnic groups, as the racist comments of Anna's uncle Stepan throughout the film demonstrate. Meaningfully enough, the choice of confronting the British nation with an externally similar otherness exposes the limits of the established idea that "racial identity […] lies in the body" (Kanneh 1992: 348). The emphasis on sameness is nonetheless challenged as well, because these people are actually – culturally – different, as the scenes describing Russian folklore at the boss's restaurant testify to, and above all they surely are threatening, as is shown by the criminal behaviour and violence they display.

As already mentioned, throughout the film the overriding symbol for both a positive and a negative cultural encounter-clash is the female body, especially the body of the mother, which comes to represent the frightening, potentially polluting, and ominous invasion as well as the difficulties of a painful coexistence and assimilation of the other, and serves as a mediating symbol under multiple perspectives. Interestingly, with this association Cronenberg exposes the way in which the power dynamics between colonizers and colonised have changed as the "colonial trope" of "feminising [a] colonised territory" and "the familiar discourse of the rape between coloniser, and colonised country" (pp. 346-7) must be reversed inasmuch as the Motherland is invaded (although certainly not colonised) by new, unexpected groups of immigrants. The notion of Motherland is no longer appropriate to account for the relationship between England and Russia, which bears no (post)colonial traces. Perhaps a masculine association like that of the "master" would be more suitable. In this respect, Derrida's arguments about hospitality seem to fit rather well the behaviour of a host country trying to establish boundaries for immigrants for fear of invasion:

> hospitality is certainly, necessarily, a right, a duty, an obligation, the *greeting* of the foreign other as a friend but on the condition that host, the *Wirt*, the one who receives, lodges or *gives asylum* remains the *patron*, the master of

the household, on the condition that he maintains his authority in his own house. (Derrida 2010: 4)

Nevertheless, this rationale undeniably prevents integration and assimilation: "hospitality is given to the other as stranger. But if one determines the other as stranger, one is already introducing the circles of conditionality that are family, nation, state and citizenship" (p. 14). That is to say, a similar, *masculine*, notion of hospitality is based on the assumption that the other be kept as a stranger, and this could be among the reasons why Cronenberg decides to conflate the British nation and the body of the mother, no matter how complex, problematic, contradictory or multifaceted the correlation can get. Motherland, in other words, must adapt her maternal function in order to be able to receive and take care of someone else's children without estranging them, in the same way as in contemporary societies motherhood must be redefined due to the actual changes in its performances. The unconventional maternal functions described in *Eastern Promises* are the result of an externally imposed violent hindrance or of the malfunctioning of the normalised biological course. In any case, in spite of its anomalies, the reconfiguration of the maternal role seems to be the only way through which the tear in the individual, psychological, as well as in the social, collective fabric can be mended. The analysis of the conflation between the private and the public dimensions of the phenomenon is best illustrated through the parallels drawn by Cronenberg between the bodies of the female protagonists and those of their nations.

To start with, the female body, like that of the nations under examination, is a violated body. Both female protagonists, indeed, underwent a physically painful and psychologically traumatic experience which has to do with reproduction and maternity. Tatiana is a Russian fourteen-year-old girl, tricked into emigrating to the UK and then forced into prostitution and drug abuse, who dies while giving birth to a daughter under the sorrowful eyes and useless efforts of Anna, a young British-Russian midwife, who has recently broken up with her boyfriend after a miscarriage from which, as shortly after becomes clear, she has not recovered yet. Tatiana's body was beaten up and abused by the Russian boss of London in a surge of rage due to the acknowledgement of his son's

inability to take pleasure from a woman. Her experience alludes to the brutality of the criminals in whose hands the female body is not only commodified, but also broken up and thrown away. In addition, the girl stands for all the poor dwellers of Easter-European countries who are easily misled into migrating with false promises of work, and therefore happiness and well-being because of their ingenuity and lack of perspectives. In the same way as Tatiana's body bears the bruises of the beatings and of the needle, her country bears the scars of a painful past whose ghosts are still hunting the present: the heritage of the Communist regime and of the fall of the Wall, whose breaches had started since long before to expose the numerous failures of an exhausted utopia and, more generally, the inability of a country to provide for the – material and symbolic – needs of its people. As for the British woman, Anna has been most probably left barren by a miscarriage, which also brought her relationship to an end. Besides the easy reference to the identification between womanhood and motherhood in Western countries, as a consequence of which the former needs the latter in order to be defined as and feel normal and whole, Anna's experience, too, points to the UK's. The end of the empire, the extenuating bombing during World War II and the constant arrival of people from former colonies – just to quote the most significant factors – have been ceaselessly urging the rebuilding and redefinition of the British territory and of its national identity, and the hybridisation and broadening of its cultural boundaries.[4] Meaningfully enough, London as the capital city – and foster mother of the empire – could well be compared with a traumatised, probably barren midwife, who helps foreign mothers to give birth to children who do not belong to her, but all the same will be nursed and taken care of by her one way or another. A second common trait between the female body and the body of the nation with reference to Anna is in fact her own hybridity, which could be defined "in disguise", because she is the daughter of a Russian father and English mother, even if only

[4] The personification of London and the description of the metropolis under attack, or destroyed by the invader through the image of a female body, often actually or symbolically violated or cut into pieces is not new in British literature. Among the most telling literary examples one could count Peak's poem *The Rhyme of the Flying Bomb* (1962) and Moorcock's novel *Mother London* (1998).

one of her halves has survived. Together with her father, indeed, also her Russian identity has died, since she speaks English with a perfect British accent, does not understand Russian nor displays any physical signs or habits which could disclose her mixed origins.

This peculiar element leads to another issue, which draws together motherhood and the threat of invasion of the body of the nation referred to above, that is the problematic immigration from Russia to the UK. In the early 2000s-London represented in *Eastern Promises,* Russian immigration is becoming a critical issue. To begin with, the incoming people are not former citizens of the Commonwealth, therefore they do not look at London as a symbolic Motherland, nor is their culture known to the British people, who all of a sudden need to confront an unfamiliar but seriously threatening criminal organisation[5].

Nevertheless, the difficulty of integration between the two communities and the negative association of the Russian immigrants with the fears of poisoning and contamination expressed through the motif of the violated maternal body, also has a positive counterpart in the film. Womanhood in general and motherhood in particular, are the only elements that help outline the possibility and feasibility of integration, recovery and healing. On the one hand, the only way in which the otherwise anonymous personal history of Tatiana is given attention is through a network of female solidarity built on the common experience of traumatic and denied maternity. Anna insists on finding a translator for Tatiana's diary despite her uncle discouraging her from doing so, because she desperately wants to find the baby's family so that they can take care of her. On the other hand, it is through the maternal function that the two communities truly merge and coexist, as in the end Anna decides to take care of the baby personally, thus bridging the gap between the two cultures, healing her psychological wound and counterbalancing her physical handicap.

It is by means of an unnatural and abnormal experience of motherhood, therefore, that the alien body is accepted and

[5] Evidence for this claim is the fact that Nikolai, the main male character played by Viggo Mortensen, is a Russian infiltrated agent who works with the British police. In other words, he is a sort of mediator needed in order to penetrate an otherwise utterly and totally unknown organisation.

integrated, and perhaps will even lose every clue of its difference (as is suggested by the fact that the little Christina will be raised by Anna and her mother alone, and that perhaps she, too, like Anna, will bear no marks of her origins).

As a consequence, the film seems to suggest, the need for redefinition of cultural interaction, hospitality and national identity goes hand in hand and is intricately linked with motherly performances, which likewise must be rethought and adapted to the new needs of an intercultural and multicultural society. In other words, the cultural organisation of what is too often considered the "biological activities" of motherhood must be reimagined, for "mothering and motherhood" – not unlike national identity – are "dynamic social interactions and relationships, located in a societal context organized by gender" and therefore are also and by necessity "historically variable" (Arendell 2000: 1193).

2. "Bodies that matter" – and signify

The significance of the body in *Eastern Promises* could take on multifaceted connotations and be investigated from different angles. In this work, it is understood and disentangled through two main symbolical associations: the body as text and as map.

Overall, the body is defined by Grosz (1994, 1995) and Butler (1990, 1993) as a surface of inscription, on and with which identity is signified in a performative fashion through the tension between compliance with and challenge to the regulatory norms which constitute the embodied subject. Moreover, Cronenberg's bodies are interpreted as abject on more than one account. First of all, throughout the film death, corpses, blood and bodily fluids, the exposure of the inside of the body and its spilling onto the outside are explicitly represented, which directly points to Kristeva's (1982) definition of "abjection". On a deeper level, which could be more interesting to this analysis, Cronenberg's bodies also perform the underlying, symbolical functions connected with the abject, like the defiance of boundaries, the disturbance of order and the blurring of the boundaries between proper and improper, order and disorder, inside and outside (Kristeva in Grosz 1994: 192-3 and in Creed 1993: 8).

According to Kristeva, the abject is a subtle, yet pervasive boundary, "a border that has encroached upon everything"

(Kristeva 1982: 3). Neither self nor other, it is a residue of both, that which "is thrust aside in order to live" (p. 3). In addition, it is not simply "lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (p. 4). Most notably, then, the abject designates the permeability of the body (Grosz 1994: 193) and as such can symbolise and signify the physical pollution of the body, as happens to Tatiana, whose body is forcedly injected with drugs, then raped and contaminated with the seed of criminality and with an unwanted baby, and eventually spills its insides when the girl starts bleeding on the floor of a pharmacy before giving birth. Remarkably, the abject also plays a metaphorical role in the film, as pollution could be referred to the invasion of the nation by alien bodies which contaminate its surface and, more or less unnoticed, blend with it and change its organism. This process is incarnated by Christina, Tatiana's baby, who will be brought up as if she were British, by Anna herself, or even by Nikolai, who works as an infiltrator for Scotland Yard in spite of being Russian and being in effect accepted by the gang as a *vor*.

Of course, the most abject object is the female body, even more so when it is the body of the mother, or rather when it is at the peak of its possibility for change: "Menstruation and childbirth are seen as the two events in woman's life which have placed her on the side of the abject", for in those phases the body is characterised by "becoming, change, expansion, growth, alteration", that is, it exceeds its boundaries and exposes its newly generated interiors (Creed 1993: 48, 50)[6].

The centrality of abjection in the analysis of the bodies of *Eastern Promises* is all the more significant if one considers, like Butler, that the subject constitutes itself only with relation to – and even recognising itself as – the other (Butler in Salih 2004: 8) and the abject: "the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject,

[6] With reference to these considerations, it is interesting to observe the paradoxical position of Anna as woman but above all as mother, as her body is actually deprived of the abjection of pregnancy, but her maternal function is perceived as abject in any case, because she cannot bear children and her womb has literally killed the embryo it was nurturing.

an abjected outside, which is, after all, 'inside' the subject as its own funding repudiation" (Butler 1993: 3). Once more, thus, a parallel is drawn between the body of the mother and that of the nation, and the conflation of pollution and invasion, but also productivity, birth and rebirth is emphasised with reference to immigration and the practicability of cultural exchange, as these abject bodies are and engender at once destructive and constructive forces.

As for the notion of body as text, it is linked to the idea of the narrativisation of experience through which identity is built and negotiated and the subject manages to have its voice heard, to make its personal story matter, and to bring to the surface what was institutionally hidden. When it comes to the female body, in *Eastern Promises* narrativising experience becomes synonymous with moving away from the "abjected" body with which trauma, violence and suffering are associated to focus instead on the voice that has been silenced.

In case of a traumatic experience like Tatiana's, the over-identification of woman with, or her reduction to, the (maternal, reproductive) body is exacerbated, because the rejection of the body and the impossibility of representing it in language thwart the necessary materialisation of subjectivity through language. Bodily trauma, indeed, cannot be articulated in language:

> Whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this usharability through its resistance to language. […] Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, […] its resistance to language is not simply one of its incidental or accidental attributes but is essential to what it is. (Scarry 1987: 5)

Tatiana, however, has left a diary, which covers all the above-mentioned functions at once by allowing her to narrativise her painful bygones. First of all, it materialises Tatiana's traumatic experience in a double sense: she manages to account for herself with her own words (that is to say, she constitutes herself as a subject through language), and since she does it in writing her personal history is permanently fixed and becomes "recoverable" (see Foucault in Grosz 1994: 145). Of course, not only is her story of violence and abuse troublesome and disturbing for the institutions which officially register and hand down what will be deemed as history, but also for the illegal ones,

for the Russian boss wants to prevent his involvement with her death and all the related circumstances from being disclosed. The conspiracy of silence, however, is interrupted thanks to a network of female solidarity built on mutual understanding and inhibited mothering functions: Anna asks first her uncle and then the Russian boss to translate Tatiana's diary in order to find her family so that her baby will not grow up in an orphanage. Furthermore, Tatiana's diary defies the annihilating process triggered by violence, and could as such be interpreted as an expression of her agency, as a means of resistance against the impossibility of accounting for her suffering with words. By writing her story, indeed, she challenges the difficulty of meaningfully articulating the actual pain by giving shape to and asserting her identity exactly when her torturers are trying to wipe her subjectivity away.

Her voice, nevertheless, cannot be heard directly, as Anna needs a translator because she does not know Russian. The necessity of a cultural mediator suggests that the two women can somewhat understand each other thanks to the commonality of their bodily performances (in this specific instance, suffering and hindering of the maternal function) but at the same time their – cultural, self and social – identities are so different that they require someone to build a bridge between their specificities.

In spite of the difficulties faced by the female characters to assert their identities outside of the maternal function, which paradoxically requires distancing themselves from their bodies, when it comes to the male characters, in particular to the male protagonist Nikolai, the body itself becomes "a prime vehicle of narrative signification" (Brooks 1993: xii) through tattoos. The notion of body as a text whose experience can be narrativised and translated into language during the process of identity construction thus evolves into that of "inscriptive surface" (Grosz 1994: 138), that is Cronenberg matches the "semioticization of the [female] body" of the mother with the "somatization of story" (Brooks 1993: xii) on the male body. This is the function of the tattoos, which have a significant weight throughout the film: they are to be understood as markers of identity, which convey a sense of belonging as well as distinction: "it is as if identity, and its recognition, depended on the body having been marked with a special sign. […] Signing or marking the body signifies its passage into writing, its becoming

a literary body, and generally also a narrative body, in that the inscription depends on and produces a story" (p. 3). Not only do the tattoos create "a map of the body but the body precisely as a map" (Grosz 1993: 139), we could add, "of power and identity" (Haraway in Pile 1996: 188), because they "mark the body as a public, collective, social category, in modes of inclusion and membership; they form maps of social needs, requirements, and excesses" (Grosz 1994: 140). Furthermore, they brand the body with "the history and specificity of its existence", as Nikolai's skin testifies to. The tattoos, therefore, enable one to "construct a biography, a history of the body, for each individual" (p. 142).

Cronenberg himself stresses the meticulous research done together with Viggo Mortensen on the "Mark of Cain", the Russian prison tattoos that cover Nikolai's (and also the other criminals') body: "For *vor y zakone*, your life is written on your body. The *vor* have a saying, 'we are marked for life and our stories tell the truth'" (Dunlap and Delpech-Rame 2010: 329). In the film the tattoos are not only often exposed (as happens in the scene where Nikolai struggles naked and unarmed against two killers in a sauna), but they are also assigned a whole sequence, which shows Nikolai receiving the stars (i.e. being officially made a *vor*). The symbolic importance of the tattoos for the thieves in law is foregrounded by the ritual which precedes their engraving on the body, where the older *vor* read Nikolai's tattoos (and in so doing they effectively tell his personal, individual, story) before insulting his family and forcing him to repudiate his origins to be reborn in the "code" (that is, marking his belonging to a social group). It should be easy to understand, then, how the tattoos may turn into a double-edged tool, for they map meanings onto the bodies, and thus can become a source of empowerment for the subject who wants to invent or reinvent his story, as Nikolai does. The paradoxical potential of the tattoos is epitomised by "the scene where Nikolai is about to receive his tattoos" and where "he has to 'truthfully' account for the ones he already has", since its solemnity is paradoxically spoilt because the spectators know that his tattoos are fake: he had them done/applied only to infiltrate the criminal gang (pp. 329-30). As Dunlap and Delpech-Rame remark, "precisely that which is supposed to tell the ultimate truth – the body – is itself a lie", but besides undermining the masculine ideal of "authenticity and

heroism associated with the survival of painful ordeal and danger" (p. 330), the fake tattoos highlight the power of self-creation of the body when it is conceived as an inscriptive surface for subjectivity and identity.

Ultimately, the bodies portrayed in *Eastern Promises* map different kinds of journey through physical as well as symbolical spaces, which draw us back and forth from Russia to the UK and eventually to the subtle but strong links between the dialectic invasion-integration and the maternal body-function. Tatiana comes from a god-forsaken village in Russia, as do other prostitutes victims of the *vor*'s business of human trafficking, weapons, alcohol and drug dealing. All these dangerous goods enter the country illegally, are therefore frightening and perceived as alien, dangerous, polluting, like the immigrants. They show that the border which encloses "us" within and protects us from "them" who come from without is more than ever fragile and easy to cross. In a similar fashion, the imagined/imaginary cultural boundary proves to be extremely vulnerable as the body of the nation is threatened and infected with the blood which comes from outside and, barely noticed, infiltrates and spreads by circulating within the networks of the metropolis.

In *Eastern Promises* the polluting viral bodies of the thieves are countered by Christina's body. The baby alone manages to embody a chance of positive cultural encounter and exchange by carrying a promise of future wellbeing, which was denied to her biological mother, and by healing the wound of a foster mother whose fertility was barred. The narrativisation of painful maternal experiences, most notably of mothers that cannot perform a healthy or biologically normalised maternal function, hence takes on an ambivalent, but nonetheless positive meaning. As the female body was traditionally associated with the forcibly occupied, violated body of the colonised in colonial discourses and narratives, in *Eastern Promises* the body of the mother becomes the emblem of a Motherland which is in turn invaded and contaminated by alien, disturbing bodies, which generate turmoil and are difficult to digest. Yet, in the film motherhood takes on a positive meaning as well, because the body of the mother also becomes the medium through which a cultural encounter can be devised and is actually established, by means of the maternal function. Anna and Tatiana's stories show that life and integration are possible if the effort of

translating and incorporating each other's – abject – experiences is made. By so doing, besides cultural assimilation, a way is also found to make – maternal – trauma representable and recovery from it viable if old, conventional performances of motherhood are set aside, or at least compounded with newly devised ideals which respond to the changes of contemporary intercultural societies.

In the same way that the female body of Tatiana is irremediably dead and that of Anna is sterile, the bleeding wound in the body of the nation cannot be completely healed, as Cronenberg seems to suggest with the open ending of the film. A new boss, indeed, takes the old one's place: the punishment of the culprit is shown to be merely due to the need to change the leadership: "How can I become king if king is still in place?" Good has prevailed, because Nikolai is a policeman, but it is only a small and provisional victory, since he still needs to pretend to work for, and indirectly sustain and perpetuate the criminal system. The price to pay for the final victory, therefore, is an even deeper absorption into the evil invading organism, with which the nation needs to cope by devising suitable strategies, as the mothers in *Eastern Promises* were able to do.

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