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Gutted buildings: the hapticity of demolition in Émile Zola's *The Kill*

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Every now and then, a previously overlooked or minor text resurfaces on the critical horizon after having travelled a circuitous and unexpected route. Émile Zola's *La Curée*, or *The Kill* as it is commonly known in English, is one such text. Narrated against the backdrop of the large-scale urban renovation of Paris, enacted under the auspices of Georges-Eugène Haussmann, the novel (the second instalment in Zola's magnum opus *Rougon-Macquart* cycle of twenty novels, published between 1871 and 1893) follows the misadventures of a ruthless speculator, Aristide Saccard, who builds a fortune exploiting the inflated compensation paid for properties demolished to make way for the new boulevards.[1] His launching pad into capital speculation occurs by way of the dowry of his second wife, Renée, who is similarly defined by lust, in this case for pleasure rather than money. Running parallel to these events, Renée falls into an incestuous affair with her husband's dandified son, a transgression that intensifies the novel's preoccupation with themes of moral decay and tainted heredity and which reflects Zola's broader indictment of the excesses and corrupt appetites of the decadent Second Empire.

A key leitmotif in *The Kill* is the demolition site, or the 'gutted buildings' of Paris, as the many houses felled by the pickaxes are at one point described.[2] It is a preoccupation that not only straddles the spatial and affective registers of the novel but, to the extent that ruins stimulate the sense of touch, is inherently haptic, too. As Giuliana Bruno suggests in her *Atlas of Emotion*, the haptic, as 'a function of the skin [… and] the sense of touch—constitutes the reciprocal contact between us and the environment, both housing and extending communicative interface'.[3] The haptic interface between body and environment is the source of much tension and ambivalence in Zola's novel, and is disruptive in a manner that reflects a growing awareness of the capacity for the critical faculties to be engaged and challenged through sensory apprehension which, in turn, provokes consideration of the political ramifications of aesthetic experience. In what follows, I argue that haptic modes of encounter in *The Kill* present a valuable means through which to unpack the complexities of the novel's geo-spatial and simultaneously gendered politics, as well its relevance to contemporary debates on the place of aesthetics in literary criticism and beyond.

Given that the first modern and unabridged translations of *The Kill* only first appeared in English in 2004, the reception of this text in the Anglophone context has from the outset been set apart from the canon of French naturalist fiction among which the *Rougon-Macquart* novels

[1] The character of Aristide Saccard is the protagonist of two novels in the *Rougon-Macquart* series. The second is *L'Argent*, or *Money*, published in French in 1891 and generally considered to present a more measured account of the role played by finance and the economy in nineteenth-century France.
[2] Émile Zola, *The Kill*, trans. by Brian Nelson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 247. Henceforth cited in-text as (*TK*, page number).
[3] Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture and Film* (London and New York: Verso, 2002), p. 6.

are more conventionally discussed.[4] It was during the spatial turn of the 1980s that the text captured the imagination of the new breed of postmodern geographers for whom an interrogation of the politics of Baron Haussmann's renovation of nineteenth-century Paris was pivotal to the formation of the modern discipline of urbanism. A discussion of *The Kill* figures prominently in Anthony Vidler's seminal 1986 essay, 'The Scenes of the Street', for instance, which links the spatial redesign of Paris to a complex set of city-making motives ranging from a political intent to suppress urban insurrection to concerns for public health and hygiene and the economic imperative to accelerate commercial trade by improving circulation through the city. For Vidler, Zola's *Rougon-Macquart* cycle presents Paris under the knife of Haussmann, 'disembowelled and bleeding, as the prey of speculation, the victim of all-consuming greed,' while Aristide Saccard—anti-hero of *The Kill*—speaks the 'double language of the planner and the hunter'.[5]

As reflective of empirical methods of the social sciences more generally, the attention paid to *The Kill* and the novels of Zola by geographers such as David Harvey and Vidler, an architectural historian, is largely thematic in the sense of being principally concerned with the insights Zola's texts offer into the geopolitics of the city's spatial transformation. At the same time, Vidler's colourful and visceral description of Paris as 'disembowelled and bleeding' anticipates the second major surge of interest to surface in Zola's novel, namely the attention paid more recently to its aesthetic properties, which coincides with the rise of the affective turn in literary studies. Inherently interdisciplinary in its forging of links with the cognitive sciences, the emergence of affect as a critical paradigm has involved a rethinking of the relationship between aesthetics and politics with a particular focus on the disruptive potential of embodied experience and its capacity to unsettle established readings of the Western literary canon.

Indeed, in *The Antinomies of Realism*, Fredric Jameson asserts that '[t]he novelist who offers some of the richest and most tangible deployments of affect in nineteenth-century realism is Émile Zola'.[6] Affect is a notoriously difficult concept to define; however, Jameson's distinction between emotion as a linguistically codified phenomenon, and the more non-conscious affect as an intensity that 'eludes language and its naming of things', provides a useful starting point for understanding its operation in Zola's text.[7] For a Marxist thinker such as Jameson, the affective intensity of nineteenth-century realist fiction is a symptom of the historical evolution of a modernist capitalist society beginning to organise itself around the structures of consumerism. And yet this historical understanding of the destabilising role of affect and hapticity in *The Kill* is complicated, I wish to suggest, by way of feminist and psychoanalytical approaches that locate within affect theory a powerful means to dissect the gendered workings

[4] Following an extended period out of print, two modern English translations of *La Curée* appeared within close proximity: the 2004 translation by Brian Nelson, for Oxford University Press, and Arthur Goldhammer's translation published in 2005. Prior to this, *La Curée* was published in English as *The Rush for the Spoils* (undated, no translator named, with an introduction by George Moore), and as *The Kill* (1895, translated by A. Teixeira de Mattos).
[5] Anthony Vidler, 'The Scenes of the Street: Transformations in Ideal and Reality, 1750-1871', in *On Streets*, ed. by Stanford Anderson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), pp. 28-111 (p. 97).
[6] Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013), p. 45.
[7] Ibid., p. 29.

of such social structures.[8] Thus viewing the treatment of demolition in the novel through the twin lens of affect and gender paves the way for a more critically nuanced interrogation of Zola's materialism and how 'naturalist writing generates an ambivalent poetics of negative emotions that deploys strategies of shock and disgust to enhance its critical potential'.[9]

Coupled with this renewed interest in Zola's novel as an exemplary case of the heightened significance afforded to affect in nineteenth-century fiction is, finally, its appeal to twenty-first century readers as a melodramatic account of the razing of Paris. Presently, there is heightened visibility of the widespread demolition of buildings resulting from the cycles of destruction and renewal that are a constitutive feature of late capitalist modernity. These urban ruins exert an attractive charge, setting in motion a kind of 'visual-tactile feedback' that is inherently haptic.[10] This contemporary fascination with demolition again presents another distinct lens through which *The Kill* is read in the Anglophone context, with one author even going so far as to proclaim the book a masterpiece of 'the literature of demolition'.[11] Despite the sensational nature of such claims there is merit, nonetheless, in focusing on the *literariness* of demolition. Bringing together both the spatial and the sensory, the treatment of demolition illuminates the challenges faced by the author in responding to the sudden upheavals and disruptions brought about by modernity's rapid pace of change. At the same time, encounters that unfold in haptic spaces prompt re-evaluation of the novel's determinism and the limits, too, of Zola's understanding of the influence that milieu and environment exert on human behaviour.

A city in transition

Zola's cycle of *Rougon-Macquart* novels engage with many facets of the changing nature of everyday life as it was impacted by the extraordinary transformation of Paris during the Second Empire, an era that witnessed a total remaking of the city that to this day remains 'the largest urban renewal project in the history of western Europe'.[12] Under the auspices of such renewal, the demolition of the city's run-down old neighbourhoods is thought to have displaced as many as 350,000 people from the centre of Paris. The evicted were for the most part poorer working-class Parisians unable to afford the new properties that sprung up along the newly widened boulevards punctuated by grand public parks and elegantly ordered in a classical geometry of straight lines. While the picture of modernity that emerges across the *Rougon-Macquart* novels

[8] Jameson is by no means unique in distinguishing affect from emotion, and this is a major point of contention within affect studies. While feminist approaches also vary considerably, I am concerned specifically with the line of thought which, building on Silvan Tomkins's biologically based theory of affects, relationally links powerful affects such as shame, disgust and abjection to the construction of social identities (including sexual and gender identity). While contemporary scholarship in this field is proliferous, much is indebted to the earlier work of key thinkers such as Eve Sedgwick, Adam Frank and Julia Kristeva.
[9] Rikka Rossi, 'Writing Disgust, Writing Realities: The Complexity of Negative Emotions in Émile Zola's *Nana*', in *Writing Emotions*, ed. by Ingeborg Jandl et al. (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2017), pp. 277-293 (p. 291).
[10] Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 158.
[11] Jeff Byles, *Rubble: Unearthing the History of Demolition* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2005), p. 122.
[12] David P. Jordan, 'THE CITY: Baron Haussmann and Modern Paris', *The American Scholar*, 61(1) (1992), 99-106 (pp. 100-01).

is complex and ambiguous, *The Kill* is the novel dealing most explicitly with the politics of Haussmann's *grands travaux.* It is also one of the most combative in its treatment of the city both in the influence of the newly renovated Paris on its bourgeois city-dwellers and in its prosecution of the exploitation of the city itself by an ambitious breed of speculators embodying the more rapacious tendencies of a rapidly expanding capitalism.

From the outset, then, the city is more than a backdrop for the events of *The Kill* but rather one of its constitutive parts. As a naturalistic study of man in his milieu, the reader is presented in Saccard with a character who, roaming the razed streets of Paris, is quite literally in his element:

> Paris was at that time disappearing in a cloud of plaster-dust. The time predicted by Saccard on the Buttes Montmartre had come. The city was being slashed with sabre-cuts, and he had played a part in every gash. He owned demolished houses in every neighbourhood (*TK*, 94-95).

Saccard is imbricated in his environment through the buying and selling of property, tethered to its built fabric by his expectation to gain from the demolished houses that he owns in 'every neighbourhood'. As the reference to the city 'disappearing in a cloud of plaster-dust' suggests, however, there is something inherently immaterial about this relationship. Not unlike the volatile spikes and plummets of the stock market, the levelling and rebuilding of the city provides an unstable foundation for identity. Corresponding to this uncertainty, Saccard presents as an inherently quixotic character who remakes himself in response to shifts in circumstance and fortune. In his study on the relationship of Zola to the bourgeoisie, Brian Nelson suggests that '[t]he *haussmannisation* of Paris becomes in *La Curée* a symbol of the general corruptions and injustices of contemporary society. Haussmann's large-scale transformation of the capital gives *La Curée* one of its main themes and much of its symbolic décor'.[13] It is true that the events of the city's transformation form one of the novel's main themes; however, its impact extends well beyond the emblematic in so far as *haussmannisation*, or urban renewal by demolition, manifests just as prominently as an intensity, a dynamic force that affects, influences, and alters those who cross its path.

Tellingly, the affective properties of demolition are especially apparent in the original French, in which there is close lexical proximity between *événement*, the noun for "event" (or, more specifically, an influential event or occurrence of upheaval), and the verb *éventrer*, which means to disembowel, to gore, or to tear open.[14] Zola knowingly plays with the interchangeability of these terms, describing the demolition of architecture in a visceral terminology of piercings, cuts and gore—a city 'slashed with sabre-cuts' as it is evoked in the account of Saccard's climbing of the property ladder, and his having 'played a part in every gash' (*TK*, 94-95). Judging by the sheer grisliness of its language alone, it is tempting to follow Vidler in his assessment that the Paris of Zola's imaginary is left 'disembowelled and bleeding'. As a chronicle of the city's destruction, *The Kill* appears to present an overall unfavourable

[13] Brian Nelson, *Zola and the Bourgeoisie*: *A Study of Themes and Techniques in Les Rougon-Macquart* (London: Macmillan Press, 1983), p. 72.
[14] *The New Collins Robert French Dictionary* (Scarborough: Canada, 1998), p. 355

view of the grandiose program of works conducted by Haussmann under the directive of Napoleon III.

In so far as the city of Paris is materially exploited by a newly emergent bourgeoisie to their own advantage, the gory depiction of demolition in *The Kill* correlates with the novel's critique of the disintegrating moral fabric of a Second Empire society tainted by an insatiable appetite for wealth, luxury, and self-advancement. When the novel first appeared in print, in a serialised format, it was attacked for its scandalous depiction of incest and adultery, a charge which Zola refuted on the basis that *The Kill* presents, rather, a 'true portrait of social collapse' (*TK*, 3). Far from endorsing 'the glamour of this life of excess', Zola insists his motivation was, rather, to expose 'the premature exhaustion of a race which has lived too quickly and ends in the man-woman of rotten societies, the furious speculation of an epoch embodied in an unscrupulous temperament' (*TK*, 3). But just as an awareness of the affective force of demolition complicates its status as 'symbolic décor', consideration of the corporeal language in which it is described destabilises Zola's claims to detached observation of a society in decline. Indeed, the language of cuts representing the city as a pierced body is employed obsessively, compulsively even. This relentless wordplay and punning elicit an ambiguous pleasure in the text, raising questions about the latent content of the novel's corporeality.

From a contemporary perspective, Sandy Petrey observes how, '[u]nder the influence of Jacques Lacan and other psychoanalytic theorists, critics have in recent decades paid close attention to the nineteenth century novel's propensity for reducing the human body, especially the female body, to its component parts'.[15] In this way, the complicated sense of enjoyment elicited in the novel from the notion of demolition as a 'gutting' of the body of the city points to an undertow of affects with psychoanalytical implications. The breaching of the skin of the city by the blade of the pickaxe, for instance, has erotic overtones; on other occasions, the encounter with torn down structures stirs feelings of disgust and aversion in its male protagonists, as occurs in the later part of the novel when Saccard sets out with a group of men forming an authoritative-sounding 'committee of inspection' dispatched by the city's Compensation Authority to visit a demolition site on the Rue du Temple (*TK*, 247).

Here, Saccard is joined by a doctor and two businessmen, one of whom is a manufacturer of surgical instruments who 'used to be an itinerant knife-grinder', no less (*TK*, 247). The expedition to the Rue du Temple is prompted by the city's failure to strike an acquisition deal with the site's owners and what follows is an intriguingly sensory encounter with urban ruins that is riven with a feeling of lurid fascination:

> The path these gentlemen followed was dreadful. It had been raining all night. The sodden earth was turning into a river of mud, running between the demolished houses over a track cutting across the soft ground, in which the dobbin-carts sank up to their axles. On either side, great pieces of wall, burst open by pickaxes, remained standing; tall, gutted buildings, displaying their pale insides, opened to the skies their wells

[15] Sandy Petrey, 'Zola and the representation of society', in *The Cambridge Companion to Émile Zola*, ed. by Brian Nelson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 39-52 (p. 46).

> stripped of stairs, their gaping rooms suspended in mid-air like the broken drawers of a big, ugly piece of furniture (*TK*, 247-48).

If the domestic interior is typically a feminine space in Zola's fiction, then the demolished house turned inside out for all to see implies the indecorum of a woman in the state of undress, belying an association between gutted architecture and a female sexuality construed as grotesque or revolting.[16] Immersion in these liminal zones triggers, too, an antipathy towards uncleanliness and the notion of waste and excess in the broader sense of what Bataille usefully terms *dépense*—the principle of nonproductive expenditure.[17] An architecture that has lost its material utility in this way represents a kind of surplus threatening both the productive functioning of the city and the individual who inhabits it. Possibly as a means of sublimating this agonistic relationship to waste, Saccard and his colleagues turn their focus to its acquisition and rebuilding. Nonetheless, the men derive a certain a thrill from the spectacle of observing a structure's collapse:

> When the wall at last gave way and came down with a thunderous crash, raising a cloud of plaster, the gentlemen smiled at one another. They were delighted. Their frock coats were covered with a fine dust, which whitened their arms and shoulders (*TK*, 249).

Especially striking in this description is the manner in which the encounter with the demolition site engages multiple senses, as the witnessing of the building's demolition offers not just a visual spectacle but also a tactile or haptic experience as the plaster dust literally touches the men's bodies. In Zola's treatment, the pleasurable affects brought about by the crossing of boundaries that occurs in an interstitial zone such as the demolition site complicates the more commonplace view that the novel presents a definitively negative cauterisation of Haussmann's *grands travaux*. For Denis Hollier, the more conservative limits of Zola's materialism are thrown into sharp relief by comparison with the marked aggression towards architecture displayed by a thinker such as Bataille, for instance, who vigorously contests architecture as 'society's authorized superego'.[18] Indeed, Hollier is near heretical in his assertion that Zola, far from critiquing the disappearance of the old Paris, should instead be counted among the league of advocates for its cleaning up:

> Zola is vigorously in favour of the modernization of Paris. Naturalism as he conceived it was first of all the celebration—aesthetic if not moral—of the Paris created by the Second Empire, with its stations, its department stores, its exhibition halls, and especially its great boulevards […]. Once the Second Empire falls, Zola's admiration for the former Seine prefect's city planning is unreserved. He approves of straightening

[16] For more on the relationship between repressed sexuality, secrets, and the feminine in Zola's fiction, see Rita Oghia-Codsi, *'The Return of the Repressed': Uncovering Family Secrets in Zola's Fiction—An Interpretation of Selected Novels* (Oxford; New York: Peter Lang, 2016).
[17] Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, trans. by Allan Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt, and Donald M. Leslie Jr., ed. by Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p.117.
[18] Denis Hollier, 'Bloody Sundays', trans. by Betsy Wing, *Representations*, 28 (1989), 77-89 (p. 77).

> things out in the name of an aesthetic of cleanliness: straight avenues are essential against stagnant humors. Blood is aerated in large arteries.[19]

On the one hand, Zola's treatment of the old city in *The Kill* reveals his disaffection for an architecture of the past with its cramped and poorly lit spaces breeding disease and decay. As a transitional zone, the demolition site functions as a site of becoming, as the tearing down of the old makes way for the convalescent architecture of modernity. It is a productive and generative aspect of destruction most prominently embodied in Saccard the speculator, characterised by a 'remarkable dynamism, restless energy, huge ambition, egocentricity, cynicism, an utter lack of principles, single-mindedness, and the profligacy involved in his financial swindles'.[20] At the same time, the attitude of the narrator cannot be directly equated with that of the author. To this end, Hollier's qualification that Zola's celebration of modernity is 'aesthetic if not moral' registers a certain ambivalence and, indeed, the multivalent nature of his fiction means that aesthetic concerns and moral preoccupations frequently operate on quite distinct and sometimes even contradictory registers. By turning now to the specifically haptic modes of perception at play in the novel, tensions between differing phenomenological modes of 'being-in-the-world' are brought to the fore. These tensions raise further questions about Zola's concept of modernity and his corresponding views on how its undisciplined excesses, intensities, and appetites might be managed.

Hapticity and the body

Close attention to the material world is a hallmark of the naturalist novel and *The Kill* is no exception. As Nelson notes, '[a] novel by Zola is usually remarkable for its creation of a total atmosphere, for the concrete density of its texture, for its pictorial and sensuous power'.[21] This density of texture in Zola's descriptive passages is frequently haptic, to the extent that the haptic names a mode of perception that is related to the sense of touch, although not necessarily commensurate with it. As a relatively modern term with its origins in the late nineteenth-century and deriving from the Greek *haptikos*, meaning able to touch or grasp, the concept of the haptic has arguably received its most detailed elaborations in the writing of Gilles Deleuze, for whom hapticity is central to his theory of sensation in the paintings of Francis Bacon. For Deleuze, haptic seeing denotes an intensity of sensation that is distanced from direct modes of narrative and representation. It involves not only the textures of continuous variation but also a relaxed subordination between the hand and the eye, such that haptic seeing occurs 'when sight discovers in itself a specific function of touch that is uniquely its own, distinct from its optical function'.[22]

As we have seen, the demolition site in Zola's novel is a liminal space that generates haptic modes of aesthetic experience. In such zones, the tactile surfaces of eroded and collapsed

[19] Hollier, (p. 82).
[20] Nelson, p. 81.
[21] Ibid., p. 84.
[22] Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. by Daniel W. Smith (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), pp. 109-10.

structures stand in opposition to the smooth retina-focussed architecture of modernity that is the substance of the new Paris. From the glass and steel of the arcades to the reflective surfaces and seductive window displays of the modern department stores, this new architecture dazzles with visual delight and heralds the arrival of the scopic regime of a capitalist consumer society. In *The Kill,* it is an optic mode of perception that characterises the clandestine interludes of Renée and her stepson Maxime, as they pass along the new boulevards where the tall houses 'with their great carved doors and heavy balconies, with inscriptions, signs, and company names in great gold letters, delighted them' (*TK*, 168). No longer shrouded in the cold darkness and patina of the past, the architecture of modernity is marked by openness and transparency, the play of light and a logic of exhibition. The dissolution of boundaries between inside and outside transforms the relationship between public and private, formerly clearly demarcated, into a porous one. For Renée and Maxime, '[e]very boulevard became a corridor of their house' (*TK*, 169). The permeable architecture of the new Paris becomes complicit with the abandoned boundaries of their incestuous affair.

In this way, the architectural and material spaces of *The Kill* bring to bear significant influence upon the actions, thoughts, and feelings of the characters of the novel. This mutual imbrication of milieu and behaviour was emphasised by Zola in his manifesto on naturalist fiction, *The Experimental Novel*, in which he insists that, in addition to the science of heredity, considerable importance should be attached to surroundings, for 'our great study is just there, in the reciprocal effect of society on the individual and the individual on society'.[23] The extent to which Zola's fiction posits the social milieu and its setting as an active force largely accounts for the relevance of Émile Zola to contemporary readers, Sandy Petrey suggests, as 'his representation of society's impact on the individuals within it memorably depicts what it means to be a human being in the modern world'.[24]

Just as Saccard's walks through the rubble of the building sites of Paris spur him on to greater heights of speculative risk, Renée is similarly influenced by the spaces she moves within. From the public dining room to her private apartment, the interiors within which Renée's affairs unfold are extravagantly decorated with an abundance of exotic plant species which, not unlike the demolition site, generate haptic modes of interface between body and environment. This is especially prevalent in those sequences taking place in the hothouse, perhaps the most haptic and fecund space in the novel and one distinctly at odds with the austere interiors of her father's sixteenth-century Hôtel Béraud where Renée spent the summers of her youth. In the hothouse Renée luxuriates in the room's 'rich vegetation, its mass of lush greenery, its spreading rockets of foliage' (*TK*, 37), a tactile and multi-sensory environment that plays an active role, the novel suggests, in developing the lustful dimension of her character:

> Endless love and voluptuous appetite pervaded this stifling nave in which seethed the ardent sap of the tropics. Renée was wrapped in the powerful bridals of the earth that gave birth to these dark growths, these colossal stamina; and the acrid birth-throes of

[23] Émile Zola, *The Experimental Novel*, trans. by Belle M. Sherman (New York: Haskell House, 1964), p. 20.
[24] Petrey, (p. 40).

> this hotbed, of this forest growth, of this mass of vegetation aglow with the entrails that nourished it, surrounded her with disturbing odours (*TK*, 39).

Such passages present the reader with a melodrama of sensation, registering a link between the feminine and a prolific nature as mediated by the olfactory senses. In his reading of the allegorical function afforded to the sensory overload produced by pernicious introduced species of flora in *The Kill,* Jameson notes their role 'as signs of the sickness of the Second Empire' and simultaneously as vehicles for the beginnings of 'new kinds of perception, whose microscopic convexities now serve as vehicles for affect itself'.[25] In the later novels, such affects become autonomous, Jameson argues, moving away from narrative and the naming function of language, while in *The Kill* their purpose remains largely didactic in so far as the novel is principally concerned to condemn the corruption of the Second Empire. To characterise *The Kill* as an essentially didactic text, however, again risks affording greater weight to the author's narrative intent at the expense of those ambiguous meanings generated by its unstable affects. As Hannah Thompson points out, frequently 'Zola's depictions of sexual excess are evidence of a fascination with transgressive practices which is not entirely in keeping with the novelist's proclaimed moral stance'.[26]

The heightened attention paid to perfumes, scent, and the 'disturbing odours' linked to the haptic or tactile spaces inhabited by women, for instance, once again suggests a certain complexity to the novel's latent erotic content.[27] Psychoanalytical readings emphasise the libidinal sublimation at work in Zola's treatment of female sexuality with the role of repression highlighted by Rita Oghia-Codsi, who argues that the stimulating effect that odour exerts on the male narrator is fetishistic in nature. Scent frequently has an overpowering effect and its attractive charge generates an arousal that cannot be openly expressed as the novel condemns sexual pleasure for its own sake as destructive hedonism. The exhaustive detail points once more to a surplus of sensation that threatens the narrator with engulfment not unlike the aversion provoked by the narrator's exposure to the 'sodden earth' and 'gaping rooms' (*TK*, 247, 248) of the torn down structures on the Rue du Temple. At the same time, and just as the male "inspectors" derive a thrill in observing the collapse of a building, the complicated pleasurable affects linked to encounters unfolding within domestic spaces suggest that complete mastery of the body may not be in, Zola's view, neither possible nor entirely desirable.

The influence of the profit motive

As the responses elicited by haptic environments interpolate, then, between attraction and aversion, this dynamism reflects the manner in which *The Kill*, as a materialist novel, is

[25] Jameson, p. 49.
[26] Hannah Thompson, 'Questions of Sexuality and Gender', in *The Cambridge Companion to Émile Zola*, pp. 53-66 (p. 63).
[27] The connection between scent and women's bodies arguably reaches its apogee, in the *Rougon-Macquart* series, in its third instalment dealing with the food markets of *Les Halles*, *Le Ventre de Paris* ('The Belly of Paris'), published in 1873.

ultimately concerned with modernity's structure of feeling. One of the defining features of the modern sensibility to emerge in nineteenth-century Europe was the feeling of *ennui*, an existential boredom linked to alienation, a shift towards which *The Kill* is markedly sensitive in its cataloguing of the 'falsification and distortion of human relations produced by the cash nexus'.[28] Zola is interested in the *haussmannisation* of Paris, for instance, not just for its spectacular scale of brazen destruction and transformation but also for the shift in economic relations it entails as the rise of the property market abstracts the house into a commodity form governed by exchange value over use value. An economic mindset similarly governs the connection of Saccard to Renée, whom as a result of her dowry he regards as a financial asset 'rather like one of the fine houses he owned and which would, he hoped, yield a large profit' (*TK*, 99). The scopic regime of consumerism further objectifies Renée as the accoutrements of her wealth position her as an object to be looked at and possessed by others. In this way, the sense of *ennui* that permeates her existence is a product of reification—the phenomenon by which the structures of capitalist modernity transform human actions into things.[29]

While the stimulation of the senses is linked in Renée's case to sexual perversion, hapticity also serves an integrative purpose in the novel as it is through sensory apprehension that isolated bodies are temporarily alleviated of their alienation. The affective intensity provoked by encounters with demolished architecture is one of the few means by which Saccard exhibits an embodied relationship to his surroundings to the extent that hapticity or touch is 'the sensory mode which integrates our experience of the world and of ourselves', as the Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa observes.[30] A feeling of disconnection frequently underscores Renée's relationship to her surroundings, signalling another mode through which *The Kill* explores alienation as a constitutive feature of the daily life of the bourgeoisie. For not only are the novel's protagonists alienated through their instrumentalising of one another for their own gain but also in their inhabiting of an architecture that no longer serves as an armature for life but as a display case for luxury and wealth:

> The father was never there. The lovers sat by the fireside more often than before. The fact was that Renée had at last filled the emptiness of those gilded ceilings with the satisfaction of her desires. The disorderly house of worldly pleasure had become a chapel in which she secretly practised a new religion (*TK*, 165).

And yet, however much haptic spaces function as a counterpoint in *The Kill* to the disembodiment of ocular-centric modes of perception, the novel by no means presents an endorsement of the power of the sensory. Unlike the libertine novels of the eighteenth-century which locate a subversive power in sexual transgression and eroticism, for instance, Renée's 'worldly pleasure' is punished in *The Kill* and her final abandonment and untimely death is presented as a cautionary tale against a life lived in surrender to the pleasure principle. This

[28] Nelson, p. 94.
[29] First introduced by Georg Lukács, the concept of reification is central to the Marxist critique of human labour as commodity transforming the human individual into a thing. For a contemporary reappraisal of the concept, see Axel Honneth, *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea*, ed. by Martin Jay (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).
[30] Juhani Pallasmaa, 'Hapticity and Time', *Architectural Review*, 207 (2000), 78-84 (p.78).

ambivalence towards the sensory reflects the novel's broader distrust of the *dépense*, to draw again on the terminology of Bataille, embedded in wealth, leisure, play, and non-reproductive sexuality. Zola is unsettled by the principle of loss underlying non-productive expenditure, Hollier argues, to such an extent that 'in every act of spending he sensed the threat of an undisciplined, uncontrollable energy'.[31] In this way, the compulsively prolific cataloguing of the stimuli of modernity in *The Kill* suggests a desire to understand the workings of a consumerist age with a view to curbing its excesses as distinct from the channelling of its energies to radical ends.

In its concern for the distorting effects of materialism on human behaviour, *The Kill* is not blind to the more undisciplined aspects of the literary project, too. Through the character of Saccard, the novel draws parallels between financial speculation and the activity of authorship. Saccard is an adept manipulator of words. His accumulation of wealth relies heavily on the licence he takes with the truth whether in respect to his own identity ("Saccard" is a pseudonym and thus an aid to his self-invention) or in the audacity of the inflated prices that he prescribes on the deeds of sale for his properties. The printed word affords authority to his preposterous claims and further bolsters his coffers. Upon discovery of Renée's affair, Saccard takes possession of the signed deed transferring her property into his name thus finally stripping her of the residual power attached to her independent wealth. Lastly, walking through the demolition sites of Paris, Saccard enjoys 'the secret joy of authorship, as though he himself had struck the first blows of the pickaxe with his iron fingers' (*TK*, 251). Like an author constructs worlds by marking words on a page, Saccard, by rearranging the city, exercises a form of authorship on the urban fabric, imprinting his creative influence, however borne of destruction, onto its streets.

This ambivalent depiction of Saccard as an anti-hero sharing traits with the figure of an author draws attention to the metafictional strategies at work in the text. The parasitic relationship between Saccard's speculative enterprise and the written word, in particular, suggests an anxiety concerning the status of the novel in an era in which literature was becoming transformed into an industry indistinguishable from any other commercial endeavour. Feeding on the base and lurid details of daily life, as distinct from the momentous events of history and religion that were once the worthy subject of tragedy, the subject matter of the modern realist novel as Zola conceives it contains the seeds of its own decay. Not unlike the opportunistic Saccard who stalks the city in search of his next lucrative find, it is Zola's astute sensitivity to the vicissitudes of the everyday and his capacity to sensationalise sensation that accounts for the power of his narrative. As Jameson observes, 'everything that is admirable and productive in Zola to this effect can also be judged as a shameless exploitation and manipulation of poetic perception that has been harnessed to a commercial project'.[32] However hard Zola labours to morally elevate his project by likening it to science, the interchangeability of the pen and the pickaxe in *The Kill* reveals to what extent the writing of the modern novel takes place within a set of economic relations compromised by the blunt instrument of the profit motive.

[31] Hollier, p. 85.
[32] Jameson, p. 46.

While receptive to the corrupting influence of commerce on both the city and the artistic works produced within it, *The Kill* does not necessarily identify the Second Empire's pursuit of wealth as the sole cause of that society's ills. Rather it is the impossibility the novel's characters face in overturning the circumstances that have shaped them which arguably forms Zola's principal concern for the limits that determinism places on individual agency. One of the main threads woven throughout the *Rougon-Macquart* series is that of tainted heredity, a biological predetermining influence that compounds the pervasive sense that the protagonists of Zola's naturalist fiction are, for better or worse, moulded by circumstances right down to their genetic programming. This is an inherently entropic vision of the world in so far as Zola 'unhesitatingly sees man as essentially formed, and explained in terms of, the biological model: birth, life, decline, death, developing within the broader framework of evolution, destined to struggle and eventual waste'.[33] In *The Kill*, this 'entropic vision' brings to the fore a principal tension between the novel's praxis—the author's desire to reform society through an unflinching revelation of its shortcomings—and, paradoxically, the seeming impossibility of any meaningful change in light of the inevitable movement of all human endeavour in the direction of decay and disintegration.

For the contemporary reader, the unrelenting negativity of *The Kill's* portrait of the bourgeoisie combined with the entropic sliding of its characters towards dissipation may appear unjustifiably fatalistic. And yet the novel remains prescient on many levels precisely due to the intensity of its affects which introduce layers of complexity and ambiguity to the reception of its frequently overwrought moral critique. Where the novel initially attracted interest in the Anglosphere for the insights it yields into the extraordinary transformation of Second Empire Paris, the more recent proliferation of phenomenological and psychoanalytical readings of Zola's work demand more nuanced responses to its principal leitmotif of demolition. It is no coincidence that Zola's novel has come back into view precisely at a moment in time when the 'retinal-biased architecture of our time is clearly giving rise to a quest for a haptic architecture'.[34] The contemporary fascination with urban ruins, demolition, and rubble, and likewise the attention paid to their prominence in Zola's novel, responds to this need. At the level of affect, *The Kill* presents neither a valorisation nor condemnation of the renovation of Paris by Haussmann but rather an ambivalent study of modernity's structures of feeling, a grasping for answers to the still pressing question of how to construct a non-alienated existence in a material age.

[33] David Baguley, *Naturalist Fiction: The Entropic Vision* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 216.
[34] Pallasmaa, (p. 78).

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